

Agnes Street Congregation

Industrial development in North Belfast in the second half of the nineteenth century led to the General Assembly's Church Extension committee in 1867 to recommend the building of a new church to meet the needs of those who worked in the mills and factories of the area. The foundation stone was laid on the **25th February 1871** and the first minister was the **Rev. Samuel McComb**. Mr McComb ministered in the congregation with great acceptance until his sudden death on the 3rd December 1891.

Another long serving minister, for 28 years, was the **Rev. William John Baird**, who was installed in **August 1904**. He saw the congregation through the period of the **First World War** in which over 500 of its men served in the armed forces and some 65 lost their lives. In 1927 a union was effected between Agnes Street and Eglinton Street, to form what then must have been the largest congregation in the General Assembly. Mr Baird resigned in 1932.

In the latter half of the 1880's a young woman named **Margaret Magill** began to attend the services in Agnes Street. There she dedicated her life to Christ and in due course was instrumental in the formation of the first **Christian Endeavour Society** in Ireland. We are indebted to D.A. Levingstone Cooney for the following information from his book "A History of the Christian Endeavour Movement in Ireland": -

'Margaret Magill worked in a fancy box factory and was a woman of simple piety, great determination, loyalty and humility. She initially had a Sunday Class of girls under the gallery of the church and as numbers increased the class moved into a separate room on the 28th December 1888 and continued to flourish. At the end of July in 1889 a number of young men asked if they could join and did so, bringing with them their teacher, a Mr Brown. This necessitated a reorganisation and the joint classes became a society, with office bearers. It is notable that Margaret Magill herself did not hold formal office, though it was her ideas that continued to guide the group.

*It was at this time that the Sunday School Chronicle published an article about Christian Endeavour in America. Struck by the title, Margaret Magill made some enquiries and obtained a copy of "Christian Endeavour: What it is and How it Works", by **Francis Clark** (founder of the movement on 2nd February 1881 in Williston Congregational Church. Portland, Maine, USA). She was surprised to discover that the methods it recommended were only a little different from those she herself had devised. She brought the book to her young folk. It was discussed, the new name was adopted and on the **30th September 1889** the Agnes Street Young People's Society of Christian Endeavour was formally registered as No. 39 in the British Section. **The first Christian Endeavour Society in Ireland had begun!***

It should be added there is a Memorial Tablet marking Margaret Magill's singular and lasting achievement. It was erected first in Agnes Street and moved in 1971 to Immanuel, as the united congregation of Agnes Street and Bethany became known.

A member of Agnes Street, the Rt. Hon. Sir **William George Turner**, was prominent in local government. He was Lord Mayor of Belfast from 1923 to 1928 and was knighted in 1924. In 1927 he was appointed a member of His Majesty's Privy Council, a high honour indeed.

Another member prominent in local government for 29 years was Alderman **Malcolm Mercer**. He was elected first as a Councillor for Court Ward on the 15th January 1923 and then as an Alderman on the 15th May 1936. He was Chairman of the Libraries, Museums and Arts Committee from 1935 to 1942. He retired from the Council on the 21st May 1952.

The Boys' Brigade Company, the 28th Belfast Company, was always prominent in football circles. However, the Company produced probably the finest ever athlete in the Boys' Brigade in the Province, **Eddie Boyce**. A feature of the Company Displays was his demonstration of high jumping, given in the limited space of the Perth Street Lecture Hall.

Eddie went on, as a member of North Belfast Harriers, to represent Great Britain in the long jump and the hop, step and jump (now the triple jump) at the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936. The winner of the long jump was the black American athlete, Jesse Owens. He won four gold medals in all but Adolf Hitler refused to congratulate him.

Owing to redevelopment in the area the Agnes Street congregation closed in its centenary year **1971** (it united with Bethany to become Immanuel). The closing services on the **10th October** of that year were conducted by the **Rev. Donald Gillies**, on the 25th anniversary of his ministry in the church.