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Dissenting Mendicant Friars?

AMONG the records of the Weymouth Baptist church is a small leather-bound note-book which illustrates a practice still used in the early nineteenth-century, but destined to be rejected thereafter. This was the collecting tour by which churches sought to raise money for the capital cost of a new building or a major repair or extension. For a century or more this matter seems to have been regarded as an appropriate method for a congregation needing help. The minutes of the General Baptist Assembly for 1735 show that churches whose "case" was approved were "advised to apply to such Persons and Churches within their reach, to desire their assistance," and to do this "either by Messengers appointed for the purpose or by Letters."¹ There were of course, churches which managed their own fund raising² and some found a generous individual to do it for them. But for others the collecting tour was one of the few resources available until, partly stimulated by reaction against this very method, corporate funds were brought into being as the denomination sought to establish more worthy and effective ways of assisting churches with their building programmes.

A tour might take the minister (or, sometimes, a lay member) away for a period lasting several weeks or months. He went, of course, with the full cognizance of his church meeting if not indeed at its bidding. Doubtless there were churches which initiated such an effort without reference to others³ but apart from the theological and ethical considerations involved, a church would obviously have been better advised to obtain beforehand the goodwill of the wider fellowship whose support it was seeking. This the Weymouth church did and the document here transcribed shows that the goodwill was expressed in a testimonial as to the necessity of the case and as to the efforts of the church to help itself. It was signed individually by a number of leaders in the area and by the moderator of the Western Association in his representative capacity.⁴ Signatures of well-known Baptists from further afield were also secured to add weight to the commendation. The testimonial (which bears in another hand the date July 1813) was inscribed at the

beginning of the note-book, but such a testimonial would sometimes be printed and circulated by letter as well as being taken round in the collecting book.

The populous towns of Waymouth (sic) and Melcombe Regis are supposed to contain about 5 thousand inhabitants; while the Places of Worship already erected would not contain above two thousand. On this account, several persons of the Baptist Denomination resident there have long been desirous of forming themselves into a Church, that they might enjoy the Ordinances of the Gospel under a Minister of their own Persuasion; and are still more earnestly solicitous of promoting the Salvation of immortal souls, by inducing many of their neighbours to attend on the means of Grace. Having lately open'd a small place of Worship, they have been much encouraged, by finding many are disposed to hear the Gospel and as one Friend has offer'd them a very convenient Piece of Ground situated at a distance from the Places of Worship, they have resolved upon building a new chapel forty feet by forty five, which shall be immediately vested in the hands of Trustees; in expectation of the speedy formation of a Baptist Church and procuring a suitable Minister.

In taking this step they are conscious of being actuated by a sincere Concern for the Divine Glory, and an ardent desire of turning sinners from careless negligence of religion to seek after the blessings of eternal Redemption.

They hope ever to manifest a cordial affection towards all true Christians of other persuasions, but think themselves fully justified in thus acting according to their own Consciences, and the directions of the divine Word in smaller matters, while they wish still more earnestly to promote the diffusion of the essential truths of Christianity, in which all good men are agreed. In pursuit of this Important Object they hope to obtain the Assistance of their fellow Christians in general and of their Bretheren of their own Denomination in particular, as their numbers and ability are not sufficient to defray the expence alone tho they trust it will appear they are willing to exert themselves strenuously in the Cause of God.

Dated July 1813.

We whose names are underwritten, cordially recommend this Case, considering it as wearing a very promising appearance for the furtherance of the Gospel. John Ryland of Bristol; Jos. Tyso of Watchet; John Paul Porter, Bath; Henry Page of Bristol; William Giles of Lymington; Thomas Price of Yeovil, Somerset; Joseph Dawson, Lyme; Thomas Roberts, Bristol; Isaiah Birt, Birmingham; John Birt, Hull;

Samuel Kilpin in Exeter; Dan' Miall, Portsea.

The knowledge I have of this case enables me with satisfaction to recommend it —

John Saffery Salisbury
Sam Saunders Frome

I cordially unite with my Brothers in recommending the case of the church at Weymouth to the attention of my Christian friends and of the publick at large.

W. Steadman Bradford, Yorks

Resolved that the Western association do cordially recommend this case as highly deserving the attention of the religious public.

(Signed in behalf of the whole) Thomas Roberts

Moderator

Salisbury May 17 1814

Having had an opportunity of viewing the character and circumstances of this case on the spot, I feel authorized to give it my cordial recommendation — Joseph W. Hughes, Weymouth, August 25, 1816 [?1818]

The case of the Baptist Congregation at Weymouth is considered by the Ministers resident in Bristol, as well worthy of the countenance of their religious friends. Mr Flint, the Pastor of the Church is too much indisposed to render his personal application practicable. Mr Trotman has, therefore kindly undertaken to be his representative and his application is cordially recommended to the benevolent attention of the respective friends of

September 3rd 1819 Samuel Lowell

Thomas Roberts.

(Indecipherable word) by John Ryland, Wm. Thorp, Thos S. Crisp, John Holloway

The remainder of the note-book contains entries of donors' names and the amounts they gave. It will be seen from the transcript that some of the commendations were added several years after the initial one. No doubt these fresh additions were helpful in bringing the appeal up to date, and certainly the fund raising tours still continued. In 1817 the minister, Thomas Flint, was asked to write to Dr. Ryland at Bristol "as to the best means of introducing the case effectually into that place".⁵ The following April the committee recorded its acquiescence in those arrangements which the minister might deem most proper "as to supplies during his absence," and in the September the same committee agreed to defray "the expences attendant on the journey of Mr Flint to Bristol for the purpose of furthering the general objects of our Society . . .".⁶ A layman, James Rolls, was asked to visit Bath in the Christmas vacation of 1817 in order to collect for the debt due on the building;

again in 1819 the committee's thanks were recorded for further collecting by the same man. Other members also seem to have been involved, though perhaps more locally.⁷

In some parts of the country there was by the early nineteenth century a growing awareness of problems connected with these collecting tours. The Northamptonshire Association resolved in 1809 "That in recommending cases of meeting-houses to be collected for among the churches, we judge it advisable, as ministers, not to sign any case, without being previously consulted as to the expediency of building, and satisfied as to the economy of the expenditure."⁸ In 1834 the Western Association limited to three the number of building cases which might be "presented to the Churches under the sanction of the Association", and in so doing it specified which three and also when they might present their appeals.⁹ In 1835 the committee recommended the churches "not to admit the cases unless application be made *at the time appointed*."

The problems were such that if collecting tours were to continue some kind of control needed to be exercised. In the biography of Rev. J. P. Porter, a man who had given his backing to a number of collecting appeals, there appeared pointed criticism of the collecting method, perhaps reflecting a mood that was spreading in the Western Association at this time. The writer objected to the method because it was bad for the ministers who were involved in it and also because it encouraged churches to build without adequate means. ". . . the grand point is to propose a substitute that shall utterly extinguish the whole order of mendicant friars among Dissenters . . . the salutary reform of this system or removal of it altogether would be one of the greatest blessings in the interests of religion."¹⁰ The same disquiet had been felt in London for some time: ". . . the present mode of collecting Money in London, and its Vicinity, for the purposes of building, repairing, and enlarging Places of Worship . . . is attended with much inconvenience, and many serious evils, both to the Applicants and the Contributors."¹¹ So it was agreed by the "numerous and respectable Meeting of Friends, of the Baptist Denomination" who met at the King's Head, Poultry, on 10 November 1824.¹² The same meeting went on to form the London Baptist Building Fund, encouraging an altogether more fitting approach to the problem and the desirable dissolution of the order of Baptist mendicants.¹³

NOTES

1. (ed) W. T. Whitley, *Minutes of the General Assembly of the General Baptists*, 11 34, cited by E. A. Payne in *Baptist Quarterly*, xviii. p.132.
2. See for example, the account of the church at Bratton, Wilts, in H. Anderson, *A memorial of the Lord's dealings*, n.p., n.d.

This records extensions or improvements to the property in 1807, 1818, 1858, and the author thought it worthy of mention that the costs were defrayed entirely or almost entirely by the members of the church and congregation.

3. There is an instance in which, so far from consulting others, the aim of the begging visit was initially concealed! When the Hinckley members sent William Gadsby to Manchester, c.1803 they thought it possible that the churches there would refuse if consulted beforehand. Gadsby therefore wrote to one of them that was without a minister, saying that he had some business in Manchester (without specifying what the business was) and that he would be willing to supply their pulpit for three or four weeks. By the time his business was disclosed, that of fund-raising for Hinckley, there were at least some who were ready to help "for his preaching had got into their heart and they would communicate of their carnal things." So, although "the deacons told him he was a crafty beggar . . . he got a good sum, about £100, and returned home to his family and his flock." John Gadsby, *Memoir of the late Mr. William Gadsby*, Manchester and London, 1844, p.46.
4. An unsigned note in *Baptist Quarterly* v. (1930-31), p.236. (probably from the pen of W. T. Whitley) gives details of a collecting tour for the church at Corsham which the Baptist Home Missionary Society sponsored in 1828.
5. Minutes of Committee Meetings 2 December 1817. It is not clear whether this was a special Finance Committee or simply another term for the Deacons' Meeting; it could well have been the latter.
6. *Ibid.* April and September 1818.
7. *Ibid.* 26 August 1819, 9 March 1827.
8. Northampton Association, Circular Letter, 1809.
9. Western Association, Breviates, 1834, p.13.
10. P. Cater, *Memoir of Rev. J. P. Porter*, Bath, 1834, p.128.
11. *Baptist Building Fund. Formation and Rules of the Society*, London 1824. A copy of this document is in the Angus Library, Regents Park College, Oxford.
12. Seymour J. Price, *A Popular History of the Baptist Building Fund*, London 1927.
13. The article by R. J. Owen in the *Baptist Quarterly*, xxiii (July 1970) p.304 shows, however, that the collecting tour was still in use in the 1840's.

G. W. RUSLING