

METHODIST CHURCHES IN LEICESTERSHIRE, 1945–80

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Methodism, with its circuit system of organisation and its reliance on local preachers, fared better in the post-1945 years than the older Nonconformist denominations. In Leicestershire, as elsewhere, it had to deal with the aftermath of the reunion of Wesleyan, Primitive and United Methodist connexions. There was also the challenge of Afro-Caribbean immigration that was faced with imagination and resolution.

The story of Nonconformist (including Methodist) membership in England is one of long-term decline in numbers during the twentieth century.¹ Congregational membership in England and Wales declined from 291,128 in 1916 to 196,171 in 1966.² Membership in Baptist churches was reduced from 434,741 in 1906 to 200,100 in 1960.³ Membership in Methodist churches also decreased from 844,163 in 1921 to 557,249 in 1974.⁴ Methodism, however, did not show as steady or immediate a decline as the other denominations. During the inter-war years, for instance, there was a 21 per cent increase from 675,018 in 1916 to 818,480 in 1936.⁵ Although there was a decline from 752,659 in 1946 to 726,152 (–3.5 per cent) in 1951, between 1951 and 1961 there was an increase of 1 per cent to 733,658.⁶ By 1974, however, membership was down to 557,249, while the number of churches declined from 14,497 in 1954 to 10,000 in 1974.⁷ This paper examines the changes in Methodist membership in the immediate post-war years and attempts to explain those changes within the local context of Leicestershire.

One of the advantages of Methodism was its form of organisation, with the circuit effectively linking each of the individual churches or societies. It meant that members tended to broaden the horizons of their thinking beyond the immediate neighbourhood. The reunification of the three main Methodist Connexions (Wesleyan, Primitive and United Methodists) in 1932 was supposedly to have been followed by the closure of redundant buildings. Competition between the

¹ The author wishes to express his gratitude to the Reverend Dr David Palmer, Superintendent of the Leicester Trinity Methodist Circuit, for permission to consult Methodist documents at the Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland Record Office (hereafter LLRRO). His critical reading of this article at an early stage is much appreciated.

² G. T. Rimmington, 'Congregationalism and Society in Leicestershire and Rutland 1916–1966', *Trans. Leics. Arch. & Hist. Soc.*, 81 (2007), p. 139.

³ G. T. Rimmington, 'The Baptist Churches and Society in Leicestershire 1951–1971', *The Local Historian*, 39 (ii) (May 2009), p. 109.

⁴ B. P. Sutcliffe and D. C. Church, *250 Years of Chiltern Methodism* (Ilkeston, Derbys, 1988), p. 348.

⁵ G. T. Rimmington, 'Methodism in Leicestershire between the Two World Wars', *Trans. Leics. Arch. & Hist. Soc.*, 76 (2003), p. 111.

⁶ *Methodist Conference Minutes*. Thanks to Dr P. G. Nockles, at the John Rylands University Library of Manchester, for permission to consult Methodist records deposited there.

⁷ Sutcliffe and Church, *250 Years of Chiltern Methodism*, p. 348.

Wesleyans and Primitives, for instance, had resulted previously in chapels that were only a 'stone's throw' from each other. Rationalisation had to be delayed, however, until the cessation of Second World War hostilities in 1945. In some areas this had been pursued with enthusiasm, perhaps too much so in some places. The Methodist Conference in 1951 noted: 'we have long urged to close redundant village chapels, but are sorry to hear of chapels being closed which are not redundant'.⁸ In Nottingham the rationalisation process was conducted with great efficiency. R. C. Swift notes that five years after the end of the war, Methodism in Nottingham had largely completed the process of regrouping and adapting to changed conditions.⁹ Similarly, in the Wycombe area of the Chilterns it was noted that 'in future years....the Wycombe areas will have new churches that will never have been anything other than "Methodist"'.¹⁰

On the other hand, Leicestershire was much slower off the mark. There was little need for an extensive rebuilding programme. Most of the existing premises were adequate for the reorganisations that took place. In Leicester only one church – Saxby Street – had been affected by bombing. Though the building itself was totally destroyed, the congregation was able to meet in the adjoining schoolroom until a new church – Mayflower – was built in a suburban area. At Barwell, a shoe-manufacturing village near to Hinckley, the building chosen for use by the two amalgamating congregations was inadequate and had to be rebuilt, but it was possible to use the same site. At nearby Earl Shilton, a new church building also appeared.

In 1946 there were 23 chapels in Leicester. By 1961 there had been only three closures. Six more were to disappear in the 1960s, and two more in the 1970s.¹¹ E. Fortescue, a local preacher, noted the slow process of rationalisation at Barwell: 'there were a number of meetings to explore the possibility of the two Methodist Churches in Barwell to unite.... So at last the Circuit voted that all the Churches throughout the two Circuits should join. This took place in 1966.'¹²

Sometimes, however, reorganisation was forestalled by a spirit of evangelical zeal. In 1951, for instance, it was reported that, thanks to the efforts of Reverend Fred Barrett, 'a declining downtown church has been infused with new life and hope. Under his earnest evangelical preaching many have been won. During his ministry congregations have steadily improved and are more than double what they were at the commencement.'¹³

Statistical analysis of Methodist membership in the later twentieth century is fraught with problems. The statistics that were so carefully collected and published, circuit by circuit, annually in the Methodist Conference minutes, continued in this form until 1961. By 1971, however, they had disappeared.

⁸ *Methodist Conference Minutes* (1951), p. 177.

⁹ R. C. Swift, *Lively People: Methodism in Nottingham 1740–1979* (Nottingham, 1982), p. 167.

¹⁰ Sutcliffe and Church, *250 Years of Chiltern Methodism*, p. 253.

¹¹ A. Moore, *Where Leicester has worshipped* (Leicester, 2008), pp. 34–9.

¹² E. Fortescue, *My journey through the twentieth century 1903–1996* (Nantwich, 1997), p. 21.

¹³ LLRRO/DE3747/2 (Leicester Central Mission Circuit Quarterly Meetings Minutes, 6 June 1951).

	1946	1951	1961*
Leicester Central Mission	304	328 (+8%)	260 (-21%)
Clarendon Park	743	733 (-1%)	
King Richard's Road	1,168	1,126 (-4%)	
Saxby Street	1,005	1,022 (+2%)	
Anstey	238	250 (+5%)	
Hinckley Road	1,243	1,246 (-)	
Curzon Street	394	386 (-2%)	
Claremont Street	708	739 (+45%)	
Total	5,803	5,830 (+0.5%)	5,938 (+2%)

*By 1961 the Leicester Circuits consisted of Leicester Central, Leicester South, Leicester East, Leicester West and Leicester Central Mission. Apart from Central Mission, the Leicester total increased from 5,502 in 1951 to 5,678 (+3 per cent) in 1961.

Table 1. Methodist membership in Leicester Circuits, 1946-61.¹⁴

Thereafter one is limited to crumbs of information.¹⁵ A further problem arises from changes in circuits. As will be noted above in Table 1, the number of circuits in Leicester in 1961 was quite different from the listing in 1951. The process of rationalisation that faces every complex organisation in process of change had resulted in eight circuits being replaced by five new circuits. There was only one of the previous circuits left, the Leicester Central Mission. There were to be further changes as the century progressed.

What is clear is that within both the City of Leicester and the surrounding countryside, membership was being retained in the immediate post-war period. Table 2 shows that there was a 4 per cent rise in county membership from 11,977 in 1946 to 12,445 in 1951. So that, in spite of some losses in the next decade, total membership in 1961 was still higher than it had been in 1946.

	1946	1951	1961
Leicester	5,803	5,830 (+0.5%)	5,938 (+2%)
Loughborough	1,203	1,245 (+3%)	1,359 (+1%)
Hinckley (2 circuits)	1,387	1,413 (+2%)	1,495 (+6%)
Sileby*	250	286 (+14%)	-
Melton Mowbray	1,302	1,307 (-)	1,244 (-5%)
Market Harborough	244	265 (+9%)	262 (-)
Coalville	403	838(+108%)	777 (-7%)
Castle Donington	541	554 (+2%)	502 (-9%)
Ashby-de-la-Zouch	844	707 (-16%)	664 (-6%)
Total	11,977	12,445 (+4%)	12,241 (-2%)

*Sileby circuit absorbed into Loughborough circuit by 1961.

Table 2. Methodist membership in Leicestershire, 1946-61.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Methodist Conference Minutes*, 1946, 1951, 1961.

¹⁵ Dr P. G. Nockles, at the John Rylands University Library of Manchester, was unable to point the author to precise information on Methodist statistics in the 1970s and beyond.

¹⁶ *Methodist Conference Minutes*, 1946, 1951, 1961.

Outside the county town there appears to be a relationship between population changes and membership. Loughborough's population increased from 34,731 in 1951 to 45,875 (+32 per cent) in 1961. Similarly, Hinckley's population increased from 15,492 in 1951 to 20,397 (+32 per cent) in 1961. Though Methodist membership did not keep pace with the rate of population growth, there were significant gains in membership, as Table 2 indicates. Melton Mowbray, on the other hand, experienced only a small population increase, from 14,053 in 1951 to 15,914 (+13 per cent) in 1961, while Market Harborough also moved from 10,400 in 1951 to 15,535 (+11 per cent) in 1961. In both of these towns the Methodist membership remained stable. Population alone, however, cannot explain the vagaries of membership. For instance, Ashby-de-la-Zouch showed steady population growth, from 5,826 in 1951 to 7,460 (+28 per cent) in 1961, but Methodist numbers declined from 844 to 707 (-16 per cent). At the same time, Coalville, whose population actually diminished from 4,226 in 1951 to 3,668 (-13 per cent) in 1961, had a rapid increase in membership from 403 in 1946 to 838 (+108 per cent) in 1951, thereafter diminishing (as mining employment began to fall with the exhaustion of coal reserves) to 777 (-7 per cent) in 1961, but still remaining significantly higher than in 1946.

It is obvious that other variables need to be identified in order to suggest reasons for changes in membership that cannot be explained by population fluctuations alone. If one compares Methodist with Baptist witness, it becomes clear that there are differences between the denominations. Loughborough's Baptist membership declined from 777 in 1951 to 537 (-31 per cent) in 1961, at a time when the Methodist circuit showed significant increases. Similarly, Hinckley's Baptist membership declined from 282 in 1951 to 222 (-21 per cent) in 1961; yet Methodist membership continued to increase. At the same time, Melton Mowbray and Market Harborough remained fairly stable both in Baptist and Methodist membership. Coalville, the only circuit with a significant loss of population, lost only 4 per cent of its Baptist membership and 7 per cent of its Methodist membership between 1951 and 1961.¹⁷

Other factors come into play when one considers Leicester itself. There, apart from the Central Mission, which fluctuated considerably, membership was remarkably stable. Outside the Central Mission area, Methodist membership increased from 5,502 in 1951 to 5,678 (+3 per cent) in 1961.

Leicester Central Mission, however, was a special case. Initially the circuit consisted of only two churches, Bishop Street in the city centre and Humberstone Road, a mile away to the east. The former church, the oldest Methodist church in Leicester, was thriving because of the inspirational leadership of its minister, Fred Barrett. There were references to his 'helpful preaching and cheery friendliness', which 'engendered such an atmosphere in the church that strangers coming to the services are conscious of the friendly spirit abroad and are feeling at home in our midst'.¹⁸ On the other hand, the pastor at Humberstone Road 'was not able to do

¹⁷ LLRRO/DE3747/2, 7 Mar. 1946.

¹⁸ Rimmington, 'The Baptist Churches and Society in Leicestershire, 1951-1971', 109ff.

	Bishop Street	Humberstone Road
1948	196	104
1950	230	97
1952	235	87
1953	240	80

Table 3. Changing membership at Bishop Street and Humberstone Road Methodist churches.²⁰

the work required of him', and he was asked to retire.¹⁹ Consequently, membership tended to increase at Bishop Street and diminish at Humberstone Road.

There were hopes that Humberstone Road would be superseded by a new church at Thurnby Lodge, a new housing estate on the eastern periphery of Leicester. However, although work was started there, in the local primary school, it did not flourish and was soon abandoned. By 1966m Humberstone Road church had been closed down and the building sold.²¹

The closure of Humberstone Road, and the failure of Thurnby Lodge to germinate, left Bishop Street in the unusual position in Methodism of being an isolated church. The question was asked, therefore, as to whether it should be linked with others. The Methodist Conference appointed a commission to examine the situation. Members of the commission were appreciative of the church's 'distinctive and vigorous witness', and commented that 'it can hardly be described as a mission although a powerful evangelical ministry has been sustained there'. They decided not to make any substantial change, and recommended that 'a concentrated ministry should be maintained there'.²² Apart from a period in the late 1960s and 1970s, when a second minister was appointed with responsibility for student chaplaincy, Bishop Street remained as a single charge, eventually to be the only Methodist church in or near the centre of Leicester.

All of the other circuits within the city were characterised by their linking of several churches, some of them outside the urban area. Earlier policy had been to link city churches with rural churches, as population movement tended to strengthen the former at the expense of the latter. The expectation was that wealthier urban churches would help with the ministry and the financing of their village counterparts.²³ That this policy was continued may be seen in the Leicester East Circuit, where a listing of eight churches included Houghton-on-the-hill and

¹⁹ LLRRO/DE3747/2, 6 Dec. 1951.

²⁰ LLRRO/N/M/179/866 (Leicester East Methodist Circuit Quarterly Meetings Minutes), 7 Sept. 1953.

²¹ LLRRO/DE3747/2, 10 Sept. 1958, 9 Sept. 1959, 3 March 1960, 14 Sept. 1960, 8 Sept. 1961.

²² *Ibid.*, 9 Mar. 1961.

²³ In 1906, Leicester circuits included 868 members of rural chapels in the total of 3,516. See G. T. Rimmington, 'Methodism and Society in Leicester, 1881-1914', *Local Historian*, 30 (ii) (May 2000), p. 74.

Halstead.²⁴ An earlier listing in 1953 of 12 churches included Tugby, as well as Houghton and Halstead.²⁵

The post-war period was believed to be one in which the strength of commitment to church membership was more relaxed. The presidential address at the Methodist Conference in 1961 'asked the Connexional Membership Committee to undertake a survey....to discover the real reasons why so many slip away from their allegiance to Christ and loyalty to His Church'.²⁶ The Leicestershire evidence was not difficult to find. In 1963, Superintendent Arnold Cooper had only three candidates for a membership training class, and felt that 'there is a kind of fear in some people about committing themselves to membership'.²⁷ In 1970 the Reverend A. H. Teare noted that 'there was a decline of commitment, and because of this our membership was decreasing. There is also a decline in the number of men entering the ministry'.²⁸ The Leicester East Circuit, in listing the churches within it, recorded not only membership (total 766), but also those who had been placed on a community roll (total 1,765), indicating that each society had a large penumbra of non-committed adherents.²⁹

The Methodist perception was that not only was lack of commitment common to all the churches, but that it stemmed at least in part from population movement and immigration. It was noted that,

in the city a number of societies are having to contend with the difficulty of a moving population. Near to one of our largest Churches (Curzon Street) a slum clearance scheme has taken many....to new housing estates where....there is no Free Church witness.... Another difficulty arises from the fact that when our young people marry....they have to move into these estates. Often they wish to retain their membership with the Church with which they have been associated, but the distance restricts their attendance.³⁰

The arrival of Afro-Caribbean people also posed a challenge. Many of them began to settle in houses in areas such as Highfields in Leicester which had been vacated by people who had moved to the new estates. Whereas most of the Baptist and Congregational churches had retreated to the suburbs, the Methodists still had a number of churches in the area, but all was not well with them. Curzon Street had lost many of its congregation through slum clearance, and there was mention of the 'depressing effect of the derelict area around the Church'.³¹ It lay just outside the main area where many of the new immigrants lived, and so offered little to them. On Melbourne Road the Methodist chapels were virtually defunct; both the St Paul and Highfields places of worship were closing, the latter to house the 'New Testament Church of God', which had been founded to serve the immigrant community, and which lay outside the Methodist aegis. Only Wesley

²⁴ LLRRO/N/M/179/866, 4 Dec. 1969.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7 Sept. 1953.

²⁶ *Methodist Conference Minutes*, 1961, 103. Address by Dr. Maldwyn Edwards.

²⁷ LLRRO/DE3747, 11 June 1963.

²⁸ LLRRO/N/M/179/866, 3 June 1970.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4 Dec. 1969.

³⁰ LLRRO/N/M/179/866, 1956-57: Report of Leicester East Methodist Circuit.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1963: Report of Leicester East Methodist Circuit.

Hall offered real hope. In 1963 it was noted that the closure of St Paul's and Highfields 'will strengthen our hands for the work which needs to be done in the area soon to be served solely by Wesley Hall. The Commonwealth Class at the Hall is flourishing....only the beginning of a very essential and valuable ministry to the coloured people of the neighbourhood.'³²

Much attention was lavished upon Wesley Hall in the following years. It was stressed that the Church had to be a 'Community Church if it is to make any impact now or in the future'. There were efforts to overcome the differences of culture which tended to result in separateness of witness, it being noted that the 'young mothers with their children are invited each month to join the older women in the usual Women's Meeting'. Ways and means were also sought 'to offer help and service to the mothers and children who attend the weekly clinic run on the premises by the City Welfare Department'.³³

In 1968 the Reverend R. J. Hodgkinson reported on Wesley Hall 'with regard to immigration work', admitting that the adult work was 'a little restricted', but stressing that 'with the children good efforts are being made'.³⁴ By 1975 the church had become a neighbourhood drop-in centre, pioneered by the Reverend John Hastings, and, when he became the Secretary for the Methodist Church Social Responsibility Department, was joined by the Reverend Chris. Lee. Lee had had a varied career which included work in a department store, two years in the National Health Service, eight months as a labourer, before theological training at Didsbury. At Wesley Hall, Hastings and Lee were supported by five other workers, one of whom was a native of Jamaica. Financial support was provided by central government and the county council.³⁵

Provision for the Afro-Caribbean immigrants highlighted the need for rethinking styles of worship. In 1957 the Methodist Conference meeting in Nottingham appointed a committee 'to examine the nature of Christian Worship and its appropriate expressions in the life of the Methodist Church today', the immediate cause of which had been adverse criticism of the ordering and conduct of worship in many Methodist churches. The convenor was Arnold Cooper, minister at Bishop Street, Leicester, who had been concerned about some of the old-fashioned biblical teaching and wanted to see the recognition of science 'seen within the context of the proclamation of God'. There was concern too about members of church organisations who attended Sunday services only spasmodically, and who had to be attracted by special occasions such as Men's Sundays, Women's Anniversaries, Youth Services and Sunday School Anniversaries.³⁶ The influence of Cooper's report could be seen in D. C. Collingwood's Trinity Church on the western fringes of Leicester. A junior choir was formed, as were Sunday clubs for young people. During the 1960s a junior

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5 Dec. 1968.

³⁵ LLRRO/N/M/179/1026 (Wesley Hall Minutes).

³⁶ *The Methodist Church: Conference Committee on Christian Worship* (1957), pp. 1, 2, 12–13.

church was formed; eventually it gave way to family worship.³⁷ It was also noted that at Mayflower (the new build successor to Saxby Street) a family service would be held every Sunday morning'.³⁸

The possibilities of changes in worship were, however, limited by alterations in organisation and ministry. Earlier Methodists had been content with small circuits containing three or four churches, the worship being conducted by one ordained superintendent and a number of local preachers. They were refreshed by the replacement of the minister every three years. In the post-war era, however, with a reduced number of ministers available and the closure of redundant churches, preference had been given to larger circuits with, preferably, more than one ordained person. As has been noted in Table 1, the number of circuits in Leicester in 1961 was quite different from what had been the case in 1951. Eight small circuits had been reconstituted as five. The situation continued to change. In 1972, Leicester South and East Circuits were combined to form the new Leicester South-East Circuit, which in turn joined with the Leicester Central Circuit to form the Leicester Trinity Circuit in 1984. The Reverend Charles Randell, writing about the birth of the Leicester East Circuit in 1952, explained that 'there is naturally a sense of regret that the intimate fellowship of the small compact circuit is now coming to an end and we are right in consenting to enter into the larger fellowship of the Leicester East Circuit'.³⁹ Its 11 churches, eight of them in Leicester, the other three in villages to the east of the city, were to be served by three ordained ministers.⁴⁰ When the Leicester South-East Circuit was formed in 1971 it consisted of 18 churches, about 2,000 members, seven ministers and 50 local preachers.⁴¹

The changes in circuit formation were accompanied by changes in ministry and the expectations of the congregations. Early in the twentieth century it was noted that ministers were becoming formally educated and were often chosen less for their evangelical fervour than their organisational ability.⁴² By 1945 many of them were 'polished' professionals. Arnold Cooper, an arts graduate, arrived at Bishop Street with plans for visiting and the institution of house Bible study, as well as the conducting of evangelistic witness. He was careful to say, however, that his new plan was 'to be built on existing organisations and activities'. The emphasis was on continuity. Within a year he had also taken on the chaplaincy at Leicester Teacher Training College and the temporary Youth Leadership Training College. By the time that he left in 1965, to take charge of English-speaking work in Sri Lanka, the home groups were growing, family services were beginning on some Sunday mornings with social gatherings following, and there had been discussion (but not agreement) about the 'use of liturgical service'. When he was succeeded by the very capable Philip Beuzeval, B.A., LL.B, formerly a tutor at Richmond

³⁷ *50 Years: Trinity Methodist Church 1929–1979* (Leicester, n.d.).

³⁸ LLRRO/N/M/179/866, 1960 Report.

³⁹ *125 Years Celebrations: All Saints' Methodist Church, Leicester, 1859–1984* (Leicester, 1984), p. 15.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴¹ LLRRO/N/M/179/866, 8 June 1972.

⁴² Rimmington, 'Methodism and Society in Leicester, 1881–1914', p. 86.

⁴³ LLRRO/DE3747, 4 Dec. 1962, 11 June 1963, 10 Sept. 1963, 8 Dec. 1964, 10 Dec. 1965, 7 June 1970.

College, Cooper was thanked for his 'very hard work, both in the Church and among students' and 'for thoughtful preaching and pastoral work'.⁴³ A few years later the superintendent was Graham West, B.D., while Beuzeval had become an additional minister in the circuit with particular responsibility for the chaplaincy to students, conceived as a temporary but important ministry.⁴⁴

There was a determination to achieve a well-educated ministry, which Methodists found easier to attain than the Baptists. Whereas the latter tolerated a situation where individual churches ordained poorly qualified candidates, some of whom were not recognised as ministers by the Baptist Union,⁴⁵ the Methodists insisted that all candidates reached a minimum standard before they were ordained at the Annual Conference. The 1951 Conference noted that 'we had the great joy of welcoming an unusually large number of ministers into Full Connexion.... A few years ago, we were gravely concerned about its numbers. But God has answered our prayers, and a larger number of candidates with the necessary gifts have offered themselves.'⁴⁶ The number of graduates would be increasing. In 1961, Leicester had only two graduates, while elsewhere there were two theological graduates in Hinckley and one (out of five) in Melton Mowbray. By 1971 there were 17 graduates out of 38 in the county.⁴⁷

It appears that the Methodists were much more successful than the Baptists also in improving the qualifications of their ministers. While the number of Baptist ministers with graduate qualifications in 1971 was only seven out of 32 (22 per cent), the Methodist percentage of 45 per cent was much more successful, reflecting the rise in educational opportunities in the country as a whole.⁴⁸ However, it must be remembered that the Methodist system was different in that there were fewer ministers, sometimes only one or two ministers in a circuit with greater reliance being made on local preachers as a matter of policy.

As in other Nonconformist denominations, the quality of the local preachers varied considerably. E. Fortescue noted that 'though I had no formal training I read as much as I could to enable me to be appointed as a fully accredited Local Preacher in 1925'.⁴⁹ At the other end of the educational scale, however, there was one candidate in 1970 who was placed on trial, having 'read theology and English at university' and had 'presented a thesis for M.A. Leicester'. He was given permission to take an oral examination in 'Belief and Doctrine', but excused all other examinations. Another candidate was reported to the Central Methodist Mission (Bishop Street) as having passed his examination in the New Testament. Three months later he had completed his examinations, and that 'after some more experience will be put forward for acceptance onto full plan'. The circuit committee also suggested 'that sermons for acceptance onto full [preaching] plan

⁴⁴ LLRRO/4444/1, 11th June 1970.

⁴⁵ Rimmington, 'The Baptist Churches and Society in Leicestershire, 1951-1971', pp. 116-17.

⁴⁶ *Methodist Conference Minutes*, 1951, p. 177.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1961, 1971.

⁴⁸ Rimmington, 'The Baptist Churches and Society in Leicestershire, 1951-1971', p. 116.

⁴⁹ Fortescue, *My journey through the twentieth century*, p. 20.

⁵⁰ LLRRO/DE4443/1, 2nd June 1969, 10th Sept. 1969, 10th Dec. 1969, 11th June 1970.

should be before a bigger meeting of another church'. By the end of 1969 it was noted that he 'is taking preaching appointments in other circuits and is to take his oral examination and....preach a trial sermon on 12th June 1970'.⁵⁰ Nationally the Methodists had tried to ensure that their local preachers were up-to-date in their theological understanding. They had enforced higher standards through the 1960s and 1970s. Before 1972 circuits had had the right 'to make local preachers without any connexional tests at all', but this was rescinded and there was thereafter a Conference approved system, with a 'choice of written examinations, continuous assessment course or (carefully safeguarded) connexional oral examinations'. Some candidates found that their conservative tendencies were severely tested. One complained about John Stacey's specially written *Introducing Theology*, and other books as having been written by 'Liberal Modernists'. He was disturbed that 'the Fundamental Evangelicals have been left out in the cold'.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the application of the system in Leicestershire enabled ordinary people to become capable modern preachers who were more than mere substitutes for ordained ministers.

Earlier ordained ministers had been regarded as 'travellers', the intention being that they established churches, then, after three years, moved on. While not wishing to lose entirely the idea of ministers moving on to new work, the denomination recognised that change of location was not as easy as it used to be. By now many wives were in employment and there were children at school whose studies ought not to be interrupted. It was in any case recognised that ministers needed to put down roots in order to become respected members of the community. Although five-year appointments succeeded the earlier three-year 'stints', more circuits were asking ministers to stay for longer periods. In the Leicester South-East Circuit in 1976, for instance, it was noted that not only was Douglas Maw invited for a sixth year, but Arthur Rowe was invited for a 10th year and Kenneth Wilson even for a 13th year.⁵²

There were, however, other reasons for increasing the length of ministerial appointments. Whilst valuing what 'travelling' had meant in the past, the perception was that retaining membership was at least as important as gaining new members. Travellers who were capable preachers had been good at attracting new members, but not so good at retaining them. Maldwyn Edwards's presidential address to the 1961 Methodist Conference stressed the importance of a survey 'to discover the real reasons why so many of our members slip away from their allegiance to Christ and loyalty to His Church'.⁵³ There were many who felt that the temporary nature of ministerial appointments did not seem to give time for the development of relationships. The 1971 Conference address noted that:

Methodism is a distinctive and tightly knit system of Church which has in the past secured notable triumphs of the Gospel and been the envy of some communions.

⁵¹ G. Milburn and M. Batty (eds), *Workaday Preachers: the story of Methodist local preaching* (London, 1995), p. 279 and p. 288.

⁵² LLRRO/DE4443/2, 4 March 1976.

⁵³ *Methodist Conference Minutes*, 1961, p. 103.

But it cannot be stretched to serve the present age without snapping at some points.... The old itineracy does not seem to be the only form of ordained ministry.⁵⁴

The long ministry over several decades of the Methodist minister Dr Leslie Weatherhead, who had a Leicester upbringing, at the City Temple in London, a Congregational Church, of Donald (later Lord) Soper at Kingsway and of Dr W. E. Sangster at the Westminster Central Hall, had shown the value that longer tenure could have for preaching and healing ministries. There was an uneasy feeling that they would not have achieved as much had they remained in the regular circuit system.⁵⁵ Moreover, there was also the commitment to church unity, which suggested that some changes in ministry would have to be made. In Leicestershire, as we have seen, this was happening.

Overshadowing all was the possibility of reunion with the Church of England, which Methodists took very seriously. Both Anglicans and Methodists had moved markedly from the situation in 1886, when the Wesleyan Home Missions Report looked forward to the day when Methodism would 'inevitably become, in the hour of its victory, *the Church of England*'.⁵⁶ By the 1950s, Dr R. F. Wearmouth judged that the decline of Methodism was accelerating, and that 'the open and manifest record is of non-success'.⁵⁷ A decade later Currie stated that 'close examination of the process of reunion shows that in advanced societies ecumenicalism is the product of an ageing religion. It arises out of decline and secularisation, but fails to deal with either.'⁵⁸ On the other hand there were others, especially those with a background in Primitive Methodism, who were much opposed to the proposed reunion.

Talks on reunion with the Anglicans were held between 1954 and 1969. While much of the discussion was necessarily at the national level, there was activity at the local level too. Arnold Cooper at Bishop Street in Leicester was particularly keen, and made a number of suggestions for informing his members of the reunion scheme. He proposed informal discussions in the Methodist Guild, a meeting of all church members, a brains trust, an exchange of literature and a possible meeting with St Martin's Cathedral members. He also felt that an Anglican group should be invited to meet with Bishop Street members and that there should be Anglican preachers in the Methodist pulpit.⁵⁹ As the decision time drew nearer there was more intense discussion. Dr E. J. B. Bish, a layman, who lectured at the Leicester Polytechnic, was concerned about the position of Methodist local preachers in relation to Anglican lay readers, and suggested there was a need for clarification. There was also a resolution, carried unanimously at a quarterly meeting, urging

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1971, pp. 73-4.

⁵⁵ According to J. Taylor and C. Binfield (eds), in *Who they were in the Reformed*.

⁵⁶ *Churches of England and Wales, 1901-2000* (2007), p. 236ff. Dr. Weatherhead, who had a 'personality of great charm, rare sensitivity and humour', had been a pupil at the Alderman Newton's School in Leicester; see also R. W. Perks, *The Re-union of British Methodism* (London, 1920), p. 71.

⁵⁷ R. Currie, *Methodism Divided: a study in the sociology of ecumenicalism* (London, 1968), p. 302.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

⁵⁹ LLRRO/DE3747, 3 Dec. 1963.

the Methodist Conference 'to see that the historic episcopate is not regarded in practice as being of the essence of the Church'. On the question of establishing 'closer relations with the Church of England', there were 33 in favour and seven against. When asked whether they saw the proposals as pointing 'the way forward to full communion between the Methodist Church and the Church of England', there were 30 votes in favour, seven against, with three declaring themselves neutral.⁶⁰ When a final vote was taken at another quarterly meeting, 29 representatives were in favour of the scheme of unity, with 16 against.⁶¹

There were similar meetings in each of the Leicestershire circuits. As with Bishop Street, discussion was lively and far from unanimous. The Leicester East Circuit, for instance, although agreeing in March 1959 that conversations should continue, stated that 'we are unable to see how the Anglican concept of episcopacy....can be reconciled with our doctrine of the ministry'. They were vigorous in stressing that 'no priesthood exists which belongs exclusively to a particular order or class of persons', and threatened that 'until this matter is resolved we consider that no definite steps can be taken towards union, or even intercommunion'.⁶² By the following September, voting on the Methodist-Anglican conversations showed that, despite continuing misgivings over episcopacy, 52 representatives wanted closer relations with the Church of England, 20 were against, with 13 neutral.⁶³ The final vote, a decade later, produced 84 votes for unity, but there were 32 votes against and two abstentions.⁶⁴

When the scheme failed, the Anglicans having rejected it, there was, on the part of those Methodists who had consistently voted against it, a sense of relief; coupled with a realisation that, if unity was eventually to prevail, there was a need for shared developments at the local level. At Nottingham, for instance, Methodist evening services were established in Clifton at the Anglican Church 'as a first step towards local unity'. The Rice Park development was 'designated an Area of Ecumenical Experiment when the Methodist minister was joined by an Anglican colleague'.⁶⁵

In Leicestershire there was less enthusiasm for linking with Anglicanism, perhaps because of the preoccupation with turning Wesley Hall into a community centre caring for the Afro-Caribbean immigrants. Nevertheless there were a number of ecumenical experiments in the 1980s. In 1985 the new suburban development in the north of Leicester at Beaumont Leys found itself with a new church, Christ the King, an Anglican institution, but in association with the Baptists and Methodists. The Cavendish Road Methodist Church, originally a Primitive chapel, was merged with Vernon Road (formerly Wesleyan) Methodist Church to form the Aylestone Park Methodist Church in 1966. Later, in 1988, it was joined by the priest and parishioners of the nearby St James's Church (which

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 9 Mar. 1965.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 10 Dec. 1968.

⁶² LLRRO/N/M/179/866, 5 Mar. 1959.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 11 Sept. 1958.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 6 Mar. 1969.

⁶⁵ Swift, *Lively People*, p. 169.

was subsequently demolished), to form the ecumenical Church of the Nativity.⁶⁶ In Clarendon Park, Leicester, conversations were to begin, some years later, in the 1980s, between the Congregational Church, the Baptists, the Methodists and the Anglicans, which led to the fusion of the Methodist and Baptist churches.⁶⁷ Elsewhere in the county the main concern was that of uniting what had previously been Wesleyan and Primitive congregations, as at Barwell, rather than linking with other denominations.⁶⁸ There was, however, to be a further attempt at Anglican-Methodist unity in the 1980s, which also was to fail, leaving local ecumenical ventures as the only way forward to co-operation between the denominations.

As Methodism approached the 1980s it was undoubtedly diminished in numbers. There were both fewer members and churches. The magnificent Sunday school anniversaries of the late 1940s were a distant memory, as were many of the Sunday schools themselves. There had been many regroupings of churches to form larger circuits, though of course there were less of them. Attempts to link with the Anglicans at the national level had failed, even though most of the Methodists had worked hard to achieve unity. They were limited to local ecumenical efforts. Despite their problems the denomination had some definite achievements. The circuit system still functioned reasonably well. Although sermons were seldom preached out-of-doors and with passion any more, they were delivered indoors by well-trained speakers, both ordained and lay. Moreover, there was more concern for systematic pastoral activities, to try to retain the membership, than there had been in earlier times.

⁶⁶ Moore, *Where Leicester has worshipped*, p. 8 and p. 35.

⁶⁷ G. B. Pyrah, *Clarendon Park Methodist Church, Leicester: glimpses into a century of Christian Witness, 1900-2000* (Leicester, 2000).

⁶⁸ Fortescue, *My journey through the twentieth century*, p. 21.