

Oldpark Congregation

I'm aware that the History of Oldpark Presbyterian Church sort of fades into insignificance compared to the length of time that Oldpark is connected to Immanuel. Oldpark's history to Immanuel is only a matter of several years. But as we are now joined in amalgamation it is worth noting some of the background and history of Oldpark so that along with Agnes Street and Bethany we can now form part of the combined History of the four Churches.

Back in June 1900 the Convener of the Extension Committee of the General Assembly had expressed hope that something might be done in the district of Oldpark, because Belfast was expanding at an alarming rate. It was seventeen months later that decisive action was taken. The Rev. William McCoach of Second Clontibret in County Monaghan was considered and asked to labour in the district of Oldpark with a view to the organisation of a new congregation. So on the 1st December 1901 Oldpark congregation commenced. A suitable building was obtained in the form of a disused farm building on the turn of the Oldpark Road facing Deerpark Road, then non-existent, but today that same building is still standing as a furniture shop. The opening services were encouraging, with 120 being present at the morning and 200 in the evening. On April 6th 1902, at the first Service of Communion 36 Communicants were admitted, 18 by certificate and 18 on profession of faith.

On April 15 1902 a congregational meeting was called and after the poll list was read and passed the Commission of Presbytery was asked to moderate in a call to the Rev. William McCoach to become the new Minister and at a later congregational meeting on the 28th April the call was accepted at a stipend of £50 per annum with increase. The installation took place on the 20th May. By the 31st March 1903 the number of families in connection with the congregation had risen to 130 with other non-contributors attending. The number of Communicants had risen to 50 while the Sunday School had 200 pupils and 15 teachers on the roll. You may wonder how Oldpark Presbyterian Church came to be on the Cliftonville Road. This came about because by May 1903 it was felt that the congregation was growing continually and the present accommodation would not be adequate in the future. The task of erecting a Church costing over £5,000 in the 1900 was a daunting prospect for a small congregation. I'm not going to bore you with all the financial figures how this was achieved but just to say that over the following years with the Lord's help and the stalwart members of the congregation it was achieved. The foundation stone was laid on the 27th February 1904 and the building started and completed by the end of the year. The last services in the Oldpark Hall were held on the 23rd October 1904. So many were present the Hall was taxed to its utmost.

Over the following years Oldpark continued to grow in numbers and spirituality, and by 1933 there were 320 families and 290 Communicants. The completed Church was able to accommodate upwards of 1,000 people in fixed pews and with additional seating extra could be seated. During the Belfast Blitz Oldpark took a bit of a hammering as in other parts of Belfast, with the tower having to be removed because of its dangerous state and the rear roof of the recently erected main hall being blown off. Over a period of time everything was replaced and made good and things got back to normal. After the War and during the Fifties Oldpark reached its peak, with over 1,200 names on the FWO register, Communicant members stood at 709, Sunday Schools reached 680 pupils with 90 teachers.

Around the same time the BB had over 200 boys in the Company. From then on and especially during the Troubles a steady decline set in and with an ageing congregation, and with members moving away from the district and it becoming predominantly Nationalist, Oldpark closed its doors on the 30th September 2007.

It is worth noting that from the conception of Oldpark in 1901 until it closed its doors some 106 years later it had only five Ministers with Rev. McCoach serving 32 years and Dr Dunlop Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland serving 40 years. The three remaining Ministers Rev. J. Carson, Rev. N. Agnew and Rev. K. McConnell served during the last remaining thirty four years.

The Congregation produced from its members over twenty ministers including Rev. A. Dunlop son of Dr. James Dunlop and Rev. I. McKay who later became Moderators of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and a large number of foreign missionaries, 26 assistant ministers served their term and some went on to higher positions in the Presbyterian Church, at home and abroad.