



DARLINGTON STREET METHODIST CHURCH

90th ANNIVERSARY

1901 - 1991

"FROM GLORY TO GLORY"

**Greetings from the Rev T J W Sampson
Chairman of the Methodist Wolverhampton and
Shrewsbury District**

Greetings to you on behalf of the Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury District on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the Darlington Street Methodist Church. You continue a mission at the heart of this community which began in the earliest days of our Methodist tradition. In recent days you have renewed and reformulated your ministry so as to fulfil your calling in the service of the present age. We rejoice in your Christian witness and pray that you will be given grace to carry forward this work into the future.

THE ROOTS OF THE TREE

It would be so easy to concentrate our celebrations upon the ninety year old building standing at the corner of Darlington Street and School Street, but in order to put these last ninety years into their proper context, and to see our way forward into the next decade, we must identify the roots of our Christian witness in Wolverhampton.

Methodism first reached Wolverhampton in 1744 when Whitefield sent preachers to speak to the ordinary people of the town. These attempts were met by mob violence and suspicion but one of Wesley's helpers, a man named John Bennet, came to live and work in the town. He began a Society, meeting in the homes of sympathetic members, and from this original Society our roots at Darlington Street have grown. Together, this small group, amid strong opposition from townsfolk, struggled to build the first Methodist preaching house in Wolverhampton. This was in 1762 in Rotten Row (now Broad Street) opposite the Quaker Meeting House (currently where Westbury Chapel stands).

Wesley had already visited Wolverhampton himself in 1760 and found the people here unruly and wild. Wild enough for a mob of them to tear down the new preaching house within twelve months of its building, so great was their fear and suspicion. Four men were imprisoned for this deed and the ringleader, a lawyer, was compelled to rebuild the preaching house which was then used for a further 25 years, thus firmly establishing Methodism in this town.

The Society grew and this growth called for a new worship centre. A site in Wheelers Fold was found (off Lichfield Street). A rectangular building measuring thirty eight feet by thirty two, with the entrance in the centre of the west front, was opened on 28 March 1787 by John Wesley himself. He commented that the feelings of the people of Wolverhampton had visibly changed from the time of his initial visit to the town. Fear and suspicion had subsided into tolerance and acceptance of the existence of the Society.

This chapel must have been quite splendid compared with the old preaching house. It had five arched windows over the front entrance, a gallery for the choir and a large raised pulpit opposite the door. Family pews ran down the centre with free pews at the side, men and women sitting apart. The building was called Noah's Ark, after a public house nearby, and in 1801 it was leading the Wolverhampton Circuit.

By this time our roots are strong and well founded and our witness powerful in the town. The Society grew so that more rooms had to be hired in John Street. The Ark could only accommodate five hundred, besides which it was thought unseemly for the Chapel to be in such sordid company near a public house. A new site was sought for in a more respectable part of town. The Earl of Darlington was developing land along what is now known as Darlington Street and Waterloo Road and the Methodist Society decided to try and purchase a plot of this land.

A banker named Richard Fryer had purchased a corner site which seemed ideal. Thomas Hancher, a shoemaker and respected member of the Society, was deputed to interview Fryer to see if he would sell. There was great opposition to this from

the Anglicans at this time. They felt that a new Methodist Chapel in the town would increase the influence of the non-conformist element and saw this as a threat. But every banker has his price and Fryer's was five shillings per square yard - £396 for the whole plot!

So in 1825 Noah's Ark was sold and a new chapel opened on the site of the current church. It was a splendid building thought to be a real contribution to the architectural treasures of the town. It was built with pride and a lot of money, planned to seat eight hundred people, with a schoolroom and vestry underneath. The building was begun in August 1824 by Richard Hickman of Bilston at a cost of £2641. This handsome edifice, this "chief ornament of the town" was the only building on the street and was surrounded by fields and gardens. The opening celebrations spread over three days during August 1825.

At this point in time our roots are founded in a large and growing Society, composed greatly of middle class businessmen and professionals, self made men. The witness of Methodism in Wolverhampton began to be blurred by things financial. The building of the new church had plunged the Society into debt.

Nevertheless the seeds of our mission statement were sown at this period. The Sunday School, originally begun in 1799 in rooms next door to Noah's Ark, grew to one thousand scholars, meeting in the crypt of the church. The Society worshipped three times every Sunday and there were more than one thousand confirmed members at one point. In 1848, the church was extended at the back and two new vestries were added. In 1857, John Hartley (later to become mayor) donated the land in School

Street for the school rooms. Between 1825 and 1860 the Society sponsored the building of five new Methodist chapels in Wolverhampton. In 1885, more changes were made to the building as the vestries were redesigned and Sunday School rooms and a lecture room were added. The church needed new pews and during investigations prior to replacing them it was discovered that a great deal of repair was required to the fabric of the building. It was not long before a radical decision was made to demolish and rebuild a new church more suited to a new century of Christian evangelism.

So the decision was taken to build the Church we are still using today. Arthur Marshall of Nottingham was selected as the architect. Mr F Lindsay Jones won the tender to build at a cost of £16,300. The year 1901 was fraught with problems. In March the Society ran out of money to pay the contractor and a further appeal had to be made to keep the work on schedule. By May 1901, the two turrets were complete and the metal framework of the dome was fixed. But money ran out again which delayed the plasterwork on the interior. Would the building be ready in time? The opening was planned for 24 September. The situation was obviously far too worrying for the Superintendent Minister who resigned on health grounds in July 1901. The final blow was the death of the organist in August!

Not an auspicious year you may think, but the formal opening ceremony was held on 29 October 1901 at 3 o'clock followed by a service and the ubiquitous Methodist church tea - admission by ticket priced one shilling. There followed several weeks of celebration with special services led by key Methodist figures from Leeds, Belfast, Birmingham and London.

The new church was considered to be a joy both to preach in and to worship in. So we come to the ninety years during which this particular building has been a part of our witness. The growth and development of the worshipping congregation at Darlington Street church has influenced the spread of Methodism throughout Wolverhampton. Every other Methodist church in the town today can trace its origins back to Darlington Street, and so to our common roots almost two hundred and fifty years ago when George Whitefield and John Bennet came to town. These roots, firmly fixed in the heart of Wolverhampton and amongst the ordinary citizens of this place, play an important part in our mission statement. The aim of our work is and has been for some time, to serve the town centre, to worship and pray, and to provide a meeting point for people needing Christian counselling and social help.

Over the last ninety years, this aim has been evident in many aspects of the church's involvement with the local community - in the establishment of a day school for local children, in the use of the crypt as a shelter during the war years, in outreach work with the local elderly, in work with ethnic minority groups, the physically handicapped and with youth.

In 1965 the crypt was converted as a Youth and Community Centre which began a serious relationship with young adults in the community which continues today. During the 70s this work developed on a huge scale encompassing counselling and advice, Victim Support Services, clubs for the physically handicapped and able-bodied, work with the homeless and particularly work with the unemployed. A Manpower Services Commission funded project for the adult unemployed led to more than three hundred placements being provided in construction,

gardening and painting and decorating. In addition, a Youth Opportunities Scheme funded one hundred and fifty trainees.

Youth work included sports activities and a club averaging forty five people attending during the day and often doubling in the evenings. Counselling for drugs and alcohol abuse, housing and legal matters was also available. Much of this work is continued today through the work of the Methodist Centre and the agencies who are facilitated by the use of the church premises during the working week.

So what about the next decade leading up to our centenary? Financial matters may still weigh heavily on our minds. A listed building may preserve the Wolverhampton skyline but may also be a millstone around our necks. Our membership may be visibly ageing and perhaps not growing as we would like but it is quality not quantity that counts. As Rev John Jackson said in 1961:

"...methodist churches are as strong or as weak as their laymen,..."

The people called Methodists currently witnessing at Darlington Street Methodist Church have roots with a very fine pedigree. There can be no doubts about the quality but it is 1991 and time to look ahead and to build on the history of our witness in this town and to continue to live and work to God's praise and glory.

Hallelujah!

Val Bigford

Worship Consultation Committee

TOWARDS ONE HUNDRED YEARS

The last major celebration of a church anniversary was the 75th in 1976. In the fifteen years which have passed since then there have been major changes in all of Methodism's large town and city centre churches.

Churches, and particularly central halls, which were built as preaching places for vast congregations have found themselves farther and farther away from where people live. The big congregations of today are in the suburbs, not in the city centre churches. This has been particularly true in the larger cities like Manchester and Birmingham, but Wolverhampton has not escaped. Since 1976 the ring road has been completed round the town, and the inner city streets just outside the ring road have become more noticeable. Many people who worship with us and in other city centre congregations now have to travel in. If anything, we are more fortunate than many of the other churches because we have a good, loyal nucleus of people who can walk to church.

Methodist town centre churches cannot exist today just as preaching and worship centres. The ones which have flourished are the ones which have been prepared to do two things:

- 1) They have been prepared to see that the love of God, seen in the life and work of Jesus, must have practical expression in the life of the church. This is why, since the Crypt Association Ltd. pulled out of community work, we have been active in the continuing and developing of groups for sections of the community with particular needs - especially in the last couple of years for people with physical or mental disabilities. This work is not secondary to the Gospel.

It is central to the Gospel as proclaimed and practised by Jesus. This work must continue to develop as we move towards the centenary.

- 2) They have been prepared to allow worship to develop and change. In fact all sorts of developments have taken place in our city centre churches from the singing of new hymns to new music in the charismatic mood to the encouragement of discussion as part of the ongoing diet of worship. Sadly the churches which have been unwilling to accept new thinking in their worship have tended to be the ones which have closed. Again, as we move towards our centenary we must be as adventurous in our worship as we are in our weekday activity.

In the ten years that I have been here I have been much encouraged by the warmth of the congregation and its willingness to be totally realistic in today's world. I believe in the Mission of God in the town centre. I believe that God is leading us in the ways in which we may be vital and active in all we seek to be and to do.

Rev Tony Kinch
Minister
Darlington Street Church

I see the future of Darlington Street Church as being further involved with work among the young and old of the town. As a city centre church our congregation travels in to worship and there are very few of our people who come from the immediate vicinity. Perhaps with the new outlook prevailing to develop and modernise the vast unused first and second floor living accommodation above shops in the town centre there will be some scope for evangelism and new local members.

Coupled with this is the very real renewed ecumenical outlook with the town centre churches, both Anglican and Catholic. Our valuable premises must be used to their fullest capacity at all times to make them economically sound and our outreach must be to extend our existing work among the young handicapped people and the elderly of all races, who have so much to give in many ways.

Hopefully by centenary year some progress will have been made with replacing the church hall block of 1850 vintage to provide smaller modern premises, but this depends on the economic climate of the late 1990s.

Dick Rhodes
Senior Church Steward

Whilst to be ninety years old may still be regarded as an achievement in humans, we often seem to expect our buildings to last forever. With modern technology and unlimited finance this can be so - but so far as the latter is concerned the Church rightly perceives more worthy outlets for its monetary resources.

Nevertheless, the prestige value of keeping a high profile building, now enforced upon us by its listed building status, brings its own difficulties of maintaining a centre of Christian service and outreach. The large auditorium and rambling layouts on differing levels were built to serve an earlier era and now even the basic provisions of heat and light become disproportionately more expensive if modern systems and controls cannot be provided.

The refurbishment of the early 1980s has ensured that the basic fabric is sound. Recent work to enhance our facilities includes replacing worn parts in our magnificent organ, building new access stairs to improve security and providing ramps to assist the disadvantaged.

Whilst our long term aim is towards a major redevelopment of the ailing schoolroom block as soon as this becomes financially viable, there are a number of further minor improvements already planned. The foremost of these is the conversion of the Guild Room and adjacent kitchen into a homely drop-in centre for the elderly.

Roger T Squire
Property Steward

Geoff Troth
Youth Worker
Methodist Centre

For the past thirty years Darlington Street Church has been my second home. It is where I met and married my husband and my three sons were baptised there. I have been treasurer for the past three years and during that time I have tried to ensure that our overdraft does not increase any further!

In the future I would hope that all fund raising activities can be shown as "profit" and not merely used up in the ever increasing bank charges which have been at a nationally high level over the past few years. We could make our premises a live and active venue for the many who pass daily with their varying needs.

We are in an ideal position in our town centre to reach out to people of many different cultural backgrounds, and to people of all ages, and offer refreshment, a little of our time and the love of God. If we call ourselves Christian then we are christ-like and should try to reflect his image in our daily lives.

R M Priest
Treasurer

Having for many years worked with various groups of young people who use the town centre, in 1987 there was a complete change of direction towards work with young people with disabilities. The 1990s sees the work firmly established covering the whole range of disability - sensory, physical and learning difficulties.

The Freewheelers Challengers and Wolverhampton Independent Deaf Club meet in the evenings and offer recreation, sport and leisure facilities for their client groups. During the day an information and counselling facility is available and disability awareness training is provided for schools, youth clubs and anyone who wishes to take advantage of the service. Young people from the Methodist Centre take part in the sessions covering all aspects of attitudes to disability.

Over the past two years the Freewheeler Holidays have become firmly established. Last year two parties went to Jersey and in September of this year twenty young people are visiting Disneyland, USA. Although funded by the local authority Youth Affairs Department, the project is very much a joint project with the church. Help in the form of time, transport, encouragement and motivation is invaluable.

The Methodist Centre Management Committee enables the smooth running of the Centre and although there is still a long way to go towards providing a good service for young people with disabilities, I am confident that the firm base established over the last three years will stand in good stead for the future.

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Youth Worker
Methodist Centre

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By the end of the year I am that group has been established. The Free Wheelers Challenge and Wolverhampton Independent Deal Club meet in the evenings and offer recreation, sport and leisure facilities for their own groups. During the day on Wednesday and on Friday mornings a valuable and specially designed service is provided for schools, youth clubs and groups who wish to take advantage of the service. Young people from the Methodist Centre take part in the sessions covering all aspects of activities to be carried out in the day.

A period of one hundred and thirty hours training was provided. Over the past two years the Free Wheelers have become firmly established. I set up two parties in January and in September of this year twenty young people are training in the USA. Although funded by the local authority Youth Affairs Department, the project is very much a joint project with the church. Help in the form of time, transport, encouragement and motivation is invaluable.

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