

CHAPTER 16

Wider grouping

Soon after the arrival of Mrs. Payne, plans began to circulate about a proposed wider grouping of the churches in the area, and in due course a 'Royston Group' was formed, consisting of the churches in Great Chishill, Bassingbourn, Buntingford, Melbourn, Croydon, Litlington, Great Chishill, Barley, Fowlmere, Thriplow, and Royston.

This Group would be served by three ministers (Revs. J.K. Antrobus, J.R. Palmer and C.O.M. Payne), but whilst all would have a general concern for the whole Group, each would exercise particular care for a small number. With varying ministers, this pattern continued until 1983.

A group Diaconate was formed, consisting of all church secretaries and treasurers together with the ministers, and it was agreed that financial and other provision for the ministers according to the national scale would be a concern for the whole Group.

In particular there was a Manse Properties Committee on which Great Chishill was represented. The issue of manses, some let and others occupied by Group Ministers, proved a difficult problem for the financing of the Group.

A constitution was agreed by the churches which was considered sufficient for present needs, but open-ended for further amendment 'according to the mind of Christ'.

Proposals now began to circulate for a nationwide union between Congregationalists and the English Presbyterians. These were discussed at the May Assembly in 1969, with a view to a decision being taken the following year. Difficulties mainly centred upon the

concept of ordained Elders, and the role of the Church Meeting.

The matter was reported upon many times at Great Chishill, but in the event, the national decision was not taken until the May assembly in 1971, at which representatives from Great Chishill were present.

A special Church Meeting was held on 13th October 1971, at which all 21 members present passed a resolution in favour of joining the Union, to form the 'United Reformed Church'. Support for the new body grew and in due course serving deacons were ordained Elders.

The church was represented at the First Assembly of the new URC in 1972. In February 1973, a visit was paid by Rev. Arthur MacArthur, a leading Presbyterian in the time before the Union, and third Moderator of the URC.

Throughout its history, Great Chishill church had always taken a considerable interest in overseas missionary work, and missionaries home on furlough often addressed meetings there. For the first time, one of the congregation (Miss Mary Palmer) offered herself for service with the London Missionary Society and was sent as nurse to Zambia for a two-year period from June 1972.

More and more, Mrs. Payne began to find the amount of travelling within the Group a strain upon her health, and in late-1973 she accepted a call to Marston in Oxfordshire, where she was inducted on 8th December.

For a time, the Group ministers undertook the care of Great Chishill and Barley, and in February 1975 it was planned by the new URC Cambridge District Council that the Group should have only two full-time and one part-time minister.

Accordingly, Rev.C.L.Taylor joined the Group as from 1st July 1975, to conduct certain Services and give pastoral oversight to Great Chishill and Barley, including Weddings and Funerals. He later agreed to conduct the Morning Service at Great Chishill on two Sundays per month and one Afternoon Service at Barley.

When Rev.J.K.Antrobus retired in April 1979, Mr. Taylor agreed to preside at Elders and Church Meetings, but in June 1980, Mr. Taylor retired also.

The team of ministers, which had now reduced to one (Rev.W.Hurley), was augmented by Rev. Gillian Jones who had graduated with training at Mansfield College in 1979 and now accepted oversight of Royston, Great Chishill and Barley Churches. Miss Jones lived in the manse at Royston.

Miss Jones was kind and a good preacher, but she often felt that being a woman put her somewhat in a minority amongst many male Elders, and she felt very conscious of not always being in a position to present her ideas strongly.

There ensued a very difficult period in the life of Royston Church, which eventually led to its closure, and this caused such a strain upon Miss Jones that she resigned from the ministry.