

CHAPTER VII HOW A METHODIST CHURCH WAS FORMED

THE early emigrants were not without the means of grace. A chaplain for the Colony (the Rev. C.B. Howard) had been appointed by King William IV. He arrived with Governor Hindmarsh in the *Buffalo*. The appointment proved to be a wise one. Mr. Howard was a man of catholic spirit. His name appears as one of the contributors to the Pioneer Methodist Chapel in Adelaide, erected in 1837.

The first Episcopalian service was held under a sail. It was borrowed by Mr. Howard from a captain in port. There were no carriers in those days, and how to get the sail transported from the seaboard to the city site was a problem. The zealous minister was equal to the solution. A hand-truck was borrowed. The Colonial Treasurer, Mr. Osmond Gilles, was pressed into service. The cleric and his lay associate dragged the sail in triumph across country, a distance of about seven miles. The first church (Trinity) was a reed-hut.

It will be a revelation to many to learn that amongst the early emigrants was David McLaren, father of the famous preacher of Manchester. Though he did not stay long in the Colony, in more ways than one he has left his mark upon it. A beautiful little village in the hills, and a wharf at Port Adelaide, are named after him. He was sent out as General Manager of the South Australian Company; Samuel Stephens taking charge of the agricultural department.

David McLaren was a Baptist. It will be interesting to know that he was a preacher of considerable ability. A gentleman who was in the Colony a year after its foundation, and who published his reminiscences in England, has put on record the following: - "Mr. McLaren, the Colonial Manager of the South Australian Company, preaches on Sunday to a small but very attentive audience, and it is to be lamented that the very excellent discourses of this gentleman are not widely appreciated. A remarkable earnestness attaches to his style, and his eloquence is sometimes very forcible." He returned to England in 1841.

Thomas Quinton Stow, pioneer Congregational minister, came out in 1837. The first Congregational service was conducted in a tent. Governor Hindmarsh attended, and was accommodated with a seat on a box. The pioneer Congregational church consisted of gum-posts for uprights, and old sailcloth canvas for walls. It was thatched with reeds. Mr. Stow helped to build it with his own hands, felling timber and cutting down reeds. One of the early colonists expressed surprise that a man of Mr. Stow's talents should ever have left the Old Country. But the good man was more than satisfied. Writing to the Missionary Committee, who sent him out, he said: "What a land is this to which you have sent me! The loveliness and glory of its plains and woods, its glens and hills! But of these you will hear more from others. I cannot, however, leave it out of my estimate of God's goodness to me." He died in 1862. A fine church has been erected to his memory.

The first minister of the United Presbyterian Church was the Rev. Ralph Drummond. He came out in 1839.

But it is of the Methodist Church that we have more especially to speak. Its history is a stirring one, and is coeval with that of the Colony.

In the early history of the Methodist Church of South Australia three names will ever prominently stand out: Edward Stephens, John C. White, and Jacob Abbott.

The latter is still alive – a grand old Christian man, with clear intellect, aged eighty-five years. He lives at Glenelg (Holdfast Bay), and to him the writer is indebted for many historical facts. "Pastor Jacob Abbott" (as he has been known for many years) came by the *John Renwick*, which arrived in the early part of 1837. About sixty-five years ago he was consciously "born again" in the Wellingborough Circuit, England.

His name was put on the local preachers' plan, and shortly after he left for the newly-proclaimed Colony of South Australia. For more than half a century he has been preaching the gospel. During 1897, though in his eighty-fourth year, he preached fifty-seven times, besides taking part in week-evening work and attending committee meetings of benevolent institutions. Yes, a grand old man is Jacob Abbott, as his face will show.

John C. White was born in 1813. Was accepted by the British Conference as a candidate for the ministry. His health failed, and he had to give up all thought of entering the itinerant work. Before leaving England for the new Colony of South Australia he was a local preacher in the City Road Circuit. Just before leaving London for these shores he supplied an appointment for one of the City Road ministers in the Morning Chapel. In the Methodist roll of honour for South Australia he will always occupy the foremost place. He conducted the first Methodist service on the mainland of this Colony, and until the arrival of an ordained minister, as we shall see, he was the first superintendent of a South Australian Circuit.

For more than sixty years spent in these Colonies he has been an influential worker in the Methodist Church. He now lives in New South Wales, aged eighty-six.

Edward Stephens' history (so far as it is available) we have already given. He came out in the same vessel as John C. White.

In the letter from which we have previously quoted, written by Mrs. Stephens' niece, reference is made to the service held at Holdfast Bay in Mr. Stephens' tent. By the second Sunday after his arrival (about 19th January 1837) Mr. Stephens had a large tent erected. In this Mr. John White was invited to preach. Whilst he has the honour of preaching the first Methodist sermon on the mainland, to Edward Stephens belongs the distinction of providing the first place of worship.

There is another name that South Australian Methodists must ever gratefully remember – the name of Samuel East. At this distance of time the writer has not been able to glean much respecting him. He arrived by the *Africane* on 2nd November 1836. It is more than probable that he was the first Methodist local preacher to reach these shores. With his wife, two sons, and four daughters, he landed at Nepean Bay, Kangaroo Island. Here he preached the first Methodist sermon within the boundaries of the new Colony. Through the kindness of Samuel Stephens, the service was conducted in the South Australian Company's store.

The services at Kangaroo Island and Holdfast Bay were temporary. The settlers were merely located there till the site for the city had been fixed and the land surveyed. When this was done, as we have seen, there was a general exodus to the city site.

In Methodism there is a freemasonry of a very decided type. We fear that it is not so ardent as it once was. To a very large extent it has been called into existence and developed by our distinctive means of grace. The prayer-meeting, class-meeting, and love-feast have a tendency to create a family feeling. They give birth to spiritual affinities of a very powerful type. The world over, Methodist people feel that they are "members one of another." Heart is drawn to heart. Mutual sympathy is felt. It finds expression in the words of Charles Wesley –

Help us to help each other, Lord,
Each other's cross to bear;
Let each his friendly aid afford,
And feel his brother's care.

It was so with our pioneer Methodists in this Colony. Edward Stephens migrated from the shores of Holdfast Bay to the banks of the Torrens. A wooden house was speedily erected. It stood near the present House of Parliament. In the kitchen of this house the pioneer Methodists met for conversation and prayer. They felt that they must be doing something. The harvest of emigrants was a growing one, and the labourers were few. Open-air services were begun. They were held not far from the

banks of the Torrens, near a series of huts termed "Buffalo Row." The men who conducted these services ought to be held in perpetual remembrance. They were: John C. White, from London, North; Jacob Abbott, from Wellingborough; William Pearce, from London, North; and William Croxall. In addition to these open-air services, service was also held in a small wooden hut. The little band of worshippers then moved to a more convenient room of which they had the loan. Here they were assisted by David McLaren. One one occasion, when Mr. McLaren came to preach, he was accompanied by His Excellency Governor Hindmarsh. The Methodist worshippers were somewhat surprised to see the preacher sit down to deliver his address.

In April 1837 the pioneer Methodists took a further step. They were without a minister, but thought they ought to form a Church. On two successive Sundays a notice was "given out" that all who desired to unite in Church fellowship, and who had tickets of removal from the Old Country, should meet in the hut of Mr. John White, on Monday evening, the 11th of May. The auspicious evening came. Fifteen persons were present: Edward Stephens, John White, Jacob Abbott, Edward Burgess, Joseph Middleton, Thomas Abbott, Isaac Jacobs, William Pearce, and William Croxall; Mesdames Stephens, White, Burgess, Pearce, Middleton, and Jacobs. These unanimously decided to form themselves into a Wesleyan Methodist Society. Two classes were formed. Brother Jacob Abbott was appointed leader of the men's class, and Brother John White was elected to take charge of the women's. The only survivors of the band who met sixty-one years ago to form a Methodist Society are Jacob Abbott and John C. White.

In more senses than one, "distance lends enchantment to the scene!" At this far-off date there is something delightfully charming about this inaugural meeting. It was the birthday of the Methodist Society in South Australia. A few emigrants had left the Old Country. They had traveled sixteen thousand miles over the mighty deep. Anchor had been cast on the shores of a practically unknown land – a land the principal occupants of which were blackfellows, dingoes, wombats, emus, and kangaroos. They were carried ashore, or waded through the water to the beach. The vessel that carried them – the last tangible link, as it were, that connected them with the Old Land – sailed away. They fixed up tents or made booths of rushes and boughs; in these they dwelt for a time by the seashore. Another migration took place. Their tents were taken down; their bough – booths were deserted; with household utensils in their hands, and with little ones toddling by their sides, they made their way through the grass and gum-trees to the site of a city that was to be. Again there was a temporary encampment. They "huted" themselves on the banks of the Torrens, where, since creation, no white man had ever dwelt. Civilisation, so far as material surroundings are concerned, was in a state of chaos. Pork casks, packing cases, trunks, and boxes had to serve as chairs and tables. In the midst of surroundings like these, with no President of the Conference, Chairman of District, or Travelling Preacher, a small band of Methodists met together in a hut to form a Church. What vast results sometimes grow out of small beginnings! Little did these Methodist emigrants know how speedily they would realize the sentiment of one of their hymns-

When He first the work begun,
Small and feeble was His day;
Now the Word doth swiftly run,
Now it wins its widening way.
More and more it spreads and grows,
Ever mighty to prevail;
Sin's strongholds it now o'erthrows,
Shakes the trembling gates of hell.

The first class-meeting in South Australia was held on Friday evening, 15th May 1837. The leader was Jacob Abbott, and the place of meeting a hut occupied by Isaac

Jacobs, on the banks of the Torrens. At this meeting Edward Stephens was present, and all the members, save John White, leader of the women's class. This class he met the following Sunday afternoon, at the house of Edward Stephens.

The pioneer band set to work in earnest. A plan was made out. The leading preachers were John White and Jacob Abbott. They did not labour in vain. The attendance at the service grew. Souls were saved and added to the Church. This was an additional inspiration.

Adelaide was now laid out, and the town lots were available. The pioneer Methodist felt the need for a more commodious place of worship. The room in which they were worshipping became too small. "And the sons of the prophets said unto Elisha, Behold, now, the place where we dwell... is too strait for us. Let us go, we pray thee, unto Jordan, and take thence every man a beam, and let us make a place there, where we may dwell." The monetary difficulty was evidently not so great to the "sons of the prophets" as it was to the early South Australian Methodists. However, having put their hands to the plough, they were not the men and women to turn back. They had made up their minds to build a chapel that would hold about one hundred and twenty-five persons. A piece of ground was secured in Hindley Street, near the place where the Eagle tavern now stands. A subscription list was drawn up, and Edward Stephens appointed treasurer. Not far from the site of the chapel there was an abundance of limestone. The stone was raised, and carried to the building site. The foundation was laid by Mrs. Edward Stephens. When the walls were the required height there was a delay. The carpenter who had undertaken the contract for the roof, could not get the timber. The pioneer Methodists were equal to the occasion. They stretched a tarpaulin from wall to wall. In this rough but, we think, cherished building they sang their hymns "For Believers Fighting" and "For Believers Rejoicing." Here earnest prayer was offered, and the gospel gave no uncertain sound. The first preacher to conduct service in the embryo chapel was John White. The Methodists have the credit of erecting the first stone House of God in the city. From a book published in England about 1838 by one of the early emigrants we take the following: - "There is also a Methodist chapel, built by Edward Stephens, the manager of the South Australian Company's Bank, but, as yet, no regular minister has been appointed. Mr. McLaren preaches in it in the morning, and it is occupied by the Methodists in the afternoon and evening."

When a small garrison is holding the fort against numerous foes, with what joy they hail the advent of reinforcements! In October 1837 such was the joy of our early Methodists. During that month three emigrant vessels arrived – the *Lady Emma*, *Katherine Stewart Forbes*, and the *Hartley*. They brought a large contingent of settlers, amongst whom were several Methodists who had credentials from the Old Country. These vessels also brought the tidings of the death of William IV. And the accession of Queen Victoria.

We can imagine with what heartiness John White and Jacob Abbott would give to the incoming Methodists the right hand of fellowship. Edward Stephens and his godly wife would not be lacking in Christian courtesy.

The first Sunday after dropping anchor, what a strange experience theirs must have been! We see them meeting in the embryo chapel on the site of a city that was yet to be built. No doubt some of them had come from the large English towns, and from the cathedral churches of Methodism. Here they saw a few buildings of a very primitive type. They were dotted about on a plain. Here and there in the city bounds were large gum-trees and numerous stumps. There were no macadamized roads or nicely-formed paths. The little chapel was in keeping with the city – roofless and windowless, with a tarpaulin stretched over the top from wall to wall. But

Jesus, where'er They people meet,
There they behold Thy mercy-seat;

Where'er they seek Thee Thou art found,
And every place is holy ground.

How these Methodists would sing! The "pioneer band," because their number had been increased; the "new arrivals," for the mercies of a sixteen thousand miles' voyage. Instinctively their minds would revert to the Old Land. They would think of the time – gone for ever – when in London, Manchester, Sheffield, Camborne, or Hull, they went up with the multitude to the House of God, with "the voice of joy and praise." The old pew and pulpit would rise before them, and loved faces they would never again see. We do not know what text the preacher took, but a very appropriate one would have been: "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God; for I shall yet praise Him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God."

Among the Methodists who arrived in October 1837 were some local preachers: Messrs. Micham, Lillecrapp, Sparshoot, and Sleep. Later on, the *Royal Admiral* brought two more workers- Messrs. Breeze and Turner – and an accession to the membership of the infant Church.

In March 1838 the windowless apertures and tarpaulin roof were things of the past. The little chapel was finished. What a glad day that must have been! As they faced their difficulties the pioneer Methodists could say: "Who art thou, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain." And it was so. They brought forth the "head-stone thereof with shoutings, crying, "Grace, grace be unto it!" At the dedication service there was a "feast of fat things." John White preached in the morning from Psalm XXVI. 8: "I have loved the habitation of Thy house, and the place where Thine honour dwelleth." In the afternoon William Mincham conducted the service. His text was Haggai I. 7: "Thus saith the Lord of hosts, Consider your ways." An eloquent sermon was preached in the evening by the Rev. Thomas Q. Stow (Congregationalist). The subject was, "Redemption interesting to the Angels"; and the text, 1 Pet. I. 12: "Which things the angels desire to look into."

The first printed plan was issued in 1838. No traveling preacher had yet reached the new Colony, so John White was elected Superintendent. There were two preaching places: the chapel in Hindley Street, and "Forbes' Square," – this was a temporary settlement on the West Parklands. It lay between where the Catholic Cementary and the Observatory now stand. A Sunday school had also been established. There were five accredited local preachers, and three brethren on trial. One of the local preachers was deputed to give special attention to the blacks. But this was not all. Said one of the pioneer Methodists: "The services had to be kept up, prior to the advent of our pastor, by persons who had to work hard for the maintenance of their households; and it was considered a bounden duty to visit the sick and poor, who, compared with the population, were not a few." How this duty was attended to, the following will show: - An elderly Methodist, with wife and family (some of whom were married), came from Cornwall. One of the married daughters was ill of consumption. A request came to Jacob Abbott that he would visit her. "I went," he says, "and when I beheld her, a feeling of sadness and awe thrilled my very being. A beautiful yet sorrowful face, giving expression to anguish of spirit, was before me. In conversation it came out that, prior to her marriage, she had known Christ, and had, with her parents, been connected with the Wesleyan Connexion. Her husband made no profession, and she soon became careless and worldly, neglecting prayer, and losing first-love. Now, death approaching, remorse and dread filled her soul. Counsel given, prayer offered, she exclaimed, amid tears –

'Oh, how could I my Saviour leave,
So soon unfaithful prove?
How could I Thy good Spirit grieve,
Or sin against Thy love?'

More prayer followed, and I left her with a gleam of hope. On visiting her again, in a day or two, I found there were some doubts lingering in her mind on account of what she called her back-sliding. After assuring her that God had said, 'I will heal their backslidings; I will love them freely,' and speaking cheerily of the wonderful love of our Heavenly Father, and of the fullness and freeness of the grace that is in Christ Jesus, she burst into tears and said, 'Now I see. Now I do believe.' Her heart was filled with peace and joy in believing. After a few days of acute suffering, borne with much patience and holy confidence, she died, triumphing in redeeming love." This is the Christlike work that the pioneer Methodists, in the absence of a pastor, did. The record is beautiful.

From the printed plan we gather that these early Methodists were true to old traditions, - they worked upon old lines. Provision was made for a love-feast and watch-night service. Not the service with which we are familiar on the last evening of the old year, but a monthly meeting, established by John Wesley. It usually began with a sermon in the evening, and continued, by singing, prayer, and exhortation, until just after midnight.

The honour of conducting the first love-feast in South Australia belongs to Jacob Abbott. It was held on 3rd June 1838. A sermon was preached from John SV. 26: "But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, He shall testify of Me." A good time followed. Among the early Methodists were a few warm-hearted members who had come from Gloucester, Cornwall, and the Isle of Wight. At this love-feast several testified, with tearful eyes and grateful hearts, of peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Soon after, a glorious revival took place.

The names of the South Australian pioneer Methodists, and the work they did for God and the Methodist Church, deserve to be put on perpetual record. With others, they had come to colonise a new and unknown land. The circumstances in which they were placed were peculiar, - it was a transition indeed. They might have been so absorbed in the material as to lose sight of the spiritual. An Episcopal and Congregational minister had reached the new land. These had formed Churches. The pioneer Methodists might have thrown in their lot with them. But no: "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning." In the absence of ordained minister, quarterly meeting, district meeting, or Conference, they began to preach, formed a society, built a chapel, established a Sunday school, made out a plan, visited the sick, and deputed one of their number to give special attention to the blacks. But they sadly needed - as Jacob Abbott said sixty years later - "a pastor to lead and to guide." They applied directly and indirectly to the Missionary Committee, but no answer came. The Society was now in troubled waters. John White desired to be relieved of his responsibility. What could the members of the little Church do? They made their position a matter of earnest prayer. How that prayer was answered we must reserve for the next chapter.