

Methodism in Leicestershire between the Two World Wars

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This article examines changes in the Methodist membership in Leicestershire during the inter-war period, at a time when non-conformity in general was declining. Changes in membership were effected by the fusion of the three main strands of the denomination to form the Methodist Church, as well as by social and economic factors. Although numbers were maintained in Methodism, both nationally and locally, the seeds of decline were evident.

D. W. Brogan, in *The English People* (1943) observed that ‘in the generation that has passed since . . . 1906, one of the greatest changes in the English religious and social landscape has been the decline of Nonconformity’.¹ Similarly A. D. Gilbert noted that Nonconformity had reached the zenith of its development in 1906, coincident with the general election of that year that swept the Liberals into power, and thereafter had ‘entered a phase of prolonged and continuing decline’.² Neither Brogan nor Gilbert, however, appeared to notice that there was a difference between Methodists and others. The Baptists, for instance, declined absolutely, from 408,029 in 1916 to 396,531 in 1936,³ but the Methodists, though declining relative to population, increased in absolute terms, from 675,018 in 1916 to 818,480 in 1936 (+21 per cent).⁴ There were, however, serious problems threatening the future of the denomination.

The intention in this article is to discern the extent of the changes in Methodist membership in the county of Leicestershire during the inter-war period and to relate them to the social and economic circumstances. This is not without its problems, for, although there is good statistical information available in Methodist Conference minutes and valuable material in circuit minutes, the various historical accounts of particular churches are remarkably bland for this period. Their concentration tends to be on the rapid rise in membership during the nineteenth century and the problems of the post-1945 years, leaving the inter-war years inadequately covered.

¹ Quoted in E. A. Payne, *The Free Church Tradition in the Life of England* (London, 1944), 121.

² A. D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England: Church, Chapel and Society 1740–1914* (1976), 38–39.

³ A. Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920–1999* (London, 3rd Edition, 1991), 265.

⁴ Figures abstracted from annually published Connexional Conference Minutes (from 1932 onward *Methodist Church Conference Minutes*). See also G. T. Rimmington, ‘Methodism and Society in Leicester 1881–1914’, *The Local Historian*, 30(2) (May 2000), 82. Note, however, that R. Davies, A. R. George & E. G. Rupp (eds.), *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*. 4 vols. (London, 1988), III, 339, state that Methodist membership increased from 703,643 in 1914 to 919,099 in 1932. Presumably they were including probationers, junior members and overseas members.

Leicestershire, the smallest East Midland county (apart from Rutland), whose population increased from 467,553 in 1911 to 541,861 (+16 per cent) in 1931, had at its centre the city of Leicester, whose hosiery, shoe manufacturing and engineering industries made it one of the most prosperous population centres in England. Even in the worst depression years of the 1920s and 1930s the number of unemployed people never exceeded 16,000.⁵ Its population increased from 227,222 in 1911 to 239,169 in 1931 (+5 per cent).

In the areas surrounding the city were the five ancient market towns of Ashby-de-la-Zouch, Hinckley, Loughborough, Market Harborough and Melton Mowbray, and the newer mining centre of Coalville. Their combined population increased from 77,751 in 1911 to 89,695 in 1931 (+15 per cent).

Each of these population centres had become the focal point of Methodist circuits. Leicester, where the Wesleyans had previously increased their membership from 1,525 in 1881 to 3,515 in 1914 (+130 per cent), was the focus for three circuits, which between them had nineteen villages societies (or churches) as well as twelve in the city itself in 1921. The Primitives, whose membership in Leicester had moved from 1,526 to 2,412 (+58 per cent) over the same period, also had dependent village societies attached to their four circuits.⁶ Outside Leicester there were six Wesleyan circuits, whose membership had increased from 3,106 to 4,142 in 1911 (+33 per cent), and five Primitive circuits, whose membership had increased from 1,579 to 2,332 (+48 per cent) over the same period. Most of these increases had been in industrialised and urban or semi-urban communities; there had been some losses in purely agricultural, some rural societies collapsing in the face of depopulation, and the diminishing numbers of people working on farms.⁷

Table 1: Methodist membership in Leicestershire 1916–1936

Circuits	1916	1936	% change
Leicester	5691	6127	+8
Hinckley	1029	1266	+23
Market Harborough	235	280	+19
Melton Mowbray	1391	1374	-1
Loughborough	1244	1412	+14
Castle Donington	482	491	+1
Ashby-de-la-Zouch	1249	1255	+1
Coalville	417	398	-5
Sileby	278	278	-
Total	12016	12573	+5

Source: *Wesleyan Methodist Connexional Conference Minutes* and *Primitive Methodist Connexional Conference Minutes*.

⁵ D. Nash & D. Reeder (eds.), *Leicester in the Twentieth Century* (Stroud, 1993), 50ff.

⁶ Rimmington, 'Methodism and Society in Leicester'.

⁷ G. T. Rimmington, 'Methodist membership in rural Leicestershire 1881–1914', *The Local Historian*, 33 (1) (February 2003), 30–47.

During the inter-wars years Leicestershire did not show the growth rate of the pre-war years; nor did it keep up with the national growth rate. As Table 1 indicates, Wesleyan and Primitive membership in the county increased from 12,016 in 1916 to 12,153 in 1931 (+1 per cent). Between 1931 and 1936 there was an apparent increase of 420 members, but as the 1936 total came after the reunion of Wesleyan, Primitive and United Methodist factions and included 406 members of the United Methodist circuit in Leicester there was no real increase. This was a very different situation from the 60 per cent increase in Wesleyans and Primitives between 1881 and 1914.

Before World War I, Wesleyans and Primitives had continued to be in a competitive situation, particularly in urban areas. In Leicester the Primitives had been recruiting more successfully than the Wesleyans during Edwardian times. Between 1901 and 1911 the Wesleyans had increased their membership from 1,346 to 3,515 (+5 per cent), while the Primitives had moved from 1,986 to 2,412 (+21 per cent).

Table 2: Wesleyan Methodist membership in Leicestershire 1916–1931

Circuits	1916	1921	1926	1931	% change overall
Leicester:					
Bishop Street	1030	979	896	869	-16
King Richard's Road	1086	1167	1237	1170	+8
Humberstone Road	1159	1091	1127	1184	+2
Ashby-de-la-Zouch	911	798	975	925	+2
Loughborough	793	635	793	771	-3
Castle Donington	482	493	492	489	+2
Melton Mowbray	1021	1022	951	900	-12
Hinckley	649	677	724	740	+14
Market Harborough	235	273	253	297	+26
Total	7366	7135	7448	7345	-1

Source: *Wesleyan Methodist Connexional Conference Minutes*.

The inter-war period saw the situation moderated. Before Methodist Union in 1932 the Wesleyan circuits in Leicester showed membership diminishing marginally from 3,275 in 1916 to 3,223 in 1936 (-2 per cent), while the Primitive circuits increased marginally from 2,416 to 2,455 (+2 per cent). If, however, we restrict our attention to Wesleyan membership in urban societies (i.e. subtracting the village societies attached to Leicester circuits) it is notable that the loss in urban membership was more serious, from 2,455 in 1921 to 2,333 in 1941 (-5 per cent).

Of the four societies which comprised the urban section of the Bishop Street circuit in 1921, one (Knighton) became defunct during the early 1930s. Bishop Street society in the centre of the city, diminished from 490 in 1921 to 267 members in 1941 (−40 per cent). It had gained membership in 1920 from the closure of the society based on the Temperance Hall (where the lease had run out), but the ‘marriage’ of a middle-class congregation with a working-class society, resentful because of its loss of venue, was doomed to failure. Writing about the merger, Caroline Morris noted that it was ‘disastrous’; ‘around fifty people were lost in the initial merger alone’.⁸ The other two churches located in the suburbs managed to increase their memberships slightly, Aylestone Park by 10 (+10 per cent) and Clarendon Park by 9 (+5 per cent). The circuit as a whole suffered a loss of 222 members (−28 per cent).

Table 3: Primitive Methodist membership in Leicestershire 1916–1931

Circuits	1916	1921	1936	1931	% change overall
Leicester 1	448	336	350	320	−29
Leicester 2	1220	1220	1260	1260	+3
Leicester 3	310	399	400	410	+32
Leicester 4	438	445	455	465	+6
Loughborough	451	419	428	430	−5
Melton Mowbray	370	395	392	406	+10
Hinckley	380	460	496	500	+32
Sileby	278	255	260	285	+3
Ashby-de-la-Zouch	338	338	352	350	+4
Coalville	417	402	380	382	−8
Total	4650	4669	4773	4808	−3

Source: *Primitive Methodist Conference Minutes*.

The Humberstone Road circuit, whose urban societies consisted of the Humberstone Road, Saxby Street and Wesley Hall churches, all experienced losses in membership, from a total of 712 in 1921 to 603 in 1941 (−15 per cent).

Only the King Richard’s Road circuit experienced a membership increase, from 938 in 1921 to 1,167 in 1941 (+24 per cent). This was mainly due to the transfer of one older church to the suburbs and the development of three other churches in suburban settings. While the older societies in King Richard’s Road, Aylestone Road and Belgrave Hall experienced a serious depletion in membership from 909 in 1921 to 679 in 1941 (−25 per cent), the suburban societies of Epworth Hall, Uppingham Road, Trinity and Southfields Hall grew from 49 members in 1921 to 488 in 1941 (+896 per cent). Trinity in particular, with its church built on a prominent site on a main road, and surrounded by new housing, both privately and council-owned, grew from 84 members in 1931 to 228 in 1941 (+171 per cent).

⁸ C. M. Morris, ‘Methodism in Leicester, 1851–1944. The Bishop Street Circuit’ (n.d., typescript in the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester & Rutland (hereafter LLRRO)), 10.

Table 4. Wesleyan Methodist membership in Leicester 1918–1941

Circuits	1921	1931	% change	1941	% change
<i>Bishop Street Circuit:</i>					
Bishop Street	490	327	-33	267	-18
Clarendon Park	181	159	-12	190	+20
Knighton	18	12	-33		
Aylestone Park	96	80	-17	106	+36
Circuit total	785	587	-26	563	-3
<i>Humberstone Road Circuit:</i>					
Humberstone Road	138	132	-4	95	-28
Saxby Street	250	239	-4	198	-17
Wesley Hall	324	320	-1	310	-3
Circuit total	712	691	-3	603	-13
<i>King Richard's Road Circuit:</i>					
King Richard's Road	456	421	-8	378	-10
Aylestone Road	151	144	-5	101	-30
Belgrave Hall	302	270	-11	200	-26
Northgate St/Epworth Hall	29	52	+80	94	+81
New Humberstone/ Uppingham Road	20	82	+310	85	+4
Trinity		84		228	+171
Southfields Hall		54		81	+50
Circuit total	938	1107	+18	1167	+5
Leicester total	2455	2376	-3	2333	-2

Source: *Leicester Messenger*.

Fluctuations in Primitive membership are more difficult to discern, because it is not possible to separate the memberships of outlying village societies from city churches. There are no detailed membership figures for individual societies. However, the Primitives were less adept at this time in developing new societies in the suburbs, preferring to evangelise from the existing churches. It is probable that membership remained static.

Outside Leicester there were significant variations in Methodist membership. Negatively there was the collapse of support in mining communities. As the Leicestershire and South Derbyshire coalfield had developed, the new town of Coalville had appeared and some pre-existing villages had gained new inhabitants, many of whom had been attracted to Nonconformity. Baptist membership outside Leicester, for instance, had increased from 3,064 in 1881 to 5,061 in 1912 (+65 per cent), much of the increase being attributable to population increases in mining areas.⁹ The Methodists had been similarly successful. Between 1881 and 1911 the Wesleyan circuit at Ashby-de-la-Zouch (which included the Coalville area) had increased its membership from 590 to 937 (+59 per cent), while the Primitive circuit of Coalville had increased its membership from 210 to 460 (+119 per cent). In addition the Wesleyan Reform Union had developed chapels which competed successfully with the other Methodist Connexions.¹⁰

During the inter-war period, however, the situation changed markedly. The Wesleyan Reform Union chapels disappeared, apparently without trace. The Coalville Primitive

⁹ G. T. Rimmington, 'Baptist membership in rural Leicestershire 1881–1914', *Baptist Quarterly*, XXXVII (8) (October 1988), 386–401.

¹⁰ Rimmington, 'Methodist membership in rural Leicestershire'.

circuit, though showing a 4 per cent increase during the early 1930s, saw its membership decrease overall from 417 in 1916 to 398 in 1936 (–5 per cent). The Ashby-de-la-Zouch circuits (both Wesleyan and Primitive) experienced a brief flourish between 1921 and 1926 (+4 per cent), a reflection of increases at the national level achieved by some ‘aggressive evangelism’ that Kent has described as ‘the last flicker of expansion of modern Methodism’.¹¹ Overall though, there was a slight decrease from 1,249 in 1916 to 1,225 in 1936 (–2 per cent). As in the preceding period changes in Methodist membership mirrored Baptist changes. The Baptists in Coalville, though they made a 3 per cent gain in membership in the early 1930s, nevertheless lost 77 members (–18 per cent) overall between 1916 and 1941. At Ashby-de-la-Zouch they achieved stability between 1921 and 1936, but overall lost 31 members (–29 per cent).¹² The decline of Methodism in coalmining villages was probably true also of granite-quarrying communities. Markfield (see table 5), for instance, experienced a decline in Wesleyan membership from 58 in 1921 to 42 in 1941 (–28 per cent).

Table 5: Wesleyan Methodist membership in villages within Leicester circuits.

	1921	1931	% change	1941	% change
<i>Semi-urban and Industrialised villages:</i>					
Wigston Magna	84	76	–10	93	+22
South Wigston	89	121	+36	141	+17
Syston	134	138	+3	131	–5
Sileby	72	110	+53	107	–3
Markfield	58	44	–24	42	–5
Anstey	19	20	+5	12	–67
Glenfield	63	90	+43	98	+9
Rothley	31	29	–6	23	–21
Thurmaston	65	71	+9	61	–14
Total	615	699	+14	708	+1
<i>Rural villages (mainly Agricultural):</i>					
Glen Magna	19	35	+84	32	–9
Billesdon	6				
Tugby	3	5	+67	2	–60
Houghton-on-the-Hill	22	21	–5	30	+43
Barkby	8	5	–38	2	–60
Rearsby	16	19	+19	19	–
Tilton-Halstead	14	10	–29	12	+17
East Norton	7	7			
Thornton	48	35	–27	34	–3
Thurcaston	8	10	+25	12	+17
Total	151	147	–3	143	–3
Village total	766	846	+10	851	+1

Source: *Leicester Messenger*.

¹¹ J. H. S. Kent, *The Age of Disunity* (London, 1966), 365, n.3.

¹² G. T. Rimmington, ‘Baptist membership in Leicestershire between the Two World Wars’, *Baptist Quarterly*, XXXIX (8) (October 2002), 393–407.

More impressive than the response to Methodism in the mining and quarrying communities were the membership increases in some manufacturing centres. At Loughborough, for instance, where population increased from 22,990 in 1911 to 26,945 in 1931 (+15 per cent), and where there had been rapid developments in the engineering industry, Methodist membership increased from 1,244 in 1916 to 1,412 in 1936 (+14 per cent). Similarly in Hinckley, where the hosiery and footwear industries experienced a period of prosperity, and the population increased from 12,834 in 1911 to 16,030 in 1931 (+25 per cent), Methodist membership, though slumping from 271 in 1916 to 222 in 1921 (-18 per cent), recovered to 284 in 1936 (+5 per cent overall). Market Harborough, where population increased from 8,866 in 1911 to 9,312 in 1931 (+5 per cent), and where there was some light industrial development, had an increase in Methodist membership from 235 in 1916 to 280 in 1936 (+19 per cent). Melton Mowbray, on the other hand, where the population increased from 9,412 in 1911 to 10,537 in 1931 (+11 per cent), but where there was no significant industrial development, experienced fluctuating membership. There were 1,391 members in 1916 and 1,374 in 1936 (-1 per cent).

During the pre-1914 period there had been a steady decline of Nonconformity in rural areas. Because of agricultural depression, villages without industrial capacity had tended to lose population, so that the chapels had lost members. By 1894 the Baptist Union had complained that tenant farmers, who had been 'the backbone of religious Nonconformity' were 'looked for almost in vain among our village churches'.¹³ The Leicestershire villages of Arnesby, Billesdon, Foxton, Thurlaston and Queniborough, for instance, all of which had population losses, also had Baptist chapels whose membership fell significantly.¹⁴ Among the Methodists there had not always been a direct relationship between population and membership. The Castle Donington registration district, for instance, which had no urban community within its boundaries, had experienced a fall in population from 7,648 in 1881 to 6,416 in 1911 (-16 per cent), yet the Wesleyan circuit there had seen membership rise from 396 to 437 (+10 per cent). On the other hand, in Loughborough registration district, outside the town of Loughborough, the rural population had increased from 8,971 in 1881 to 10,121 in 1911 (+13 per cent), while the rural Wesleyan societies there had a membership of about 444 in 1892 and 438 in 1910 (-1 per cent). Generally though, the membership trend in agricultural villages was downward.¹⁵

During the inter-war period, however, the population trend in many Leicestershire villages, especially those near to urban centres, was reversed. The increased incidence of motor buses and the use of bicycles made it possible for many rural people to work in towns but remain resident in the countryside. Villages with Wesleyan Methodist societies attached to Leicester circuits almost invariably increased their populations. The industrial settlements of Wigston, Syston, Sileby, Markfield and Anstey grew rapidly, as did Rothley and Thurmaston, which were becoming suburbanised. Between them these communities grew from a total population of 24,613 in 1911 to 32,419 in 1931 (+32 per cent). At the same time some smaller villages seemed to be retaining their natural increase, even if they were not attracting people from elsewhere. It is true that Billesdon, Tugby, Barkby and East Norton between them were reduced from 1,684 people in 1911 to 1,307 in 1931 (-22 per cent), but Houghton-on-the-Hill, Rearsby, Halstead and Tilton, and Thurcaston increased from 1,979 to 2,815 (+42 per cent).

¹³ D. M. Thompson (ed.), *Nonconformity in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1972), 14.

¹⁴ Rimmington, 'Baptist membership in rural Leicestershire'.

¹⁵ Rimmington, 'Methodist membership in rural Leicestershire'.

Despite the population increases in many villages, however, the Methodist situation did not improve very much. The semi-urban and industrialised villages experienced a total increase in Wesleyan membership from 615 in 1921 to 708 in 1941 (+15 per cent), but this masks the fact that Syston, Sileby, Markfield, Anstey, Rothley and Thurmaston all had losses. Most of them increased membership temporarily during the 1920s, but slumped in the 1930s. Wigston (+35 per cent) and Glenfield (+56 per cent), both semi-urban and on the fringes of Leicester, accounted for the whole of the increase. The mainly agricultural villages meanwhile showed a membership loss from 151 in 1921 to 143 in 1941 (–5 per cent). Detailed examination shows that the Billesdon and East Norton churches, both in depopulating villages, were closed down. Tugby varied in membership between 5 and 2. Barkby's membership went down from 8 to 2. Great Glen (+68 per cent), Houghton-on-the-Hill (+36 per cent) and Thurcaston (+50 per cent) societies, all in villages with rapidly increasing populations, were the only ones to show an increase in membership.

Even though Methodist membership was kept up better than among the Baptists, there were disquieting facts that indicated greater membership problems were to come. One problem was that Methodism was clearly losing its working-class roots. As early as 1892 the Wesleyan leader Hugh Price Hughes complained that 'office and authority are almost everywhere in the hands of tradesmen and professional men. It is the rarest thing to find a genuine representative workman on any of the governing bodies of our Church'.¹⁶ This was true even among the Primitives; the trustees of the Claremont Street Church in Leicester in 1938 included a plasterer, a counterman, and three footwear workers among their members, but the other sixteen members were mainly directors or manufacturers.¹⁷ The collapse of support in mining areas was symptomatic of the tendency for the more politicised members (with the rise of the electoral strength of the Labour Party) to fade away from their religious ties. As Davies, George and Rupp indicate, there were many people who 'lapsed from their Methodist allegiance and made socialism their religion'.¹⁸ Caroline Morris notes that 'the largest hole in membership was made by the loss of mission halls in the [Leicester] city centre'.¹⁹ Bread Street was sold to the Salvation Army. The working-class Temperance Hall congregation largely disappeared after its closure in 1920. Northgate Street Mission, which had been in the poorest part of the city, was moved to a lower middle-class suburb, and became Epworth Hall. On the other hand Trinity and Uppingham Road churches were built in areas that ensured the attraction of middle-class people. Only Southfields Hall was in an almost entirely working-class area; it had to contend with serious vandalism in the 1930s, which discouraged the Methodists from developing other similar ventures.²⁰

Another problem was the reduction in the numbers of children attending Sunday schools. In the main it reflected the losses in other denominations. Among the Anglicans, for instance, Sunday school pupils declined nationally from 2,223,111 in 1918 to 1,546,007 in 1936 (–31 per cent), while in the dioceses of Peterborough and Leicester (which were not divided until 1926) the decline was from 61,924 to 45,111 (–27 per cent).²¹ Rupert Davies noted that the national decrease in Methodist membership

¹⁶ *Methodist Times*, 20 October 1892.

¹⁷ LLRRO/N/M/29/14 (Trustees' minutes, Claremont Street Methodist Church).

¹⁸ Davies, George & Rupp (eds.), *History of the Methodist Church*, III, 333.

¹⁹ Morris, 'Methodism in Leicester', 10.

²⁰ LLRRO/N/M/179/1168 (Southfields Methodist Church Trustees minutes), 12 February, 1935.

²¹ G. T. Rimmington, *Bishop Cyril Bardsley and the Diocese of Leicester 1927–1940* (Leicester, 1999), 6.

immediately following the reunion of 1932 was accompanied by 'an equivalent shrinkage in the number of Sunday school scholars'.²² The pastoral address at the Methodist Conference in 1938 lamented that 'in our Sunday schools today, there are nearly 320,000 fewer scholars than there were six years ago'.²³ This was reflected in Leicestershire. In the Leicester Second Primitive circuit there was an average of 618 attendances at Sunday schools; by 1938 this had been reduced to 316.²⁴

Since the Sunday schools had become the main source of membership recruitment the reduction in the number of pupils was serious. Matthew Davison, in his pastoral address to the Primitive Connexional Conference in 1921, expressed his concern about 'a serious decrease in the number of scholars who are members of the Church'.²⁵ Junior membership in the Leicester Bishop Street circuit dropped from 18 per cent of church membership in 1915 to 8 per cent in 1930.²⁶ As early as 1916 there were seven village societies in the Leicester Wesleyan circuits in which there were no junior members. Moreover, even some societies with substantial memberships and Sunday schools, like Wigston Magna, with a membership of 93, recorded no junior members.

While other denominations had successful Bible classes for young people, Methodists rarely seemed to succeed in this type of venture. The Anglicans at the time were particularly successful. In England and Wales the total number of attenders at Bible classes for young people increased from 427,069 in 1918 to 661,479 in 1936 (+55 per cent). In the new Leicester diocese there was an increase of 80 per cent, from 6,314 in 1931 to 11,371 in 1936.²⁷ Among the Baptists too there were many successful efforts to attract young people to Bible study, notably at the Leicester churches of Victoria Road and Archdeacon Lane and Loughborough's Woodgate. A Baptist youth rally in Leicester in 1937 had representatives from 13 churches in attendance.²⁸ However, there does not seem to have been a corresponding development among Methodists, except at some of the newer churches. Epworth Hall, for instance, which had replaced the Leicester Northgate Street Mission in the early 1930s, reported in 1936 that 'the spiritual life . . . has never been as deep as it is now. The sincere devotion of the young folk especially is cause for gratitude'.²⁹

The truth was that many young people could not be attracted by purely religious activities. Gilbert refers to Bernard Shaw's distinction between 'salvation' and 'melioration', suggesting that concern for eternal life had become less important than 'systematic improvement through a sustained application of human effort and intelligence'. Churches which urged people to choose between salvation and 'the new paganism of worldly recreations' found themselves at a serious disadvantage.³⁰ The effects of meliorative tendencies were evident in many churches, both Anglican and Nonconformist. The Baptists in particular developed cricket and football clubs, together with church buildings 'to which all age groups, all classes and all interests could gravitate, and where all could indulge in something attractive enough to occupy their leisure hours', though they usually stopped

²² Davies, George & Rupp (eds.), *History of the Methodist Church*, III, 362.

²³ *Methodist Church Conference Minutes* (1938).

²⁴ LLRRO/N/M/179/272 (Leicester Second Circuit Primitive Methodist Connexion Statistical Returns).

²⁵ *Primitive Methodist Connexional Conference Minutes* (1921), 5.

²⁶ Morris, 'Methodism in Leicester', 39.

²⁷ Rimmington, *Bishop Cyril Bardsley and the Diocese of Leicester*, 116, n.40.

²⁸ Rimmington, 'Baptist membership in Leicestershire between the Two World Wars'.

²⁹ *Leicester Messenger*, October, 1936.

³⁰ A. D. Gilbert, *The making of post-Christian Britain: a history of the secularization of modern society* (London & New York, 47, 93).

short of encouraging ballroom dancing.³¹ Among the Methodists the more ‘successful’ churches had attractions like Ladies’ sewing meetings, mothers’ meetings, lectures and brass bands, which ran alongside a diminishing number of class meetings. Caroline Morris noted that in 1916 the Leicester Bishop Street circuit had had 53 adult and 13 junior classes. By 1939 there were 39 adult classes and only 3 junior classes. No more than 35 per cent of the members were meeting in classes by 1935. No wonder that Inglis commented that the church was jumping on the ‘entertainment band wagon’.³²

Why Methodism was less successful than the Established Church and other forms of Nonconformity in the recruitment of the young, at a time when adult membership was being maintained or even increased, is not at all clear, but some suggestions can be made. The nature of the ministry at the time may be partially responsible. While the ordained ministers were no longer itinerants or ‘travellers’, but firmly placed within their circuits for three year periods, they were nevertheless not attached to any one church. The peripatetic style of their preaching appointments, moving from one church to another within the circuit, ensured that they were not available to lead in the same way that Anglican incumbents or other Nonconformist ministers attached to one particular church were able to do. Hence they were without the genius of notable individuals like the Baptist preachers L. H. Marshall and Thomas Edmunds, both of whom were noted for their work among young people in Leicester at this time. Primitive Methodism in particular continued to emphasise that ordination did not confer any gifts upon their ministers not available to other preachers.³³

While it is true that the ministry, in the absence of theological colleges representing particular party interests, was devoid of the Modernist-Fundamentalist divide that was so much a feature of the Baptists or the Catholic-Evangelical divide within Anglicanism, and all could be said to have been subjected to ‘the rigours of critical methods in biblical and theological studies’, ministers often served with faithfulness rather than distinction.³⁴ When the Reverend J. Whittle retired from the Leicester North Primitive circuit, it was particularly noted that, although there was much praise for his preaching, and influence upon young people, ‘his Circuit Statesmanship and business aptitude have made for steady ordered progress’. Although there was recognition of the giving of ‘spiritual nourishment and inspiration for service’, there was no mention of evangelical zeal or the saving of souls.³⁵ While the early Primitives ‘measured the worth of a preacher according to the number of souls won’ their inter-war counterparts were more concerned with the maintenance of the *status quo*.³⁶ This is hardly surprising when it is realised that there were more buildings to maintain and more societies per minister in 1932 than there had been in 1907.

Lay leadership too was in crisis. Many of the churches had passed the ‘progressive phase’ identified by Currie, Gilbert and Horsley (in which there had been rapid expansion) and the ‘marginal phase’ of lesser responsiveness to the wider society, and were either in the ‘recessive phase’ (when there was a serious reduction in the capacity to

³¹ I. Sellers, *Nineteenth Century Nonconformity* (London, 1977), 47–8; See also Rimmington, ‘Baptist membership in Leicestershire between the Two World Wars’.

³² Morris, ‘Methodism in Leicester’, 12; K. S. Inglis, *Churches and the Working Class in Victorian Britain* (London, 1963), 74.

³³ Davies, George & Rupp (eds.), *History of the Methodist Church*, III, 332.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 319.

³⁵ LLRRO/N/M/320/24 (Leicester North Circuit Quarterly Meetings Minutes), 31 May, 1919.

³⁶ J. S. Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion: Its Background and Early History* (Madison, Wisc., 1984), 174.

attract outsiders) or the 'residual phase' (in which there was serious demoralisation and even autogenous growth had become well-nigh impossible). Consequently the leadership was tending to be older, with many men holding multiple appointments.³⁷ John Cook of Syston was trust treasurer, superintendent of the Sunday school and a class leader. He 'took a deep interest in District and Connexional matters', as well as working tirelessly for the Primitives in Syston.³⁸ George Edward Hilton, apart from being a member of the Leicester City Council for many years, and Lord Mayor in 1921–2, was also the organist and choirmaster at Claremont Street Primitive Methodist Church for forty years, the Sunday school superintendent and leader of the young men's class. H. E. Wragby 'lived hopefully and helpfully' as a trustee, teacher in the Sunday school, a local preacher and worker'.³⁹ Davies, George and Rupp noted that 'Wesleyanism brought to [Methodist] Union an aging leadership'. They concluded that 'the general leadership of the United Church before World War II tended to lack vigour, drive or new ideas'.⁴⁰ What was true of the national leadership was true also of the local leadership in Leicestershire.

It has to be remembered that Methodism up to 1932 lived within the shadow of efforts to reunify the Connexions, a movement that many members in Leicestershire believed was 'a "London-made scheme", the work of "so-called leaders", chiefly domiciled in the Metropolis'.⁴¹ One Primitive circuit in Leicester passed a resolution to the effect that 'if approach is made from the other Methodist Churches we will make arrangements for class co-operation', and expressed its willingness 'to co-operate in the movement among local Methodist Churches towards Methodist fraternity', but the lack of enthusiasm is evident from the failure to initiate action.⁴²

Undoubtedly there were some far-sighted people who looked forward to Methodist Union. R. W. Parks had seen it as the means of bringing 'a new Methodist church in at least 2,000 more English villages'. Scott Lidgett had declared that only a reunited Methodism could 'evangelise the world'. After Methodist Union had been achieved in 1932, Luke Wiseman, the president of the Methodist Conference in 1933, declared that 'Methodism should at once embark upon a great evangelistic campaign'. There were the challenges of children growing up without religious instruction, the problem of 'downtown' churches, and the embitterment of young unemployed people.⁴³ The Union, however, had been a compromise, for 'the unionists relied for success on liberal promises that the chapels would not close', when what was needed was the closure of formerly competing churches so that others could be developed in places where Methodism had not reached.⁴⁴ Wesleyans and Primitives in Leicestershire, as elsewhere, retained their ecclesiological structure as it had been before the union, the same circuits, the same societies, the same buildings. Rationalisation would wait until a new post-war era took it in hand.

By the end of the 1930s the process by which the 'middling' middle-class gained control of Methodist circuits in Leicestershire was virtually complete. The missions in

³⁷ R. Currie, A. D. Gilbert & H. Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles since 1700* (Oxford, 1977). See also Gilbert, *The making of post-Christian Britain*, 78.

³⁸ LLRRO/N/M/320/44, 2 June, 1917.

³⁹ LLRRO/N/M/29/13 (Leicester Claremont Street Primitive Methodist Church Minutes), 25 September, 1936, 27 January, 1938.

⁴⁰ Davies, George & Rupp, *History of the Methodist Church*, III, 340.

⁴¹ R. Currie, *Methodism Divided: A Study in the Sociology of Ecumenism* (London, 1968), 196.

⁴² LLRRO/N/M/320/24, 3 December, 1927, 2 March, 1929.

⁴³ Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 183, 187; *Methodist Church Conference Minutes* (1933), 376.

⁴⁴ Currie, *Methodism Divided*, 198.

Leicester town centre had disappeared, the politically-inspired among the working-classes had found an alternative home in the Labour Party rather than in the Methodist Church (though there was some overlap) and the most successful churches were those in the middle-class suburbs. So far had Methodism drawn away from its mission to the poor that one local preacher could declare, without contradiction, that 'the church cannot make itself responsible for the practical details of social amelioration'.⁴⁵ The Primitives' dilemma (and the Wesleyans' dilemma too) can be summed up in the words of Julia Werner that they no longer had 'effective revival preachers, a desire for the outpouring of the spirit, a willingness to let decorum fall by the wayside' or any means of 'communicating revival experiences from one place to another'.⁴⁶ Nevertheless Methodism was still an effective religious force. It was the largest element of Nonconformity in Leicestershire. While the Baptists were dwindling, Methodists had maintained their numbers, but they faced the future with professionalism and bureaucracy rather than the heat of nineteenth-century evangelism.

Personal note

Dr. Gerald T. Rimmington was Professor of Education, Mount Allison University, Canada, until 1981, when he resigned to enter the full-time Anglican ministry. He retired as Rector of Barwell in 1995. Since 2000 he has been an Honorary Visiting Fellow in the Centre for the History of Religious and Political Pluralism at the University of Leicester. He is Chairman of the Committee of the Society.

⁴⁵ Morris, 'Methodism in Leicester', 39. On the relations between Methodism and Labour Hastings notes that, despite the fact that there were a score or more of Labour M.P.s who were also local preachers, 'the two causes increasingly pulled apart. Labour meetings found room for a glass of beer. The good Methodists could sadly not approve where the working-class Catholic felt quite at home'. Hastings, *History of English Christianity*, 267.

⁴⁶ Werner, *Primitive Methodist Connexion*, 174.