

Articles by John E. Frost

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Brook Street Chapel - Tottenham - London

‘In surroundings as nearly perfect as wealth and refinement could make them, a number of Christian families live in the pleasant suburb, as it was in those days. Rooms, beautifully furnished, opened on lawns shaded by spreading cedars. Friends from far and near gathered around the ample board, where quiet talk flowed freely on the deepest interests of the kingdom of God. And best of all, the love of Christ possessed and permeated everything.’

In these words, James Hudson Taylor, missionary and founder of the China Inland Mission, described the believers at Tottenham over one hundred years ago. In the early 1800’s, Tottenham, to the north of London, was a pleasant country town of about 8000 inhabitants. Many farms, nurseries and smallholdings were dotted across the landscape, and the rich and famous had their country homes in this rural setting to escape the noise and squalor of London.

In 1838, John Eliot Howard, the distinguished chemist, and fellow of the Royal Society, commenced a regular gospel meeting in the area. Some time earlier, through his personal study of the Scriptures, his eyes were opened to the great truth of justification by faith alone. He renounced all ties with the Religious Society of Friends, of which many of his family were members, and he and his wife Maria were baptized by immersion, and for the first time broke bread at the local Baptist Chapel. In November of the same year, a small group (eight in number) of like-minded believers, met for ‘worship and

the breaking of bread' in a small cottage. This marked the beginning of assembly work, witness and testimony in the area.

Under the mighty hand of God, souls were saved, whilst others, seeing for themselves from their personal study of the Scriptures the errors of the established church, left other groups to join the now growing company of believers. Within just three years the assembly numbered 88, no longer meeting in the small room of a cottage, but in the Brook Street Meeting House, (Brook Street Chapel), which was erected and opened by John Eliot Howard and his older brother Robert in June 1839.

In the newly erected Brook Street Meeting House a baptistry was constructed under the floor, and many there were who publically testified to their faith by passing through the waters of baptism. Dr. Barnardo, founder of the famous orphanages, James Wright, son-in-law to George Muller, and hundreds of other believers, well known and unknown, have down through the years passed through the waters of baptism at Tottenham. In those early days, many well known and highly esteemed brethren gave help to the growing assembly, including J. N. Darby, George Muller, John Morley, J. G. Penstone, and G. Soltau, to name but a few.

When the tragic split took place amongst the growing number of assemblies, the brethren at Tottenham felt it necessary to draw up the Tottenham Statement of 1849, which clearly set forth their position in regard to those whom they could receive. The Tottenham Statement, or Memorandum, is still displayed and adhered to today.

From those very early days, the work of mission played an important part in the life of the assembly. There was

long and lasting fellowship with James Hudson Taylor, as China was opened up to the gospel. In 1852, A. N. Groves spoke of the work of God in India and pleaded prayer for the vast sub-continent. James Von Summer, and his wife were in fellowship at Tottenham for a number of years, during which time he produced the Missionary Reporter, which was to be one of the forerunners of the Echoes of Service missionary magazine.

This was the commencement of an interest in the Lord's work and servants which has continued to the present day, resulting in the commendation of many brethren and sisters who have gone forth to many parts of the world with the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thus a work for God was commenced in North London and by the grace of God continues to the present day. During the early to mid-1900's the assembly prospered with both spiritual and numerical growth. Just prior to the Second World War there were about 130 in assembly fellowship, with a Sunday School numbering over 350 children. Great efforts were made to reach young and old alike with the gospel. Evangelistic campaigns both in tents and in the hall were held, as well as regular gospel preaching indoors and out. In the years immediately following the war, numbers in fellowship began to decline for many and varied reasons, and tragically that decline has continued.

The area has vastly altered, from a quiet rural area to a busy, industrial and cosmopolitan one, in fact one of the most deprived areas of London. The farms and smallholdings have long since gone, together with the wealth and refinement of those early days, but a needy

population still remains. This includes men, women and children from over 150 different ethnic backgrounds, with their diversity of language, culture and spiritual needs. In recent years many 'groups', mainly Afro-Caribbean have sprung up in the area, some of them preaching 'another gospel'. More recently 'The Temple', advertised across London, has opened for Hedonistic worship!

Today the assembly is very weak, but by the grace of God a testimony is still maintained. Gospel preaching, distribution of literature, work among young and old alike continues. Over the years efforts have been made to reach some of the ethnic groups with the gospel. For example, a work amongst Kurdish boys, Bible studies in the home with Ethiopian refugees, and pioneer work on two notorious housing estates have reached many with the message of God's love.

With the demise of so many London assemblies over the past forty to fifty years, how important it is to strengthen the things that remain. Prayer is valued, not only for numerical, but also spiritual growth within the assembly and the furtherance of the gospel in this most deprived and needy area of North London.

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