CONGREGATIONALISM AND SOCIETY IN LEICESTERSHIRE AND RUTLAND 1916–1966

Gerald T. Rimmington

From 1916 to 1966, after which most Congregational churches were absorbed into the United Reformed Church, Congregationalism experienced considerable reduction in membership although there were some temporary increases in the after the two world wars. While middle-class suburban and large town churches continued to maintain their membership, the ‘downtown’ churches of Leicester disappeared, as did smaller community churches, where their independent status could not cope adequately with pastoral needs. The Leicestershire situation illustrates the problems which led to the replacement of a free association of independent churches with a more hierarchical entity.

When the First World War ended it was a pyrrhic victory for the British and their allies that brought both hope and anxiety about the future in Leicestershire and Rutland as well as nationally. The loss of manpower and the disillusionment of young men who had suffered in the trenches served to temper the expressions of hope. The leaders of voluntary organisations and churches were to express both hopes and fears for the future. The Report of the Council of the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society for 1919 noted that the organisation ‘is now passing through a critical time in which anxieties and hopes are blended’.1 Theodore Woods, the bishop of Peterborough, who included Leicestershire and Rutland in his diocese, expressed the hope that ‘the last shot had been fired [and] henceforth there would be among them fellowship, justice and peace’. At the same time, however, he lamented that the Church lacked the means ‘to save the Nation’s soul from the material influences of industrial and commercial reconstruction’.2 There followed a difficult period of industrial strife, fluctuations of the trade cycle with greater amplitude than ever before, political bewilderment, another disastrous war in 1939–1945 and the more successful, though stressful, recovery period from 1945 onward. This was the world in which the English Congregational churches operated and sought to be relevant to the needs and aspirations of the people. This paper examines the fortunes of the Independent Churches through this period, which ended with the formation of the Congregational Church (as distinct from the free association known as the Congregational Union) its aftermath in the forming of the United Reformed Church, and attempts to explain what happened

1 F. B. Lott, The Centenary Book of the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society (Leicester, 1935), 188.

in Leicestershire and Rutland, where hosiery and shoe manufacturing were relatively prosperous and the population grew from 512,845 in 1921 to 706,153 (+38%) in 1961.³

Congregationalism grew out of the Independent Church movement after the post-restoration ejection of non-conforming ministers from the Church of England. In the eighteenth century it had been influenced by the Evangelical Revival, so that by 1821 there were 799 Independent congregations in England and Wales. Like other Nonconformist denominations the Congregationalists had grown considerably in numbers during the Victorian era. By 1880 there were 2,013 fully independent churches.⁴ In the towns and villages of Leicestershire and Rutland there had been assiduous evangelism so that in 1900 there were some 62 chapels with 3,831 members. By 1915 there were 4,358 members in 60 chapels, an increase of 14% in membership. Within the county borough of Leicester, where the 1851 Census indicated that there were two chapels, with an evening attendance of slightly less than a thousand (and a membership that cannot be quantified, but was undoubtedly less than that), the number of chapels had increased by 1901 to ten, with a membership of 2,075. By 1915, just before the beginning of the period under examination, there were 2,301 members in twelve chapels although decline had begun.⁵ After membership increases in the rural areas at 10% in 1900–1905 and 6% in 1905–1910 (more than the national increases of 8% and 3% respectively), there was a 3% decline during 1910–1915, while the national total had increased by 3%.⁶ In Leicester the numbers increased similarly up to 1910, from 2,072 in 1901 to 2,312 (+12%) in 1910. During 1910–1915, however, there was a slight decline to 2,301.

Statistical summaries in the annually published Congregational Yearbooks indicate that the decline continued into the inter-war period and tended to accelerate after 1945. A note of caution, however, is needed. Because of the nature of Congregationalism, with the strength residing in independent congregations of worshippers, there is necessarily some uncertainty about numbers. Some congregations never completed returns of membership or did so spasmodically. There is documentary evidence, for instance, that there were chapels in Bottesford, Dadlington, Great Easton and Ketton, but no membership returns were made. Others had wavering affiliation with the Congregational Union, such as the chapel in Blaby, whose church committee noted in 1922 that ‘we had not paid any subscriptions for a number of years’ and agreed that forthwith membership should

³ This increase was much higher than the national increase. The population of England and Wales grew from 37,886,699 in 1921 to 46,071,604 (+22%) in 1961.
⁵ Ibid.
<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
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<td>299,006</td>
<td>352,615</td>
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*Totals not available for 1926.

Table 1. Congregational membership in Leicestershire and Rutland (compared with neighbouring counties and England and Wales).

Source: Congregational Yearbooks.

be renewed. In 1916, therefore, there were at least 60 churches in Leicestershire and Rutland, but in 1966 there were only 50. Membership in 1916 was recorded as 4,409; by 1966 it had declined to 2,699 (−39%). Comparison with neighbouring counties (see Table 1) suggests that the decline was more rapid in urban areas than in rural areas, though it was certainly significant in both kinds of areas. In Nottinghamshire (including Nottingham), for instance, there was a decline from 3,774 to 2,090 (−45%). However, in largely rural Lincolnshire there was a decline from 2,838 to 1,968 (−30%) and in Northamptonshire from 4,508 to 3,206 (−29%). In England and Wales as a whole the membership decline was from 291,128 in 1916 to 196,171 (−33%) in 1966 and the decline in churches from 3,323 to 3,065 (−8%). The decline in Leicestershire and Rutland, therefore, while greater than in Nottinghamshire, and less than in the more rural counties of Northamptonshire and Lincolnshire, was higher than the rate of national decline.

To trace the course of membership decline it is necessary to examine in greater details the difference between numbers in city and county areas. Even a cursory glance indicates (see Table 2) that the membership decline in rural areas between 1916 and 1966 was perceptibly greater than in urban areas, and certainly different from the situation in Edwardian times. Before the First World War, rural Congregational membership continued to increase even in villages where population was decreasing. In seven villages with population figures between 500 and 999, where there had been a 1% decrease in population, membership had

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7 Blaby Congregational Church minutes, 30 November 1922. These church records were kindly loaned by Mr. Gavin Bryson, the Church Secretary of Blaby Congregational Church, with the consent of the Church Committee.
8 The term ‘chapel’ tended to fall out of use toward the end of the nineteenth century. Clarendon Park Congregational Church (founded in 1886), whose members included many Leicester civic dignitaries, was never referred to as a chapel. The term had been used originally to describe any Christian place of worship other than the parish church, but as Nonconformists sought respectability and vied for equality of status with the Established Church they began to insist on the term ‘church’ to describe their own places of worship.
<table>
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<td>791</td>
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<td>809</td>
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<td>2180</td>
<td>2072</td>
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<td>101075</td>
<td>136410</td>
<td>164735</td>
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</table>

a. Ashby-de-la-Zouch, Hinckley, Loughborough, Lutterworth, Melton Mowbray, Market Harborough, Oakham, Uppingham (8).
d. Excludes settlements with Congregational memberships where the records are incomplete.

Table 2. Congregational membership and population in Leicestershire and Rutland (outside Leicester) 1916–1966.
Sources: Census of Population, Congregational Yearbooks.

increased by 37% between 1901 and 1911. In ten villages with population figures lower than 500 there had been a 10% population increase, which was more than matched by a 12% increase in membership. In ten large industrialised villages (population more than 1,000) population increased by only 7%, but the increase in membership had been 37%. In the seven towns where Congregationalism was represented, however, membership increases dipped slightly below the rate of population increases. Population had increased by 10%, while the membership increase was 9%.\(^9\) In the county town of Leicester, where the population increased from 211,579 in 1901 to 227,222 in 1911 (+7%), membership decreased from 2,312 in 1900 to 2,301 (–1%) in 1945.\(^10\)

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\(^9\) Rimmington, ‘Congregationalism in rural Leicestershire and Rutland’.

\(^10\) Rimmington, ‘Congregationalism and Society in Leicester’.
Within the period 1916–1966 changes in membership and population may be analysed in relation to Table 2, which indicates that while population increased in all the communities in which there were Congregational churches, membership was generally in decline. Agricultural villages showed a brief increase of 5% in the aftermath of the First World War, while industrialised villages showed a brief increase of 15% during the Great Depression of the inter-war period. Thereafter there was a flurry of membership increases after the Second World War leading to an overall increase (outside Leicester) of 11% throughout the denomination, with the largest increases in the towns (+19% between 1946 and 1956).

Within the city of Leicester, as elsewhere in the two counties, figures for membership were generally downward, except during the Great Depression of 1929–1932; there was a 15% increase in membership during 1926–1936. There were some spectacular gains and losses among individual churches. The ‘downtown’ churches experienced considerable losses. The large and hitherto prosperous Gallowtree Gate Church disappeared in 1921, many of its members transferring to suburban Clarendon Park. Bond Street survived throughout the period, though it was destined for closure by redevelopment of the area in which it was located. Oxford Street was still in existence, but was soon to fade out.

Emmanuel, having sold its church building, continued to worship in the schoolroom, but its members decided that it was to be affiliated to the Baptist Union rather than the Congregational Union. Sanvey Gate and Ivanhoe Street closed down in the 1930s. By 1966 it was accepted that there would be no Congregational witness in the town centre.

The Victorian suburban churches fared a little better than the ‘downtown’ churches, although London Road had by this time become a ‘downtown’ church and did not survive beyond the early 1960s. By 1956 there were only 97 members there, whereas there had been 292 in 1916. All of the other churches survived, though only Clarendon Park remained in the same building. Located in an attractive suburb, it was the only church which had more members in 1966 than it had in 1916, though it had passed its highpoint of 360 in 1936. Humberstone Road, the only remaining evidence of S. T. Williams’ missionary efforts in the 1870s, whose original building had been destroyed in the ‘blitz’ of 1940, acquired a new worship centre, but had only 94 members in 1966, compared with 266 in 1916. Belgrave Union Church also was rehoused as a result of city planning, its membership, however, being also reduced by a third, from 148 in 1916 to 104 in 1966, though it had a highpoint of 360 in 1936. Wycliffe, which languished on its old site, where it shared its building with the Collegiate Girls’ School, achieved a post-Second World War relocation to the village of Evington, which, having become part of the city of Leicester, had been over-run by new housing estates, both council and private. From a low point of 49 members in 1956 it achieved a 78% increase to 87 in 1966.

The twentieth century suburban churches were the most successful in terms of membership. Abbot’s Road, a new development in the growth area of Humberstone, increased from 28 members in 1916 to 103 in 1966, though most of this increase came after 1946. There were 29 members in 1946; by 1966 there was a 255% increase. Of the other three twentieth century churches, Westcotes was the most successful in terms of membership, advancing from 97 members in 1916 to 186 in 1966. Christ Church, in a north-western suburb, had 96 members in 1936 and 94 in 1966. It had increased to 131 in 1946, but declined gradually over the next twenty years. North Evington Free Church, on the very edge of a twentieth century suburb, declined from 151 members in 1936 to 92 in 1966, though it had a highpoint of 160 in 1956. Like Emmanuel it was soon to affiliate with the Baptists, so that it was lost to Congregational polity.

Within Leicester the population increased, responding to the prosperity of the hosiery and footwear industries, from 234,143 in 1921 to 284,208 in 1971 (+21%), while the Congregational Church membership was reduced from 2,481 in 1916 to 1,088 (−56%) in 1966. So that, while Congregationalists had consisted of about 1% of the population in 1916, fifty years later they only amounted to 0.4%. Compared with the Baptists and Methodists they appear to have been slightly less successful in maintaining their membership, at least in the earlier years. There were 4,907 Baptist members in Leicester in 1916, a figure which had diminished to 4,767 (−3%) in 1941. In 1916 they formed 2% of the population. By 1941 their membership was only slightly less than 2%. Wesleyan Methodists had 2,455 members in 1921; by 1941 there were 2,333 members (−5%). They constituted 1% of the population in 1921; by 1941 they were only marginally less proportionately (−0.98%).

To some extent the Congregational decline between 1916 and 1966 can be attributed to problems that were nationwide. There were the inroads of secularism, which affected all denominations, and continued through the years in relentless fashion. Within Congregationalism too there were theological differences which threatened to induce sectarian rupture. Theological Liberalism, which had been dominant before the First World War, did not seem ‘to do justice to the brutalities of which civilized men were capable’, so that it came to be expressed in terms of Modernism, ‘the promulgation of the objective authority of the Word of God’. There were, however, differences of emphasis that were diametrically opposed. R. F. Horton and W. B. Selbie, for instance, were essentially evangelical and conservative. For them there were limitations in restating the faith. On the other hand, there were men like F. Lenward and T. Wigley, who were much more adventurous. Lenwood in 1930 ‘expressed his

conviction that Christianity itself had changed because people no longer accepted
the doctrine of the Trinity, atonement by sacrifice, nature miracles, eternal
punishment or the divinity of Christ.\footnote{16} There was also the problem of
Fundamentalism, with its stress on biblical inerrancy, the primacy of scripture
over scientific thinking and the ignoring of church tradition. Selbie noted that ‘the
rapid growth, since the War, of what is known as Fundamentalism is compelling a
new alignment of forces in all the Churches’.\footnote{17} Whereas the Baptists, for instance,
were tolerant of Fundamentalism,\footnote{18} Nathaniel Mickle, the principal of the
Congregational Mansfield College in Oxford, stated unequivocally for his
denomination that ‘In the Fundamentalist controversy the modern man must
sympathise with the Modernist party’.\footnote{19} R. T. Jones concluded that ‘many became
alarmed at the extreme position taken up by Lenwood and Wigley while others
found Modernism unsatisfying on religious and spiritual grounds. As a result it
[Congregationalism] began to lose its grip’.\footnote{20}

The result was a denomination in which worship had become ‘more dignified
and orderly’, with preaching that was ‘cultured, practical, conversational,
unspectacular’. Catering mainly for middle-class congregations the churches were
content to leave politics to the politicians and theology to the theologians;\footnote{21} to
some extent this was understandable. In Edwardian times, quite apart from
theological wrangling, there had been a fear that ‘Nonconformity was taking on a
too distinctly political colour, and was allowing itself to be used too readily as a
political tool’.\footnote{22} Where they remained in touch with politics it was in relation to
unemployment, conciliation and sabbatarianism, where there was a consensus
among the churches. Many members, however, ‘turned all the more fervently to
temperance’, which commanded little interest among the general public, thereby
divorcing themselves from the society of which they were part.\footnote{23} Professor
Bebbington concludes that ‘the crusading temper that bound together religion and
politics suddenly waned’. Instead there were ‘campaigns against gambling and
Sabbath-breaking and to champion the causes of temperance and social purity’.\footnote{24}
Consequently, Congregationalism tended to lose the interest of people who were
passionate about questions of theology or were budding politicians, a factor that
had been of some importance in the development of the Leicester churches in the
nineteenth century.\footnote{25}

\footnote{16} Jones, Congregationalism in England, 447.
\footnote{17} Selbie, ‘The Free Churches and Modernism’, 357.
\footnote{18} Rimmington, ‘Baptist membership in Leicestershire between the Two World Wars’. Note, however,
the splits which developed in the similarly organised Baptist denomination as a result of the
Fundamentalism-Modernism controversy.
\footnote{19} N. Mickle, ‘Radicalism and Fundamentalism’, The Congregational Quarterly (1927), 186.
\footnote{21} Ibid., 463.
\footnote{23} S. Koss, Nonconformity in Modern British Politics (London, 1975), 166.
\footnote{24} D. W. Bebbington, The Nonconformist Conscience: chapel and politics 1870–1914 (London, 1982),
159.
\footnote{25} G. T. Rimmington & A. McWhirr, Gallowtree Gate Congregational Chapel, Leicester, 1823–1921:
an history of the chapel and a list of interments in the graveyard (Leicester, 1999), 21.
Other factors in denominational decline were more local in character. One was the failure of the larger self-supporting churches to maintain their support of the rural churches. Gallowtree Gate, Bond Street, Oxford Street and London Road were all losing membership and suffering financial embarrassment. They were reduced to offering support to country churches of a kind that did not involve the use of funds. Accordingly, a new linking of churches was proposed by the Leicestershire and Rutland Congregational Union in 1929. Bond Street was to be associated with Gilmorton, Lutterworth, Ulelsthorpe and Walcote. Oxford Street included Anstey, Blaby, Groby, Markfield and Stanton-under-Bardon. The remainder of the country churches were to be linked with London Road, Humberstone Road, Westcotes, Wycliffe, Loughborough, Hinckley or Wigston. Significantly it was stressed from the outset that there was to be no financial involvement. The main outcome was to have the ministers of the larger churches taking part in ‘occasional interchanges on Sundays and for weeknight services’, ‘consultation affecting the work of the Churches’ and ‘mutual encouragement’. Other help from the central churches would include ‘musical services arranged by the choir, speakers supplied for Guilds, etc, gatherings of a social nature’.

The records of individual churches, however, indicate that such arrangements had little effect, either before 1929 or afterward. There was one reference to a ‘group meeting of village churches held at Oxford Street Church, Leicester, on Jan. 15, 1921’ in the Blaby Church minutes. However, as the topic of discussion was to help Stanton-under-Bardon with their building fund, the only just solvent Blaby congregation ‘decided not to take any part in the movement’. There was no response at all to the 1929 proposal. R. T. Jones sums up the national situation, which had been encouraged by the Moderators in 1929, stating that ‘grouping did not appeal to them [the country churches] and as the years passed by it became yet more difficult to provide them with a ministry’. By the 1950s the tendency was for the numerically stronger churches to hold their own or even increase their membership, while the weaker churches became weaker still.

The city centre churches were, in any case, having recognised that they were in a struggle for survival, preoccupied with discussions about their own futures. In 1943 the local Congregational Union drew together twenty-six representatives from the inner-city churches to discuss ‘the idea of a central church, linked with a headquarters for the Union, with accommodation for its many activities’. Following this up in 1945 a joint meeting of deacons from Bond Street, London Road and Oxford Street proposed that their churches be linked, perhaps in a single central church. They envisaged central premises in which there would be ‘large Halls for Meetings and Young People’s Workshops, which could be let to produce an income’. They also supposed, since the area around Bond Street would eventually be cleared of houses and that even the church site would be

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26 Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester & Rutland, hereafter ROLLR/N/C/X/23 (Leicestershire & Rutland Congregational Union Executive Committee minutes), 17 July 1929.
27 Blaby Congregational Church minutes, 27 January 1921.
28 Jones, Congregationalism in England, 462.
29 ROLLR/N/C/MB/26, 19 November 1943.
redeveloped, the Leicester Corporation ‘would provide another site in a central position’. It was a grand vision doomed to failure. Bond Street agreed with the proposal, but Oxford Street declined to give support. When the deacons met again several years later it was stated that ‘central was unlikely to be a success, but perhaps two churches might combine to start a new cause elsewhere. Perhaps the best use for a city church today might be to sell in order to launch out in a new district’.  

The central church idea was superseded by a commitment to evangelistic work in the suburbs of Leicester, Loughborough and Hinckley. This was not undertaken in isolation. The Reverend Dr. S. M. Berry stated as early as 1927 that ‘Church Extension ought to arise naturally out of the concern of the local churches for the religious needs of their neighbourhood’. He cited developments in Cardiff, Birmingham and Manchester. He also suggested a couple of principles. Firstly he stated that ‘we are not called upon as Congregationalists to plant a new Congregational church in every new district’. He went on to warn the denomination against ‘a repetition of the old scandal of overlapping’, which had reduced the effectiveness of much Nonconformist evangelism’. Secondly, he inveighed ‘against the policy of moving from a poorer neighbourhood to a wealthier, simply because the problem of finance is easier in the latter than the former case’. These principles were obvious limitations on Congregational development. It meant that some areas that might have been fruitful would be left to other denominations to evangelise, while even in those areas that the denomination decided to develop the long term future might be put in jeopardy by lack of funds, however laudable the aim might be.

In Leicestershire the Congregationalists were already in a disadvantageous situation. They were suffering from the fact that, as a small denomination, with most of its larger churches struggling for members and funds they would be ill-advised to pour scarce resources into new churches where the chances of selfsupport were limited. The Ivanhoe Street Church, for instance, disappeared in 1940. It had never been fully self-supporting, though it had done useful work among some of the poorest people in Leicester. The same was true of Sanvey Gate, which closed its doors two years earlier. Following Berry’s dictum, evangelistic work was embarked upon at Braunstone, a council housing estate on the western fringes of Leicester, close to a private housing estate outside the city boundary. The County Union in 1944 ‘agreed for [a] proposed new church at Braunstone’. A site had already been purchased, with the intention that the Oxford Street congregation would relocate there and form the nucleus of the new church. The County Union agreed to provide support for the work there until it was well-established. Thereafter, however, it disappeared, and there was no

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30 Ibid., 28 September 1952.
32 ROLLR/N/C/X/23, 30 July 1940.
33 ROLLR/4D73/4 (Bond Street Congregational Church deacons’ minutes), 1 June 1938.
34 ROLLR/N/C/MB/26, 25 August 1944.
further mention of it. Presumably its members were subsumed within the Friar Lane and Braunstone Free Church, which had a Baptist affiliation, replacing the old Friar Lane Baptist Church in the centre of Leicester.

Similar evangelistic work was also begun at Westfield in Hinckley, Scraptoft Valley in Leicester and Shelthorpe in Loughborough. The work at Scraptoft Valley, on a new council housing estate, started with an informal service each Sunday morning in the primary school in 1959. This mission did not, however, survive for long after the departure of the dynamic Basil Bridge from the area in 1974. The work at Westfield in Hinckley was also a post-Second World War development. There was a membership of 32 in 1951 and 1961, but the church thereafter disappeared from the Congregational Yearbook returns. Shelthorpe, on the southern outskirts of Loughborough was in existence in 1935. It was noted by the County Union in 1938 that ‘the Mission Church . . . was being formed into a fully recognised Congregational Church’. It had already existed for two and a half years by that time. There were 43 members in 1941 and 34 in 1946; subsequently it disappeared from the records. Elsewhere there was a possibility of evangelistic work in the new post-Second World War Leicester working-class suburb of New Parks. This option, however, was taken up by the Methodists.

Apart from its failure to develop missions on the new council housing estates on the peripheries of the urban areas, the greatest failing of the denomination during this period was its inability to provide adequate pastoral care in the villages. Had the tentative plans made in 1929 succeeded, there might have been a network of village churches associated with prosperous urban churches, whose ministers would have exercised a quasi-episcopal role.

In Leicestershire and Rutland, after the abandonment of this scheme for ‘shepherding’ by an urban church, there were many efforts to place rural churches in groups with a minister. One example was in the Market Harborough area, where in 1959 it was noted that there was ‘one large church . . . and seven smaller churches and only one minister’. The District Committee suggested the ‘forming [of] a group of 4 Churches with a minister to look after them and the four Churches in view were Kibworth, Tur Langton, Hallaton and Medbourne’. However, three of the churches were agreeable, but the Medbourne congregation was divided, whereupon the others declined. In the Hinckley area there had been a scheme to link Hinckley, Westfield, Burbage and Stoney Stanton. It had worked well for awhile, but in 1945 it had fallen into abeyance. In 1946 Oakham and Uppingham agreed to share a minister, but this plan fell by the wayside, for two years later Uppingham agreed to share a minister with Harringworth. By 1950 a new grouping of Oakham with Wymondham and South Witham was being discussed.

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35 ROLLR/4D73/5, 3 June 1959.
36 ROLLR/N/C/X/23, 27 May 1938.
37 Jones, Congregationalism in England, 462.
38 ROLLR/N/C/215/112 (Great Bowden Congregational Church Meetings minutes), 7 April 1959.
39 ROLLR/N/C/MB/26, 14 December 1945.
By 1951 it is clear that the County Union had become exasperated by the inability of rural churches to agree on pastoral arrangements. There was a proposal to make ‘the principle of District Grouping’ compulsory, which, however, was defeated by a vote of fourteen to seven.\textsuperscript{40}

One of the difficulties was that it was not easy to attract ministers to rural churches that appeared to be in chronic decline. From the point of view of a church member the payment of a minister was an increasing burden. It was not surprising, therefore, that many churches opted instead for a supply of lay preachers. A two-year course of training had been established in 1930. By 1957 provision had been made for a five-year course. There were nationally 319 enrolments in 1958–9, and it was concluded that ‘this thorough training of its Lay Preachers is one of the most valuable and most successful of the Union’s contributions to church life’.\textsuperscript{41}

In Leicester and Rutland, it is clear that increasing the length of training was a disincentive to prospective lay preachers. In 1956 the County Union asked the ministers and deacons ‘to search the ranks of our members to see if any lady or gentlemen could be brought forward to join the work’.\textsuperscript{42} In that year there were 31 lay preachers in Leicestershire and Rutland who had completed training, though as many as 53 claimed to be functioning as preachers. Two years later there were only 29 trained preachers.\textsuperscript{43} They were needed to supply thirteen churches which relied entirely on preachers from outside their own membership, as well as the churches to which they themselves belonged, where they provided valuable support for the minister.

Despite the factors which contributed to the decline in membership there were, nevertheless, some Congregational successes. Churches on or near middle-class housing estates were successful in developing and maintaining their membership. Among them was the Wycliffe Church, which had been in danger of closing had it remained on its original Victorian suburban site. With encouragement from the County Union a new site was purchased in the former village of Evington (on the eastern outskirts of Leicester), by that time inundated by housing estates, both council and privately owned. The Union reported that ‘as a county we are very backward in church extension work, but at least it is possible to report the successful conclusion of our negotiations for the purchase of the Evington site . . . the way is open for the erection of a dual purpose building’.\textsuperscript{44} Two years later it was noted that ‘Wycliffe’s new building had appeared, under the leadership of the Reverend Lorna Stanfield, who was attracting ‘really good congregations’. Membership was 50, and there were 35 pupils in the Sunday school. By 1966 there were 87 (+78\%) members.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Ibid.}, 10 September 1946, 21 May 1948, 9 June 1950, 7 September 1951.
\textsuperscript{41} Jones, \textit{Congregationalism in England}, 410.
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Leicestershire and Rutland Congregational Year Book} (1956), 13.
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Ibid.} (1956), 11.
\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Ibid.} (1958), 11.
Another success was the development of Abbot’s Road as a successor to Bond Street. There had been a congregation in the village of Humberstone since 1851, but it had not prospered. During the early years of the twentieth century, however, the village was in process of being absorbed by Leicester. Abbot’s Road, worshipping in a temporary structure, was opened in 1929, with a full-time minister, F. K. Mitchell, B.D. (London), whose stipend was paid partly with a subsidy from the County Union. Its existence was put in question by internal squabbles. Mitchell resigned in 1933. During the long interregnum, which lasted until 1937, when a student pastor was appointed, it is noted that ‘the deacons took the drastic step of expelling a lady member “for vilifying the deacons, and because of her attitude at Church meetings”’. It resulted in the resignation of four of the deacons. The slow development of the church, which in 1950 had only 43 members, was accelerated with the appointment of Basil Bridge as minister in 1955. Bridge, a notable preacher and hymn-writer, held the joint pastorate of the old church at Bond Street and Abbot’s Road, charged with winding down the work at the former and concentrating on the development of the latter. By 1966 he had been remarkably successful. In 1959 he had managed to obtain £3,000 for extensions to Abbot’s Road from the sale of the London Road Church in 1959. By the time that Bridge left in 1974 the church was well-established, with 142 members.\(^{46}\)

Though the situation in areas outside Leicester was less satisfactory, there were at least some bright spots, particularly in towns and industrialised villages. Though the small towns of Oakham, Uppingham and Lutterworth all recorded significant losses in Congregational membership, Ashby-de-la-Zouch more than doubled its Congregational membership from 25 in 1916 to 51 in 1966. Loughborough meanwhile increased its membership from 113 to 163 (+44%). Melton Mowbray increased its membership throughout the period from 75 to 98 (+31%).

Among the industrialised villages with a relatively successful congregation was Blaby, a community dominated by hosiery and footwear manufacturing. Even though it was usually without ministerial supervision, and struggled to maintain numbers, its members were much concerned about the spiritual health of the people and had an appreciation of ecumenicity. At the annual church meeting in 1922 it was commented that, although there were no new members, the spiritual life of the church was better than it had been for some time. Indeed, they were so concerned about flooding around their Sycamore Street place of worship, which had prevented services being conducted many times, that they purchased land in Park Road away from the floodable area and built a new church there. With a touch of imagination about the use of flexible space they decided to purchase 250 chairs instead of installing pews.\(^{47}\) They believed that the church had ‘received a

\(^{46}\) E. Hanson, Abbot’s Road United Reformed Church: The First Fifty Years, 1929–1979 (Leicester, 1979), 3, 5, 7, 15, 21.

\(^{47}\) Blaby Congregational Church minutes, 15 February 1928, 15 June 1928, 11 October 1928, 8 May 1929.
blessing through the Caravan Mission [organised by the Baptists] that was held in September.\(^4^8\) In 1930 they shared in a Good Friday service and summer open-air services with the Baptists in the village.\(^4^9\) In 1933, in the immediate aftermath of the Great Depression, they elected three representatives ‘to unite with other representative bodies of the village to do something for the unemployed’.\(^5^0\) They even discussed at great length ‘the best ways and means of making the services more attractive and brighter’.\(^5^1\) By 1963 it had not only become affiliated with the Congregational Union, but had also shared in a full-time pastorate with the church in Narborough, though the arrangement broke down in 1967, and was never adequately replaced.\(^5^2\)

Earl Shilton, an industrial village near Hinckley, which prospered even in the worst years of the Great Depression because it had a number of hosiery and footwear factories, and whose population increased from 4,434 in 1921 to 6,360 (+43%) in 1961, had only 83 members in 1916, but by 1966 there were 106 members (with a highpoint of 150 in 1936). Wigston Magna, a hosiery village in process of becoming part of the Leicester conurbation, increased in population from 9,220 in 1921 to 30,225 (+228%) in 1966; its Congregational membership, though far from responding to the large increase in population, nevertheless remained stable at slightly less than 150. Markfield, a quarrying village, where the population increased from 1,899 in 1921 to 3,164 (+57%) in 1961, had a more than proportional membership increase from 16 in 1916 to 36 (+125%) in 1966.

A few of the villages also showed remarkable resilience, though the number of members bore little or no relation to changing population, except in the case of Thurnby, where the community was in process of becoming a middle-class commuter village within easy reach of Leicester. Its population increased rapidly from 241 in 1921 to 1,605 (+566%) in 1961. There the Free Church, founded in

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<th>1936</th>
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<td>Lutterworth</td>
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<td>209</td>
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<td>Oakham</td>
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<td>Uppingham</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1016</td>
<td>945</td>
<td>791</td>
<td>689</td>
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Table 3. Congregational membership in Leicestershire and Rutland towns.
Source: Congregational Yearbooks.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 4 February 1922.
\(^{49}\) Ibid., 24 February 1930, 4 April 1930.
\(^{50}\) Ibid., 5 May 1933.
\(^{51}\) Ibid., 31 October 1938.
\(^{52}\) Ibid.
1906, became affiliated to the Congregational Union in 1946, when it gained the services of an experienced minister, the Reverend Bernard Uffen.\textsuperscript{53}

On the whole, however, where there were membership increases in villages this seemed to be related to the appeal of particular ministers or styles of worship or the friendliness of the congregation or the success of the Sunday school. At Blaby, for instance, where the Sunday school was generally successful, Arthur J. Latham, held the ministry of Narborough with responsibility also for Blaby. Although most of his time was spent at Narborough his presence was much valued at the smaller church, where his leadership gave a sense of direction that had been lacking. The Sunday school was reorganised, and this was reinforced by engagement ‘with the parents of children who had been baptised, a setting up of Church friends, also the regular visiting of parents of Sunday school scholars’.\textsuperscript{54}

Throughout much of the twentieth century the question of a suitable ecclesiology for Congregationalism was the subject of debate. It was clear that in Leicestershire, as elsewhere, the total independence of each congregation was unsatisfactory for the provision of ministry where many of the churches were small and rural. It was also inadequate for responding to the biblical urge to spread the gospel. As early as 1831 the Congregational Magazine had asserted that independence had ‘seriously hindered the full and public assertion of their ecclesiastical principles’, and stressed the need ‘for mutual sympathy and help’, for the maintaining of contact with Christians elsewhere, and the need for statistical information.\textsuperscript{55} Later in the century Alexander Mackennal, who had been minister at Gallowtree Gate in Leicester from 1870 to 1877, reflecting upon his experience there, stated that he ‘believed in trying to realise . . . what might be called the primitive Episcopal ideal, according to which a strong central community with its minister may take over the “oversight” of several smaller communities around it . . . and may with these constitute one church’.\textsuperscript{56} Early in the twentieth century Dr. Joseph Parker of the City Temple in London called for a ‘United Congregational Church’.\textsuperscript{57} The Leicestershire and Rutland Congregational Union discussed this proposal, and agreed with ‘a “Federation of the Churches” for dealing with common concerns, the ministry, well-being of colleagues, assistance to smaller churches, provision for disabled and retired ministers’, but preferred to retain the old title of ‘The Congregational Union of England and Wales’.\textsuperscript{58} It was this view, repeated throughout most of the County Unions, that won the day at the September Conference in 1904. By 1919, however, the first Moderators (\textit{de facto} bishops) were appointed to encourage greater uniformity and control from London.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{53} ROLLR/N/C/MB/26, 10 September 1946.
\textsuperscript{54} Blaby Congregational Church minutes, 21 January 1967.
\textsuperscript{56} F. J. Powicke, \textit{A History of the Cheshire County Union of Congregational Churches} (Manchester, 1907), 92.
\textsuperscript{58} ROLLR/N/C/MB/4, 12 February 1902.
\textsuperscript{59} Munson, \textit{The Nonconformists}, 164.
Following the Second World the centralising tendency was pursued with great vigour. The feeling was that, if Congregationalism was to pursue church unity it needed to be a ‘church’ that could relate on equal terms with other similar bodies that a ‘union’ could not do so well. By the May Assembly of 1965 the Congregational Union of England and Wales had transformed itself into the Congregational Church of England and Wales.

The response in Leicestershire and Rutland was not quite as encouraging as the denomination’s leaders would have wished. In Leicester R. W. Cleaves, the fiery Welsh minister of Leicester’s Clarendon Park, exclaimed with dismay that ‘The belief in the autonomy of the local church ... was now surrendered for a new belief in ... a centrally governed and connexionaly administered denomination’. He also noted with concern that those churches which had been traditionally Conservative Evangelical in their belief system had seceded and become members of a new ‘Fellowship of Evangelical Churches’. Following Cleaves’ lead Clarendon Park remained aloof from the new body. Some followed Clarendon Park’s lead, but most of the churches decided to covenant with the new Congregational Church of England and Wales. At Blaby, for instance, the members followed the debate carefully. They noted that ‘The revised Draft Constitution was accepted for consideration at the 1965 Assembly’ and that, by an overwhelming majority the Assembly had ‘accepted the principle of Covenanted Fellowship on the basis of a national body’. Later they were advised that ‘if at the end of the five year period a Church refused to covenant it would not be excluded from the Union but would lose the right to vote [and that] Churches were asked to centralise their work instead of working in sections’. By 1966 they had agreed to sign the Covenant and become affiliated with the Congregational Church.

The period 1916–1966 certainly shows a marked decline in Congregationalism both in Leicestershire and Rutland and in the country as a whole, a fact that it shared with Nonconformity as a whole. It served the same segments of society as it had in Edwardian times. Jones comments that ‘Congregational churches are still in the main dependant for their membership upon the lower-income groups of the middle-classes’. As respectability had been achieved it had experienced some loss

60 R. W. Cleaves, Congregationalism 1960–1976: The Story of the Federation (Swansea, 1977), 9, 26. Cov enanting with the new Congregational Church was less contentious than the 1972 union with the Presbyterian Church, when Cleaves noted on page 131 that ‘before the formation of the URC there were 2,359 Congregational Churches and 302 Presbyterian Churches. After Union there were 2,132 United Reformed Churches and 528 Congregational Churches’. At the First Annual Assembly of the Congregational Church, John Huxtable, the general secretary, stated that ‘to date the number of churches which had covenanted together was 1,761 (representing 80% of the total church members in the Congregational Union) those which had definitely declined to covenant – 42 churches (representing 1.2% of the membership); 56 churches had deferred their decision and 24 were in correspondence’. See Congregational Yearbook (1966–67), 88.

61 Norah Waddington, The First Ninety Years: Clarendon Park Congregational Church, Leicester (Leicester, 1966), 47.

62 Blaby Congregational Church minutes, 3 June 1964.

63 Ibid., 17 June 1965.

64 Ibid., 17 March 1966.

65 Jones, Congregationalism in England, 462.
of membership to Anglicanism. A few years later, in 1972, most of its churches were to become constituent worshipping congregations within the United Reformed Church, though some, like Clarendon Park in Leicester, Blaby and Narborough, remained outside and continued to be independent Congregational churches.

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65 Jones, Congregationalism in England, 462.