

***A BRIEF RECORD
OF
SHIRLEY COMMUNITY
CHURCH***

Adapted from a booklet printed in October 1999 to remember all the way that the Lord has
lead us, and to His Praise and Glory.

From notes taken at the time from the founding Pastor, Geoff Bowater, and his wife
Winnie. Compiled by their Son and present Senior Minister, Anthony J. Bowater.

Revised October 2003 by Jon Heyes

THE ORIGINS OF THE CHURCH

It was before the 'North Birmingham Industrial Crusade', February 1957, in which Geoff played a significant inspirational role that God clearly spoke concerning the desire that he had to be working full time in the ministry. Geoff had been offered the job of Travelling Secretary with the 'Workers Christian Fellowship' after the death of its previous Secretary, Charles Potter, a former Communist.

The direction came through the gifts of the Spirit in the form of a Tongues message by Pat Charles and interpreted by Michael Carr who was later to become her husband. The parts of the message which so impressed Geoff and Winnie were two phrases, the first, which began the message was ***'Do not run ahead of your Lord.....and don't run away'***, which really reiterated a conversation between Winnie and Geoff in which she had said virtually the same thing to him. The interpretation continued.. ***'I have a specific work for you to do, but the time is not yet'***. It was an amazing confirmation of Gods hand upon their lives because they had been seeking specific guidance on the issue of full -time service. This all took place in a public meeting at the Full Gospel Tabernacle, Yardley Wood Road, Billesley, Birmingham, in the autumn of 1955.

Between the years of 1957 and 1963 Geoff continued in Lay ministry, preaching in many Midland Churches and his particular and closest interest, the 'Factory Fellowship' at I.C.I. Kynock Works, Witton, Aston, Birmingham. The lunchtime meetings there had begun in the cab of a lorry, soon there were up to 100 people meeting in a room loaned to them by the Company. Geoff also taught a class of 14 & 15 year old boys at the Full Gospel Tabernacles Sunday School. Many will know Stuart Tilsley, he was in that class, and others may know Derek Hathaway now the Chairman and C.E.O. of the Harrisburg Steel Corporation in America, he too was taught by Geoff in that same Sunday School.

In September 1963 Geoff was approached by Eddie Jackson, also a member of the Tabernacle at that time, who told him that the Lord had said that he should ask Geoff to take responsibility for a Sunday School of twenty four or so children that were meeting in the old Shirley Community Centre, Youth Annexe, on Stratford Road, Shirley. Eddie, who was currently leading that Sunday School, was leaving with his wife, in two weeks time, to live in the South of England and was anxious for someone to care for the children. However, Geoff at this time had no particular inclination or 'Word' from God on the issue.

After spending time in prayer and much thought, Geoff agreed to be 'caretaker' until someone 'more suitable' came along. At this time Geoff's Sunday School class at the Tabernacle was bigger than the one he was being asked to take on.

On visiting the Institute Geoff felt that this venue was, for many reasons, unsuitable, so began looking for somewhere else, having been told that there was no other place that would suit.

The following week, after passing Shirley Institute in Bills Lane, Geoff arranged to meet with Mrs. Dickinson who was then the Secretary to the Committee who looked after bookings. She did not feel that the caretaker to the building would be agreeable to come out, to open and close up on a Sunday, so Geoff offered, and it was agreed, that he would be caretaker for the Warwick Room on Sundays. So it was that two weeks after being asked, the Sunday School began to meet, with Geoff, in the Warwick Room

of Shirley Institute in Bills Lane, Shirley, with twenty-four children and three teenage teachers. Lesley Jennings (now Bowater), Gennie Baker (now Halford) and Rosmarie Stanton, who later went to live in Guernsey).

It was to be the first week in October that year, having placed a small ad in the local press advertising the beginning of an adult evening service that approximately 30 people turned out to wish the 'new' Church well. The meetings proper began the following week with 11 people, and the work continued growing slowly, until by the following Easter (1964) there was 30 people meeting regularly, thus enabling Geoff to launch a Sunday morning service as well, this necessitated him officially laying down his membership at the Tabernacle. Peter Jackson, who was a colleague from the Tabernacle, decided to join Geoff in Shirley with his wife Margaret, and was a valued co leader, and although blind, he was excellent in the ministry of the Word and a very gifted pianist. He left after seven years to work full time with 'Torch Fellowship' (for the blind) and MWE, the Movement for World Evangelism. He was followed as a pianist in the Church by Chris Bowater then Doug Wilkes, both of whom ultimately went into full time Christian Ministry. Chris' ministry is known, but it may not be known that Doug studied by correspondence course and was accepted into the Elim Ministry.

It was Chris, who, round about Easter 1964, having returned enthused from Beach Missions on the East Coast, decided to do some personal evangelising. So arming himself with footballs, rounders bats and an accordion borrowed from a Church member, he walk around Shirley talking to Parents and children, inviting them to an afternoon of fun in the Park. Chris taught them songs, mainly ones he'd written himself and invited them to attend Sunday School in Shirley Institute the following week. 100 children turned up and arrangements were made to teach them.

The adult congregation grew to 70, with a number of students attending. Some were from Solihull studying in Bristol, they obviously could only attend during holidays, and there were students from local schools and colleges too.

One of the Churches greatest needs at this time, was teaching that was fundamental in style and content, this was provided by such men as Harold Fox, who became something of a mentor for Geoff. There was Len Warham from Hope Chapel Kings Heath. There then was Ian Ferguson and Stanley Banks from the Holiness movement and Dr. John Hunter and Charles Price from Capenray. Local ministers included Geoff's old Pastor Mr. T.F. L. Middleton whose ministry was greatly influenced by the doctrine of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

For Geoff and the Church this period of input was invaluable because it brought good grounding in Faith and the congregation was strengthened and encouraged by it.

THE FIRST BAPTISM

What a spectacular occasion this was to be! The like of it had not been seen before and it was full of imagination and excitement for all concerned.

Perhaps the reader will remember that the venue was still at this time a community room in Bills Lane Shirley. This was definitely not a purpose built Church with its own insitu Baptistry tank. Without borrowing another Churches baptistry for the occasion, how does one conduct a baptism service?

Well, you obviously employ the services of the Fire Brigade!!!! Having been approached they agreed to come and erect a portable inflatable water tank in the middle of the floor in the Arden Hall in Shirley Institute. It was necessary to examine the floor structure to ensure that the joists would take the strain of several thousand gallons of water. The tank when erected stood at least 5 feet high and the side walls at least 4 feet wide. What a monster of a tank. By using his skills as a carpenter, Les Prince, one of the earliest members at the Church, designed and built steps that climbed up, over and into the tank. They looked like a pedestrian walkway over a duel carriageway, but they worked perfectly. You can imagine the crowds that were attracted to see the Brigade fill and empty the tank, what a spectacular! But what a blessing to baptise 14 people that day.

THE CURRENT BUILDING

Just a brief eighteen months after the opening service in 1963, a lady, Molly Aston, attended one of the meetings and afterward asked Geoff if he had any vision regarding a permanent site for a purpose built Church. Molly was told that he had employed the gracious services of a Christian Solicitor, Mr. Edward Lovesy, who was sending letters on a regular basis to Solihull Council requesting to be told if there was land available on which to build a Church. For their part, it would be true to say that the Council were not convinced at this time as to the permanence of the fellowship and were wondering if we were a 'flash in the pan' type of splinter group that would be here today and gone tomorrow.

Molly insisted that there was a piece of ground available and offered to show Geoff where it was. She took him that very evening to show him a piece of ground on the corner of Green Lane and Haslucks Green Road, adjacent to the Station, and at that time, in approximately 1965, Green Lane was not much more than a track and neither Mason House or the Mapleborough Estate were built yet. The land proved to be, in Geoff's 'informed' opinion very unsatisfactory, in as much as it was the neighbourhood rubbish tip and its topography meant that it rose 6 feet at one end and dropped 6 feet at the other. Molly however insisted that this very piece of land belonged to God because she, as a teenager, had stood with her Mother and two other ladies and a friend on this piece of ground and had claimed it for God, believing that ***'Wherever the sole of your foot shall tread, shall be yours'***. This 'claiming' was approximately in 1940. Back then, just at the beginning of the war, there had been a Sunday School held in Haslucks Green Road School, and the leaders had wanted there to be an adult work established in the area one day. Geoff's initial reaction was, as he later confessed a little indifferent, believing the ground to be most inappropriate for the building of a Church. consequently gave the matter very little more thought.

Time elapsed, in fact about eight years, bringing us to 1973. The Solicitor received a letter from Solihull Council saying that they only had one piece of ground that was going to become available within the next decade.....it's on the corner of Green Lane and Haslucks Green Road adjacent to Shirley Station! The amazing thing was that Geoff made no connection between this letter and the previous visit to the site eight years earlier. By now Green Lane had become tarmacked and Mapleborough estate was being built, Mason House was also built. Astonished, now remembering the

conversation with Molly, but still believing the ground to be unsuitable, discussions nevertheless took place with Solihull Council and Geoff found out that there was another interested party who wanted to purchase the ground. It was a well-known brewery who wanted to build a Public House. The 'Drawbridge' was eventually built half a mile away. The solicitors however, were duly instructed to confirm with the council that the members of SEC were prepared to purchase the land, and with only £3000 in the bank were told that the council wanted £8000 for the land and a contribution towards the drainage that had already been put in place. Quite amazingly the council agreed on the basis that it was a Church that was to be built, re-offered the land at £2000 plus £700 towards the drainage. It doesn't need a mathematician to work out that there was now only £300 left to build a Church with, and to aggravate matters the council had also stipulated that the building was to be erected within a specified time scale.

Geoff was introduced to Len Trickett, a Christian builder, who took him to view several Churches that he had previously built; this was to get some idea of what was required for Green Lane. Len wanted to attend a prayer meeting at the Institute in order to ascertain the faith and intent of the congregation since there was only £300 in the bank to buy materials with, and no large supporting denomination behind the venture. These meetings convinced Len that they should go ahead and build and having been asked 'was this a sign of your faith Len?' he replied 'No....ours'. What Geoff was ignorant of at this time was that Len's business was on the brink of bankruptcy and this venture was genuinely a step of faith for him as well. So began the task of finding finance. With absolutely no experience whatsoever, no co-lateral, no assets that a bank manager would accept, only an immovable Faith that God was in this venture, Geoff approached a friend at the Tabernacle for advice, who returned some time later to say that he knew of two men who each would loan him £5000 for first purchase of materials. These men at this time did not know who it was that needed the money, only what it was for. As it turned out, it was to be that one of the men was prepared to loan him the full amount, and an interview was arranged with this man, in his office. Today this man is a successful Christian businessman living and working in America. The outcome of this interview was that it was thought the best plan to adopt, was for Geoff to arrange the loan through the bank with this benefactor to stand co-lateral for any monies borrowed. Thus money became available immediately and continued to be available throughout the building of the Church. The final cost of the build, which consisted of a main meeting room, toilet facilities, kitchen, vestry and three classrooms, was £32,500. Faith had become sight. The philosophy of giving at that time was that there were no 'special gifts days' no appeals for money, just an implicit trust that God would provide. This provision was to come through only one offering received on a Sunday morning, and it is to the Praise of God that the debts were completely cleared in three and a half years.

The first meeting to be held in the new building was the first Sunday in September 1974, with the official opening held on the first weekend in October. The place was packed, even out into the foyer and the speaker on that occasion, not surprisingly, was Mr. Harold Fox. It proved to be his last speaking date, because he passed into the presence of his Lord the following Sunday. In the weeks and few years that followed

150 people were meeting regularly for worship. Since those early days, a new sanctuary has been built over the top of one of the classrooms, this cost £54,000 to build, but it too was fully paid for in three and a half years. Geoff 'retired' in 1984 and left Birmingham to live in Lincoln.

THE WORK OF THE LORD

There were many noteworthy events over the years, many happy, some sad, marriages, deaths, births baptisms and many things to bring about Praise to our benevolent God. Sheila Leech, whose testimony is already known to many, came as a teenager in a desperate state of living and destiny, but by Gods grace she now serves God in Ecuador being partly supported from the Church and other friends. Young people who grew up through the Church became Doctors, Dentists, Civil Servants, one became one of the country's leading authorities in Psychiatry, another became one of the Nations leading Youth Workers, yet others became Pastors and Church leaders, others became Youth Leaders in SEC, one is now the Administrator.

It is often asked whether over the years there have been any 'significant' Prophetic Words spoken into the Church. It is understood what the question relates to, and the truth of the situation is that the answer is 'Yes....every time the Word of God is preached'. However, to answer the question in its currently understood form, the answer is still 'Yes'. Two significant Prophecies occurred. The first was before the opening of the new Church building. *"I will make of you an Ark...."* was the theme of the Word and over the years much thought has been given to its understanding. It might at first seem obvious in that the Ark was a safe place for a family and the writer supposes that it could be construed to mean that people would 'fly' to the Church and find a safe place for themselves. So for many years the Prophecy was there 'in the background'. Then in January 1996, the present Senior Minister was seeking to know from God what the 'Mission calling' for the Church was. He read in Isaiah Chapter 61 verses 1 -3 and became convinced that this was indeed the particular ministry that God had laid upon the Church. Over the years many bruised, poor, bound, captive and grieving people had come into the Church and found a place of love, warmth, safety and blessing in God. Many had found release from things which bound them, others healing from bruising. Church House, purchased in 1984 has been used for such and in fact was originally bought for such a purpose. The Church also found that many who had received healing eventually left and became significant members of other Churches. Until the prophecy was fully understood, this often concerned and hurt the congregation and its leaders. The prophecy about the Ark became to be understood more fully in that it was revealed that after being kept safe for a period, those who were preserved in the Ark went throughout the land and populated it. It was as if the Ark was a staging post between tragedy and multiplication elsewhere, between pain and finding a place in God. We are therefore grateful for the opportunities that God has given us to bless others lives and be a means towards their healing and ultimate service for the Lord.

The other significant Prophetic Word was given by the late Pastor John Shelbourne of 'New life Fellowship' Lincoln, who said many years ago that when considering people

for service in the Church '*Always look for the servant Spirit*'. Bearing in mind the former Prophecy, it brings into strong relief the attitude we need to show when dealing with people who have problems, or people who are problems.

THE ON-GOING MINISTRY

In January 2003 the working title of the Church was changed to Shirley Community Church. This was done to reflect the growing involvement in the local community. For the last three years the Church has provided housing for people with learning difficulties. The formal support is provided via the Social Services but people in the Fellowship have befriended and supported the occupants. Some people have become advocates for people with learning disabilities. Other on-going ministries include a thriving Mothers & Toddlers group which meets twice a week, a Youth Club and a children's work Boulder Gang (the origins of which can be traced directly back to Sunshine Corner nearly thirty years ago).

In recent months the Church has begun to host an art group and in the very near future will begin to host meetings by a local Rainbow, Brownies and Girl Guides pack. This will include Sunday meetings in the Church several times a year, an opportunity to further demonstrate the love of the Lord.

The Church has also supported a youth initiative between local Churches called X-Stream. Apart from regular meetings X-Stream are now providing support to both pupils and parents at a local school. In the last few months our Senior Minister has provided Chaplaincy support to the school. He is also involved in local PPG Groups as well as being a member of the local Health Care Trust Ethics committee. The nature of the outreach may have changed but the underlying ethos remains the same, to show the love of the Lord to those who do not know Him and so lead them to the Lord.

FOOTNOTE

This booklet was produced as part of the celebrations for the 40th anniversary of the Church. It is a brief reminder of all that the Lord has done for us over the years. There have been good times and there have been some unpleasant times. However the fact that you are reading this is testimony to the Lord. The fellowship is still continuing, God is still blessing us, we are still praising Him.

In September 2003 Geoff Bowater went to be with the Lord. As a fellowship we want to honour him for his faithfulness to the Lord and his obedience to God. Without that obedience, we would not be celebrating forty years. If Winnie and Geoff left any inheritance to the congregation still worshipping at the Church, it is this "*With our God, nothing is impossible*" and the last comment of this story surely belongs to Geoff, who once said that he would like this emblazoned across the doorway of the Church...

'The World has not yet seen what God can do with a man who will not touch the Glory'