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CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND ECUMENICAL RELATIONS Case Studies from the Potteries

This editorial is written immediately after the debate at the Plymouth Assembly on our ecumenical relationships. Recognizing that the church of God is wider than our own denomination and yet being faithful to our heritage and to our understandings of scriptural teaching on church and mission has a long history. My own work in the archives during this last month reveals these contrasting emphases within the life of one local church.

If anything of sanctity haunts my present house it will be the legacy of a Baptist saint who lived there a hundred years ago from 1859-1890; it was he who added the coach house at the bottom of the garden for his gig, a vehicle of greater romantic potential than my motor car. He was born in 1815 near to St Austell where he grew up and came to Christian faith. His business as an agent for the West of England China Stone and Clay Company brought him to live in the Stoke some time after 1843. Prospering in business, he became the principal in two firms, W. H. Grose & Sons, Clay Merchants, and Grose and Stocker, who specialized in selling plaster

for mould making. Grose gave the churches devoted service, first through the Particular Baptist Church in Hanley of which he soon became a deacon.

The pastor of this church was the potter, L. J. Abington, a product and former deacon of the Little Wild Street Church, whom Llewellyn Jewitt, the ceramic historian, describes as 'a clever modeller . . . and a fair chemist'. He is one of those several figures that belie the philistine image of nonconformity of Matthew Arnold's creating, for he assisted Benjamin Wyatt in the decoration of Drury Lane Theatre after the disastrous fire of 1809, and was entrusted by Sir John Soane with executing much of the ornamental detail on the Bank of England. Unwillingness to undertake Sunday work, however, limited his career development and this, with health problems, led him to leave the capital for the Staffordshire potteries.

Abington, like his protégé, was a rounded character: he edited the Liberal newspaper, *The Pottery Mercury*, campaigned for the abolition of dissenting disabilities, was a vigorous opponent of the Truck System, a promoter of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, and a frequent speaker at the local Mechanics Institute of which he was one of the founders. He was well enough trusted by both sides to act as conciliator in the ending of the 1836 pottery strike. Few Baptist ministers can have had to write the kind of letter that Abington wrote as the promoter of two Liberal candidates for the parliamentary election of 1837. In this he expressed public regret at the loss of life which had occurred at election riots in Burslem in which two men, George Baskerfield and an adolescent, Nathanael Johnson, were killed whilst another man had to have his leg amputated. Abington wrote 'the committee lament that . . . horsemen should have rode against and trampled upon their fellow-townsmen and that bludgeon-men should have assaulted and wounded others, while in exercise of their legal rights.' This exemplar of provincial Baptist life ran a church, was a partner with the New Connexion Methodist, William Ridgway, in his famous pottery and still found time to work with others to promote the interests of the Evangelical Alliance, the Religious Tract Society, the Bible Society and the Sunday School Union, the appropriate forms of ecumenical activity for that period in time. For four years he also pastored the church in neighbouring Newcastle-under-Lyme.

Grose learnt well from Abington. From the late 'sixties he transferred his membership to the Stoke church which was much nearer his home. His special concern was a Bible Class which under his instruction regularly collected about fifty to sixty young adults. He presided over the North Staffordshire Baptist Association which sought to bring Particular and New Connexion churches closer together, and with his cheque book supported most of the local churches as well as other charities most handsomely, in particular providing £1500 for the building of a new church in Fenton, the pottery town that Arnold Bennett forgot.

Grose was not just an archetypal deacon: he was also an engaged citizen. An Improvement Commissioner for Stoke on Trent before that town secured borough status, he was a most devoted Guardian of the Poor who exercised 'a watchful and

considerate regard for the necessities of those who sought relief as well as for the interests of the Ratepayers'. He surely went beyond his formal duties in providing the Aged Poor with an annual New Year's Entertainment. He was Vice Chairman of the School Board presided over by that very establishment figure, the Reverend Sir Lovelace Stamer, Rector of Stoke and first Suffragan Bishop of Shrewsbury. Such a respect developed between the two men that at Mr Grose's funeral, conducted by his pastor, the Revd Sam Hirst, the Bishop pronounced the benediction, an act of considerable significance in 1890, for the widely acclaimed Burials Act of 1880, which gave nonconformist ministers the right to preside at nonconformist funerals in parish churchyards, still left conservative churchmen trying to resist nonconformists' just claims.

But all was not sweetness and light in Stoke: the following year in November 1891 the Mayor of Stoke, Alderman Kirkham, a well-respected Congregationalist, led a procession of almost 300 dignitaries and others from Stoke Town Hall across the road to the parish church for a civic service. That same evening the new Baptist pastor, the Revd S. C. Allderidge, recently arrived from Ripley in Derbyshire, preached a fiery sermon at London Road Chapel on 'The Triumph of Principle', in which he censured both the mild Congregationalist Mayor and the Rector, Sir Lovelace Stamer, protesting 'that an official of nearly twenty years' standing in a Congregational Church, a gentleman who has advocated by his voice and by his influence and wealth, the principles of Congregationalism, principles which have been purchased by the lives of our holy fathers and sealed by noble martyrdom, principles for which bloody revolutions have been made and crowns hurled into the dust, should publicly deny them by honouring the church which has been the foe of all liberty, the enemy of all progress, which has persistently hated independency, and taught that Nonconformity is a lie, is a disgrace to us and an insult to nonconformity.' Mr Allderidge was reported to have gone on to argue that the Church of England taught that 'a child is on the high road to hell because he has not been sprinkled by priestly hands and made the object of insane mumblings', not remarks calculated to deepen the bonds of ecumenical friendship nor, as the Bishop/Rector painfully pointed out, accurate in reflecting his church's teaching on the fate of the unbaptized.

It was as difficult then as it seems to be today to get the right balance between denominational conscience and ecumenical understanding. But one hundred years of growing together ought not to be lost on a denomination that has always expected to see the work of the Spirit manifest in God's dealings in history with all those who confess him as Saviour and Lord.

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There is still time to enter for the Payne Memorial Essay Competition - for details see inside back cover.