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MP. 15/3/2022

ABOVE BAR CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

SOUTHAMPTON. ENGLAND

About six o'clock in the evening of Saturday, Nov 30 1940 the sirens sounded in Southampton. Ten minutes later a ring of incendiaries was flaring round the town. Into that ring, the Luftwaffe dropped thousands of incendiary bombs, until the whole of the centre of the town was ablaze, shops, offices, warehouses, homes, churches went up like brushwood.

Among the sixteen churches that were burnt out was Above Bar Congregational Church, the mother church of Congregationalism in the town and district. The Church fellowship had been founded in 1662 by Isaac Watts, father of the hymn-writer, who allowed the congregation to use a house he owned on the site just above the Bar Gate, the northern gate of the old walled town. Nathaniel Robinson, ejected minister of the near-by All Saints Church was the first minister, and here, Isaac Watts, the hymn-writer was baptised, here he gave his heart to Christ, and here his hymns first were sung.

In the nineteenth century the house was demolished and first one church, and then a larger one was built on the site, to accommodate the ever growing congregation. It was this larger church which was ruined by the fires of that terrible night. It seated a thousand people, was well appointed and comfortable, with a fine organ, and a great suite of halls and classrooms. Five thousand pounds had been spent on renovations and alterations only ten years before.

Although the spacious days of the nineteenth century had given place to the anxious days of the twentieth, Above Bar Church still continued to exercise a ministry over a wide field. The thousand seats were seldom filled, but until the war began a third of them were. There was a warm-hearted, vigorous life in the Church, expressed in all sorts of ways in the service of youth, of womenfolk, and of the men of the Forces.

Then, on that fiery night the whole great suite of buildings was laid in ruins. From the oak-beamed roof the fire swept downwards, consuming pews and organ, classrooms and equipment, until everything that could be burnt was burnt.

The next morning Above Bar Street looked like a page from Dante's Inferno. Fires still burned all around, hose pipes coiled like serpents, tram wires hung in festoons. I arrived about half past ten, with just a shred of hope that the building might have been spared. It was still alight. My first concern was for the workers in the Canteen for the troops, and I made a hurried journey to see if they were safe. All was well, and in the

course of the day I was able to discover that there had been no casualties among my people, though some had lost their homes and all their possessions.

But the Church buildings were gone - a shock that brought on a great sense of loss, not simply to those who were wont to worship in Above Bar Church, but to hundreds who regarded it as an historic landmark, and as the mother church of the Free Church life of the town. Imagine for example how a man like Edward Curtis felt. He had been in the church as boy and man for seventy three years. The last fifty three of those years he had been church secretary. Perhaps the shock hastened his death, for in less than a year he died, died with dreams of what the new Above Bar might be like surging through his mind.

The week that followed that terrible week end - for there was another equally severe raid on the Sunday night - was a most anxious one. But we were determined that although we had lost our buildings, that was all that was lost. The immediate task was to gather the remnants of our congregation together for worship, but where could we go? One of the members of our choir had a shop, still untouched, and over it a good sized room. Could we meet there? Permission was gladly given, and on Dec. 8th forty three of us met for worship. I feared lest the floor of the room might give way. There was no room left, not even so much as about the door.

We shall never forget that service. It was hard to keep our emotions in check, but we did everything that we usually do - except enjoy an Anthem. And here let it be said that that had been the only Sunday since the Blitz that we have foregone an Anthem. Our Choir has been magnificent! That morning we sang the Te Deum, thankful for lives spared, and affirming again the faith that is in us. The sermon was about the Living Stones that make up the Church of Christ. We had lost our building - but not our Church.

During the week that followed it occurred to us that perhaps the Friends might be willing to allow us to use their Meeting House for worship. As soon as the approach was made the Friends not only said 'Yes', but arranged to hold their own meeting at a different hour and in a different room in order that we might have the Meeting House itself.

It is a homely little place, seating only a tenth of the number of people who could use our old building, but at that time our congregation could barely fill it. We found it very pleasant to be able to sit near together, we could sing better, we made friends more easily. Folk who had always sat in the gallery discovered people who had always sat downstairs. We began to pluck up heart, the ties that bound us together had stood a great strain and now were tighter and stronger.

Another pleasant thing was that we were joined by the remnant of the congregation from Northam Congregational Church. The buildings in Northam had been blasted to pieces and many of the folk there had had to leave their homes. But about twenty of them now came to worship with us. It was only natural that they should, for Northam Church is a daughter of Above Bar.

One of the things that made us anxious about the future was that when we lost our buildings we lost with them a large slice of our church income. Over half of the money we used to spend for our church we had received from rents. Now, with a depleted congregation, we had to face the necessity of raising the whole of the income we needed ourselves. Of course our overhead charges went down with a bump. We had no great suite of rooms to keep up. Instead we had to meet the very modest sum which the Friends asked from us to pay the extra expense which our use of their building incurred. But even though our overhead charges went down, and other items of expenditure were reduced, we were anxious lest we should find it impossible to finance the working of our church in its greatly reduced form.

An appeal was sent out to all the folk connected with the Church, whether they were still in the town or not. It was responded to magnificently. At the end of 1941 our treasurer was able to report that we had raised by offerings and envelopes not only as much as we had raised in this way in the year before we lost our buildings, but a hundred pounds beside. In addition to this we have given £120 to the L.M.S. and have received promises of £600 for the Reconstruction Fund.

When the financial anxiety had been allayed another, pleasanter anxiety appeared. The Meeting House was proving uncomfortably small. We began to ask, What will happen when the war ends and our people return. We shall not be able to build a church at once, perhaps not for several years, but the Meeting House will be far too small then. The difficulty was solved for us.

Near to the Meeting House is St Andrew's Presbyterian Church. At that time the Presbyterians had no minister – but they had a Church building. We had a minister, but no Church building. Could not some arrangement be made whereby the three congregations (Northam as well as Above Bar and St Andrew's) could worship in the Presbyterian Church under the Congregational minister? Committees were appointed to see what could be done. In a very short time arrangements were made in the most friendly spirit, and at the end of April 1942 we said 'Goodbye' to the Meeting House, at least as far as Sunday worship was concerned.

There were some regrets. The Meeting House was small and snug. It had become a very pleasant home to us. Now we were going to a larger building and to a strange congregation. But we retained the use of the Meeting House for our Week Day activities – the Women's Own, the Women's Guild, the Prayer Service, the Children's Service, since all the halls at St Andrew's had been commandeered.

We have been worshipping with the Presbyterians for six months now. It has been a happy experiment. There were lots of little difficulties, but no big ones. A friendly and sympathetic spirit has enabled us to surmount them all. The Choirs amalgamated under the Above Bar Choirmaster, the organists co-operate, the two hymn books are used, and there is a simple and equitable method of apportioning collections. Presbyterian

ministers often come to take the service. Indeed our hearts are beginning to wonder whether we have not begun an experiment in unity which may prove a sign post to others. We are not making very definite plans for the future yet. We shall be led – that is our conviction, and although we are examining the possibilities of new sites and buildings, we feel that ultimately the decision is in the hands of Him who has wonderfully blessed and guided us during one of the most trying and anxious times in the history of our Church.

We have faced a huge loss. But it is not all loss. From out of our experiences there has come a new unity, a new sense of belonging to each other, and a new hope that one day we can build a Church – whether Presby-Congregational or not – more adequate to the demands of a very needy and bewildered world.

Maxwell Janes
Minister.