

LEVENSHULME UNITED REFORMED CHURCH A BRIEF HISTORY

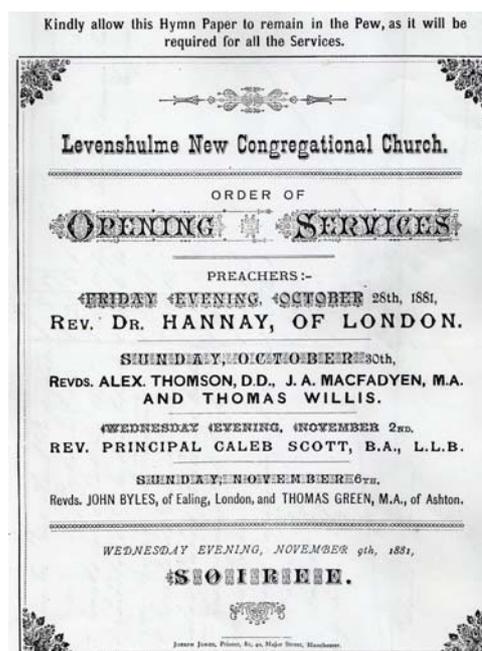
Levenshulme Chapel or Congregational Church is likely to have been founded in the early 1860s. The earliest documented records relating to Levenshulme Congregational Church are a set of accounts for the year 1869-70 and a short note of a Deacon's Meeting of 1870. During that year there is a payment to a JC Needham for expenses relating to a 'Trust Deed': it might be that this related to the acquisition of the site. Other early documents refer to a Levenshulme Chapel Trust and it may well be that a 'Levenshulme Chapel' significantly pre-dates the 1869 accounts. The earliest date relating to the church is contained in a roll of ministers in the 1916 Church Manual which suggests the first minister was Rev John Byles who served the church from 1866 until 1869.



Levenshulme Congregational Church on Stockport Road c.1904

The church was born into the Congregational tradition of the Christian church and was therefore determinedly self-sufficient, with funds for buildings and the minister coming from the donations and 'pew rents' of the local members and decisions relating to the life of the church being made at Church Meeting. In a statement of 'principles' in 1916 it is stated: "we believe each Christian Church to be complete in itself; that it has the right to choose its own officers, to administer its own affairs, to stand independent of all outside authority; and that it is subject only to Jesus Christ who is present at all its assemblies." This expression of self-determination and self-sufficiency is a characteristic that has lasted to this day with a commitment to community-led activities and a social enterprise model of business activity.

After two further ministers, the Rev W Reid became the fourth minister at the church in 1875 and served the area until 1899. During this time, Levenshulme New Congregational Church was opened on October



Order of Service for opening of
Levenshulme New Congregational
Church 1881

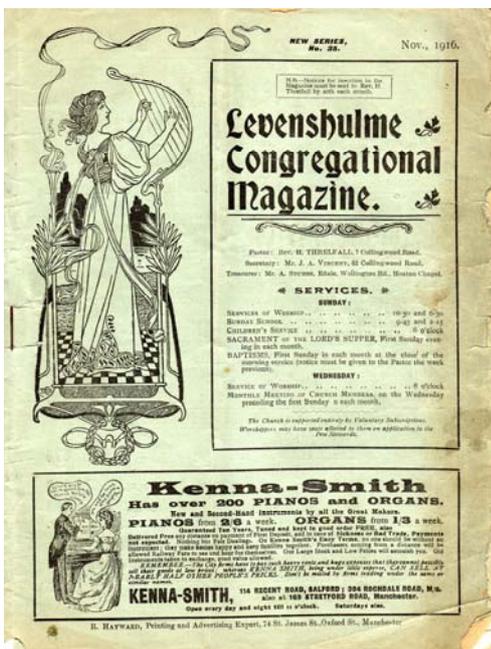
28th 1881 with a series of church services with preachers including the Rev Dr Hannay “of London” and the Rev Principal Caleb Scott. Little is known of the church’s activity during these years but one can assume that in order to generate the funds necessary to build such a fine church building that the congregation would have been relatively strong and that there would have been a burgeoning Sunday School. Located on the principal thoroughfare between Manchester and Stockport, it was – and still is – in a prominent location and something of a local beacon marking the ‘entrance’ to Levenshulme high street.

Reid was succeeded Rev RC Scurrah. During this time the ‘Cong School’ was built adjacent but connected to the church building. It is likely that the school was opened as a result of the growing Sunday School and, as the photo suggests, its opening was the cause of some fanfare.



The opening of the Congregational School 1906

It would appear that during the First World War the church struggled. The Church Manual of 1916 contains a heartfelt plea from the Rev H Threlfall that the school had reverted to being a Sunday School, that membership had declined to around 107 with an average attendance at Sunday service of just 46 and that the numbers of willing volunteers for running activities was being “handicapped” by the war effort. There were however, a wide range of activities being offered by the church as “a source of real blessing to the people of Levenshulme”. A Social Club, Choral Society, Boys Brigade and Ladies Sewing Circle all had regular attendance of 30-40 people and the ‘Band of Hope’ attracted 75 people each week. The church also produced a regular magazine which demonstrates its wider engagement with the community with advertisements from local businesses and the Beswick Co-op and news of ‘Home Circles’ and the Choral Society.



Cover of Levenshulme Congregational Magazine November 1916 and War Memorial

During the 1930s life at Levenshulme Congregational Church was very busy with two church services and two Sunday School meetings every Sunday as well as a wide range of activities during the week. These included Brownies and Guides, Womens Guild, Life Boys, Boys Brigade a Dramatic Society and occasional outings and social events. Some folk still remember Sunday School's very popular outings to Prestatyn and Heaton Park: the outing in 1937 involved 162 people.



During the Second World War, people say that the activities of the church were the centre of their lives – not least as young people – and this is reflected in some pages of the Sunday School Roll of Attendance from 1948-49 which shows 72 Sunday School members.

An early Maypole celebration c. 1919

The minister during the 1950s was a Rev. Geoffrey Underwood. During this time considerable attention paid to young people's activities: a Bible Study course and 'League of Young Worshipers' attracted 30 – 40 young people every week. This was complemented by a popular Youth Club, Girls and Boys Corps, annual Maypole events and a famed Variety Show or Pantomime, scripted and produced by the Church Organist, Arthur Fawcett.



The Variety Show 1959 (left) and the last May Queen 1990 (below)

The May Festival was one of the most popular local events associated with the church and involved many people from the Levenshulme community. The crowning of a May Queen each year continued right up until 1990.



The May Festival was closely linked with a combined 'Procession of Witness' with other Levenshulme churches which took place on Whit Sunday each year.



Whit Walks in the 1930 and the 1970s

Levenshulme Congregational Church became Levenshulme United Reformed Church in 1972 when the Congregational and Presbyterian churches were joined by an Act of Parliament. But by 1977 the Rev J Houston makes clear in his notes in the May Festival leaflet the actual church congregation was relatively small, in comparison with its presence within the community – a situation which continues to the present day.

During the 1980s the congregation dwindled further and Sunday School activities also experienced unfortunate setbacks. The church manse was sold and the church joined the South East Manchester Group Pastorate with churches in Gorton and Clayton under the care of Rev Chris Warner and Rev Pamela Parrish. These were the last ministers at the church and by 1984 church members took responsibility for their activities without a minister.

Throughout the 1990s the loyal congregation organised their own preacher and organist each week but remained active in the local community, running activities such as bowling and bring and buy sales and hosting a wide range of community activities including a twice-weekly parent and toddler group, Line Dancing and even Egyptian belly-dancing. During this period a number of housing associations showed an interest in the property but each time proposals were developed they stalled in trying to attract the necessary investment.

Slowly the building fell into greater disrepair to the point where, by 2005, a number of building users had to withdraw. It was at this time that Manchester Methodist Housing Association renewed their interest in the property and a number of local community groups also expressed an interest in developing their own activities within a refurbished building. The Levenshulme Inspire Partnership was formed



The church building in 2005

and plans developed for a vibrant new community facility with a focus on the creative arts and media and 14 rented apartments financed through MMHA and the Housing Corporation. In July 2008, the Big Lottery Fund awarded a £446,000 grant putting the church within touching distance of reaching its fund-raising goals. By the end of the year, the legal paperwork was completed and the new vision was about to become a reality.



Plans for the Inspire Centre



Ed Cox
December 2008

A DVD containing photographs and videos from the church's history is available from the Church Secretary, Peter Ryan (pp.ryan@ntlworld.com).