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“A Splendid Prospect”? Congregationalism in Edwardian Southampton 1901-1914

Introduction

Many historians regard the years leading up to the First World War as a pivotal moment for Congregationalists, as well as members of the other Free Churches, as they sought to come to terms with increased competition from secular pursuits and modes of thought.¹ Some, such as Alan Gilbert, see the period as characterised by an ultimately fatal ‘crisis of faith’.² Others, including Callum Brown, argue that the religious sensibilities of the Victorian era remained firmly entrenched and that Edwardian Britain was still essentially a ‘faith society’.³ Historians of Congregationalism also differ in their assessment of the early years of the twentieth century. Ward describes the ‘period between the middle of the nineteenth century and the First World War ... [as] the golden age of Congregationalism.’⁴ By way of contrast, R. Tudur Jones labels the last decade of the nineteenth century and the Edwardian era as ‘the beginning of sorrows’.⁵

Which of these assessments best characterises Congregationalism in Edwardian Southampton? What challenges did Southampton’s Congregational churches face during the Edwardian era and how did they confront them? In the words of a report from the *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express* on one of the churches, which was published in 1910, how far was the ‘prospect’ for Congregationalism as a whole ‘splendid’?⁶ Such questions provide the impetus for this article in which it is intended to review the standing of Southampton’s Congregational churches with respect to their spiritual and social activities and their engagement with the wider community between 1901 and 1914.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Congregationalism was well established in Southampton. With six churches, approximately 1,500 members and substantially more adherents, as well as 2,500 Sunday School Scholars, it was the largest of the Nonconformist denominations.⁷ In the main, Congregationalists, or Independents as they had previously been known, traced their roots to the so-called Great Ejection of 1662, when approximately 2000 clergy left the Established Church rather than conform to the provisions of the Act of Uniformity. Thus, Congregationalism was

¹ Other Free Churches included Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian.

² Alan Gilbert, *The Making of post-Christian Britain* (London: Longman, 1980)

³ Callum Brown, *The Religion and Society in Twentieth Century Britain*. (Harlow: Pearson, 2006), Ch 2: 40-87

⁴ Reg Ward, “Professor Clyde Binfield: A Critical Appreciation,” in *Modern Christianity and Cultural Aspirations* ed David Bebbington and Timothy Larsen (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003): 16

⁵ R. Tudur Jones, *Congregationalism in England 1662-1962* (London: Independent Press Ltd, 1962), Ch.7: 314-388

⁶ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, November 26, 1910

⁷ Other Nonconformist Churches in Southampton at this time included Baptist, Bible Christian, Churches of Christ, Presbyterian, Primitive Methodist and Wesleyan Methodist.

characterised by its belief that ‘the spiritual vitality of the Church could only be sustained by separation from the State’.⁸ Congregational churches were self-governing and self-financing. They were also democratic to the extent that members chose their pastors and their deacons. Moreover, a high view was taken of the role of church meetings as ‘the place for gaining new life, for developing the generosity, and for organising and directing the energies of the Church.’⁹ Such arrangements were seen as being far more in tune with Biblical principles than the hierarchical structure and ‘priestism’ of the Church of England.

During the nineteenth century, most Congregational churches subscribed to the tenets of Evangelical Nonconformity, with its emphasis on individual conversions and personal salvation. By the Edwardian era, however, pastors and members often saw their spiritual role as being tempered by a social one which incorporated making a contribution to public affairs. In other words good works motivated by a strong Christian faith were their *raison d’etre*.

Although formally independent, most Congregational churches in Hampshire, including the six in Southampton, were members of the Hampshire Congregational Union [HCU], which had been founded in 1781.¹⁰ This indicated a willingness to accept a degree of collective responsibility, especially for the weaker churches in the rural parts of the county. The Southampton churches were in the Middle District of the HCU, one of four districts into which mainland Hampshire was divided.

In the sections which follow, attention is given firstly to the origins of Southampton’s Congregational churches. This is followed by a descriptive review of the churches and their activities during the Edwardian era. In the final substantive section, the ways in which the churches reacted to, and dealt with, the challenges they faced are explored. The article concludes with a provisional assessment of the contribution of Southampton’s Congregational churches to the socio-cultural milieu of the community at large.

The Origins of Southampton’s Congregational Churches

The most historic of Southampton’s Congregation churches was Above Bar. It was founded at the time of the Great Ejection. Although records are sparse, the first pastor of what became Above Bar Congregational Church was Rev Nathaniel Robinson (1662-1696). In the early years of the church, one of its most famous members was the renown hymn writer Isaac Watts (1674 – 1748).¹¹ Above Bar served as the catalyst for the establishment of many other Congregational churches. As it was put in a history of the Church published in 1909, Above Bar could regard itself as ‘the Alma Mater of Congregationalism in Southampton.’¹² However, it was not until the

⁸ *Romsey Advertiser*, June 26, 1903

⁹ Rev Thomas Hooper, *The Story of English Congregationalism*, (London: Congregational Union of England and Wales, 1907), p.138

¹⁰ The name was changed from ‘The Hampshire Association of Independent Ministers and Churches for the Propagating of the Gospel in the County’ in 1860

¹¹ His father had been one of the deacons of the Church.

¹² S. Stainer, *History of the Above Bar Congregational Church Southampton from 1662 to 1908* (Southampton: Southampton Times, 1909): 139

nineteenth century and the great explosion of Evangelical Nonconformity that new Independent/Congregational churches emerged. The first to do so was Albion Congregational Church, which was formally founded in 1844, by some members from Above Bar who felt that not enough was being done to meet the spiritual needs of those living in St Mary's parish. In a souvenir brochure produced in 1899 to celebrate the golden jubilee of the buildings it then occupied, Albion's origins were described in the following terms:

In the early part of the year 1842, some of the leading members of the Above Bar Congregational Church ... began to feel dissatisfied at the very slow progress their principles as Congregationalists were making in the town; the claims of the growing parish of St Mary, especially, pressed very heavily upon them ... The individuals in question, William and Robert Wakeford, William and Robert Lancaster, Joseph Knight, James Durkin, John Gray, and Samuel Parmiter, set themselves in a prayerful spirit to remedy this state of things.¹³

After two years of rather fraught negotiations, 'about 35 members withdrew from the Above Bar Church to assist in forming the new church.'¹⁴ Albion was initially housed in the old Infirmary building suitably converted for the purposes of worship. Notwithstanding any animosity that might have been generated by this move, the Above Bar pastor was one of the preachers at the opening of the converted Infirmary in 1844. Albion moved to purpose built premises in St Mary Street in 1849.

A few years later, in 1853, Albion experienced discord of its own. This time it was the pastor, Albion's second, Rev Joseph Wyld who precipitated the split:

He was an eloquent and flowery speaker and by his oratory attracted large congregations; very few, however, were added to the church. A lecture he delivered on "Fudge" gave rise to very strong feelings on the part of many of the members; this resulted in the withdrawal of Mr Wyld from the church, after a short pastorate. He at once commenced holding services in the Victoria rooms, to which place a large proportion of the congregation followed him. The present Kingsfield Congregational Church was the outcome of these services.¹⁵

Thus, Kingsfield, like Albion, was born of controversy, acquiring its own buildings in West Marlands in 1861.

By contrast, the birth of Northam Congregational Church seems to have been more harmonious. In the 1850s, Above Bar appointed Rev G.W. Gregg 'to act as a Missionary for the town, and selected Northam, and established him there, by building a Chapel to carry on stated ministrations.'¹⁶ The church became an independent "cause" in 1865. Originally known as Belvidere Independent Chapel, due

¹³ *Albion Church Souvenir 1849-1899 Brochure*:. 5

¹⁴ *Albion Church Souvenir 1849-1899 Brochure*: 9

¹⁵ *Albion Church Souvenir 1849-1899 Brochure*: 17

¹⁶ S. Stanier, *History of the Above Bar Congregational Church Southampton from 1662 to 1908* (Southampton: 1909): 96

to its location in Belvidere Terrace, Northam Congregational Church served a predominantly working class community.

In the case of Freemantle Congregational Church, which was established in 1885, the initiative again came from members of Above Bar, in particular Samuel Bartlett. As it was put in a history of the Church, it 'began in a new growing suburb ... and drew its strength essentially from the expanding middle class,' with its first members coming from the congregations of Above Bar, Albion and Kingsfield who had moved into the neighbourhood.¹⁷ It was situated in a prime location on the corner of Roberts Road and Shirley Road.

Suburbanisation also prompted the foundation of Avenue Congregational Church. Located in a 'select suburb,' near Winn and Westwood Roads, this was an area to which many of the more affluent members from mainly Albion, described as Avenue's 'Mother Church', had moved.¹⁸ They wanted a church closer to where they now lived. In July 1892, a house was purchased at the corner of Alma Road and The Avenue. Initially, services were held in a portable tin church moved from Clifford Street and re-erected in the garden of the house. New church buildings were opened in 1898.

The process of church planting continued into the late nineteenth century, with Above Bar establishing a church in the new suburb of Bitterne Park in 1899.¹⁹ In addition, Above Bar supported missions in Cross Street/Lime Street and Albion at Netley.

Southampton's Congregational Churches between 1901 and 1914

As in other towns and cities, during the Edwardian era Southampton's Congregational churches were prominent features of the built environment (see Figure 1). Above Bar was praised as 'one of the most beautiful [churches] in the district.'²⁰ It had a 'very fine suite of buildings ... with excellent class-rooms and the church ... [was] very well situated'.²¹ The buildings included the Watts Memorial Hall which had been opened in 1875. Above Bar was also the largest Congregational church being able to seat 1200. Albion was described in the 1880s as 'a spacious building adorned in front with a classical pediment, in which is inserted a most useful clock.'²² Here the number of sittings was 1100. Kingsfield was 'a building of red brick with stone dressing ... and a plain but comfortable place of worship', with seats for about 500.²³ Of the suburban churches, by far the most notable was Avenue, 'a large and handsome building', which also gets a mention in Pevsner:-

¹⁷ Charles Barrett, *Freemantle URC Southampton 1885-1985* (1986): 3

¹⁸ Dora Caton, 'Century of Change for Avenue Congregational Church', *Hampshire*, Vol 22(8), June 1992: 40

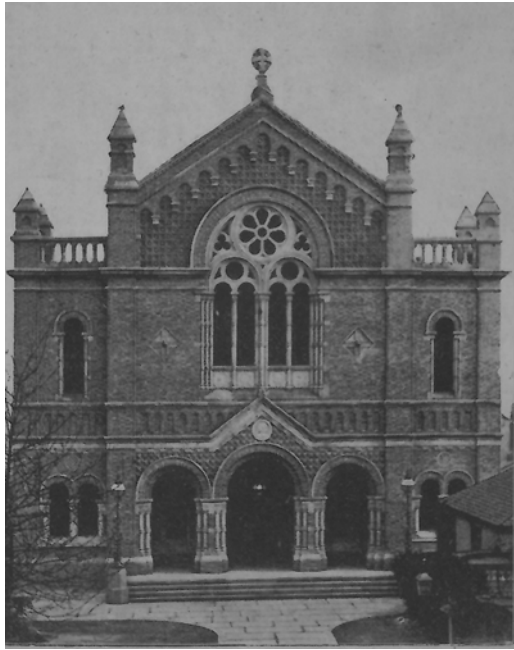
¹⁹ By 1900 there were two further Congregational churches, both situated in the urban district of Itchen, at Bitterne and Pear Tree Green. These, together with Bitterne Park, are outside the scope of this article.

²⁰ *Southampton Annual*, 1901 (Southampton: Topographical Publishing Co, 1901): 27

²¹ *Hampshire Independent*, March 11, 1905.

²² Rev J. Silvester Davies, *A History of Southampton* (Southampton: Gilbert & Co, 1883): 430

²³ *Southampton Annual*, 1901 (Southampton: Topographical Publishing Co, 1901): 27



Above Bar



Albion



Kingsfield



Northam



Avenue



Freemantle

Figure 1: Southampton's Six Edwardian Congregational Churches

Rich neo-Dec; red brick with stone dressings. Short, but strong near-w tower, with small assertive shingled spire and fancy wooden open-work turret over the stairway.²⁴

It could accommodate up to 800 worshippers.

Freemantle was an exact replica of the Congregational church at Ringwood and had seats for about 550. Finally, although Northam was tucked away, it was, nonetheless, a familiar landmark to those who lived in the area. In size it was more modest having seating for approximately 400.

While buildings are important, most clergymen and many churchgoers would stress that it is people rather than bricks and mortar that make a church. Moreover, leadership is a vital ingredient in determining the effectiveness of churches, just as it is in secular organisations. Thus, members of Southampton's Congregational churches, looked to their pastors and deacons, for direction and inspiration. The pastors who served during the Edwardian era are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Pastors of Southampton's Congregational Churches during the Edwardian Era

Church	Pastor	Period of Pastorate
Above Bar	Rev William Frederick Clarkson	1896 – 1902
	Rev George Stephen Samuel Saunders	1904 – 1920
Albion	Rev Henry J. Perkins	1895 – 1903
	Rev Ieuan Maldwyn Jones	1904 – 1917
Kingsfield	Rev Vincett Cook	1890 – 1904
	Rev Robert Ashenhurst	1905 – 1910
	Rev Peter Buchan	1912 – 1917
Avenue	Rev Arthur D. Martin	1894 – 1905
	Rev George E. Startup	1906 – 1909
	Rev Meredith Davies	1910 – 1912
	Rev Henry T. Spencer	1913 – 1929
Northam	Rev James Thompson	1885 – 1907
	Rev Walter Cannon	1908 – 1909
	Rev Thomas Henry Harries	1910 – 1923
Freemantle	Rev Harry J. Howell	1895 – 1901
	Rev David John Benyon	1902 - 1916

As can be seen, most churches enjoyed a reasonable degree of stability, with pastors serving for most of the period. Above Bar and Albion both acquired new pastors in 1904 after fairly lengthy interregnums. In keeping with the democratic principles on which the Congregational churches operated, Rev George Saunders and Rev Ieuan Maldwyn Jones were chosen by substantial majorities of the church members. Given that they both served for relatively long periods, the members obviously made sound

²⁴ *Southampton Annual*, 1901 (Southampton: Topographical Publishing Co, 1901); Nicholas Pevsner and David Lloyd, *Buildings of England: Hampshire and Isle of Wight* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967): 574-5.

choices. In each case, however, they had what, in colloquial language, would be described as a 'difficult act to follow.'

At Above Bar, although Rev William Clarkson's pastorate was a fairly short one, he had undoubtedly made a strong impression. As recorded in a history of the Church, at the time of his departure it was acknowledged that during his time there 'the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ ... [had] been faithfully preached ... [and] in his public and private life he ... [had] set ... an example of consistent and gracious Christian living.' It is also clear from further remarks that his ministry was based on what was described as the 'Old Theology', which would have emphasised the traditional Evangelical tenets of personal conversion and holy living.²⁵

His successor, Rev George Saunders, was relatively experienced having previously served churches in Leicester and Whitby. In a letter from his church at Whitby, which was read at his recognition service, it was stated that 'he preached a lofty ideal of the Christian life and character'.²⁶ Not long after his arrival Rev Saunders, along with many other clergymen of all denominations, was interviewed for a series of profiles of local religious leaders which appeared in the *Hampshire Independent*. Thus, traces of his views on a range of issues have survived and reference is made of some of these later in the article.

At Albion, Rev Henry Perkins was, indisputably, a well loved and respected minister. When, in 1901, he was invited to pastor another church Albion members passed the following resolution:

That this meeting of the church and congregation having learned with deep regret that our dear Pastor ... has under his consideration an 'invitation' from another church to become their Pastor, very heartily and in all sincerity, would assure him of their deep affection and entire confidence in him both as minister and Pastor, and unanimously expressed their earnest hope and prayer that he may be led to continue the great and good work that, by the blessing of God, he had been able to accomplish during the nearly six years of his pastorate at Albion.²⁷

In the event, and much to relief of the members, Rev Perkins turned down the invitation and remained at Albion for another three years.

Following Rev Perkins' eventual departure, the pastorate passed to Rev Maldwyn Jones. On the basis of the sermons he preached on his first Sunday as pastor, he was described as having 'a good pulpit presence ... and ... a remarkably fine voice'. The content of his sermons was also deemed to be 'of great power and of much practical helpfulness'.²⁸ Together with Rev George Saunders, he became one of the leaders of Congregationalism in Edwardian Southampton.

²⁵ S. Stanier, *History of the Above Bar Congregational Church Southampton from 1662 to 1908* (Southampton: Southampton Times Co, 1909): 259-62

²⁶ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, December 17, 1904

²⁷ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, January 5? 1901

²⁸ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, September 10, 1904

At Kingsfield, Rev Vincett Cook was one of Southampton's 'elder statesmen' amongst Congregational pastors. This was acknowledged by his inclusion in the local religious leaders' series. After leaving Kingsfield in 1904, he remained in the area, serving as pastor of Bitterne Congregational Church. His successor, Rev Robert Ashenhurst came from a pastorate in Belfast. 'Having done excellent work there ... his leaving as ... testified by the Belfast daily Press ... [was] the occasion of deep concern and regret to the Belfast Church, and of very many in the Congregational body in that city.'²⁹ In his 'impressive' inaugural sermon which focused on encouraging the weak, he asked his congregation 'to pray that they might that morning go forth with confidence and power, and to feel that they had been dealing with Christ.'³⁰ After five years, Rev Ashenhurst and his family moved on 'with the sincere wishes of the people at Kingsfield for their future welfare.'³¹ His departure was followed by a very lengthy interregnum, with his successor, Rev Peter Buchan, a student from New College, not being installed until August 1912. In the report on the warm welcome given to the new pastor, reference was made to the fact that the church had passed through 'hard and troublesome times.'³² From the available evidence it is not clear what the problems might have been, but they may have served as a deterrent to potential pastors. Nonetheless, Rev Buchan served for five productive years and as he remarked at his farewell event: 'he bore very hearty testimony to the happy relations which had existed during his ... ministry, and to the loyal support he had received.'³³

One church which experienced a very rapid turnover of pastors was Avenue. This was due primarily to the ill health of those appointed, rather than the tensions which could arise between the pastor, on the one hand, and deacons and members, on the other. 'During the Summer of 1905 the Rev A.D. Martin became very unwell, and after a period of "sick leave" was compelled by illness to leave Avenue.'³⁴ His successor, the Rev George Startup had to resign after only three years 'owing to prolonged ill-health and other difficulties.'³⁵ At this point, in the words of the Church Secretary, 'it was thought advisable to allow a period of time to elapse before selecting another pastor.' In due course, an extremely promising senior student from Hackney College, Meredith Davies, was chosen. As indicated in the press report of his ordination service in October 1910, by then:

[He] ... had taken thirteen Sunday services with increasing power and blessing. The congregations were increasing, the offertories were increasing, the church was increasing. All the church organisations were in a healthy state, and the officers looked forward hopefully and prayerfully to a season of great spiritual prosperity.³⁶

²⁹ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, April 8, 1905

³⁰ *Hampshire Independent*, May 6, 1905

³¹ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, December 3, 1910

³² *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, August 31, 1912

³³ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, May 16, 1917. From Southampton, Rev Buchan moved to Bolton to continue his ministerial career.

³⁴ Dora Caton, *A Short History of the Avenue Congregational Church*, c1968: 12

³⁵ Dora Caton, *A Short History of the Avenue Congregational Church*, c1968: 15

³⁶ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, October 22, 1910

According to the Church historian, all the evidence suggests that Rev Meredith Davies was an ideal pastor for the Avenue. His ministry got off to an excellent start and he was 'much loved'. Unfortunately, however, it was again to be cut short through a 'serious illness' which was diagnosed as tuberculosis and he had to resign in early 1912. Eventually, in Rev Henry Spencer the church secured the stability for which it had yearned, as well as someone who possessed the attributes of an effective minister. As Rev Maldwyn Jones from Albion put it in welcoming the new pastor at his recognition service, 'he had heard Mr Spencer described as an able teacher, a capable minister, and an earnest Christian worker, and he did not think the work of any minister could be effective unless he possessed these qualifications.'³⁷

The incidence of illness amongst Avenue's pastors, while exceptional, does reflect the stresses associated with the role and the need for a strong constitution and equable temperament to cope with the demands involved. One pastor, who appears to have exemplified these characteristics was Rev James Thompson at Northam, another of the Congregationalists interviewed for the newspaper articles on local religious leaders. A 'large' man in every respect, his very long pastorate, 22 years, was testament to both the high regard in which he was held and his 'staying power' in what was a particularly challenging location. He was also able to make his mark, to the extent that he was 'affectionally styled "the Bishop of Northam"'.³⁸ That said, he appears to have displayed considerable humility in serving as pastor. As the *Hampshire Independent* put it: 'The work there [i.e. Northam] is impressed with his personality and the pastor and the church have one feature in common – they are both unostentatious.'³⁹ However, in the end, even Rev Thompson had to retire due to 'failing health'. His replacement, Rev Walter Cannon, who had previously 'laboured for ... two years in the districts of East End and Pilley' near Lymington, served only briefly.⁴⁰ The arrival of Rev Thomas Harries in 1910 was greeted with enthusiasm, with his work as pastor at his previous church in South Wales being 'eulogised' in a letter from the secretary of the South Pembrokeshire Congregational Union, which was read at his recognition service.⁴¹

At Freemantle, Rev Harry Howell's departure in 1901, again due to illness, was much regretted since his personal qualities of 'intense spirituality and earnestness ... [had] made a deep impression' on all who came into contact with him.⁴² The new pastor, however, Rev David Benyon was to be equally well respected. Between his arrival in August and his recognition service in November, it was evident that the services of 'a sincere and faithful pastor' had been secured. As reported, although Rev Beynon had 'only been in Southampton a few weeks, he ... [had already] won the respect and esteem of a large circle of friends.'⁴³ The fact that he remained for many years indicates that, in this case, first impressions were vindicated.

³⁷ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, July 19, 1913

³⁸ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, December 21, 1907

³⁹ *Hampshire Independent*, March 25, 1905

⁴⁰ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, May 9, 1908. He moved to Canada in June 1909

⁴¹ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, February 5, 1910

⁴² *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, January 12, 1901. He had accepted a call to the church at Stratford.

⁴³ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, November 9, 1901

While pastors generally made the preparation of sermons and how they performed in the pulpit their priority, most recognised the need to engage in pastoral work; to participate in church events; and to contribute to other aspects of church life. As the Rev Maldwyn Jones put it at the commencement of his ministry in Southampton:

... he considered preparation for the pulpit was of chief importance, but he hoped to assist in the work of the various societies, and as he believed in recreation they would find him taking a share in the pleasures of young men.⁴⁴

What these pleasures might have been are not specified, but no doubt his audience would have known. One can assume that they included sport and possibly outlets for intellectual recreation, including debates and discussions on the issues of the day. He and a number of other pastors, including Rev George Saunders and Rev Vincett Cooke, were also in demand as visiting speakers at events organised by Congregational churches in Southampton and beyond. Thus, there was a considerable degree of collaboration between churches and amongst pastors. Moreover, with the use by the press of phrases, such as 'eloquent preacher' and 'brilliant successor', it would not be going too far to suggest that, with respect to certain pastors, there was something akin to a 'celebrity culture'.

For Congregational churches to function harmoniously pastors also had to establish and sustain a good rapport with the deacons of their church. Deacons shared responsibility with the pastor for the well-being of the church and contributed to the administrative function, with one of their number often serving as church secretary and another as church treasurer. One of the most important roles of the diaconate (i.e. the deacons collectively) was to ensure that all aspects of church life ran smoothly during an interregnum which, as has been indicated, could last for a considerable period. They also had the major task of identifying and inviting prospective pastors to visit the church and preach and subsequently taking soundings amongst the members as to their suitability and ultimately whether or not they should be invited to pastor the church. In the case of the interregnum at Above Bar:

After the resignation of the late Minister [Rev William Clarkson], a rather long period transpired before the appointment of a successor, which continued close upon two years. Calmness and carefulness were judiciously exercised [by the deacons] during the vacancy in making inquiries and gaining information that would lead to the choice of one who would commend himself as suitable to the honoured position. The pulpit was adequately supplied during the interval with a long series of different Ministers from all parts of the country, the number reaching nearly one hundred ... During the interval nothing of a special nature occurred, but all the services and organisations moved along at their accustomed pace.⁴⁵

Invitations to potential pastors, however, might be rejected, thus the deacons had to sustain the church through possible disappointments. For example, following the illness of Rev Meredith Davies at Avenue, during a 22 month interregnum 'they were able to decide to send invitations to two good men and true ... [but] those invitations

⁴⁴ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, September 4, 1904

⁴⁵ S. Stanier, *History of Above Bar Congregational Church from 1662 to 1908* (Southampton: Southampton Times Co, 1909).

were not accepted.’⁴⁶ Deacons also needed to take account of the fact that the Congregationalists’ ‘method of choosing a minister had its attendant dangers ... [since] they were apt to judge the man by the sermons they heard, whereas they ought to take into account the whole considerations which governed the ministry.’⁴⁷

In undertaking their taxing responsibilities, the deacons clearly required the trust of the church members and the skills and attributes to undertake what were extremely important and often sensitive functions. Consequently, it would not be an exaggeration to describe them as ‘the great and the good’ of their respective congregations.

Deacons were selected from, and elected by, the membership of the church. Being a church member signified both a commitment to and an acceptance of the veracity of foundational Christian beliefs. To be added to the roll of members of a particular church it was necessary to either make a profession of faith or transfer formally from the roll of another church. For Congregational churches membership was taken very seriously and at this time was still regarded as a ‘momentous step’.⁴⁸ Thus, the number of members is generally regarded as a fairly accurate guide to the standing of a church, at least in quantitative terms. Consequently, an indication of the relative strengths of Southampton’s six churches can be obtained from the membership data in Table 2.

Table 2: Membership of Southampton’s Congregational Churches 1901-1914

Year	Above Bar ¹	Albion ²	Kingsfield	Avenue	Northam	Free-mantle	Total
1901	353	525	111	219	120	180	1508
1902	355	547	105	237	117	197	1558
1903	381	505	104	248	112	213	1563
1904	387	507	90	258	101	208	1551
1905	387	507	90	258	101	208	1551
1906	418	479	99	295	104	221	1616
1907	413	469	90	285	99	170	1526
1908	414	465	89	270	102	184	1524
1909	423	459	92	270	98	188	1530
1910	436	447	84	293	88	188	1531
1911	439	445	84	293	82	188	1531
1912	445	456	88	326	87	218	1620
1913	445	466	84	326	87	218	1626
1914	427	466	92	326	90	218	1619

Notes

1. Includes membership of Bitterne Park, which increased from 69 in 1901 to 140 in 1914.
2. Includes membership of Netley

⁴⁶ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, July 19, 1913

⁴⁷ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, July 19, 1913. These were the words of Mr Hamilton, a deacon at Avenue Congregational Church, on the occasion of Rev Spencer’s recognition in 1913.

⁴⁸ H.F. Keep, ‘The Musings of a Semi-Victorian’, *Congregational Quarterly*, Vol XV (1937): 50

Source: *HCU Annual Reports* various years

However, the figures in the table still need to be treated with a degree of caution. They were compiled from returns made by churches to the HCU, which were not always submitted. In these instances the figures for the previous year were used. Hence, there are some years where membership appears to be stagnant. Sudden decreases in memberships were almost certainly due to the pruning of the membership roll with lapsed members being removed. This sometimes coincided with the arrival of a new pastor.

Notwithstanding the qualifications, the data in Table 2, confirm the position of Albion and Above Bar as the 'big hitters' of the three town centre churches during the Edwardian era, with there being a degree of 'friendly rivalry' between them. Alongside them, Kingsfield's membership does not look impressive. That said, it undoubtedly had a particularly loyal and tenacious membership which sustained it during the 'troublesome times' mentioned earlier. Moreover, with a slight increase in membership between 1913 and 1914, there is some evidence of the positive impact of Rev Peter Buchan's ministry.

Overall, small declines in the membership of the town centre churches were offset by growth in the suburban churches, particularly Avenue, Bitterne Park and, to a lesser extent, Freemantle. This was to be expected as the process of suburbanisation took hold.

As can be seen, there was an increase in total membership from just over 1,500 in 1901 to a little over 1,600 by the end of the period. However, when the overall increase of Southampton's population is taken into account this represented a relative decline from approximately 2.4 per cent of the adult (18 plus) population at the time of the 1901 census to 2.0 per cent in 1911.

How far the size of a church's membership was related to the numbers attending services is difficult to judge. There were no surveys of church attendance in Southampton during the Edwardian era of the kind sponsored by local newspapers in Basingstoke and Portsmouth. Nonetheless, it is likely that, as elsewhere, the number of non-members at services would have been substantial. This would have been the case at regular as well as special services. Many would have regarded themselves as adherents, deriving part of their personal identity from association with a particular church, but not wishing to take the critical step of becoming members.

To accommodate the needs of members and adherents, as well as serving as a means of outreach, all of the Congregational churches spawned a host of satellite organisations. The most visible and pervasive of these were the Sunday schools. Along with statistical data relating to membership, churches were required to submit details of the number of Sunday school scholars on their books. These are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Number of Scholars Attached to Southampton's Congregational Sunday Schools 1901-1914

Year	Above Bar ¹	Albion ²	Kingsfield	Avenue ³	Northam	Free-mantle	Total
1901	731	685	86	366	310	344	2522
1902	812	687	98	400	306	344	2647
1903	890	670	121	326	235	344	2536
1904	794	701	90	552	239	366	2742
1905	715	701	90	552	239	366	2663
1906	820	799	109	540	200	443	2911
1907	869	792	100	576	262	465	3064
1908	855	754	109	584	285	452	3039
1909	871	724	73	584	299	390	2941
1910	812	690	77	584	309	390	2862
1911	801	672	77	584	330	390	2854
1912	812	698	100	626	368	340	2944
1913	812	620	130	626	368	340	2896
1914	812	620	130	626	368	340	2896

Notes

1. Includes Bitterne Park and Cross Street (to 1902) and Lime Street (1903-).
2. Includes Netley
3. Includes Portswood (from 1904)

Source: HCU Annual Reports

Reaching a peak of just over 3000 scholars in 1907 and 1908, through their Sunday schools Congregational churches had contact with just under 10 per cent of Southampton's population aged between 5 and 17. Although all of those on the books would not have attended regularly, Sunday schools still provided the churches with one of their most important means of engaging with members of the community that might otherwise be beyond their reach. Here one particular success story was an initiative of Avenue Congregational Church, specifically in the adjacent area of Portswood. As explained in the Church history:

Our Church, as already recorded, was in a select residential neighbourhood, but not far off was, acute poverty. In 1901 a room was acquired ... and an afternoon Sunday school was opened. Very rapidly numbers reached 80 and additional accommodation was taken over ... The Sunday School had grown so large by Midsummer 1909 [to over 200 scholars] that the Education Committee of Southampton was approached and agreed to the use of two classrooms at Portswood Council School on Sunday afternoons.⁴⁹

Another indicator of the success of the Sunday schools in Southampton was the fact that Albion was often near the top of the league table of the percentage of Sunday School scholars attending classes, which was produced annually by the HCU. Such endeavours ensured that while learning the basics of Christianity, children were

⁴⁹ Dora Caton, *A Short history of the Avenue Congregational Church* (c1968): 10-11

inducted, willingly or otherwise, into some of the language in which religious discourse was conducted. Thus, they contributed to what Callum Brown has characterised as ‘discursive Christianity’.⁵⁰

However, Congregationalists, like other denominations, found it particularly difficult to facilitate the transition of Sunday school scholars into full membership of the church. This was described in the Annual Report of the Sunday School Department of the HCU for 1907 as ‘the leakage between the School and the Church.’ In attempting to stem the haemorrhage, teachers were ‘reminded that the crown of their work ... [was] to bring the children into real personal touch with Our Living Lord.’⁵¹ With a similar goal, churches also sponsored organisations and activities, which were specifically targeted at ‘young people’. These included branches of the Christian Endeavour movement, which had been founded in the USA at the beginning of the 1890s. With its emphasis on spiritual witnessing, prayer, discussion, training for public service, literary effort and social intercourse, it proved to be particularly popular in the UK. In Southampton, Albion, Above Bar, Kingsfield and Avenue all had branches.

Serving a similar purpose, but with a particular socio-religious bias, were local branches of the Band of Hope, the principal temperance organisation. Temperance was a cause with which Congregationalists were particularly associated. Thus, not surprisingly, they were keen to embrace and support any initiatives dedicated to this end. It was the view of many that: ‘Even if all adult Church members ... [were] not Total Abstainers all our children ought to be receiving instruction as to the evils of the drink and of the drink trade.’⁵²

For adults, the penumbra of satellite organisations and activities was designed to meet not only their spiritual but also their social, educational and material needs. Thus, bible classes and prayer meetings were complemented with Pleasant Sunday Afternoon gatherings and organisations, such as the Albion Guild. A particularly good example of an educational initiative of a self-help variety was Northam’s Mutual Improvement Society. During his time as pastor, Rev James Thompson was an assiduous attendee and often presided at meetings of the Society, at which all manner of topics were discussed from ‘joy’ as found in scripture to whether the tongue or the pen was the greatest power for good or evil. Material needs were addressed through organising Sick and Needy Funds and Penny Banks, as was the case at Above Bar’s Lime Street Mission,⁵³ and soup kitchens, with that provided by Albion being especially well patronised.

In addition to their regular Sunday services, morning and evening, Sunday school classes and meetings of their satellite organisations, Congregational churches were active in organising a variety of special events. These included social gatherings, organ recitals, concerts, musical evenings, entertainments, public meetings and bazaars, some of which were themed. Of particular note, were those organised by Albion in 1900, which had an oriental theme (see Figure 2), and in April 1909, when

⁵⁰ Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001): 12

⁵¹ *HCU Annual Report for 1907*, Hampshire Record Office (HRO) 127M94/62/52: 47

⁵² *HCU Annual Report for 1907* HRO 127M94/62/52: 47

⁵³ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, December 26, 1908

the theme was the Indian Empire. Church events of this kind were often fully reported in the local press thereby demonstrating to the public at large that the churches were very much 'going concerns'.



Figure 2: Albion Congregational Church's Oriental Bazaar 1900

Churches were also particularly keen to celebrate anniversaries, both of their foundation and that of their Sunday school. The celebrations generated a considerable degree of enthusiasm, with special services; public meetings; musical contributions; and visiting preachers and speakers, often of some note.⁵⁴ Of all the church anniversaries that fell during the Edwardian era, arguably the one with the greatest historical resonance and significance, especially for Congregationalists, was Above Bar's 250th in 1912. In the words of the *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*: 'The Nonconformist community have joyfully commemorated the Ejection of 1662, in which the foundations of a great movement were laid, and congratulations have poured upon the Above Bar Church ... which has this year celebrated its 250th anniversary'.⁵⁵ As was customary with 'red letter' anniversaries, it was accompanied with fund raising and capital projects. For Above Bar, these were the completion of the Robinson Memorial Hall, King Street Mission hall and the redecoration and repair of the church itself.

To publicise their anniversaries and other special events, as well as regular services, many of the churches advertised in local newspapers (see Figure 3). Since many Congregationalists were Liberals, in Southampton the Liberal supporting *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express* was the favoured medium for this purpose.

⁵⁴ The members of Freemantle Congregational Church observed their anniversary in April; Albion in September; Kingsfield and Northam in October; and Above Bar and Avenue in November.

⁵⁵ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, January 4, 1913

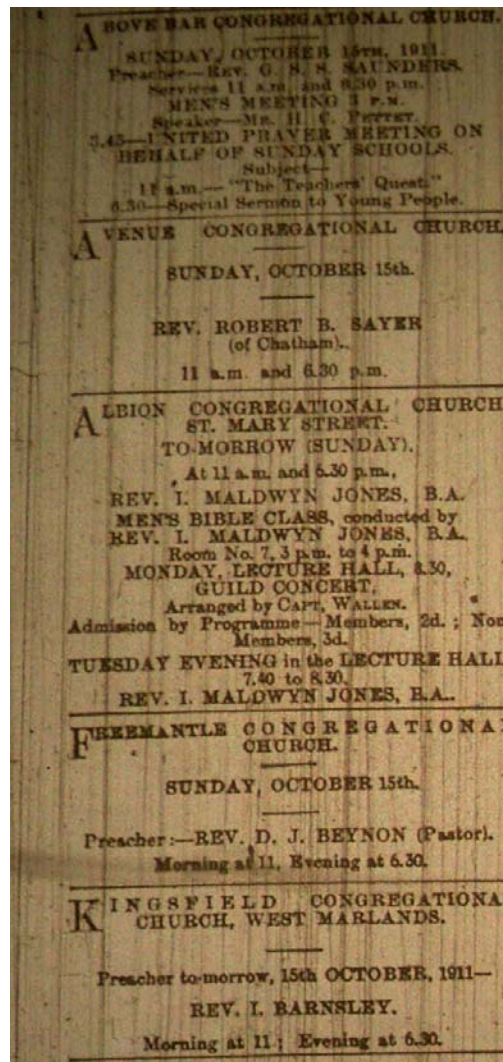


Figure 3: Advertisements for Southampton's Congregational Churches

What today would be called 'marketing and public relations' was also facilitated through the publication and distribution of Church magazines. The *Albion Messenger*, for example, was described as 'an illustrated magazine for the homes of the people.' The churches were also outward looking, to the extent that their pastors often spoke at events organised by other Congregational churches in the county. Moreover, several pastors and laymen served as office holders of the HCU. Rev Vincett Cook, for example, was Chairman for the year 1905 and Rev George Saunders was Secretary from 1909. In addition, two laymen from Southampton chaired the HCU, Mr H.C. Chaplin from Avenue in 1910 and Mr P.M Randall from Above Bar in 1914. Half yearly meetings of the HCU were hosted by Above Bar in the autumn of 1903; by Avenue, autumn 1904 and spring 1911; and by Albion, autumn 1907. These were significant occasions and received a considerable amount of publicity.

In addition, the Southampton churches played their part when it was the turn of the Middle District to organise the bazaars on which the HCU depended for raising the funds needed to support the weaker churches mainly in rural areas. These were held in Southampton in 1901, 1905 and 1910. Both the 1905 and 1910 bazaars had a floral theme. Held in the Watts Memorial Hall, the stalls in 1910 were:

... decorated with various emblems of nature. The lilac stall was managed by friends from Albion, Romsey, and Stockbridge churches, that representing gorse by friends from Freemantle, Bursledon, Hythe, Kingsfield and Pear Tree Green churches; genista by friends from Above Bar, Bitterne Park, and Northam churches; rhododendron by friends from the Avenue, Bitterne, Cadnam and Totton churches; lily of the valley, by the United churches, while the azalea stall was confined to refreshments, arranged by the Above Bar Tea Committee.⁵⁶

Such a theme was somewhat anodyne, by comparison with that of the Reformation, the subject of an equivalent bazaar held in Basingstoke in 1903. Supplementing the bazaars, individual Congregationalists also contributed to the funds of the HCU.⁵⁷

Not only were the Congregational churches in close communion with each other both within Southampton and beyond, but they also collaborated extensively with the other Free Churches. To this end, they were members of the Southampton Free Church Council and Southampton Evangelical Nonconformist Council, with pastors serving as office holders, and participated in events organised by these bodies. Examples included pulpit exchanges; a week of prayer held at the beginning of each year; and in May 1902, a mission at the Drill Hall led by the well known and highly regarded evangelist, Gipsy Smith.⁵⁸

Thus, there are many grounds for suggesting that Congregationalism was thriving in Edwardian Southampton. All six churches aspired to be dynamic and caring, motivated by a strong desire to provide their members with, and offer others, spiritual and social sustenance whenever it was required. Congregationalism, like Christianity in general, was seen as force for good. Nevertheless, during the Edwardian era Southampton's Congregational churches were faced with a variety of challenges arising from the changing nature of society and the questioning of Christian beliefs and morality.

Confronting the Challenges

Three challenges in particular are explored here. These relate to modes of outreach and evangelism; engagement with the working class; and involvement in public affairs or, as it was often expressed, the pursuit of the social gospel.

For most pastors and church members their core mission remained the conversion of those who were outside of the church. To put it in secular terms, their primary task was the recruitment of members. Although special evangelistic missions were still seen as having a role to play, their importance declined during the first decade of the twentieth century to be replaced by other initiatives.

⁵⁶ *Hampshire Independent*, May 7, 1910

⁵⁷ In 1907, members of Above Bar contributed £32 12s 3d; Avenue, £23 0s 3d; Albion, £19 2s 2d; Kingsfield, £5 6s 1d; Freemantle, £5 1s 7d; and Northam, £1 2s 6d.

⁵⁸ A greatly loved evangelist, Rodney Smith was always known as "Gipsy" a reference to his background.

At Above Bar, Rev George Saunders introduced people's services, which were held on the last Sunday evening of each month. In his words: 'At these meetings the whole service is printed, and the intention is to secure the attendance of those who are not usually in attendance at a place of worship.'⁵⁹ In addition, after the evening service on the second Sunday of the month he held a 'social hour' for young men and women. These continued throughout his ministry.

When asked about 'the alleged falling off of attendances at places of worship' during the interview for the local religious leaders' series, Rev Saunders expressed the view that:

Speaking generally, I think the mind of the nation, as a whole, is not averse to religion. It is decidedly averse to dogma, but not to the religion of Jesus Christ, as portrayed in the Gospel, and as revealed in the lives of his disciples. While this gives us cause for great thankfulness, at the same time it is a trumpet call to the Church to brace herself together in order to meet this apparent need. Men need Christ, they need the truth and the life which Christ only can give, and it will be to the peril of the churches if they do not seize this opportunity and rise to the greatness of the occasion. Men are not, in the main, unbelievers, and are ready to acknowledge the claims of Christ.⁶⁰

This may have been an overly optimistic stance, since the churches clearly felt the need to supplement outreach through their services and the preaching of the Word with other activities. To this end, many of their satellite organisations and church events and activities were seen as making a potential contribution to recruitment as well as retention. How effective this was is difficult to assess, but membership data suggest that the churches had probably reached a plateau as far as their reach was concerned.

A second challenge was the perceived bias of the churches towards the middle class and their failure to engage effectively with members of the working class. This is certainly the view of historians, such as E.R. Wickham and Kenneth Inglis.⁶¹ However, more recent studies have shown that in the words of Hugh McLeod, earlier historians had made 'exaggerated claims for the extent of working class alienation from the churches and from religion in general.'⁶² That said, social class was a particular issue for Congregationalists because as the *Hampshire Independent* put it in a question to Rev Saunders: 'Is it correct that members of Congregational Churches are drawn almost entirely from the middle classes? I think that is the prevalent impression.' In responding, the Above Bar pastor, argued that Congregationalism had 'a message for all classes' and that missions, such as one in Leeds, showed 'emphatically that Congregationalism reach[ed] all sections of society.'⁶³

⁵⁹ *Hampshire Independent*, March 11, 1905

⁶⁰ *Hampshire Independent*, March 11, 1905

⁶¹ E.R. Wickham, *Church and People in an Industrial City* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1957); K.S. Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England* (Toronto: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963).

⁶² Hugh McLeod, *Religion and Society in England, 1850-1914* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996): 222

⁶³ *Hampshire Independent*, March 11, 1905

In dealing with this issue, he could have drawn on an example that was closer to home, namely Northam Congregational Church. In reply to a similar question, Rev James Thompson, response was summarised as follows:

... Northam Congregational Church is attended exclusively by the working classes. Mr Thompson is proud of this fact. There are no “kid gloves” congregations in Northam. The deacons, as well as the members are working men. As Mr Thompson has thus been nineteen years in touch with the members, he knows a good deal about them, and it will be extremely pleasing to religious workers to learn that no lugubrious fears or opinions have been born from his ... experience of Christianity among the working classes. “Complaints have been made that the working classes don’t attend public worship,” he said, when questioned upon the subject, “but they do in Northam”.⁶⁴

However, being located in relatively poor area meant that money was an ongoing concern and in 1907 Northam had to approach the HCU for financial assistance. This was an unusual step for an urban church and it was taken for the following reasons:

We beg to inform you with deep regret of the resignation of our beloved pastor, the Rev J. Thompson, who closed his ministry on December 31st, and who for the last 22 years has bravely held the Pastorate at Northam, the cause of his resignation being failing health and the financial burden connected with carrying on the work of the Church ... The absence of Mr Thompson’s personality will entail a great financial loss to the Church, and we therefore ask for a Grant to help us in our time of need, and hope that with the settlement of a new Pastor the Church will go forward as in the past.⁶⁵

Thereafter, Northam received an annual grant of £25. One consequence of this grant aid is that it is possible to monitor what subsequently happened in quantitative terms from the data supplied in the reports which the church was required to submit annually to the HCU (see Table 4).

Table 4: Northam Congregational Church, Various Data 1907-1913

Year	Members	Attendance	Income	Grant
1907	99	185	£164	£25
1908	102	161	£150	£25
1909	98	134	£195	£25
1910	83	150	£190	£25
1911	82	135	£229	£25
1912	87	141	£198	£25
1913	87	142	£317	£25

Source: *HCU Annual Reports* various years

⁶⁴ *Hampshire Independent*, March 25, 1905

⁶⁵ *HCU Annual Report for 1907* HRO 127M94/62/52: 31

Although Northam clearly struggled to retain and recruit members, nonetheless its performance in an ‘inner city’ area was noteworthy, especially in terms of generating income and halting the decline in attendance. Following the installation of Rev Thomas Harries there was a concerted effort to engage with the community. As reported:

Excellent work is being carried on here under difficult conditions. 1,000 copies of a little leaflet, “The People’s Friend,” are distributed in the neighbourhood every month. Extensive repairs calling for a heavy financial outlay have been accomplished, and the cost has been met through the generous assistance of several friends.⁶⁶

Moreover, as the figures in Table 3 illustrate, Northam’s Sunday school was particularly successful gaining scholars in the years just prior to the First World War. The example of Northam shows that with vigorous leadership and a hardworking membership, it was possible for a church serving a working class community to, at least, hold its own. However, it was perhaps ‘the exception that proved the rule’ that, in the main, working class adults were far less likely to attend church than middle class.

A final challenge was the extent to which the church should concern itself with public affairs and political issues. There were some who felt that by embracing what had become known in theological terms as the social gospel, ‘an attempt to change human beings by transforming their environment rather than touching their hearts’, the church would lose sight of its primary mission, namely the conversion of individuals.⁶⁷ Many Congregationalists, while attracted to the cause of social action, still acknowledged the claims of the personal gospel. For them, the priority was to get the balance right.

This felt need to blend the traditional Evangelical message of personal salvation with a political awareness, or the individualism of the nineteenth century with the emerging collectivism of the twentieth, can be seen in the remarks of Rev George Saunders at the time of his accession to the pastorate of Above Bar. After making clear that his preaching would have an authentic ‘Evangelical note’, which included the proclamation that Jesus Christ ‘saves man from sin, through the power of His Cross,’ he went on to say that:

It is by the application of the teaching of Jesus to the manifold life of today that we shall find the solution of all the problems which are pressing so heavily upon us. Hence you will not expect me to be silent in reference to the great social, political and national questions which affect for good or ill the welfare of our town and country.⁶⁸

In his interview for the local religious leaders’ series, he went a little further:

⁶⁶ *HCU Annual Report for 1911* HRO 127M94/62/56: 28

⁶⁷ D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989): 211.

⁶⁸ S. Stainer, *History of Above Bar Congregational Church from 1662 to 1908* (Southampton: Southampton Times Co, 1909).

I have spoken on Liberal platforms. I think a minister should be granted the liberty which any other individual enjoys. I do not believe in the introduction of party politics into the pulpit, but I think the pulpit should state very clearly great principles and should not be afraid to apply them to every department of national life.⁶⁹

Like Rev George Saunders, Rev Maldwyn Jones also felt it appropriate for pastors to express an opinion on contemporary issues. In his first Sunday evening sermon at Albion, he commented:

I shall deem it my privilege to view the problems agitating the national and social life of today in the light of the principles of ... [the] Gospel [of Christ].⁷⁰

Similarly, at his ordination service, Rev Meredith Davies expressed his belief in both the 'redemptive Gospel ... which grappled with sin in its stronghold, in the will and moral life of man' and the social gospel. The latter required 'the Church ... to affirm the broad principles of the Kingdom [of God] in relation to the dominant tendencies and problems of the age.'⁷¹

At a more personal level, in reply to a question posed during his interview for the local religious leader's series: 'Do you think social work should go hand in hand with purely religious work?' Rev Vincett Cook observed:

Why not? Social work is religious work. Our great founder, Jesus Christ, fed the hungry, as well as preached his evangel. Indeed, the relief of physical distress was part of that evangel, and elimination here means mutilation.⁷²

Thus, it could be said that many of Southampton's Congregational pastors, if not all, subscribed to the view that religion, on the one hand, and politics and social issues, on the other should not be kept in watertight compartments. That said, it still left open the question of how best to harmonise the two. Clearly churches could, and did, pursue social goals, such as the amelioration of poverty through self-help initiatives; temperance; and Sunday observance. Moreover, pastors were prepared to speak out on matters of public concern when moved to do so. But how much further should they go in pursuing political and social goals?

Some Congregationalists believed that in forwarding the social gospel it was necessary to take an active part in public affairs by serving on public bodies. At least one pastor, Rev Spencer, had done so prior to coming to Southampton. As he commented on the occasion of his public recognition:

He knew what it was to be a member of the Education Committee and of the Board of Guardians and to serve the town in various ways. But the Avenue

⁶⁹ *Hampshire Independent*, March 1905

⁷⁰ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, September 10, 1904

⁷¹ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, October 22, 1910

⁷² *Hampshire Independent*, April 15, 1905

and the mission at Portswood must come first. When these had been attended to, whatever time he had to spare would be given to the town and district.⁷³

However, from the available evidence, it seems to have been relatively rare for Southampton's Congregational pastors to serve on public bodies.

Insofar as a church had a high profile in the public realm, this was more often through the activities of deacons than pastors. A number served on the borough council, with by far the most high profile being Colonel Edward Bance. He was a Liberal councillor from 1874 to 1889 and then served on the aldermanic bench until 1913. He was also mayor in 1890, 1904 and 1910. On the occasion of his being appointed mayor for the second time in 1904, a civic service was held at Avenue Congregational Church, where he was senior deacon, thereby symbolising the fusion of the civic and the sacred. At his funeral in 1925, the pastor of Avenue Congregational Church, who was still Rev Henry Spencer, praised him as someone:

... who did very much more than his share of the business of the town. Who gave great intelligence, devoted zeal and unstinted labour to its development and government, who became an acknowledged leader in two of its important churches [at Albion, prior to moving to Avenue], and one who, moreover, was not absorbed in those multifarious activities to the detriment of the sanctity of home life nor the amenities of wide and deep friendship.⁷⁴

He went on to highlight 'the example he set of generous and sacrificial giving' to the Church' and his regular attendance at Sunday services and in his closing words echoed St Paul: 'Edward Bance, farewell: Thou has fought the good fight, hast finished the course, and kept the faith.'⁷⁵

A second example of a Congregationalist who devoted his long life 'unselfishly to many good works' was John Atlee Hunt.⁷⁶ At the time of his death in December 1906, he was senior deacon of Albion Congregational Church and for many years he had been superintendent of the Sunday School and choir master. In the public sphere, 'his zeal for educational progress was well known' and he was the last chairman of Southampton School Board, which was disbanded in 1903 under the provision of the Education Act 1902.⁷⁷ He then served as a co-opted member of the Educational Committee, of which he was Vice-Chairman. In summarising John Hunt's public service, Rev Maldwyn Jones observed that: 'When a Christian man dies, the community is the poorer'.⁷⁸ This clearly encapsulates the view that, for motivated individuals, it was possible to rise to the challenge of fusing faith with good works through service in the public realm. John Hunt and Edward Bance both embodied the principle of Christian service and can be seen as exponents of at least one strand of the social gospel.

⁷³ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, July 19, 1913

⁷⁴ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, July 11, 1925

⁷⁵ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, July 11, 1925

⁷⁶ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, December 21, 1906

⁷⁷ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, December 21, 1906

⁷⁸ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, December 21, 1906

With respect to the challenges as a whole it could be argued that they ‘kept the churches on their toes’. Indeed it was Rev Peter Buchan’s belief that ‘difficulties had a mission in life.’⁷⁹ However, pursuit of this mission required not only tenacity and flexibility but also an acute awareness that the distinctive Christian, and indeed Congregationalist, message could easily be compromised and undermined by too close an association with the secular world.

Conclusion

Overall, Congregational churches, along with those of other denominations, made a spirited contribution to Southampton’s socio-political culture during the Edwardian era. Their presence and influence were felt not only by their members and adherents, but also the wider community, to an extent that is difficult to envisage today. Thus, it would not be going too far to suggest that various strands of Congregationalism were woven into the fabric of Southampton’s social life in the first decade of the twentieth century. Of these strands, three in particular resonated with the temper of Edwardian society.

The first strand was that of service. At a time when the role of public bodies in meeting need was relatively limited, Congregational churches symbolised the Victorian ethos of philanthropic and charitable endeavour and self-help on which much provision still depended. As they increasingly saw their mission in holistic terms, they were keen to create opportunities for meeting a wide range of needs in ways illustrated earlier in the article. The theme of service was to the fore in the remarks made by Rev Meredith Davies at the anniversary of the Avenue Congregational Church in 1910: ‘They were entering another year of service, and he thought they were doing so with a certain amount of confidence and joy.’⁸⁰

A second strand was earnestness, a further legacy of the Victorian era. Congregationalists personified a serious mindedness when it came to addressing the issues of the day. This was seen most clearly in the promotion of the social gospel. As Rev William Miles, pastor of Buckland Congregational Church, Portsmouth, observed, when speaking at Kingsfield’s 54th anniversary gathering in 1907: ‘the Word of God had a message applicable to all the social evils and problems of our times.’⁸¹ Indeed, he went as far as describing himself as a ‘Socialist in so much and so far as the New Testament was Socialistic’.⁸² Expressed somewhat differently, practising Christians should cultivate their social consciences and promote a collectivist response to the gross inequalities evident in Southampton and the nation as a whole.

A third strand was what can best be described as enthusiasm and joyfulness. This was reflected in the extensive use of the word ‘hearty’ to characterise the approach of the Churches to their worship, the events they organised and the welcomes they extended. With its connotations of whole heartedness and sense of commitment,

⁷⁹ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, August 31, 1912

⁸⁰ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, November 26, 1910

⁸¹ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, November 3, 1907

⁸² *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, November 3, 1907

Congregationalists were keen to refute suggestions that they were mean spirited or narrow minded. As Jeffrey Cox has observed, although they, like other Nonconformists, still had a reputation for being somewhat puritanical and austere, particularly on account of their support for causes, such as temperance and Sunday observance, they did know how to enjoy themselves and communicate this to others through their socials and bazaars.⁸³ Simple pleasures they may have been, but at the time they demonstrated the willingness of Congregationalist to embrace many different forms of contemporary entertainment, from concerts to conjuring and from drama to competitions. Indeed, by the Edwardian era, entertainment was an important feature of Congregational life.

How then might Congregationalism in Edwardian Southampton be portrayed? Did it epitomise a 'faith in crisis' or did it bear testimony to the hallmarks of a 'faith society'? Can it be seen as a 'golden age' or was there a sense of impending sorrow? Was the prospect for Congregationalism 'splendid'? Arguably the situation was too complex to be summarised in a phrase or two. There were both positive and negative aspects. The Churches still had a high profile and their pastors were generally respected, although there were signs that this respect was being eroded. For example, at Rev Henry Spencer's recognition service in 1913, reference was made to the fact that: 'They were living in days in which there was very little respect for the official position of minister.' This was qualified, however, with the observation that 'while respect for the cloth had passed away the respect for the man, the true, earnest Christian worker, was deeper than ever.'⁸⁴ Thus, 'high profile' Congregational ministers and indeed lay people could be seen as role models of Christian living and service that others wished to emulate. They had the ability and inner confidence to inspire and the right combination of seriousness and enthusiasm to make a difference.

That said, while the three strands of service, earnestness and heartiness and their associated values, which have been highlighted in this section, reinforced the notion of a faith society, they carried with them dangers for the Churches. Put another way, they ran the risk of sacrificing faith on the altar of accommodation with secular society. Although the motives for engaging with the wider community and redefining what was meant by religion were generally sound, the perils were not sufficiently understood. 'Crisis' might be too strong a word to use, but as the distinctive character and role of the Churches was eroded, so their *raison d'être* and ultimately their very existence were put at risk. The competition from other agencies and organisations which could pursue secular agendas more single-mindedly ultimately proved irresistible and as a result the longer term prospect for Congregationalism was far from 'splendid'.

Postscript

What then became of Southampton's Congregational churches and what traces of them remain today? With respect to their physical presence, the buildings of four churches have been completely destroyed. Kingsfield was demolished in 1936 'to

⁸³ Jeffrey Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth 1870-1930*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

⁸⁴ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, July 19, 1913

make way for a new road linking the Civic Centre with Western Esplanade.’⁸⁵ Above Bar, Albion and Northam were all destroyed by enemy action in late 1940. Freemantle was also bombed, but was subsequently rebuilt and reopened in June 1950.⁸⁶

To some extent physical destruction was emblematic of the decline of Congregationalism in terms of membership and contribution to the spiritual and social life of Southampton. The first church to close was Kingsfield. In August 1919, the headline ‘Church for Sale: Sad Destiny for a House of Good Works’ appeared over an item in the *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*. This was a reference to the fact that having shut its doors in April, the buildings were no longer required by the Congregationalists. As the paper went on to point out:

Kingsfield Church worked for over half a century. The town’s growth caused it to be left in the backwash, and it is very sad that it had to give up the struggle.⁸⁷

Approximately fifteen years later, in 1935, even the mighty Albion Congregational Church ‘gave up the struggle’ due to falling membership. The borough council turned down the opportunity to purchase the premises and they were subsequently used as a ‘provision warehouse’ and for ‘various kinds of bacon curing’.⁸⁸ This was a sad fate for a building which had been home to the largest of Southampton’s Congregational churches.

Following the destruction of its premises, the congregation of Above Bar joined with that of St Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in Brunswick Place, thereby foreshadowing the merger of the Congregational Church with the Presbyterian Church of England, at national level, in 1972, to create the United Reformed Church (URC). When St Andrew’s Church was closed in 1986, it joined with the Avenue URC, where it continues to this day as Avenue St Andrew’s URC.

In terms of memberships, not surprisingly the numbers belonging to Avenue St Andrew’s URC and Freemantle URC are very small, by comparison with the Edwardian era. In 2008, Avenue St Andrew’s reported 140 members, an average congregation at the main Sunday service of 95 and 23 children and young people aged 26 and under associated with the life of the church. The equivalent figures for Freemantle URC were 35, 18 and 1 respectively.⁸⁹ To complete the picture, the Isaac Watts Memorial URC, situated on Winchester Road, which had opened in 1932 had 61 members, average congregations of 45 and 3 children. Although these churches, have far fewer members they continue to embody some, at least, of the values espoused by Congregationalism in its Edwardian heyday.

⁸⁵ Veronica Green, ‘A provisional gazetteer of nineteenth-century Protestant Nonconformity in Southampton’, *The Journal of the Southampton Local History Forum*, No 8, Autumn 1999: 8

⁸⁶ Charles Barrett, *Freemantle URC Southampton 1885-1985* (1986):

⁸⁷ *Southampton Times and Hampshire Express*, August 28, 1919

⁸⁸ County Borough of Southampton, *Minutes and Proceedings of Council and Committees 1936-37*: 719.

⁸⁹ Figures from *The United Reformed Church 2009 Year Book* (London: United Reformed Church, 2009)

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