

All Our Saints

Recently, I read Luke's account in Acts of the Apostles of the early missionary work, which laid the foundation of the Christian Church. I worked through it with a commentary and maps - it is an amazing story. What impressed me most was the small numbers of people, sometimes just a household, involved in setting up a Christian community. I was filled with wonder at the lasting impact made by the actions and faith of a few people, truly a testament to what can be achieved by folk empowered by the Holy Spirit. This has been an inspiration to all the generations, who since then who have been fortunate to have access to Luke's account.

The early centuries of Christianity are crowded with witnesses, with many martyrs remembered as saints. In Britain, among the earliest is St. Alban. Over the next centuries, there followed the great northern saints Aidan, Cuthbert, Hilda and many others who inspired Bede to write his "Ecclesiastical History of the English People" in the 8th century. History is at the very heart of Christian belief, and without the written records, I believe, it would not have spread or even survived.

We are all witnesses to the continuing Christian tradition in Burnage, but have not yet been blessed with a written legacy that can rival that of Luke or Bede. However, we should not allow the Burnage "saints" to be forgotten, but spare a thought, in our busy Christian witness and service, for those who set our church on its way. We can find encouragement and inspiration in their stories, and may find our faith and our fellowship strengthened.

Christ Church South Manchester URC has developed from three separate roots. Hence, three inspiring foundation stories:

Burnage Congregational Church can be traced back to 1859, when Burnage consisted of about 12 large houses and little groups of cottages at Fog Lane, Green End, and where St. Margaret's Church now stands. There was also a larger group of cottages at Ladybarn. Samuel Watts was resident at Burnage Hall and one of his daughters was inspired to set up a Sunday School to benefit the people, who lived in the cottages. Her father agreed to help her on condition that she, her brothers and sisters went to a Sunday School to learn how to run one. For twelve months they attended Rusholme Congregational Sunday School, after which their father made available a cottage in Moorton Avenue, and provided money to furnish it and to buy learning materials. At that time, Sunday Schools were the only sources of education available to many adults and children, most of whom had time off only on a Sunday. The school opened on February 6th 1859 with 20 scholars. It quickly expanded from the kitchen into other rooms. Mr. Newbery, a buyer for a Manchester warehouse, started to come on Wednesday evenings and Sundays to lead services and so became minister of a church formed in the cottage. In 1868, in response to increased demand, a Congregational Chapel was built on Moorton Avenue - a focus of worship and Christian service to the people of Burnage.

Parrs Wood Road Congregational Church owes its foundation to "a small body of earnest people", who came together early in 1928 to sign "a covenant with Christ and each other". There were 26 signatories. In the mid-1920s, Manchester City Council built many new houses on the fields in the Parrs Wood Road/Fog Lane area, greatly increasing the population. It was from these new residents that the initiative came. The Lancashire Congregational Union (LCU) had purchased the land at the junction of Parrs Wood Road and Fog Lane in 1927 in the expectation that there would be local demand for a church.

Money was raised quickly for the erection of a small timber-framed building and, within a few months, the church opened. It soon became inadequate for the number of people wanting to join. A call went out to Congregational churches in the area of Manchester to donate money on Christmas Day 1929 towards the building costs of a new church. Sufficient was raised on that day to cover the whole cost, £3,600. It became known as “The church that was built in a day” and was opened in 1931.

The third tradition is **The Churches of Christ**, which originated on the other side of the Atlantic and arrived in Britain in the middle of the 19th century. The founding principle of the Churches of Christ (C of C) was a return to the beliefs and simple structures of the early Christian communities, as evidenced in Acts and in the letters of the New Testament. The first Church of Christ to be set up in Manchester was in Moss Side in the 1860s. It was called Bethesda. After the 1914-18 war, the leadership of Bethesda Church of Christ began to look for a site in South Manchester on which to build a new church. There was a great expansion of housing in areas such as Chorlton, Withington, Didsbury, the Heatons and Burnage, and several Bethesda families had moved out of Moss Side to South Manchester. A Sites Committee was established and, in 1932, it identified a site on Burnage Lane and the elders of Bethesda gave the go-ahead. As there was no association of C of C, such as the LCU, and as it was a cherished principle of C of C that all its churches should be financially self-sufficient, the considerable burden of establishing the new church was borne by the members of Bethesda. They expended much money and time on the project. 36 actually transferred their membership to the new church, which became autonomous in November 1935 with a membership of 74. It was launched with a 5 week mission. A marquee was erected beside the newly built asbestos and timber church, a mobile baptismal tank installed and 36 baptisms were performed.

Christ Church South Manchester URC has gone through many changes over the years since its first beginnings, as has the population of Burnage it has sought to serve. Through all these changes, guided and strengthened by God’s will, the faith and commitment of the church have not wavered and the spirit of those that have gone before us continues to sustain our fellowship.

Robert Lock