

Bethany Congregation

The congregation of Bethany was formerly an **Independent Congregation** in Agnes Street and was founded and ministered to by the **Rev. David McKee**. On his death in **1892** his widow memorialised the Belfast Presbytery, praying the Presbytery to recommend the General Assembly to receive the congregation under its care.

On the 8th June 1892 the prayer was granted and the first minister installed in July 1893 was the **Rev. Samuel Simms**, a former member of Townsend Street Presbyterian Church, who had been ordained by the Long Island Presbytery of the American Presbyterian Church in June 1887. His first charge had been the Yaphank congregation in Long Island and he had also worked with the Albany City Mission, New York.

One of Mr Simms's first acts was to abolish all pew rents, thus Bethany became the first Presbyterian Church in Belfast to adopt a thoroughly democratic and voluntary principle of supporting the work and witness of the Church.

Mr Simms was a whole-hearted and fearless advocate of temperance and Christian standards in social life. He laboured in Bethany with conspicuous success for over 40 years and retired from the active duties of the ministry in **March 1934**. He died on the 29th November 1938.

The **Rev. Andrew Crooks**, formerly minister of Minter burn and Caledon, succeeded Mr Simms in January 1935. He ministered with great acceptance for 29 years, resigning on the 31st March 1964, to become minister in Loughaghery.

The **Rev. John Girvan** of Carlisle Road, Londonderry was called to succeed him and was installed on the **30th July 1964**. Mr Girvan was minister when the decision was taken to unite the congregation with its neighbour in Agnes Street, as a response to the redevelopment of the area. The union was effected on the **14th October 1971**, the united charge being known as **Immanuel Presbyterian congregation**. Mr Girvan however was called to Hill Street, Lurgan and resigned from Immanuel on the **13th November 1972**.

We record with pleasure that three ministers with Bethany connections were **Moderators of the General Assembly**. **Dr. John Girvan** was installed as Moderator in 1981, while in Hill Street Lurgan. **Dr. John Lockington** for whom Bethany was his home church was installed in 1999 while minister of Gardenmore, Lame. **Dr. Ivan McKay** was the assistant minister in Bethany from 1969 to 1972, and was installed in 2003 while minister of Dundonald.

In our long history we have had just one Church Sister. **Miss Jean Press** was set apart for the work in Bethany in 1926 and retired on the grounds of ill health in 1955. Her dedication and spirituality had a great influence in the congregation throughout the years.

Another long serving member of the congregation was **Mr William Boyce**, who lived in Agnes Street opposite the church, and was Church Officer for 54 years. He had been connected with Bethany since its foundation as an Independent Congregation. Mr Boyce died on the 3rd April 1937 and a plaque in his memory was erected in the church in April 1938.

Long service has been a feature in Bethany and this applies, too, to our pipe organ! The **Blair Holt Memorial Organ** was presented to the church in 1936 and is still going strong - assisted by some restoration work along the way!!

A member of the congregation who made his mark in business and local government was **Councillor William Christie**, J.P. He was High Sheriff of Belfast in 1964 and Lord Mayor from 1972 to 1974. He was knighted in 1975. Sir William still retains his connections with the congregation (now Immanuel).

One of our **missionaries** from Bethany was **Henry M (Harry) Brown**, who was brought up in Glenfarne Street, beside the church. He had a godly mother who struggled to bring up her five sons after her husband was killed in an accident. Harry has told how one Sunday evening he sat in the gallery of his own church listening to the preaching of the Rev. Samuel Simms. The moment of decision had come and with head bowed he yielded his life to Christ.

Mr Simms was a great supporter of the China Inland Mission. He had once met **Hudson Taylor** (founder of the mission) and never forgot that experience. A few months after his conversion Harry attended a meeting in his own church at which one of Hudson Taylor's sons, Ernest, spoke of the need for missionaries in China. Harry responded immediately. He went to the speaker after the meeting and promised that if God should open the way he would go to China.

In 1932 he believed the time had come for him to make a move and he was accepted by the South Wales Bible Institute. He entered the C.I.M.'s Training College in September 1934 and went to China in 1935.

In the summer of 1938 Harry married **Miss Lilla Cully** from Belfast, who he had first met when she was a C.I.M. candidate in training. They were on honeymoon in the hill resort of Kuling, a few hours journey from Hankow, where they had just been married, occupying a palatial villa loaned to them by a wealthy Chinese, the chairman of the Shanghai Commercial Bank. However, with the Japanese advancing, their lives were in danger and they had to flee, leaving their wedding presents and practically everything else they possessed. They walked all through the night and most of the next day and as they went Japanese planes roared overhead, bombing and machine gunning the great stream of fleeing refugees. When the two young missionaries reached the safety of a mission station they had escaped with their lives and very little else.

Later the Browns were working in the city of Loping in the province of Kiangsi when it was captured by the Japanese. They came to the house where the missionaries lived and it seemed Harry and Lilla, like other C.I.M. missionaries must face the firing squad. An aggressive Japanese officer changed his tone when he learned they were from Ireland. He knew a little about Irish politics, but not all! "Oh" he said "You poor Irish. You have suffered under the British for years. We will not harm you!"

A sad memory of Loping for Harry and Lilla is recalled. An epidemic hit the city and it claimed the life of their little son. As they laid him to rest in the soil of China they realised their Chinese neighbours were watching to see how these folk who preached the religion of Jesus would react to the greatest calamity that can befall a Chinese family - the loss of the first born son. Harry and Lilla knelt together at that little grave and lifted their hearts to Him who gave his only begotten Son. In that hour of deepest sorrow He drew near and the balm of comfort entered their souls.

Working later in another area, the Brown's strength was spent and they were overdue for furlough. The Japanese were advancing and the Chinese urged them to leave. They escaped again, this time in a United States Army Air Force plane, which flew over the Himalayas to Calcutta in India. They later reached Liverpool in a troopship in the year 1945.

After a period of rest Harry spent some time lecturing to American troops throughout Great Britain on his experiences in Communist China.

In 1946 Harry accepted the position of Irish representative of the Mission. He was a gifted speaker and addressed many meetings every week. He died suddenly of coronary thrombosis age 47 on the **7th September 1958** while in Edinburgh fulfilling preaching engagements.

Another Bethany missionary was **Robert (Bobby) McAllister**. He was born in Germantown, Philadelphia, USA and when he was four years of age was sent back to Belfast after the death of his mother. With his sister Kathleen, Bobby was brought up by his grandmother, 'Granny Bunting' a strict Presbyterian, at No. 15 Hampden Street, right beside the church. He recalls they were raised on a Presbyterian diet of Scots porridge and the Shorter Catechism!

Bobby joined the 36th Company of the Boys' Brigade in the Shankill Road Mission and the drilling, discipline and attention to detail played their part in preparing the young boy for the rigours of future missionary work.

In 1940 there was a mission in Bethany, conducted by the Rev. A. E. Stronge of Rasharkin. One evening after the service, under the counselling of an elder and Sunday School teacher, Mr Robert Nutt, the young boy gave his life to the Lord. His own Sunday School teacher, Mr **Lewis Warke**, encouraged the lad in his new faith by taking him on preaching engagements. When Lewis became a Belfast City Missionary, Bobby helped in his mission as a Christian worker. It was there he met the girl he was to marry, **Miss Alma Arthur**, who played and sang at the services.

There was a surprise for Bobby in 1945 when he heard from the United States authorities that having been born in the USA he could be drafted for military service, although it was unlikely he would be conscripted. Not knowing where the Lord might lead in future he took the wise and honourable decision to volunteer.

For 14 months his unit was stationed outside Stuttgart in Germany and he found a niche as Chaplain's assistant. While there Bobby met a small Salvation Army company singing in the rubble of this war-torn city. In his full American uniform he stood side by side with defeated Germans singing in unison to the praise of the Sovereign God.

His Chaplain, Capt. Jones, gave him another adventure when he obtained permission to attend the Nuremberg Trials of Nazi war leaders. They managed to get into the balcony where they were able to follow the proceedings translated into several languages, through earphones.

In 1946, after only a total of 21 months in the U.S. Army, Cpl. Robert McAllister was discharged because he had been a volunteer. In 1947 he entered Emmanuel Bible College in Birkenhead and completed a 3-year course.

Alma was converted at the age of 15, under the preaching and singing ministry of **Mr & Mrs Seth Sykes** .. Like Bobby she attended the Emmanuel Bible College, commencing the 3-year course in 1944. She later trained for 2 years as a nurse and from 1949-51 was a Staff Nurse in the Lagan Valley hospital in Lisburn.

Bobby and Alma were married in June 1951 in Bethany by the Rev. Andrew Crooks. They went to the Belgian Congo (now Zaire) to Stanleyville, in the service of the Unevangelized Fields Mission, arriving in 1952.

Those were dangerous days in the Congo as rebel armies fought with government forces in the struggle for independence. On one occasion the rebels invaded the mission station, taking 19 missionaries and their families captive. They isolated Bobby and a colleague, **Hector McMillan**, who wondered what was going on. He never completed his question before he fell in a hail of bullets. The soldiers then turned their weapons on Bobby and one bullet creased his forehead, making him dizzy. He collapsed on the ground and wisely played for dead. He closed his eyes, held his breath and prayed as the rebels walked around them. Satisfied both men were dead they roared off in their jeep, to continue their butchery and killing.

The mission hostages were rescued by mercenaries fighting on the government side. Their jeeps raced through a deserted Stanleyville to the airport and all the missionary families were evacuated to Leopoldville and safety, some 1200 miles away.

However, the McAllisters returned to the Congo in the summer of 1958 for further service. They came back to Ireland in 1970 and Bobby accepted an invitation to succeed the Rev. Joe Wright, who was retiring as **Irish Secretary for U.F.M.**

Bobby and Alma never refused a speaking engagement and now the three grown up children formed a singing group with their mum. The highlight of the family ministry was a coast to coast singing tour of the United States in 1975.

In 1977 Bobby resigned from U.F.M. and the McAllisters returned to Zaire as independent missionaries in 1980. Towards the end of their furlough in 1985 Bobby was seriously ill and required double by-pass surgery. Despite this setback the McAllisters returned to their mission station in Zaire and stayed until 1991. Bobby then accepted an invitation from the World Gospel Mission to become Senior Pastor of a church in Nairobi, capital of Kenya, for 15 months, while the missionary pastor was on leave. With this period completed and indeed now over 40 years missionary service, Bob and Alma went to live in retirement in Toronto, Canada, with their daughter and her Pastor husband. Bob and Alma have returned to the province and are living in Armagh. The McAllisters have three children. **Ruth** was a missionary in her own right, **David and his wife** are still serving in Africa with a Christian mission, while the other brother, **Dr, Bill McAllister**, accepted a position in the U.K. as National Director of the Christian Blind Mission.

The members of Bethany congregation were probably the best supporters of the **Jungle Tribes Mission** (now subsumed in the Foreign Mission) in the Presbyterian Church.

For the Christian Endeavour Society the J.T.M. in India was their special missionary interest. Led by an elder of the congregation, **Mr Leonard Hughes**, they were diligent in fund-raising for the mission. Several plays with a missionary theme (two by a C.E. member, **Miss Winnie Close**) were performed. They were produced by **Cecil Courtenay** and **Ada Williamson**, also C.E.members.

With a desire in his heart to serve the Lord overseas, Cecil completed a 2-year course in the Bible Training Institute, Glasgow, and went to Gujarat, India, to work for the Jungle Tribes Mission in 1950. Ada joined him in 1951, after qualifying as a teacher. The following month they were married in Dohad in the United Church of North India.

Cecil was licensed by the Church Council of Anand on the 30th October 1957 and was ordained at Ahmedabad on the 17th December of the same year for service with the United Church of North India.

After 15 years of dedicated service the Courtenays returned home in 1964 because of Ada's ill health. The Rev. Cecil Courtenay, as he now was, was assistant minister in Trinity, Bangor, for some months and then was installed as minister-in-charge of the Church Extension project at Springfield Road (Henry Taggart Hall) on the 31st March 1965.

Because of the troubles of 1969 many families left the district and the military took over the Taggart Hall. The last service was held on the 15th November 1970 and the Rev. Courtenay was transferred to Garnerville.

He went to Kilcooley, Bangor in 1979 and retired from that congregation in 1989. He then joined St Andrew's, Bangor where he assisted the Rev. Ian McKee in pastoralvisitation. He also worked for some time as stated supply in the congregation of Donegal and Ballyshannon.

Dogged by ill health in later years the Rev. Courtenay bore it with faith and fortitude and never allowed it to hinder his service to his Lord and Master. He died on the 12th May 1996.