

## The Sale of the Baptist Church building,

On October 16<sup>th</sup> 2014, the Baptist church premises on Coldwell Street Wirksworth were sold by estate agents Fiddler Taylor at an auction held at the Peak Head Hotel, Chesterfield, for the sum of £162,000. When the building was erected in 1886, it had cost in the region of £2,200, which is the equivalent of approximately £209,000 in today's money.

The sale brings to a close this phase of the story of Wirksworth Baptist church, as told in the booklet *Living Stones*, written and published in 1986

After the For Sale board had been fastened to the wrought iron fence, the potential sale aroused much interest. Twenty or so people arranged a viewing and several came more than once. Bill Bowmer, managing the sale on behalf of the Baptists, said that although most viewers had been interested in residential development, one or two had seen the possibility of retaining the property for community use.



At the time of writing, the plans are to convert it into a family home, a development that will be watched with interest!

Comments on the Wirksworth Facebook page and elsewhere bemoaned the loss of such an important building to the town (although the exterior facade cannot be changed as the building lies within the conservation area) The wording on the agent's board also prompted interest and discussion:

*Former church, suitable for a variety of uses, subject to planning consent and change of use*

What is a former church? Can a church be redundant? The answer would seem to be 'yes' as chapel conversions in Bole Hill, Dale End and Middleton indicate.

But for the Wirksworth Baptist people the answer to these questions was that although the building was closing the church was moving on. The *Living Stones*, for so long based in Coldwell Street were changing location and structure, joining with members of Wood Street Methodist Church to become Wellspring Church Wirksworth

At the final service on September 14<sup>th</sup> 2014, the theme of the sermon and prayers was *Living stones are Rolling Stones*



Wirksworth Baptist Church (WBC) has always been open to innovative schemes in partnership with others. *Living Stones* records the story of links with Shottle, Duffield and Bonsall in the early days, and then the formation of the group of 4 Baptist churches - Swanwick, Crich, Bonsall and Wirksworth in the late 1970s-1980s. This idea was inspired by and patiently pursued by the then Area Superintendent Revd Arthur Bonsar, and was to be an exciting time of fruitfulness for all the churches under the leadership firstly of Revd Brian Nicholls, and then the Revds Harry and Frances Godden.

Wirksworth's size and strong community ethos traditionally encourages co-operation and joint ventures between different groups in the town, not least the churches. WBC has always been an enthusiastic partner in ecumenical ventures, with the 'free Churches' and with the Churches Together in Wirksworth and District. Over the years these have included united worship, shared lent courses, children's play schemes, holiday clubs and after school clubs, as well as a shared commitment to the local branches of Christian Aid and Amnesty International.

Closer links with the URC and Methodists have often been spoken about and hoped for; one long-standing Baptist member is quoted as saying that when he came to live in Wirksworth more than 40 years ago he thought it would be a very good idea if the three churches united.

It was talked about, and various overtures made between ministers and church leaders, but the story of the journey towards Wellspring really begins in the 1990s.

### **An Uncertain Future**

This was the beginning of a time of unrest and uncertainty for the Wirksworth Baptists: Minister Revd Richard

Starling was on the point of moving to North Devon, several prominent members left, and the church began to ask serious questions about the future. Wirksworth and Bonsall Baptist churches united as one church in 1992; and the Bonsall building was sold in February 1999. The church therefore was financially sound for the foreseeable future, but wondered what its role and mission was, with fewer members and an aging congregation.

Meanwhile, the Revd Martin Williams arrived in Wirksworth as Methodist minister in 1994, and quickly formed strong links with all the churches.

In 1997 Revd Ann Mansfield was called to the pastorate of WBC. The following year there were several significant moves towards closer unity, beginning with a letter from Martin Williams to the Baptists and the URC, as reported in the WBC members meeting minutes in March 1998:

*'The Methodist congregation would like to start exploring ideas for further unity with our congregations and the URC'.*

This was warmly received by the members, and meetings with representatives from the Methodist and Baptist churches were arranged, together with quarterly shared services. The URC did not join in at this time. Although there was a lot of goodwill on both sides, there was no suggestion of working towards closer structural unity.

In 1999, WBC began to talk about a much needed major refurbishment of the premises, including a new kitchen and toilets. This would be a large investment and the members were anxious to know how realistic any moves towards unity were before going ahead. In September a letter was sent to the other churches in the town. The minutes record the following response:

*Four churches wished us well but did not include us in their vision for the future. The Methodist church sent a very positive response expressing hope for a closer commitment.'*

Was it feasible to pursue closer unity first rather than spend a lot on the building? There were long discussions at meetings in the autumn, and reports were received from the joint leaders meetings. Discussion was honest and cautious, with differences as well as shared beliefs and commitments highlighted. It was agreed to hold another meeting in the spring of 2000, when people with experience of LEPs would be invited to contribute. One of these was Terry Garley, then Derbyshire Ecumenical Officer who expressed caution, wondering how closer unity would affect relations within CTWD?

The minutes of the AGM in 2000 include Anne Mansfield's comments about unity; that it was a sensitive subject, which needed wide debate and much prayer

It became clear that although the goodwill and desire for closer links still existed, nothing would happen in the short term. In April, a firm proposal was made in favour of closer links with the Methodists:

*'We value our joint monthly services, and the closer links between our congregations. We would welcome any further work that the two churches could do together but feel that the future for the churches in the town is closer relationships between all six churches in CTWD.'*

In May the following reply was received from Martin Williams:

*A large majority of Methodists felt it would be good if the end point of our growing closeness were to be visible*

*church unity; most agreed however that this could not realistically be achieved in the short term*

In 2001, firm plans for the major refurbishment were made and the following year, Revd Anne Mansfield resigned, leaving at Easter. There then followed an intense time of thinking and praying about the future. Revd John Bayes, in his role as Mission Enabler for the East Midlands Baptist Association, led a series of congregational meetings to enable members to discern the right way forward.

Although united events with the Methodists, including shared worship and social events continued to be arranged, they were poorly supported and the idea seemed to have lost momentum. Early in 2003 an approach was made from a member of the URC, concerned for the future of URC ministry in the area and the state of the roof on the URC building, which raised the subject again, but nothing came of it.

### [Link with Derbyshire Baptists?](#)

Baptist members held meetings with Revd Steve Mantle, EMBA regional minister, and the possibility of the appointment of a Mission Enabler for the Derbyshire Baptist churches was raised. Steve's vision arose out of concern for the Baptist Churches with fewer than 30 members. The Mission Enabler would be available to serve the churches, encouraging them to plan strategically for mission, while also serving one church as minister part time. Finance for the project would be available from the Derbyshire Baptists, and Baptist Home Mission, as well as the churches. Geographically, Wirksworth was in a good central location for the minister to be based.

This was a new idea, which needed much prayer and careful consideration, but it began to take hold as an exciting possibility which would enable WBC to call a part time minister and also form stronger links with local Baptist churches again, at a time when a closer ecumenical partnership did not seem possible.

Meetings of representatives of the Derbyshire Baptists also approved the plan in June 2003, and a joint appointing group was set up. In February 2004 Revd Tim Heard visited, preached and was invited to take up the role. He accepted and an Induction Service with tea was held in Wirksworth Town Hall in June. He and his wife Rachel moved into a newly purchased manse on Steeple Grange.

Meanwhile, plans for upgrade of the Baptist premises were approved, and the work began in October 2003, and continued for several months. The church looked forward to a period of growth, with settled ministry and a new focus on mission.

Sadly these hopes were not fulfilled, and the ministry came to an end in October 2006.

There then followed an intense time of discussions, soul searching and prayer about the future. The reports presented to the AGM in 2007 expressed sadness that the joint venture with Derbyshire Baptists had not worked out, but at the same time gratitude and appreciation was expressed for the collaborative work of the EMBA staff team, especially Revds Steve Mantle and John Bayes.

### What now?

The future for WBC seemed very uncertain: a small group of faithful, hardworking people maintained the church activities, but had neither the energy nor scope to do

more. How was the church to be prevented from becoming 'a *dwindling Sunday club*'? Alongside this realistic assessment was a heartfelt desire for personal renewal, and for the possibility of partnerships with others; there were still sufficient funds to call a part-time minister, it was just not clear which direction to go in.

Revd John Bayes, who had supported the church during 2006, came to lead a series of meetings based on *The Purpose Driven Church* materials written by Revd Rick Warren, to help the church consider the way forward.

Derbyshire Baptists, meanwhile, decided to appoint a second Mission Advisor and in December 2007 Revd Ian Drummond was called to work half time with the Derbyshire churches alongside his other roles with the Yorkshire Baptist Association.

For WBC therefore the choices were different. Talks continued into 2008, and in the summer Revd John Bayes was asked to become moderator. He facilitated a congregational meeting in August from which five possible ways of proceeding were drawn up:

- A. Continue without a minister
- B. Seek a part-time minister
- C. Explore working with the Methodists and URC churches with a view to eventual unity
- D. Both B and C, ie seek a part-time minister and also explore a path towards unity
- E. Close the church

After long discussion the meeting resolved as follows:

*12 members wished to seek a part-time minister and 9 of those would want the minister to be open to the possibility*

*of closer unity. It was therefore agreed to ask Revd Steve Mantle to meet the deacons to begin the process of calling a minister. A search group of deacons and members would be appointed and the church profile revised.*

The URC minister Revd Camilla Veitch and the Methodist minister Revd Steve Bennett were supportive of the plans and keen to pursue the idea of closer links between all three churches.

In the next few months the appointing group met one minister, visited a church in Derby who were exploring the possibility of calling an American Interim Pastor, and wondered about the feasibility of a student pastorate. Then in June 2009 the minutes record that the Revd John Bayes offered to come out of retirement, to serve the church part-time. This offer was warmly received by the members and after discussion the following proposal was put:

*'The meeting gratefully accepts the offer of the Revd John Bayes to be our part-time minister from a date to be agreed later this year.'*

Members agreed unanimously, and plans were swiftly concluded. John's induction took place during the morning service on August 16<sup>th</sup>, with Revd Dianne Tidball representing the EMBA. .

### **New Momentum**

John's leadership and encouragement enabled WBC to become more focussed: everything that was discussed and planned had in mind the goals of worship, fellowship, service, outreach and discipleship. Task groups of members were set up to oversee these aspects of church life.

Signs of encouragement included several baptisms in the autumn of 2009, and some new members. Firm plans were made for three united services with the Methodists and URC during 2010, hosted by each church in turn, and observers were invited to the members meetings at each church.

In the AGM minister's report in 2010, John wrote:

*As we work within God's purposes for worship, fellowship, discipleship and outreach a gentle transformation can occur where we will be surprised both by God's goodness and our own fruitfulness...(and) provided we offer what we are well able to offer, then God will lift us to a new period of growth...'Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God.'* (William Carey)

In May the key document *A Wirksworth Free Church – End in View* was produced, outlining steps towards closer unity over the next 3 years. This was well received by all 3 churches, and became the blueprint for all that followed. Incoming Methodist minister Revd Robert Foster quickly shared the vision as he joined John and Camilla in leading the joint meetings.

United worship continued, along with Vision Meetings for members and congregation, at which the important questions were asked:

*What kind of church does a community like Wirksworth need in the future?*

*How different does it need to be, so that it appeals to and is relevant to the community?*

But it was not all serious talking! There was a desire that members should get to know each other informally. Paul Heppleston along with others set up *Crossways*, a group

which learned to sing and act together; they have produced several shows, both funny and serious, and have led special services. There were also joint parties for Harvest Festival.



And so throughout 2011 it began to feel that the idea of unity *'has moved from a wistful dream to becoming a practicable possibility.'*

The first Statement of Intent was voted on by the churches early in 2012, and all agreed to continue with joint discussion and events until a final vote was held on Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> January 2013. The outcome of this vote was as follows:

Baptists and Methodists – 92% yes  
URC – 54% yes

It was time therefore to decide whether to move without the URC and in March the other two churches agreed by substantial majorities to form a 2-way ecumenical partnership.

A target date of June 2013 was agreed to begin regular united worship at the Wood Street building. The major tasks of negotiating, drawing up and finalising a Constitution, a Sharing Agreement and a Memorandum of Understanding were well under way, thanks largely to Robert Few who had been appointed to do a substantial part of the relevant administration for the LEP.

The first service for the joint congregation on June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2013 was led by Revd Rosemary Dale, based on 'weddings'! Was the coming together of 2 churches like a

wedding? What vows were we making? What celebrations were appropriate?

We prayed:

*Just when we think nothing new could be found in us  
all things known, all things tried before  
You are born within us again  
God of new beginnings!*

The service began with a procession from the baptist church; there were balloons and ribbons; and it ended with the singing of *You shall go out with joy* on the church steps and in the street as confetti was thrown.

Revd Rosemary Dale, a former Methodist minister in Wirksworth, now retired, was passionate about unity and closer relationships between all the churches. It was very appropriate that she led this service! Sadly she died before the official launch service in September 2014.



It was agreed by both congregations that although neither building was ideal, the Methodist premises on Wood Street offered more flexibility in the sanctuary and more scope for development than the Baptist building on Coldwell Street. So in November 2013 the Baptist members agreed to relinquish the building and put it up for sale.

The next step was to think of a suitable name for the LEP; the ministers launched a competition and many ideas were put forward, but none seemed quite right until

'Wellspring' was suggested. This caught the imagination of the majority of the members because of its associations with water. We were reminded that there was an actual well at the back of the building, and that the Methodists for many years had designed and constructed a Well Dressing for the Well Dressing and Carnival w/e held every May. Many Baptists were also involved in making other Well Dressings over many years.

It reminded us of our commitment in baptism, and of the promise of Jesus to become for us the 'living water' (John chapter 4) it seemed to be a name that gave promise of blessing and hope for the future.

A logo was adopted and approved and the name Wellspring Church Wirksworth accepted



Joint leaders and congregation meetings discussed everything from what kitchen equipment to move to vision statement.....inventories, disposal of stuff, moving day, gas hard work by several people

Following the final service in the Baptist Church, the official launch of the LEP took place the following week. Revd Lorraine Mellor, representing Churches together in Derbyshire led the act of commitment and invited the ministers and representatives of both churches to sign the new constitution. Revd Mike Fegredo, Baptist Regional Minister preached on the theme of new beginnings, from Isaiah 43 vs 18-19

: *Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.*

*<sup>19</sup> I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert.*

A picture, painted by a former Baptist church member, depicting the hope of resurrection through the empty cross, was ceremonially handed over and hung. And cake was cut and consumed.



The first annual congregational meeting the following week elected six Trustees