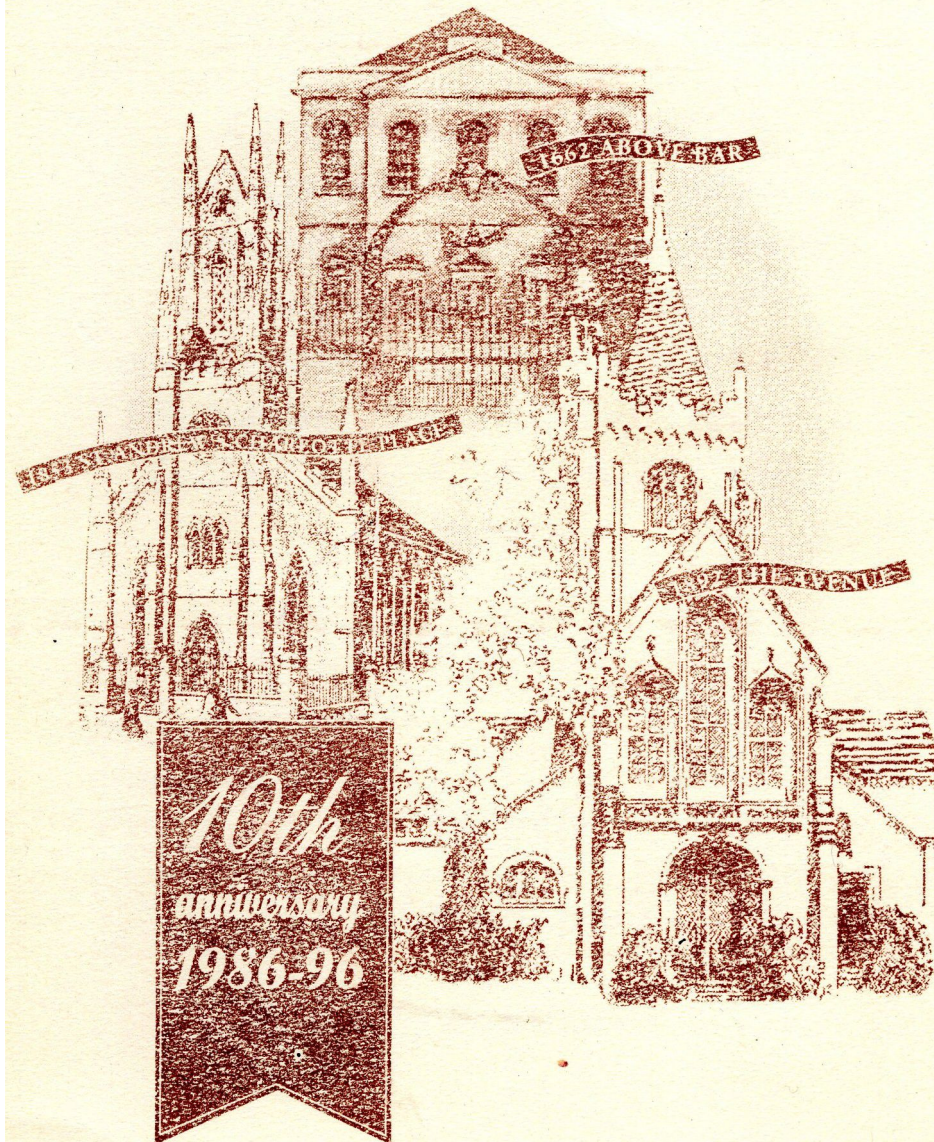


AVENUE ST. ANDREW'S  
UNITED REFORMED CHURCH



*A brief history of Above Bar  
Congregational Church, St Andrew's  
Presbyterian Church, and Avenue  
Congregational Church, to  
commemorate the first ten years of the  
life, witness and service of Avenue St.  
Andrew's United Reformed Church,  
Southampton.*

*1986-1996*

*compiled by*

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and  
Cliff Bembridge*

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## *Our Roots.*

It may seem strange to see the date 1662 on the front of a booklet which forms part of the tenth anniversary celebrations of the coming together of our two churches. In church life, as in family life, it is good to know our roots, and in this ecumenical age it is more important than ever that we are aware of where we have come from, if we are to travel confidently on the journey towards unity.

We need to look back and remember the faith and witness of those who have gone before us. We have a proud heritage, from which there is much to learn. For example, it is important that we know why the early Non-conformists were willing to risk being pilloried and imprisoned in order to escape the straight-jacket of worship dictated by The Anglican Prayerbook.

This is totally different from wanting to live in the past, or avoiding the reality of the present. It is instead about gaining strength from our past in order to engage in the world in a much more effective and creative way.

My hope is that our Anniversary will be an opportunity to rededicate ourselves to Christ as we rejoice in all the ways that God has blessed us in the last decade, and as we find renewed confidence, by looking at the story of our forebears who quite literally risked everything to worship God freely.

Reflecting on our collective history I was impressed by the wonderful openness to God's Spirit, which has enabled people to grow, develop and change - whether it was adapting to what was then the radical hymnody of Isaac Watts, or changing and at times even replacing building, or setting out on some new venture of mission or service.

As we approach a new century may we be no less open to the Spirit - no less radical in our approach to worship, buildings, mission and service.

Cliff Bembridge

October 1996.



## *Above Bar*

Our roots go back to the reign of Charles II, when, throughout the country, those who wished to worship outside the state church began to be persecuted, and had to worship in secret in their own homes. In Southampton they eventually obtained some buildings north of the Bargate. In 1662, following the passing of the Act of Uniformity, which laid down that all who held office in the Church of England should declare their agreement to everything in the Book of Common Prayer, two thousand Anglican Priests were ejected from their livings on St Bartholomew's Day. Among them was Rev. Nathaniel Robinson, the Rector of All Saints, who was invited by the little group at Above Bar to be their minister.

To-day we take our right to worship for granted, but for the fellowship at Above Bar to meet together meant risking ending up in the stocks or even in prison. Isaac Watts senior is among those who were imprisoned. Following his release he had to live in exile away from his family for two years.

However things improved following the Bloodless Revolution of 1688, and the passing of the Act of Indulgence during the reign of James II. On 24<sup>th</sup> August 1688, the anniversary of Black Bartholomew's Day, the Church was constituted with seventy four members, with Nathaniel Robinson as Pastor, and the appointment of both Elders and Deacons. It is worth noting that Robinson had some reservations about having Elders but was overruled by his members. David Geddes in his history of St Andrew's Presbyterian Church makes the point that this was a sign that within the fellowship at Above Bar there were both Presbyterians and Congregationalists.

The Watts family was one of the most notable in the Church. Isaac senior ran a boarding school of such high repute that it attracted pupils from America and the West Indies. He sold the Church the site which was to become its home, and the baptism of his famous son Isaac was the first recorded on the Church roll in 1674.

Without doubt young Isaac was to become Above Bar's most famous son. Like many a young person he complained to his father about how dreary worship was, and in particular the singing of the Psalms without any musical accompaniment. His father's response was to challenge his son, who had shown a flair for writing in verse from an early age, to see if he could do better. Isaac junior took up the challenge and during his life time wrote some five thousand hymns. His hymns, the best of which are timeless, were to transform Non-conformist worship, and to have an influence on other branches of the church as well. His early hymns were used at Above Bar as they were written until there were enough to publish in book form.

In the years that followed the church had a succession of long ministries, including that of Rev. William Kingsbury who came in 1764 and only resigned forty five years later because of ill health. He took an active part in the life of the city, and was the first Chairman of the London Missionary Society. Records show that outside of London, Above Bar gave the largest collection of anywhere in the country to help with the formation of the Society.

The church did clearly have its ups and downs. By 1764 the membership had dropped to only twenty seven; however a census on 30<sup>th</sup> March 1851 recorded attendances of 1264 in the morning, 308 in the afternoon and 960 in the evening. In 1860 at the Jubilee of Rev. Thomas Adkins 2,000 attended the evening service.

The original building was demolished in 1727 and replaced with a new one, which remained with various adaptations and enlargements until they again built a new church in 1819, at a cost of nearly £7,000. It is interesting to note that the building was designed with catacombs, however instead of the intended use these became the home of the Sunday School until the building of the Watts Hall and Class Rooms in 1875. In 1889 there were major alterations to the building at a cost of around £6,000. To commemorate the 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary the Robinson Halls (named after Nathaniel) were erected. In 1929 further alterations were carried out in the church during which evening services were held in the Grand Theatre.



Over the years two things stand out. Firstly the passion in opening new churches and Sunday Schools, and secondly the amount of philanthropic help the church gave to the community. Stainer's 1909 history of the church says; *"It (the church) not only sought to build up its own internal life and character, but it spread forth in the outlying districts, and carried life-giving impulses to others. In many instances where at first small stations were established and carried on by this community, there now exist separate and independent churches, self-supporting; and in those cases where some have lapsed they have become absorbed into larger centres"*. Over the years around thirty new causes were founded. Most were in fact were short lived, but some like Romsey, Bitterne and Bitterne Park, and Hythe still are active churches. It is interesting that between 1797 and 1863 members from Above Bar crossed Southampton Water every Sunday to support the work at Hythe. Sadly on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1815 it is recorded that a sudden wind sprang up and the boat capsized. Although four members were saved, Mr Sansome the Superintendent and the boatman were drowned.

The church also had an amazing array of philanthropic groups. To-day the approach of some may seem a little patronising, but when we make allowance for the different times in which we live we cannot fail to be amazed by their concern and generosity. Interest in education was expressed through the "Adult Week Evening Classes", founded in 1849 to teach adults the three Rs. In 1850 there were 15 males and 12 females, who were funded by church members. Prior to this in 1825 a library of 700 books was set up. There was also a vast array of groups to help those in need. There was the Good Samaritan Society (1814) whose members *"visited and relieved cases of distress and affliction in the town, and at the same time, as opportunity afforded, imparted spiritual instruction and consolation"*. Then there was the Infants' Friend Society (1820) whose aim was to: *"afford assistance to married women of good character during the period of temporary domestic retirement by the loan of an ample supply of linen for mother and child"*. Among the other groups were the Sick Room Mission (1882) whose members took food to the ill on a Sunday evening and held a short service in their home.

During the ministry of Rev. Maxwell Janes (1932-45), there were radical changes in the Sunday School, which in 1934 led to a system of grading. This continued until children were evacuated from the city at the outbreak of the Second World War.

During the early part of the war the Church ran a canteen for members of the forces passing through the city, but sadly that was to end on 30<sup>th</sup> November 1940. The Church Meeting Minutes records the events as follows:

*"On the night of November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1940, the Germans launched the first of two severe fire raids on Southampton. For over four hours incendiary and high explosive bombs were rained on the town, especially on the shopping centre in Above Bar Street.*

*Among the buildings that were quickly set alight were the Watts Hall and our Church, which burned fiercely and were soon an inferno of flame. Nothing could be done to save them owing to the many other fires. Our great suite of buildings was reduced to a crumbling ruin. Next morning Above Bar Street presented to would-be worshippers a tangle of wires and hose-pipes, with fires still burning all round.*

*We record with deep thankfulness that in spite of the severity of the raid, and of the one on the following night, no-one belonging to our Church was killed or hurt, although several of our people lost their homes and business premises. Fortunately the folk who were on duty in our Canteen that evening had left the Church half an hour before the raid began.*

*During the week that followed this severe and almost overwhelming loss, the Minister, Church secretary and caretaker were able to force the safe that had been in the wall of the Deacon's Vestry, and to obtain practically unharmed the valuable records and deeds which had been stored therein, but almost everything else we possessed perished - pictures, organ, classrooms, Robinson Hall, Chapel House - everything.*



*By the kindness of Mr. & Mrs. C.V. Tomlinson, a service was held on the following Sunday morning in a large room in their house. Some forty-five members of Above Bar Congregational Church assembled there to rejoice in the living Church of men and women which abides, even though the Church of brick and stone is destroyed. The question of a temporary home for our Church was now faced, and the Deacons were led to turn to the Society of Friends, with whom arrangements were made for the use of their Meeting House in Ordnance Road.*

*Here the church has been able to carry on some, at least of its activities, only too thankful to maintain its life and witness".*



## St. Andrew's

St Andrew's was founded in 1853, although it is possible to trace back to a Calvinistic presence in the city some three hundred years before, when Huguenot refugees were allowed to worship at St Julien's, God's House. As was mentioned in the history of Above Bar the fact that they had both Elders and Deacons suggests a Presbyterian element in that congregation.

By 1840 Southampton was becoming a significant centre of commerce. In 1853 the *London Illustrated News* referred to it as "the most go-ahead place in the South of England". The development of the port in particular brought many new residents. Among them was Andrew Lamb, the Superintendent Engineer of the Peninsular and Orient Steam Navigation Company. He, with others, had a vision of founding a Presbyterian Church in the city. The first services were held at Portland Baptist Church in 1848 and the following year the Presbytery of London recognised the fellowship as a preaching station under the oversight of Rev. A.J. Ross of Brighton. Later they met in the Royal Victoria Rooms in Portland Place.

In 1853 St Andrew's was opened on land given by Andrew Lamb from the south east corner of his Bellevue Estate. The sanctuary, designed to seat 650, cost £3,500 to build. In November 1853 *The Presbyterian Messenger* described it as "handsome and commodious". Initially there was only the minister's vestry and a small lecture room adjoining the church, but in 1884 the Lamb Memorial Hall was erected.

As with Above Bar there was a concern for the needs of both the congregation and community expressed through such organisations as the Mutual Improvement Society, the Sick Room Mission and one for free Christmas breakfasts.

In the early days there was no organ and the singing was led by a Precentor, who struck a note with a tuning fork. In September 1873 an harmonium was introduced, followed by a pipe organ in 1879. In those early days there was a paid choir. Around this time, during one six month period, £14 was paid, although it is not recorded how many people this covered.



It is also interesting to note that at this time there was a lady pew opener who received one shilling per Sunday for her labours. There were also pew rents collected on a commission basis, and metal communion tokens for members.

The first ministry was brief, but the second - that of Dr J.G. Wright - lasted some twenty six years. He gained some influence in the town taking a particular interest in the ragged school and the Philharmonic Society. During his ministry the Sunday School was extended, and branch churches set up in Totton and Freemantle. In 1870 he was Moderator of the English Synod and had a hand in the formation of Presbyterian Churches at Plymouth and Portsmouth.

Another notable ministry was that of Rev. Hugh Roger who was inducted in 1887. A man of much ability, he attracted large congregations by tackling some of the great religious, moral and social controversies of the day. His successor Rev. Robert Grimson came in 1906 and remained until 1934. His ministry covered the difficult period of the First World War, but he is probably best remembered for his work with children.

The next minister Rev. L. Race Clough took the church up to the start of the Second World War, when he left to enter the ministry of the Church of England. Following a number of bombing raids on Southampton the church was unable to be used for many months. However the military authorities who had requisitioned all the halls, allowed the services to be carried on in the Lamb Hall amid all the paraphernalia of a medical room.

At the end of 1940 Above Bar was also bombed and after a time of using the Quaker Meeting House, the congregation was invited to meet at St Andrew's and their minister Rev. Maxwell O Janes was recognised by the Presbytery as Minister in Charge of St Andrew's.

Maxwell Janes left to become Moderator of the Southern Province of the Congregational Union in May 1945. His successor, Rev. W.G. Kite was invited to be minister to both congregations, but sadly died just over a year later. The new minister Rev. W.T. Hinsley would lead the two churches to closer unity.

## ***The United Congregational and Presbyterian Church.***

On the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1948 with the sanction of the South Coast Presbytery and the Hampshire Congregational Union, the United Congregational and Presbyterian Church, became one of the first such unions in the country.

*We the Members and Adherents of the St. Andrews Presbyterian and Above Bar Congregational Churches, gathered together, as we believe, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, hereby covenant to walk together as one Congregation of Christ's people, to be kindly affectioned one to another, in honour preferring one another, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord. We pledge ourselves to seek God's Will for our united work and worship and to follow whither He leads, one Flock under one Shepherd.*

The congregation now set about planning a reconstruction of the church. Exciting plans were drawn up and each congregation put forward £900 believing that this would cover the cost. But despite the fact that many in the congregation gave their time and skills towards the project the final cost was over £4000. However, the end result met with everyone's approval. The pews were stripped, the gallery removed and a new ceiling fitted. The most dramatic change was a new chancel arch which symbolised the two congregations coming together.

The Church went forward under the ministries of Allan Smith, Michael Dunford and Derek Cole. During Michael Dunford's time house groups were held which looked at the response the Church could make to the community. Amongst other things this led to the formation of a lunch club for older people living in the area.

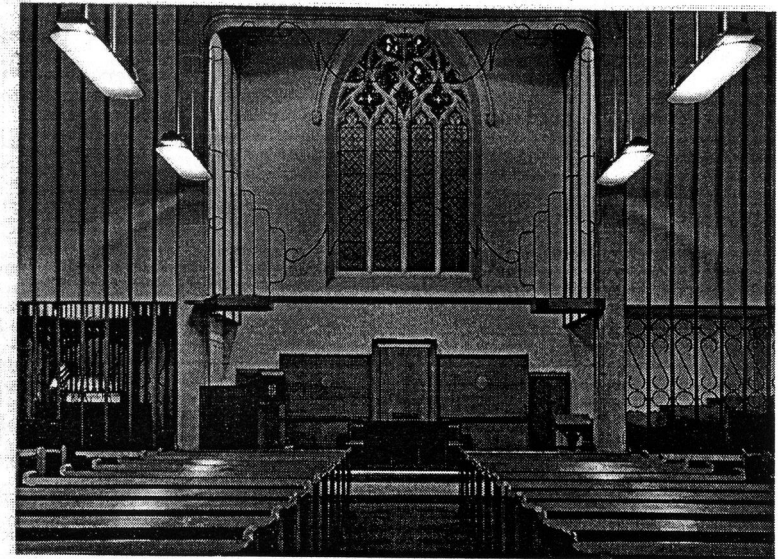
However in the late 1960s and early 70s the church began to experience some difficulties. Much of the housing around was demolished and people moved away. There were also building problems. In addition while the formation of the United Reformed Church was a matter of celebration for a congregation which had united nearly twenty five years before the rest of the country, it also meant that in future people would be more likely to attend their neighbourhood URC, rather than travel into the city centre to attend a church with a Presbyterian tradition.

Despite the difficulties the church continued to witness and serve with enthusiasm. Through the Girls' and Boys' Brigade the Church developed strong links with the West Indian Community. Under the ministry of Derek Cole, the existing ecumenical links were further strengthened, and was involvement in the city centre in general.

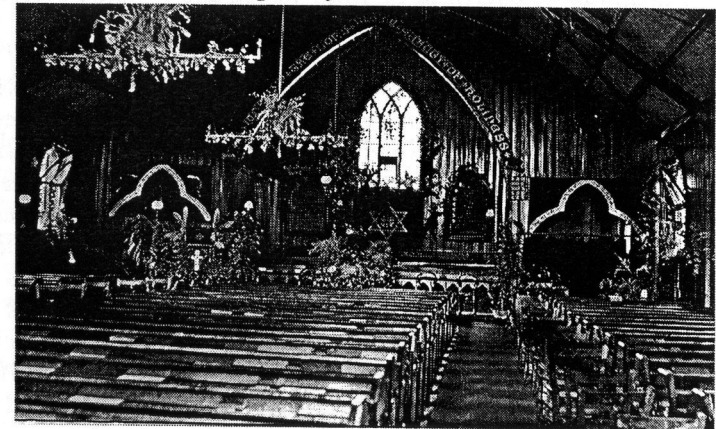
During 1975/6 there were further house study groups which looked at "What is the future role of St. Andrew's"? This showed a clear commitment to the needs of the city centre, but deep concern about the increasing costs of maintaining the buildings. Estimates suggested that a minimum of £20,000 needed to be spent. During 1977 there were discussions with the District Council about the way forward. This led to a joint meetings with Avenue URC, which looked at the possibility of a united congregation, based in one of the two buildings. However St Andrew's decided to carry on, and extensive repairs were carried out.

Sadly in the early 80's a further survey of the building revealed the need to spend a further £150,000. At this point the congregation decided they must again talk with Avenue URC. What great sadness members of St Andrew's felt at the thought that the buildings that had stood for so long as a symbol of nonconformist witness in the city centre and that had survived the wartime bombing were nevertheless becoming more and more of a liability!

St Andrew's sanctuary with the unity arch.



The temporary church at Avenue.





## *Avenue*

A glance at dates and even a rudimentary knowledge of the history of Avenue Church shows that the story of this church is very much in keeping with the social, religious and economic trends of the times in which it has existed. When the mother church, Albion Congregational in St. Mary Street, was born in the year 1842, stage coaches had only just ceased to run between Southampton and London and other places. The "London and Southampton Railroad" had just been completed and the Docks "were in the process of making"; but by the time a new Congregational church was being considered "on the outskirts of the town" even more changes were happening. There were horse-drawn trams - the route extending as far as Stag Gates (where there were still gates, with supporting pillars surmounted by stags!). Business people, members of Albion Church, were becoming less inclined to live "over the shop" and were moving to, or having built for themselves, private residences as the town spread northwards. Among them were the Lankestes, Knights, Pinhorns, Aldridges and Barlings. The Bances, Durkins, Hamiltons, Robertsons and Rowlands all moved as far "out" of town as the Avenue, Alma Road, Hulse Road and Gordon Avenue. It was a long walk to church in St. Mary Street, and it wasn't everyone who thought it right to drive in the carriage on Sundays!

Plans were made for a new Congregational church to serve the growing population of Southampton. A site at Bevois Mount was considered, and also one nearer to Portwood village, and others. Then "a very desirable residence standing in considerable grounds" on the corner of the Avenue and Alma Road came onto the market and "Avenue House" was purchased for £2000 in July 1892. The committee of fifteen moved swiftly: they heard of a moveable church building known as St. John's Free Church in Clifford Street for sale, and purchased this on August 8th. It was brought and re-erected, lock, stock and barrel, in the garden of "Avenue House" (where our Spencer Hall now stands)! Thus the Opening Service of the Avenue Congregational Church could be conducted by the Reverend R.F. Horton, M.A., on Wednesday, December 21st, 1892, and the first Sunday Services were held on Christmas Day. Late Victorian optimism, determination and strong faith could achieve a lot quickly!

It was not until February 1894, however, that a permanent minister came to the church: the Reverend A.D. Martin. The financial assets were "nil" at the beginning, but there must have been great faith: by the end of 1894 there were 112 church members and with tremendous enthusiasm and energy these members embarked on plans for a permanent building.

At about this time a "powerful oxyhydrogen lantern" was purchased and the "Avenue Lectures" were launched. These continued for many years (until about 1929) and were well known in Southampton and beyond. Following the fourth anniversary of the forming of the church, on December 14th, 1896, a special meeting was held and plans were accepted for the building of our present church. The estimated cost was £10,000 and the builder instructed to undertake the work was Mr John Smith. The pulpit cost £70 and this sum was raised entirely by the children of the Sunday School. The Foundation Stone was laid on August 4th, 1897, and the ceremony was followed by a garden party, in - we understand - "perfect weather"!

The familiar red-brick building which is now Avenue St. Andrew's Church was opened on Wednesday, December 7th, 1898 as the Avenue Congregational Church, so it will soon be a hundred years old and still going strong! There were many fund-raising efforts to help pay for the church and its furnishings. One such was a "Bazaar and Industrial Exhibition" held in the autumn of 1900.

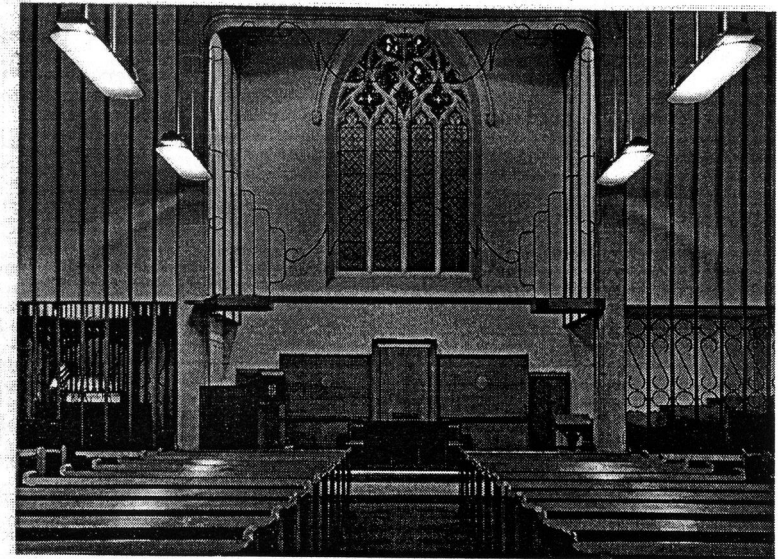
Nowadays major projects are sometimes postponed because of political unrest and the like, but the Boer War does not seem to have deterred early Avenue members, for in January, 1902, at a huge cost, the organ (rebuilt in 1960) was purchased. The organ was dedicated on November 12th, 1902, at a service from which people had to be turned away. It was the first, or one of the first, electric organs built - a marvellous instrument, although soon to have a reputation for being bad tempered and idiosyncratic at times. Interestingly, Avenue Church was probably the first public building in Southampton to have "the electricity."

Despite the difficulties the church continued to witness and serve with enthusiasm. Through the Girls' and Boys' Brigade the Church developed strong links with the West Indian Community. Under the ministry of Derek Cole, the existing ecumenical links were further strengthened, and was involvement in the city centre in general.

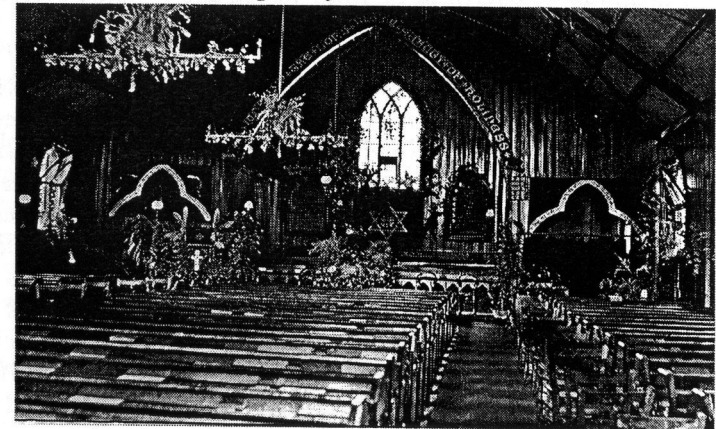
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Although situated in a select residential area and ambitiously planned, the Avenue church building housed a congregation who were aware that not far off there was acute poverty. It is clear that, at the turn of the century the church was the hub of social life. There was a Cycling Club, Cricket Club, Band of Hope, Christian Endeavour, Literary Society, Avenue Lectures, London Missionary Society Committee and Ladies Working Party. (The faithfulness and devotion of members of the last mentioned was to continue throughout the century - only being disbanded very recently. It is on record that these first ladies "furnished the Minister's Vestry" for the opening of the new building.) But in spite of the social nature of many of these activities, members of the congregation were looking around them and endeavouring both to address the social ills of the time and to spread the Christian message.

The first Avenue Missionaries left in 1899 to spend many years in China. But this notion of practical "mission" did not apply solely to far away places. In 1901 a room was acquired at a "small house on the Drummond Park Estate" - in fact number 1 Somerset Road, Old Portswood, where an afternoon Sunday School was opened. An Evening Service was then requested. After an appropriate site was found nearby, a secondhand wood and corrugated iron hall purchased. (Our predecessors seem to have been expert at recycling buildings!) This Portswood Mission Hall was erected at the junction of Arnold Road and Bowden Lane and opened in April, 1904. From then until the work was closed down in 1964 a succession of devoted "evangelists" were in charge, assisted very largely by Avenue friends.

Portswood at this time was a very poor district indeed, in spite of much building of new terraced houses. The country generally was passing through a period of terrible unemployment. Ladies of "Avenue" organised a "Soup Kitchen" in an effort to help the destitute hungry people of that particular area. They had 150 to 200 families on their list for "free soup" and any surplus was sold to those who could afford to buy a little more at one penny a quart. All this was at a time when the rich were called upon to pay little if any income tax, purchase tax was non-existent and yachts and Riviera cruises were very much "in". Small wonder that the minister of Avenue in 1910 was moved to preach what proved to be a most inspiring sermon on "Pageantry and Poverty", delivered at the time of the Coronation of George V. 1907 had seen the formation of the "Portswood Guild of Help" - "for timely help to those in need to arrest the drift of so many into the poorhouse."

Fund raising was also still needed at Avenue itself and in 1905 the Church went all out to clear a debt of £6000. A scheme was devised to cover five years, but the debt was not cleared until twenty years had elapsed!

The Reverend A.D. Martin became very unwell in 1905 and was eventually compelled by illness to leave Avenue. An immensely talented man who wrote theology, literary criticism and even an historical novel, he was somewhat of a revolutionary. When Avenue was built it was very modern, a breakaway from Victorian church architecture. Reverend A.D. Martin wanted public worship to show a fresh approach too, a larger vision, to be a reality "in spirit and in truth".

Two very short ministries followed that of A.D. Martin: those of the Reverend E. Startup and the Reverend Meredith Davies. The next minister, the Reverend H.T. Spencer began a sixteen year ministry in June, 1913. There were 277 church members at this time.

On August 4th, 1914, war was declared - what was to become the first World War. The select fashionable church on the Avenue was about to become a centre of practical Christian service where work went on "quietly and usefully till August 1919." Over the war years three hundred or more people "helped" - some for the whole period of the war. The Visitors' Book contained 40,000 signatures but more than ten times that number crossed the threshold. Something like 360,000 letters were written and posted in our Hall - and thousands more were written in the Hall but posted elsewhere. At the end of the War, the Reverend H.T. Spencer and Mrs Harrison and Mrs Leach (in charge of catering) were awarded the O.B.E. in recognition of their work and leadership, and as a token of the nation's gratitude.

The full, amazing story can be read elsewhere, but suffice it to say here that the Avenue Halls, Southampton were to become world famous during the five dreadful years of war that followed. Men and women literally wore themselves out in voluntary service to the troops.

On the first day the Halls were opened 3500 letters were stamped and posted; in a very short time, 70,000 had been handled by the helpers. For nearly three years the only item for which a charge was made was a stamp.



And not only were the soldiers looked after, but also often their wives and sweethearts too, as they came from long distances to say goodbye. At one time on short notice one hundred beds were found in Avenue homes alone.

This, together with a vast amount of catering and practical help, was the work that went on "quietly and usefully till August, 1919." When the war ended and the "Soldiers' Hall" closed its doors, Southampton must have seemed strangely silent. What memories and emotions those who lived through that time must have had! But soon they were looking ahead, regaining energy and making an all-out effort to clear the debt of 1905 and to raise money to redecorate the halls that had once thronged with soldiers, so many of whom were never to return from the trenches of France.

Avenue was involved in the Denominational "Forward Movement" of 1922-1925, raising more than the £1000 requested. Another new development was the church taking possession of its first manse, 6 Rose Road, which had been bequeathed by our first lady Deacon, Mrs. Miriam Williams, along with a generous monetary bequest. The 1920s also saw a very strong Young People's Society and Dramatic Society and a flourishing Sunday School and Bible Class. Missionary work continued. In September, 1928, Miss Gladys Parkhouse left to join her fiancé, the Reverend Martin Shepherd, in the mission field of China, working with the China Inland Mission.

The Reverend Henry Thomas Spencer died on 15th June, 1929, a much loved and respected minister the scholar. Mrs. Spencer lived on in Southampton and reached her hundredth year. The war years had seen much interdenominational contact with the need for an all-out war effort. The Reverend Spencer, after the war, had worked in close association with Canon Neville Lovett (then Rector of St. Mary's and later Bishop of Salisbury) and the Roman Catholic Father O'Mahoney, G.M., on the town's Education Committee and in other ways that enriched the life of Southampton.

November 20th, 1930 saw the induction of the Reverend Stanley Herbert and the start of another epic chapter in the history of the Avenue Congregational Church.

1933 saw the launching of a New Halls Scheme with an estimated cost of £9,600. In May 1933 the old Halls came down. Sunday School met in all available rooms around the church, in the church itself, and also accepted the hospitality of the Christian Scientists, who then owned the property in Alma Road opposite the church's present back gate.

On 26th July, 1933, Mrs. G.M. Spencer laid the foundation stone of the smaller Hall which was to bear her husband's name and Mr. Harold Lankester laid that of the Avenue Hall. On 3rd January, 1934, the *Echo* proclaimed "New Avenue Halls Opened."

While these new developments were happening at the Avenue site, fewer and fewer people were living nearer the centre of town within easy distance of Albion Church. Because of this and various other factors, very sadly the remaining members of that church found themselves compelled to come to the decision to discontinue the work and witness there, and to add their support and strength to one of the other fellowships. In October, 1935, Avenue was very happy to welcome quite a large contingent of friends from what was, of course, the "mother" church.

Avenue at this time was very much alive: the young people's organisations went from strength to strength; Mrs. Herbert founded the Women's Guild; and there was a small but enthusiastic Men's Club.

Stanley Herbert had been appointed Mayor's Chaplain before he left Avenue and he was to come back from the church he had just gone to in Hampstead on March 12th, 1939, to conduct a Civic Service at Avenue. On that day the Choir were first robed - forty strong and "all present and correct". One rather puckish Deacon, on seeing them gowned for the first time, was heard to remark: "like a row of penguins!" Fortunately for us all, the singing and the contribution of the choir over the years in their leading of worship has been much more inspiring and graceful than those words might suggest!

1939 was to be an eventful year in world history and in our corner of the world as well. There was a vacancy at Avenue. Many ministers came to preach and arrangements were made for the Rev. Doctor Marlais Davies to come from Greenock to preach "with a view" on September 3rd, 1939. In spite of a certain "important announcement" expected on the radio at 11.00a.m., there was a large congregation.

Sir William Rowland had, by arrangement with the Church Secretary, remained at home to hear the announcement. At about 11.15a.m. he arrived at the Church, handed Mr. George Caton a slip of paper; he in turn took it to the pulpit. There was silence as Doctor Davies himself read the message: "Our Country is at War." He went on to say, "Let us all pray," and the congregation sang the National Anthem.

Again the door had opened for the people of Avenue - those left at home - to serve their country in the same way as in 1914 - by offering the hospitality of our Halls and premises to men and women of H.M. Forces stationed in, or passing through, Southampton. September, 1939 saw the opening of the second Avenue Soldiers' Hall. And on the Sunday when Doctor Davies commenced his ministry he arrived for morning service to find great activity in the Halls. At midnight on the Saturday, the French survivors of Dunkirk had arrived in Southampton in very large numbers and many made their way to the Avenue Hall. Every available space in both Halls was filled and also the corridors. All the men were in dire need of rest, food and clothing. Tragically, most of those given shelter and sustenance here lost their lives soon after arriving back in France, through the destruction of the troop train in which they were travelling.

During the day and night immediately before "D" Day the Halls, stages, balcony and corridors were again thick with men, lying down to sleep before the "alert" and the march to the Docks and the ships waiting for them "down the river". All could not be given shelter at Avenue; hundreds more were getting what rest they could lying on the pavements outside, and Avenue helpers were in and out supplying them with tea and biscuits. All through the 1939-45 period copies of the "Echo" were supplied free through the courtesy of the "Echo" Office. The authorities required a small charge to be made for refreshments and as there were no overhead expenses, there was a resulting profit. At the end of the War this was used to clear the remaining debt on the New Halls.

Doctor Davies came to Avenue just at the point where his leadership, guidance and sympathy could be a great support in those sad and difficult days. Not only was there the sadness and tragedy of the loss of dear ones on active service overseas, but right on the doorstep were our people losing loved ones, and indeed their own lives, as the result of the prolonged enemy bombing of our land, and this town. The effects of

those years on church life were quickly apparent: the flourishing Sunday afternoon Sunday School, the departments of which filled the whole church, disbanded immediately after War was declared, as did the recently formed morning Junior Church that had met in the delightful Little Chapel (now the James Room). All the Southampton children were evacuated to safer areas; the Young People's Society, Badminton Club and other societies for young people, gradually came to an end as members were called up. The members of the Women's organisations and the Men's Club transferred their activities to the Soldiers' Hall work; Sunday services were held at 11.00a.m. and 3.00p.m. as it proved quite impossible to black-out the church building. Great numbers of people who were in the position to do so moved from Southampton - many never to return.

Many Sotonians remember the dreadful night of December 1st, 1940 - the second night of the Great Blitz on the town. News came through of all the churches in the town "razed to the ground or burning furiously" and one message was that "the Avenue Cong. has had a direct hit." It must have seemed an endless wait until the "All Clear" signal was given and people could make the anxious journeys that would enable them to ascertain how true and how exaggerated the reports were. It must have seemed like some kind of miracle to Avenue people to discover that a bomb had fallen not on their beloved church, but in the garden of No. 2, Westwood Road. Although scarred and with most of the roof tiles missing, the church still stood. They sang the Doxology on the pavement that morning, aware that elsewhere in Southampton there was anguish rather than relief.

During this period Avenue was able twice to extend the hand of friendship and welcome to churches of other denominations who had lost their premises by enemy action. St. Barnabas folk worshipped for a time in our Little Chapel and in the Spencer Hall; and for quite a long period the Unitarian congregation also met for worship in our Little Chapel.

In December 1955 a War Memorial Corner, incorporating a Book of Remembrance of those who lost their lives in the 1939-45 War, would be dedicated. There are also Visitors' Books and other memorabilia that remind us of the thousands of people who passed through the Halls during both world wars.

1950 saw the formation of the Junior Church. Eleven children attended under the leadership of Dora Caton. Congregations increased and over the next eight years numbers on the Junior Church register reached a hundred. In July, 1958 The Sunday School and the Junior Church joined forces to become a "Graded Morning Junior Church."

The Reverend Vine Russell came in 1952, and the following year "Congregational Praise" made its debut. During 1955, the church was re-roofed. The following year the organ was rebuilt.

At this time too, the "Every Person Canvas" was carried out under the slogan "Avenue Advancing". In January 1960 the "Ockenden Venture Committee" was appointed, whereby Avenue accepted the responsibility to educate and maintain two refugee children in England for a period until they became self-supporting. Over £3000 was raised over a period of time.

Looking through copies of the magazines for the early sixties one is truly amazed by the evidence of voluntary service given either individually or collectively in and around the city. Of course, at this period in time there were still comparatively few women who went "out to work", and probably there was more leisure time generally, but one is still impressed by the number of activities voluntarily undertaken. Many were actively concerned in the Hospital Car Service, Hospital "Trolley" Service, work in Hospital Serving Rooms, Canteen work at the Old People's All Day Club, activities connected with the Y.W.C.A. and Y.W.C.A. house-to-house collections for endless "good causes," shopping and other chores for old and housebound people. As a Church too, under the leadership of Rev. Donald James, Avenue became much more inclined to join in with other fellowships than previously.

The Children's Corner devised by Mr and Mrs Straley was dedicated on March 26th, 1961. All the furniture had been made by Mr Straley himself, and this sadly proved to be his memorial, for he died not many months after completing this labour of love.

Donald James became the Congregational Chaplain to Southampton University and regular meetings were held on Avenue premises, services being conducted by the University Congregational and Presbyterian Society.

In 1963 the plaque, a memorial to the late Mr A.E. Bance, for many years Church Treasurer, and recording the names of all Ministers of our Church, was dedicated and the "Christmas Present for Avenue" scheme was launched in December, which year by year (under different names) still helps us to "balance the budget" on December 31st.

The end of an era came with the closing of the Portswood Mission in 1964. This was caused by a combination of circumstances, the most important being a surveyor's report on the old timber frame and galvanised iron building which revealed dangerous deterioration and the fact that it was beyond economic repair. Thus ended a period of some sixty years devoted work by members of Avenue.

Following redecoration in 1967, the church was ready to host the 1968 Meetings of the Council of the Congregational Church of England and Wales.

When Donald James died suddenly, the church was shocked, and felt adrift. But just as change was thrust upon Avenue, moves were afoot in the wider Church that were to have far-reaching consequences. Along with the vast majority of Congregational and Presbyterian churches, Avenue voted to become part of the newly formed "United Reformed Church".

Shortly after, Rev. Ronald Ward came as the first URC minister, proving to be a fine pastor and preacher in a time of new developments and interesting changes. Ronald Ward especially remembers the residential conferences that happened regularly and that were well attended. These often happened at Boscombe and the list of speakers who were invited and who came is indeed impressive: Lord Soper; the then Governor of Winchester Prison; an important intellectual and political figure, John Ferguson - and so on.

One area in which the life of our church was enriched during Ronald Ward's time was in our links with Southampton University. University staff were well represented in the ranks of members, but Ronald Ward maintained strong links with students as well. (Indeed, a number of current church members forged their first connexion with Avenue during time as students in Southampton - and when jobs in this area led them to settle here, those links were renewed or continued.)



Traditionally, there had for a long time been a full-time Anglican and a full-time Catholic chaplain at the University, and Mr Ward had served as a Congregationalist chaplain. He supported and welcomed, however, a new move which resulted in the eventual setting up of a full-time Free Church Chaplaincy - a position first held by Rev. David Lawrence, who is now editor of the URC magazine *Reform*. The Chaplaincy Centre at the university was a hive of activity, where a strong ecumenical feeling existed and exciting discussion sessions and services were held. Perhaps it might be true to say that the move to ecumenism in the wider Church that was to happen over the following years was spearheaded to a large extent by a move among young people in the different branches of the Christian Church throughout the country, meeting and discussing together in just such centres.

Just as the formation of the URC might be seen in certain respects as an ecumenical event - with the individualism stressed by the Congregational church meeting with a slightly different tradition in Presbyterianism, where inter-church visitations and pulpit exchanges were encouraged, so there developed in Ronald Ward's time here more openness in the local District. There was more awareness of other churches and denominations. (Not surprisingly, one of the guests at the Wards' farewell meal was the Roman Catholic priest from Portswood, Patrick Murphy O'Connor, and there were guests from many other churches.

Two babies were baptised within months of each other in 1982 - one by an "outgoing" and the other by the "incoming" minister. The church was in good heart and happy to see again a young minister and his family at the manse.

## *One and one makes one*

A quiet browse through the URC Yearbook informs us that in 1986 a completely "new" church came into existence: the Avenue St. Andrew's Church, Southampton.

According to the Yearbook the church called "Avenue St. Andrew's" was "founded" in 1986, but, as this history of course shows, the story of the two separate churches - St. Andrew's Presbyterian and the Avenue Congregational - is a long and fascinating one. The marriage may have taken place in 1986, but the courtship had been going on for some time before that...Discussions about joining the two churches began in 1984. There was strong feeling that it should be a fully integrated *uniting* of the two churches, rather than a "takeover". There would be a change of name, a new constitution worked out by all, the elderships would somehow have to be united and the various societies in each church would have to be co-ordinated. Of course, District and Provincial approval would be needed. Moves were made to ensure that the ministers of both churches would be fully involved in the process.

One thing that was rapidly agreed on was that, if the joining took place, the books of each church should be united as quickly as possible, so as to rationalise the administration. Perhaps the folk from Avenue and St. Andrew's remembered and decided not to repeat the experience of the United Church, with its years of separate book-keeping!

Eventually a proposal was worked out and brought to each Church Meeting. It was very strongly felt that it was inappropriate for St. Andrew's simply to close its doors and for Avenue to gain a large group of new members by default. There was to be a new, united church with a new name. Both Church Meetings voted for it to happen.

What was the new church to be called? As we all know, Shakespeare wrote, "What's in a name? that which we call a rose/ By any other name would smell as sweet." Nevertheless, it was important that as many people as possible should agree to the new name and feel comfortable with it. Many and various were the suggestions made. Some wanted something completely new like "St. Columba's". Some wanted a name that reflected the past of the two separate churches, so variations like "St. Andrew's in the Avenue" were suggested.

Eventually, after much discussion and pondering, it was agreed that the new church should be called "Avenue St. Andrew's" - a name that preserved the names of the two previous churches yet located the new church geographically.

The membership at St. Andrew's stood at roughly one hundred and fifty, and at Avenue at two hundred and ten when the new church came into being. Inevitably there were a very few members of St. Andrew's who did not join the new church, but the very great majority did. By 1992 the membership stood at about two hundred and seventy.

Various new arrangements and procedures had to be worked out for the new church. Obviously both St. Andrew's and Avenue each had their own treasurer, but soon after the formation of the new church a new, single treasurer took over. The only part of the financial running of the new church that remained in any way individualised was in the area of trusts, some of which had been worded in terms of the individual church for which they had been set up.

Decisions about money, of course, are thankfully not the only kind of decisions that a church has to make. How, then, was this new church to run itself generally? Two differing traditions were involved. Although both of the churches that went to make up Avenue St. Andrew's were United Reformed Churches, each had originally belonged to a different strand of nonconformist worship.

In Avenue St. Andrew's, on its formation, there was an amalgamated Elders' meeting with well over thirty people in it. Eventually this was reduced by an agreed process, so that now, ten years on, there are only fifteen elected and ordained Elders. A new system of pastoral care has evolved, reconciling the two differing traditions - the strong Presbyterian tradition which stresses each Elder's having a list of church members and friends for whose pastoral care s/he is responsible and whom s/he represents at Elders' meeting, and the slightly different Congregational tradition. Currently a system of pastoral care has evolved that seems to draw on the strengths of the two systems: Elders have individual pastoral lists, but there is also a group of "carers" with pastoral lists. Carers have their own special Elder whose job it is to liaise between them and Elders' meeting.

Church societies and organisations would also, of course, have to be

amalgamated or rationalised. In some cases the way forward was fairly obvious. At St. Andrew's the Women's Guild met on Tuesdays and at Avenue on alternate Thursdays. But one or two women had gone to both meetings anyway, before the joining of the two churches, and their eventual integration seemed inevitable.

The traditional uniformed organisations in the separate churches were very different: Avenue had Boy Scouts and St. Andrew's had Boys' Brigade.

Cubs had originally been registered in 1928 in Avenue and as they grew, the then minister had asked for the formation of a Scout Troop in 1934. A dedicated leader came forward and got things going. During the Second World War many boys were evacuated but after the end of the war Cubs, Scouts, Seniors and Rovers flourished at Avenue, with new leaders rising through the ranks and moving to help troops elsewhere. There were happy and busy times and memorable camps. Parents who had been involved when their own children were young, such as Georgie Yarney, continued to support the Scouting movement through fund-raising and other forms of help. Sometimes there were difficulties and setbacks - such as the tragic death of one very experienced young leader while leading a Venture Unit climbing in Dorset. Scouts went on meeting, however, and in 1984 were able to celebrate fifty years of Avenue Scouts and Cubs. Difficulties with numbers and leaders meant that, although the troop continued until after 1992, it had to be disbanded and its affairs wound up during the summer of 1995. St. Andrew's had a very different tradition of Girls' and Boys' Brigading, and this was to strengthen the uniformed organisations in the new church immeasurably. Boys' Brigade had begun at Above Bar Church in 1926, the year that the Boys' Brigade and the Boys' Life Brigade (two similar organisations for boys) joined. In fact, the company that started at Above Bar was one of the first of the "new" organisation in the country. Boys' Brigade had been started by Harold Wilkins and Doug Harwood, who between them achieved a remarkable record of service: Doug Harwood was a BB Captain for fifty two years, and Harold Wilkins only gave up active involvement in BB after the company had moved to St. Andrew's. During the war years the company was kept going single-handedly by Harold Wilkins' wife Dorothy, while the male leaders were away. When Above Bar was bombed in 1940 and its buildings destroyed, the BB company, like the rest of the church, started again at St. Andrew's, where there had been no previous BB presence. St. Andrew's had both Boys' and Girls'

Brigade, with scripture quizzes, regular parades and marching in the city centre streets, often to music provided by the BB band.

The type of uniformed organisations that continued at Avenue St. Andrew's reflect a variety of tradition. Boys' Brigade flourishes, with its "junior" branch, the Anchor Boys, as well as Junior Section and Company Section, catering for boys from five to eighteen, but for girls there are organisations that already existed at Avenue: Brownies and Girl Guides. They even have "waiting lists" of those who want to join!

The new church was fortunate in that it was able to have not one but two ministers: Tony Spring, who had been Avenue minister, and Derek Cole, who had been the St. Andrew's minister. In the years that followed, the congregation was indeed "spoiled for choice" in having the benefit of *two* pastors. Derek Cole, retired in 1990, but was then appointed (for a three year period) as Associate Minister. An "understanding" had been worked out between Tony and Derek that they would probably try to leave at the same time, thus completing a process of integration between the two churches and handing on to the next minister the next new development in the history of nonconformist worship in Southampton - the challenge of the new century and how to prepare for it. As they left for their own new ventures, Derek and Tony must have felt immense satisfaction in what had been achieved so far.

Briefly, what had been achieved? A distinctly happy marriage. Like all good marriages, there were ups and downs and compromises to be made, but each partner was confident enough in themselves to be able to adapt. People were forced to think about little things, like where they sat in church and how that could become something large and important if it led to others feeling unwanted or excluded. People were forced to think about big things, like the new opportunities that could open up to this new, even bigger church. St. Andrew's tradition of city centre involvement might strengthen the witness of the new church in the city as a whole. Avenue's large buildings and tradition of hospitality might provide new opportunities of service. How were the best achievements of both churches to be carried on and strengthened in the new church? As people crowded into the Avenue building for the inaugural service on 5<sup>th</sup> October, 1986 - recognising old friends, looking perhaps shyly and apprehensively at unknown faces - they must have wondered, with some trepidation, where all this was

## *The last ten years*

It is now ten years since the new church came into existence. The couple are still together and still happy with each other... No-one who has been in Avenue St. Andrew's during that time could deny the fact that it has been a happy union. One thing that especially bears witness to this fact is that most of us have long since ceased to think of ourselves as "Avenue" or "St. Andrew's" people. Yes, we remember and are proud of where we have come from, but we are also aware of the benefits and possibilities in being members of the new church. And most of the time most of us have a bit of a struggle to label each other "ex-Avenue" or "ex-St. Andrew's".

What of the achievements of the last ten years? There have been rapid and interesting developments, as well as consolidation of traditionally strong areas such as pastoral work. The ecumenical life of Southampton has changed and grown, although there is still a long way to go. St. Andrew's had always had a much stronger commitment to the city centre Christian witness than Avenue had, and this formed a good basis for continuing links after the formation of the new church. Indeed, there had once been the possibility of St. Andrew's becoming part of a local ecumenical pastorate in St. Mary's. Discussions of ecumenical possibilities took place in the late 1980s, eventually leading to the signing, on January 15th, 1989, of a local Covenant document. The signatories were the clergy from St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church, those from the Anglican City Centre Group, and those from Avenue St. Andrew's in the Nonconformist tradition. A joint statement of belief was made. In addition, they particularly agreed to: *meet together for Christian Unity in prayer and worship;/ give joint public witness on Good Friday to mark the suffering and death of our Lord and Saviour;/ pray and study together;/ find opportunities for joining together in mission in our local community.* They also resolved to keep their progress under review and to renew the Covenant solemnly every three years.

Since that historic move, there has been a renewal of the Covenant, at which point Northam Methodist Church joined. Currently a second review is nearing completion. Slow but steady progress is being made towards more joint endeavours. There have been many more joint



services, and the Good Friday Walk of Witness in the city centre has become an Easter "fixture" in many people's diaries. There have been Ecumenical Rambles, and recently the long established Lent House groups have been run on an ecumenical basis. It is probably fair to say that the number of members of the congregation who *regularly* attend such events is small, but there is a good base for future developments. The beautiful Covenant Candle and the Covenant document displayed in the church serve as permanent reminders of our ongoing commitment.

The late 80s saw another exciting new development in the church, in the planning of which Derek Cole and Tony Spring had been fully involved. When the two churches came together to form Avenue St. Andrew's a series of house groups were held, with the idea of getting people to know each other and sharing ideas about the future. A number of these spontaneously came up with the idea of outreach to the community, perhaps more specifically responding to the current social problem of homelessness. As a result of these suggestions, a meeting was set up with the local Social Services, who agreed wholeheartedly with the necessity for such work, and voiced a very strong need for a venue for some sort of help centre to meet in. Playgroups and children's activities had taken place in both St. Andrew's and Avenue halls in the past. However, in a further development of this kind of outreach, the "Avenue Centre" was opened for two afternoons a week in 1989 "to relieve the poverty, distress and sickness suffered by homeless persons living in hotel accommodation in the City of Southampton". Although there are now links with Southampton City Council, the small administrative team that runs the centre was and is composed of about four Trustees who have to be members of Avenue St. Andrew's. It was, however, felt strongly that the centre should not present itself as a "churchy" place, in the sense of being simply an indirect way of recruiting new members.

Since its opening, there have been many changes: an expansion of staff and more paid staff, an expansion in opening times and a wider catchment. Families with all kinds of problems come along. Some of the families *do* sometimes come to special services in the church, and a few mothers have had their babies baptised here.

Having helped oversee the joining of the two churches and the setting in motion of these new ventures, Tony Spring felt that his time at Avenue St. Andrew's should come to an end after about ten years. Derek Cole had become Associate Minister and was finally to retire from here at the end of 1992. Project 2000 - of which more later - had been set up as the result of a joint impetus from the minister and Elders and other members of the congregation. The setting up of the Avenue Centre had forced us to think more about the use of our buildings and how we were to respond to the challenge of the new century, and this to some extent had prompted that Project 2000 initiative. The one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Avenue Church was the impetus for a new year Advocacy questionnaire and "Every Person Canvas". The anniversary was noted in a weekend of celebration in June, 1992, with a Flower Festival, a "Victorian" Party, and services of Thanksgiving and Praise. Later in that year, there was a marvellous recital in the church by David Hill, the Organist of Winchester Cathedral. But Tony and Derek felt that, having successfully seen through the creation of a new church, and the anniversary of the beginning of worship on the Avenue site, they should leave to the next minister the next, exciting phase in its development.

## *Where next?*

Little did the congregation of Avenue St. Andrew's suspect, as we said a sad farewell to Tony and Helen Spring and their family, that a long, long "interregnum" was to follow. It was felt to be so important to have the right person as our next minister, and much planning and thought went into a pastorate profile and into discovering and expressing our needs and hopes for the future. Throughout the next two and a half years the church was indeed fortunate in having the Rev. Henry Starkey as our Interim Moderator. In Henry we had a caring pastor, a shrewd adviser and an inspiring preacher. There were times when we wished he were at a different point in his career and free to be asked to stay permanently!

During this long period three ministers came to the church to preach "with a view", but for various reasons none of these was asked to stay (or in one case *chose* to stay). It was at times a worrying, unsettling period, with Elders and congregation occasionally wondering just how things would turn out. On the other hand, it was also a time when, out of necessity, many members of the congregation had to do more - and in the process new strengths and new confidence were found. In the area of worship - especially in organising evening services - some undiscovered talents came to light as church organisations took it in turns to plan and "deliver" an evening service. Ronald Ward was a great source of inspiration, as were various visiting ministers who came to help out. Nick Sissons, the University Chaplain, and a minister in the Methodist tradition, was a particularly good friend, giving a memorable series of evening services.

It has not been mentioned elsewhere that when Avenue St. Andrew's came into being, it was fortunate enough to continue to have *two* church secretaries: Leslie Squibb and Jackie Hillier. While one of these worked hard "holding the fort" at home, the other, out and about at a URC Assembly, was doing her best to find the right person to come to the church. Ears were pricked up at Elders' Meeting when she began to tell us about a certain minister from Halifax (originally from Northern Ireland, and married to the "girl next door" from home) who seemed to feel drawn to us and who had asked to know more.

To cut a long story short, the Rev. Cliff Bembridge eventually came to

preach with a view, and the vote at church meeting confirmed our feeling that here at last we had - as we are required to do in such a situation - "discerned the will of God." Cliff was called to the pastorate, his induction taking place in September 1995. How good it was to welcome the members of his "old" congregation to that service. What they said of him served to confirm our confidence in our choice, but also reminded us that our gain was their loss. It is worth noting that the Rev. Cliff Bembridge is, of course, the first minister to be *called* to the new Avenue St. Andrew's Church.

With children at key points in their education, Cliff and Daphne decided that it would be best if part of the family stayed in Halifax while Cliff started his ministry in Southampton. They have had a year of "visiting" and have not been fully re-united until very recently.

We have felt rather guilty at the sacrifices Daphne and the children have had to make in order that we should benefit. It is good to have a minister's young family very much involved with church life again, now that they are in their new home here in Southampton.

What of the way forward, now that there is a "new" minister and we are about to celebrate the tenth anniversary of Avenue St. Andrew's? Next year will see another anniversary: that of the laying of the foundation stone of the church building on the corner of Alma Road and the Avenue. For almost a hundred years God's work has been going on in this place. Many of the developments that are becoming more and more important to us now seem to be very much in keeping with the energetic impulses of the past - the desire to strengthen community service and "reach out" to those around us, the desire to provide a high standard and relevant form of Christian worship and the desire to have the kind of buildings that can best be used to further those aims.

Round about 1990 the church began to think seriously about forward planning and how we should work towards the Millenium. Many church groups felt our facilities needed major changes to meet future needs and a "Project 2000" group got going. During the long period without a minister the whole project was more or less in abeyance, until it was known who would be coming here and what ideas and experience that person might have or be able to contribute. Recently there have been very important new developments in Project 2000, with an offer from the church having been accepted for the purchase of 120

Alma Road - the house adjacent to the church's back gate. The fact that this possibility arose has galvanised into action the church's planning programme. All sorts of additional and important possibilities for the use of space and buildings arise if this key site is integrated into the larger church one. We are currently awaiting the next stage in proceedings with a keen sense of anticipation. Discussions about the financing of Project 2000 have been held.

Other hopeful moves are afoot, not just to do with how to use buildings or raise money. The long vacancy seemed to result in very few additions being made to our membership lists, perhaps because of the sense of uncertainty around. Now there are new members and the heartening probability of more new, *young* members. One of our secretaries, Jackie Hillier, has just started training for non-stipendiary ministry.

She will be able to draw on the many skills she displayed and acquired during the vacancy, when she and Leslie Squibb and Henry Starkey did so much to keep the church in good heart.

At last we have a well equipped Church Office, which has become a hive of activity and a centre from which our minister can operate. Who knows what possibilities lie ahead in that direction? In 1938 Avenue was on the radio, in December 1959 a morning service was televised, in 1961 the congregation appeared on "Songs of Praise", prompting a letter to the minister from an ex-soldier who had enjoyed hospitality at the Avenue Halls in 1916. In 1960 the minister and choir had been on the ITV "Epilogue" programme for a week. Perhaps by the year 2000, or before, we may be sending our church's greetings on the Internet or have a "virtual reality" version of the service to give to those who are not able to get to church...

What will still be the case is the truth that churches, in spite of all that this history may have suggested, are not really to do with buildings. Buildings can crumble, be bombed, re-built, demolished (as the old St. Andrew's one was finally about a year ago) or adapted; what they are used for can be changed. They can even - as we have seen - in some cases be dismantled and put up again on a completely new site!

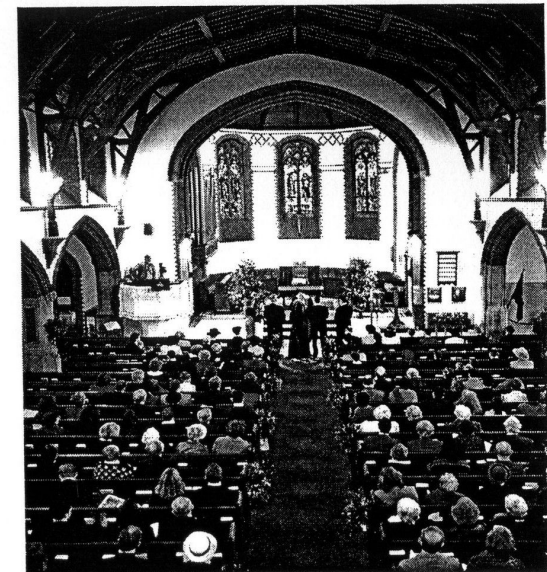
It is a well-worn thought, but one worth repeating, that churches are really to do with people. Part of the Letter of Definition of the United Reformed Church states that our responsibility under God is to "receive

and express the renewing life of the Holy Spirit in each place and in its total fellowship, and there to declare the reconciling and saving power of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ". The key words for us here seem to be "in each place and in [our] total fellowship".

That fellowship, of course, exists both in time and space. Just as we are united with all Christians everywhere in the world, we are also one with all who have gone before us. It is good to think of that as you come through the glass doors of our church on a Sunday. To your left, is the bust of Isaac Watts, which has survived bombings and two major world wars, been pulled out of rubble and given a new home in this building just as it was at St. Andrew's. Perhaps it is a whimsical thought to imagine that he is smiling out at us all.

His words, still resound in this building. One of his best known hymns still rings out over the city every day from the Civic Centre clock: "Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come.." As we face the *next* ten years, they are good words to keep in mind.

A wedding at Avenue St Andrew's





## *Acknowledgements*

*On behalf of us all I would wish to thank Joan McGavin for all the hours of hard work she has put into this booklet, and to all those people who volunteered information to both Joan and myself.*

*The original idea was that Joan should write a booklet that reflected the history of the Avenue building; however, half way through the task it seemed more appropriate to reflect our collective history. My apologies to Joan for any problems this caused her, and that in the interests of space some of the work she had done on the Avenue had to be left out. We plan to produce some copies of the whole Avenue document at a later date.*

*My thanks also to all those who helped with the preparation of the booklet, in particular Janice Curtis and Barbara Marsden in the office, Pam and Steven Humphreys for setting up masters and Jackie Hillier and Margaret Heller for the design work on the cover.*

*Cliff Bembridge*