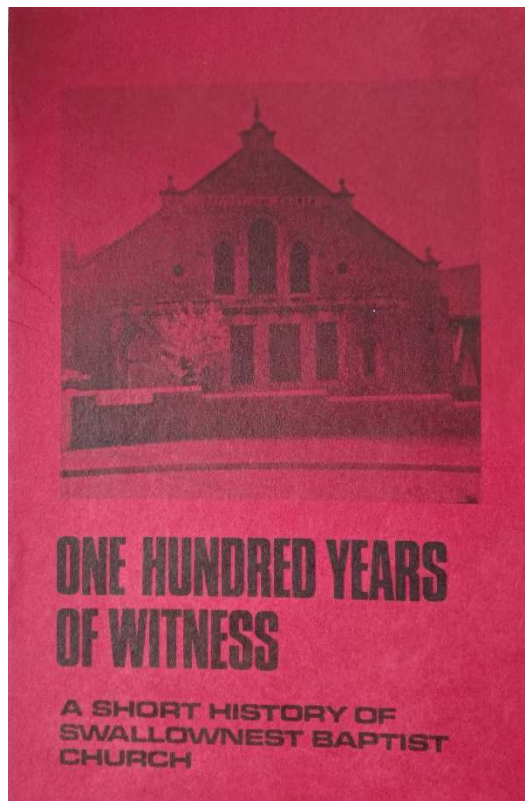


One Hundred Years of Witness – A Short History of Swallownest Baptist Church (1875 – 1975)



In the year 1875 a small group of people calling themselves Baptists met together for worship under a tree at the top of Millstone Hill in the village of Swallownest, and so began the work of a church which has grown and flourished for a hundred years.

It all started when a Mr William Walker arrived to become the underground manager of North Staveley colliery, known to the local people as “Top-o’-t’-hill”. At about the same time there arrived also a Mr. Watts and his family from the Coventry district of Warwickshire. These, together with other local friends, banded themselves together and began meeting for services of worship under a tree in a field on the edge of the village.



Picture - The church begins meeting.

Soon, the little band of Baptists were invited to meet in the home of Mr. John Allsopp, which stood near their meeting place, The congregation would meet in the living room, and the preacher would take up his position at the foot of the stairs.

It was not long before the Baptist Church in Westgate, Rotherham began to take an interest in the infant cause, and plans were made to purchase some land and erect a building in which the church might meet. It says much for the foresight of those church leaders that the site they chose for the new church became in the course of a few years the centre of a growing village.

The site was bought on the 24th May 1875, by Mr Joseph Brown, one of the leaders of the Rotherham church, and on Thursday afternoon the 12th July 1877, the foundation stone of the new Baptist church was laid. The building was erected for the sum of £250, and a little later that same year it was opened for worship.

For several years the Swallownest Baptist church was linked with the church in Rotherham as a mission, and was given pastoral oversight by the minister, the Rev J. Harper. When Mr Harper vacated the pastorate in 1880 the leader transferred the oversight of the new church to the care of the Rev. R. Ensol, the minister of the Baptist Church in Attercliffe, Sheffield. The going was not easy and the members worked on faithfully amidst many difficulties. Writing of this period, the late Mr O. Randle, who was then a scholar in the Sunday School, records there were not a great many scholars at that time, and not a great congregation, but we had some great times and some good local preachers, who seldom missed their appointments, although they used to come from Sheffield, Dronfield and Rotherham. Then I can remember a period when, on coming to Sunday School, there was no teacher to give us lessons, and I think the church had a hard struggle to keep the flag flying.

Despite many difficulties which faced the church, it grew so that in 1892 the building had to be enlarged to accommodate the church and the Sunday School. Progress continued. The church went on from strength to strength and towards the turn of the century a new breath of life came into its activities. It is not until 1902 that a record of the church roll becomes available and at the time the membership numbered 27. Among that number are names which are familiar to many in 1975 – Mr & Mrs I. Robbins and Mr O. Randle for example.

In 1907 the church invited the Rev C. Deal, the minister of Portmahon Baptist Church in Sheffield, to assume pastoral oversight. Mr Deal quickly realised that the building was too small for the need of the growing church, and forthwith set about planning the building of a new church. A building fund was opened, and the first subscriber was Mr William Havard, who had been converted some years previously at a time when it was least thought that he would ever respond to the call of Jesus Christ. Mr Deal sought the support of the Sheffield District of Baptist Churches in the new venture. A plan was submitted by Mr J.W. Winter junior, and his father was given the contract to build the church. Originally the estimate for the work had been £750, but after certain alterations had been made to the plans, the final cost of the building was £1048.



Picture - Our building circa 1908

The foundation stone of the new church was laid on the 30th April 1908, by which time the church had gathered together £450 towards its cost. By the end of the day this figure had risen by nearly £150. The new building was opened for worship on Thursday 3rd September 1908 by Mrs W. H. Barnes, the wife of one of the trustees.

Through the years that followed, the church maintained its witness valiantly, in circumstances that often proved difficult and sad. Like many another such group it shared in the losses of the First World War, when Mr Walter Scott, who had been Church Secretary before joining the forces, was killed. After the war came the depression and the strikes which made life hard for the people of the village, and the church suffered in these times as well.

By 1927 the membership had grown to 50 and another 15 were listed as congregational members. For a great number of years since its formation the church had relied on pastoral oversight provided by various ministers from Churches in Sheffield and Rotherham. However, in 1929 a joint pastorate with Treeton was established when the Rev. R.J.Jones began his ministry at the two churches.

He was followed in 1931 by the Rev. C. Stanley but following his resignation in 1934 there followed a short period when the church was without pastoral oversight. In 1935 Mr J. W. Lee offered to take over for a temporary period, the Church however decided to ask him to take over permanently and this he agreed to do. According to records of the time Mr Lee gave time and sacrificed a great deal to carry out the work entailed, in taking the responsibility of the church upon his shoulders. As he was travelling during the day time in the course of his work he often came to the fellowship meeting on a Thursday evening without having been home, and not having had tea. His great ambition was to erect a new Sunday School in place of the old church building which had now become unsafe. A committee was formed in 1938, its object being to raise £250 in 2 ½ years.

A new impetus was given them in January, 1939 resulting from an unfortunate accident which happened to Mrs E. Lax, the wife of the caretaker. A brick had fallen on her one day as she entered the building. A minute of the Deacons meeting of the 9th January 1939 reads The Deacons learned with regret and alarm of the growing dangerous condition of the old school premises. The unanimous opinion was that it was beyond repair, and recommended

the examination by experts as to its future use as a Sunday School. Therefore, until expert opinion had been obtained, it was decided to close the old premises for Sunday School work and conduct the classes in the church!

However, by March 1939, it was found that the church could not proceed with the scheme for a variety of reasons, although it was felt that the efforts to raise money should continue.

On 3rd September 1939, the Second World War broke out. The church was now faced with the question of whether or not to continue with its plans for the new School room, and after some discussion, felt led to proceed with the accumulation of funds for the work when it could be accomplished. In the Autumn of 1940 however, the pastor reported to the Baptist Forward Movement his great disappointment that he was unable to see any prospect whatever of the erection of the urgently needed new Sunday School premises, which he considered absolutely essential if this outpost of BaptThe Church at its meeting on the 30th November 1940, agreed that the scheme be indefinitely postponed. The Building fund committee was disbanded and all those who had made promises of financial support were released from their obligations. Those who had already contributed were given the option of being repaid or of leaving the money in the fund, the balance already in the Fund be allowed to remain in the bank to form the nucleus of a new building fund when times of peace returned, says the minute.ist witness at Swallownest was to be maintained. He further pointed out that people of the church were just ordinary working people and that the numbers were sadly depleted by death and removals from the district. The war then raging and the fear of a crushing debt in the consequent slump had completely eclipsed the vision for the time being.

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In the meantime heavy expenses were envisaged in replacing the heating system in the church. The church had not been finding it easy to meet its financial obligations for some time. The situation was so desperate at one stage the pastor, Mr J W Lee, sacrificially declined to receive his honorarium and the caretaker was relieved of his office, the caretaking being done voluntarily by the members.

In spite of these difficulties, the spirit of the church remained a fine one, and we find that in 1941 it was agreed to send £10. 10. 0.d to the Baptist Forward Movement, as a thank offering, to assist new causes, to help build new churches and repair the damaged ones. Though sorely needing help, the church had the vision of more needy causes before itself. Such is the making of real greatness of spirit.

On the 10th September 1941 the church suffered the loss of Mr J. W Lee, its pastor. Mr Lee had given sterling service to the cause through a difficult period in its life, and it had been largely through his vision and endeavors that the new building scheme had been commenced. He longed to see the new hall, and it must have been a great grief to him when the work had to be suspended.

In 1945 the church once again felt in need of leadership and guidance and to this end a fellowship was formed with the Baptist Church at Attercliffe. The outcome of this was that later that year the Rev. H Whittaker took over the joint pastorate of the Swallownest and Attercliffe churches. Despite difficult periods the church progressed under his guidance and it was with regret that he left to take over a church in Leeds in 1949.

Wishing to consolidate the work done by Mr Whittaker, the church immediately set about the task of securing another minister. Due to the finance involved, the church again shared a joint pastorate, this time with Treeton Baptist Church and the Rev. M A Beaton began his ministry in 1950.

Throughout these early post war days the fellowship within the church was close and many good times were enjoyed by all those connected with the church. These were the days of the coffee, squash, the baptist Broadcast, the B.Y.F. Players and of course a Sunday School Hall which almost daily became more unfit for use. It was during the ministry of Rev Beaton that the 'new' church constitution was drawn up and adopted.

In August 1954 the Rev. H. G. Cross began his ministry and it was soon realised that something had to be done concerning the old church building. In September of that year at a special church meeting, it was decided that the time was ripe for the work to be put in hand. A new committee was formed with the responsibility of raising funds, preparing plans and keeping the church interested in the scheme. In the autumn of 1956 a friend of the church was approached and asked to help. He met the deacons and suggested various lines of approach to the question, offering to make a substantial contribution if the church would increase the building fund, which then stood at £450 to £1,000 by the end of June 1957. The challenge was accepted and by various appeals and grants etc. by the end of 1957 the Building fund stood at £1,500.

Thanks to the hard work and enthusiasm of many people, the dream which had begun in 1938 was about to be realised and on the 10th April 1958 a special service was held in the old Sunday School Hall to mark the conclusion of its service to the church. The following evening members began dismantling the interior in preparation for the demolition. Later that year amid scenes of great rejoicing and thanksgiving the new Hall was opened. During the opening service those joys were increased when the Henry & Harry Bottom Trust announced that they would take over the responsibility for the repayment of the debt of £3,000.



Pictures - church members gathering together outside the new school rooms for a commissioning service as the foundation stone is laid

The Rev H. G. Cross, stayed at the Church until 1961 and it was during the period of his ministry that, for the first time in its history, the church became independent of the Home Work (Home Mission) Fund. Not only this but the church also bought a new manse. The constitution was revised and the Church continued to grow.

Following the departure of the Rev. Cross the fellowship was without pastoral oversight for two years until Rev. J. J. Hunter arrived in 1963. He worked hard in the service of the church and endeared himself to the fellowship. It was with some sadness, therefore, that he left Swallownest in 1967.

Throughout its history the church has owed much to lay men and women and to its own officers and the period between 1967 and 1969 was no exception. All continued to work hard to maintain the momentum which had begun almost 100 years earlier. The church, however, realised that under present circumstances it was no longer realistic to support a minister on its own, and so another association was formed with Treeton Baptist Church and in September 1969 the Rev. A. Loudon began his ministry at the two churches. During the years 1969 to 1975 new members were added to the church and two mammoth tasks – the building of a new organ and a completely new lighting system for the church – were successfully carried out by members themselves.

So 100 years of Baptist witness in Swallownest was completed and only one more thing needs to be said – that God will bless, guide and use his church over the next 100 years as He surely has done during the period 1875 -1975 .