

INTRODUCTION

In 1998, when writing a history of the traditions which have come together in the United Reformed Church, David Cornick entitled it ‘*Under God’s Good Hand*’. It was an allusion to some words of Ezra, a Jewish scribe and priest half a millennium before Jesus.

Ezra led the Israelite captives back from the Babylonian exile to Jerusalem, to rebuild the temple and re-establish worship there. He believed that he was able to do so ‘according to the good hand of his God upon him.’ 7.9

We listen now to two of our elders narrating something of how God’s good hand has brought us to this moment, and of where we are sensing that hand might be pointing us now.

THE GOOD HAND OF GOD HAS GUIDED

Owen Saxton

the story so far

With the reopening of these buildings we celebrate many steps taken over many years under God’s guidance.

Firstly, comings together... *Locally*: the coming together as Downing Place URC of Emmanuel and St Columba’s churches, within the URC, with Cherry Hinton Rd URC which rejoined Emmanuel 12 years ago. *Nationally*, the union of the Presbyterian and Congregational churches in England in 1972, joined by the Churches of Christ in 1981 and the Cong Ch of Scotland in 2000. *Societally*, the return to our universities of nonconformists welcomed back in 1870 by the Universities Test Act after two hundred years of being largely excluded from public life.

Secondly, the building, and repurposing of buildings... The construction in 1687 of a chapel soon known as the Great Meeting on a site adjoining this one by a group of Cambridge dissenters. The move in 1874 to an imposing new building facing Pembroke College on Trumpington Street, where Emmanuel Congregational Church could add to its community those newly able to come to the university. The erection in 1891 by the then recently formed St Columba’s Presbyterian Church of the buildings in which we are now worshipping. And of course, the recent sale of Emmanuel to Pembroke College – allowing *Pembroke* to create new facilities on the other side of Trumpington St, and allowing *us* to transform *these* buildings we rededicate today so as better to serve *our* future needs, and those of the community around us. But we can *also* remember how the eventual sale of the Great Meeting site to Newnham College contributed to the new Victoria Rd URC; and the establishment of three missions to support different areas of the city: in York St (now the York St Medical Practice), at Castle End (now the home of the Cambridge Chinese Christian Church) and on the Rock Estate (later Cherryhinton Rd URC).

Thirdly, achieving freedom of conscience under God... Both uniting churches were born from historic struggles to form churches in which the members are free to worship and serve God in the way that seems right to their own conscience and understanding. Their members were barred from public life for centuries, and actively persecuted at times (Emmanuel’s windows commemorate two ministers hanged as dissenters under the first Queen Elizabeth; and the Great Meeting’s buildings were attacked by the public several times before 1800); but they came to be accepted in the *end*, and now have warm links with other churches, established *and* free, while our training college, Westminster, is a central part of the Cambridge Theological Federation.

Freedom allowed both churches to have high profiles nationally: exceptional ministers led committed congregations from the city and university (both students and staff) that wrestled with the working out of what we feel called to – arguing sometimes about great matters (should Christians be pacifists during the first World War?) sometimes about small (should they join the minister in the words of the Lord’s Prayer?), but always found what united them stronger than anything that divided. The Congregational Union was able to ordain women as ministers from 1917, the first mainstream denomination to do so. Members took with them as they left what they learned here – some becoming missionaries to other countries – from which we now welcome ministers and trainees back.

6th November 2021: Worship for the re-dedication of Downing Place Church

And both churches have tried to show good stewardship – open to everyone, providing facilities to the city, helping people in need, and supporting fairer relations between the countries of the world. They have been fortunate in being able to give generously to outside organisations.

The first meeting of the Elders of the newly formed Downing Place URC, in June 2018 discussed help for other churches in the area, and what we should be doing in the city centre. We have tried to redesign these buildings so that they *may* be of wide service; we are now turning to how they *are* to be used.

AND STILL POINTS AHEAD

Helen Christy

what next

Where is the good hand of God guiding Downing Place?

Downing Place is a gathered group of people.

Do people feel listened to?

Do people walking along the streets of Cambridge know they can come and be welcomed, valued, respected and heard?

For a few days each week, hot drinks, cake and a listening ear will be available to people who walk through the door.

Downing Place is geographically right in the centre of Cambridge.

Will agencies, churches and charities meet here to inspire and coordinate their work more effectively?

How would they like Downing Place to be a part of the services offered to people in the centre of Cambridge?

Quarterly lunches are going to be held at Downing Place for a diverse range of agencies to meet and plan together.

Downing Place is a beautiful building.

Do people whose lives are challenging or lonely, find a sense of hospitality and peace here?

Do they feel that their life matters as much as anybody else's?

Can they have access to practical advice and support here at Downing Place?

Counselling and family support services are hoping to provide services here.

Downing Place has a wonderful space for worship.

Does faith have space to breathe here, with questions and curiosity?

Do all life experiences matter, feel supported and listened to in worship and prayer?

Downing Place can offer opportunities to explore and experience drama, music, art and gardening.

Do people come here and find their creativity, find a greater understanding of themselves and a sense of their spirituality?

Downing Place cares passionately about our world – for its sustainability

Do younger people feel supported to make changes to these vital issues for their future?

Downing Place already accommodates affordable group counselling, care for the night life community, a safe haven and Open table for the LGBT community, a venue for students to make sandwiches for people on the street, a group who knit products for people all over the world, a monthly group for sharing lunch together, weekly concerts and much more.

Do the people of Cambridge feel listened and responded to and part of Downing Place?

Is the good hand of God guiding us and showing us the way?

It would be a wonderful vision to say 'yes', again and again, to these questions.