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'THE ROYAL COMMISSION OF KING JESUS'

General Baptist Expansion and Growth 1640-1660

By the mid 1640s a number of General Baptist congregations in the capital were beginning to develop a clear sense of identity both in terms of theology and ecclesiology. Those led by the soapboiler or chandler, Thomas Lambe, the physician, John Griffith, and the merchant, Edward Barber, were the most prominent of these early Baptist groups. From the first they took missionary endeavour very seriously indeed, and the call to evangelize the provinces in accordance with the 'Royal Commission of King Jesus' - 'Go ye into all the world, preaching and baptizing' - was a constant theme of their writing and preaching. Their proselytizing took them all over the southern and eastern parts of England, but General Baptist ideas became particularly well established in Kent, Buckinghamshire, and the Midland counties. This article seeks to trace General Baptist activities in these areas, establish the links which existed between different congregations, and suggest reasons for their success.

During the early years of the Civil War, Thomas Lambe's congregation was the most vigorous of these groups, rivalled only by the Particular Baptist congregation led by William Kiffin. 'They send forth into severall Counties of this Kingdom, from their Churches in london, as Church acts', wrote the heresiographer, Thomas Edwards, in *Gangraena*, 'severall Emissaries members of their Churches, to preach and spread their errors, to dip, to gather and settle Churches'.¹ Preaching in parish churches, churchyards, private houses, and even fields, they appear to have seized every opportunity to spread their message. It is hardly surprising that Thomas Edwards came to believe that they endeavoured 'the leavening of all the Counties'.²

Even at this early stage, the proceedings of the London congregations were by no means haphazard. Areas were selected, representatives chosen, and details of the missionary tours carefully worked out. Thomas Edwards provides an amusing account of some of the methods which they are supposed to have employed: 'They have appointed and kept Disputations from towne to towne in the Countrey', he wrote, 'giving out the time, places and questions they will dispute of, as of Poedobaptisme, the Ministry of the Church of England, &c.' Before arriving at the venue the Baptists would divide themselves into two groups, some to put the case for infant baptism, others to argue the Baptist case. During the course of the disputation, the former position would at first be 'maintained . . . eagerly by some of their party against others of them who oppose it', but after a while those who argued against believer's baptism would confess themselves persuaded by the apparently superior Baptist case. It was not surprising, complained Edwards bitterly, that some of the weak-minded among the audience, 'seeing them who pleaded for Poedobaptisme confessing their error and yeelding, (they knowing nothing of this precontract and deceit)' would themselves 'stumble, question and fall'.³

In 1645 Edward Barber, pastor of the General Baptist assembly which met in and

around Bishopsgate Street, laid out detailed guidelines for the commissioning and operation of 'Apostles' or 'Messengers' and 'Evangelists', whose authority lay beyond that of the local church, and who were responsible for planting and nurturing congregations in other areas. Once a small group of believers had been 'gathered and planted in Church fellowship', the mother church must bear responsibility for their continuation in the truth of the gospel. Messengers must 'supply their wants and reform abuses . . . hearken after their welfare, and being absent from them . . . write to them'. In addition, they were to 'go often and visit the Saints and disciples of Christ'.⁴ Thomas Lambe, for example, can be seen corresponding with and encouraging members of a congregation which he had founded in Gloucestershire in 1641, and visiting a church in Norwich with which his London congregation had connections.⁵ The weaver, Samuel Oates, father of the notorious Titus, spent much time in the 1640s and '50s forging links between congregations by writing to them or visiting them in person, and John Stalham, the incumbent of Terling in Essex, referred to the letters exchanged between the 'Anabaptists' of his parish and their brethren in London.⁶

The London congregations did not possess the monopoly on missionary outreach. John Sims, a shoemaker of Southampton who had been baptized by the General Baptist, James Sickelmore (ex-clergyman of Singleton, near Chichester), was reported to be going about 'as an Emissary all the West over, from place to place to infect the people'. Sims was arrested at Bridgewater in Somerset in May 1646, and 'divers Letters found about him, written by severall Sectaries to the Saints (as they call them) in Taunton and elsewhere'.⁷ Another Baptist, John Chandler of Chichester, Sussex, was bound over to the assizes in Winchester in August 1645, for his evangelistic activities in the Isle of Wight. He was back on the island in May 1647, when he was arrested, along with Bartholomew Bulkley of Lymington, mercer, and Markes Dewy of Wimborne, butcher, for preaching and disturbing the public peace in Newport.⁸ Chandler had also been preaching in Hampstead Norreys, near Reading, in 1646, where he and a companion held a disputation with the local clergy on the subject of infant baptism. One of the disputants described Chandler as 'the first Scholar-Anabaptist that came into this county'.⁹

General Baptist publications were also important in the dissemination of their ideas. The ex-clergyman and 'messenger', Henry Denne, followed up his missionary tour to East Kent in 1644-45 by setting out the gospel message in *Grace, Mercy and Peace*, 'printed for the benefit of the city of Rochester', and the chronicler of the Warboys congregation in Cambridgeshire recorded that their eyes had first been opened to the truth through reading Henry Denne's *Conversion of John the Baptist* (1643).¹⁰ Benjamin Cox (vicar of Tiverton, Devon) had come into contact with General Baptist ideas in 1642, through reading Thomas Lambe's soteriological work, *A Treatise of Particular Predestination*.¹¹ Samuel Fisher of Ashford, Kent, was 'converted to the truth' in about 1646-47 through reading a book by the General Baptist, Richard Jackson of Biddenden, entitled *19 Arguments Proving Circumcision to be no seal of the Covenant of Grace* (1646),¹² and from Leicestershire it was

reported that the General Baptist army officer, Captain Robert Everard, 'did pollute the Sabbath . . . in putting his book [*Baby Baptism Routed*, 1650] to sale in the congregation at Withibrook on the Lords day'.¹³

The combination of dynamic outreach and painstaking consolidation was an effective one. Indeed, the development and use of the office of 'messenger', and the emphasis on 'follow-up', were among the most successful features of the early Baptist congregations and go some way towards providing an explanation for their proliferation during the revolutionary period.

At first, the London congregations tended to concentrate their attention on areas within fairly easy reach of the capital, or to act in response to specific requests for assistance, as in the case of Thomas Lambe's visit to Gloucestershire in 1641-42, and to Terling, Essex, in January 1644. But the success of these initial forays led them further afield. Lambe himself can be traced in Gloucestershire, Essex, Kent, Surrey, Hampshire, Rutland and Wiltshire, and by 1645 'Anabaptists' were reported to be baptizing converts in the River Ouse in York. By the latter part of the 1640s, congregations had been established in many of the Midland counties, aided by the fact that on occasion certain Justices of the Peace and members of the House of Commons, recognizing the political inadvisability of alienating the Independents and Sectaries by too strict an enforcement of the laws governing meeting and preaching, were willing to turn a blind eye to their activities when it was deemed expedient. Thomas Edwards made the general charge against the sectaries that 'when they have been committed or bound over by men of inferiour place, they have been released by others in higher place'. He instanced the weaver, Samuel Oates, who had been allowed to pursue his evangelistic campaigns uninterrupted by the authorities. 'No Magistrate in the Country dare meddle with him', commented Edwards bitterly, 'for they have hunted these out of their dens in the country into their Dens in London, and have imprisoned some, and they are released, and sent like decoy Ducks into the country to fetch in more'. Henry Denne was another example cited by the heresiographer. His release after his interment by the Cambridge committee had apparently been secured 'by means of one Mr Desborough a sequestrator, making Friends to a great man'.¹⁴

Of the areas covered by General Baptist evangelists, particularly noticeable is the widespread support which they enjoyed in Kent. Several historians, including G. F. Nuttall and W. T. Whitley, have drawn attention to the predominance of Baptists in this county as reflected by the large number of Baptist preachers listed in the episcopal returns for 1672 when, for a short while, it became possible for nonconformist preachers to hold licences under royal indulgence.¹⁵ In Kent almost all the Baptists were theologically Arminian or General Baptists. The Calvinistic Baptists, although first in the field in east Kent at least, were not able to gain a foothold at this stage. Kent was, of course, an area with a persistent reputation for religious dissent, stemming back to Lollardy and sixteenth-century Anabaptism; Michael Watts, in his history of the dissenting tradition from the Reformation to the French Revolution, attributes General Baptist strength in the area to the survival of radical religious beliefs dating back to the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the pertinacity and significance of these pre-existing traditions is hard to gauge and dangerously speculative where information concerning the conversion experience and process of individuals is not forthcoming.

Kent's geographical position was important in shaping the history and outlook of the county. Surrounded on two sides by water, in the north by London, and in the west by Sussex and Surrey, the population of Kent was perhaps more prone to insularity and more physically isolated than, for example the population of the Midland counties, with their common trade routes and boundaries. Kent's unique location was certainly to shape the development of the General Baptist congregations in that county and influence their relationship with congregations in other areas.

In addition to being somewhat isolated, the community of Kent was a divided one. As part of Laud's own Diocese of Canterbury, the population had experienced the full weight of the 'innovations' and there was, as Patrick Collinson has emphasized, a strongly disaffected Puritan element in a number of parishes - particularly among the unstable and fluctuating population in the clothing towns of West Kent.¹⁷ Alan Everitt's study of the county during the 'Great Rebellion' further illustrates this, revealing the way in which events of the 1640s increased the fragmentation of the social structure.¹⁸ It is possible that forces unleashed by the apparent erosion of traditional values combined with dissatisfaction about the state of the Church of England to render some sections of the population particularly susceptible to the radicalism of the itinerant preachers.

Support for the Baptists was, however, more localized than might be imagined, and their congregations were by no means evenly distributed throughout the county. Their strength appears to have laid principally in the market towns along the main trade routes from London to Dover and Hythe, and in the predominantly rural western part of the county, bordering with Surrey and Sussex and served by the highway from London to Rye. The location of these congregations may help to shed further light on the dissemination and advancement of radical ideas.

The congregations in East Kent sprang up as a direct result of a series of missionary tours conducted by the London General Baptist evangelists, Thomas Lambe and Henry Denne. In keeping with Everitt's findings regarding the spread of radical ideas along important trade routes, the two men - strangers to the area - appear to have followed the line of the coach road from London to Dover, stopping off in the main centres of habitation.¹⁹ Ashford, on the way to Folkestone, was a town visited by the evangelists; in July 1645 nine men and women were reported to have been baptized in a nearby river.²⁰ Accessibility and close proximity to London are of primary importance in explaining the establishment and nurturing of General Baptist congregations in this area.

According to the information provided by the Quaker and ex-Baptist, Luke Howard, the London Baptists appear to have begun their campaign in Kent in about 1643.²¹ They were continuing, if not intensifying, their efforts by 1645, when Thomas Edwards distinguished at least three distinct missionary journeys into central and eastern Kent during the latter part of 1645 alone.²² The amount of attention

which the tours received in *Gangraena* indicates the impact which General Baptists were having on the area. His description of the third journey contains details of the places visited and methods used: 'In Decemb. last, a little before the monethly Fast, came down Mr. Den with Lamb to Rochester'. The two men requested leave to preach in one of the parish churches, but permission was refused, 'whereupon in a house on the Fast day, Den preached to about eightscore, some of whom came out of towns near hand, and some Inhabitants'. Denne then left his companion and moved on to Canterbury and Chatham, before returning to Rochester. 'In his travels he dipped many, one of which being of the Town of Chattam fell desparately sick upon it . . . and a Gentlewoman near Canterbury was Dipped, (of whose Dipping the Anabaptists boast much) that by Dipping she was cured of an incurable disease'.²³

In September 1644, the Westminster Assembly was informed of the new growth of 'Anabaptism' among some of the French at Maidstone, and in 1646 a 'godly minister' from the area near Sandwich and Ash complained that 'the common adversary', in the form of Lambe, Kiffin, and the 'Anabaptists', 'much increaseth and multiplyeth in these parts'.²⁴ William Hussey, minister of Chislehurst in Kent, noted that 'this Doctrine of Anabaptists doth much spread, notwithstanding all the industry that hath been used by men of singular parts and piety'.²⁵ Clearly there were a sufficient number of converts to cause considerable disquiet among the parochial clergy. It was probably during this period that congregations were established in Rochester, Dover, Canterbury, Sandwich and Maidstone.²⁶ Even a decade later, in the 1650s, General Baptist support in this region continued to lie in the principal market towns; penetration of the more isolated areas was slow.

In marked contrast with the situation in the central and eastern parts of the county, the General Baptists in western Kent managed to permeate the rural communities far more effectively. Here, although the congregations were grouped around the market towns of Orpington, Sevenoaks, Tonbridge, Cranbrook and Tenterden, Baptists met in and drew support from the scattered population in the surrounding villages and hamlets. Dr Reay, writing of the impact of the early Quaker movement on mid-seventeenth-century society, has drawn attention to the fact that they did not conform to the stereotype of the urban nature of early Protestant nonconformity.²⁷ It is becoming increasingly clear that neither did the General Baptists. In the Weald, Sussex, Buckinghamshire, Essex, Norfolk, Suffolk and the Midland counties, the movement was primarily a rural one. Indeed, the complex picture that emerges underlines the limitations of assumptions concerning the growth of nonconformity and separatism based primarily on more readily available urban resources.

From the very first, the Baptists of West Kent were far less reliant on outsiders than their countymen in the East. In particular, they were fortunate in attracting three outstanding personalities into their number: the ex-clergyman, Francis Cornwell, Samuel Fisher, and - for a short time - Christopher Blackwood. A deacon of the Smarden Baptist Church, writing in the eighteenth century, included some information about these early Baptist leaders. Francis Cornwell, ordained into the Anglican ministry after graduating from Emmanuel College, Cambridge, had suffered

imprisonment under Charles I because he 'could not in conscience conform to wearing the surplice Kneeling at the Communion, the Cross in Baptism with other ceremonies then imposed'. During his imprisonment, and largely from his own study of Scripture which he believed to be 'the only Rule of faith', Cornwell came to conclude that 'Believers only were the proper subject of Baptism'. On his release he was himself baptized by one of the earliest and most successful of the Kentish 'messengers', William Jeffery of Orpington.²⁸ Christopher Blackwood, rector of Staplehurst, became a Baptist in 1644, as a result of a Visitation Sermon preached by Cornwell on the subject of infant's baptism. In 1645 he became the first (joint) minister of the General Baptist congregation at Staplehurst and, although he relinquished his office shortly afterwards on account of his orthodox Calvinist views, he may have remained with the congregation as an ordinary member until his departure for Ireland as an army chaplain in the late 1640s.²⁹ Samuel Fisher, vicar of Lydd from 1632-43, was converted to Baptist beliefs in the late 1640s through reading a pamphlet against infant baptism by a member of the congregation at Biddenden. He was an influential figure in the movement until his defection to the Quakers in 1655.³⁰

All three clergymen came from a Puritan background and appear to have joined the Baptists because of deeply-held religious convictions. Cornwell and Fisher had each experienced a crisis of conscience before leaving the Anglican Church: Cornwell in questioning the validity of infant baptism and the nature of the true church, and Fisher in refusing to distribute the Sacrament indiscriminately to believers and non-believers, with all its attendant implications.³¹

For the laity as well, religious considerations appear to have been of primary importance in the decision to change allegiance. Those from a Puritan background found the appeal to Scripture particularly compelling, and the General Baptist message - with its call for a return to the simplicity of the primitive church - had considerable appeal. The adoption of General Baptist ideas in Kent is in line with the way other separatist and independent groups developed elsewhere. The sacrifice involved in joining a separatist congregation could be considerable. Those clergymen who repudiated their former calling and gave up their livings suffered both financially and in reduced social status. Samuel Fisher is reputed to have relinquished a living worth several hundred pounds per annum.³²

Both Cornwell and Fisher appear to have exploited their former connections to the full - gaining access to pulpits, attracting a wide audience, and continuing their arguments by letter. One of the principal methods of attracting attention and winning converts was the use of disputations, usually on the subject of infant baptism, which took place in the parish churches. These disputations drew huge crowds (some accounts refer to several thousands), and attracted great interest. Samuel Fisher, writing in 1650-51, referred to his 'often avocations from home in way of service to the truth', and his involvement in 'no lesse then ten publique (not to speak of private) Disputations, in which I have actually been interessed since that of Ashford [1649], besides publique preachings, other occasional meetings, and writings, Church visitings, and visitations of sick members, to whom I have been moved several times

to move many miles in such junctures'.³³ Mr Simpson of Marden, whose pamphlet *A Sovereign Preservative against Anabaptism* was countered by Fisher in 1650-51, complained of being 'stormed on every side, and almost tired out with onsets and oppositions from their private letters'; while the Vicar of Horsmonden in south-west Kent, writing in 1649, observed that it was well known that he had been challenged by the Anabaptists, 'who daily encreas, and are grown so bold among us'. Matthias Rutton, incumbent of Boughton Monchelsea, near Maidstone, was another member of the clergy who was pressurized into holding a public debate with one of the local General Baptist leaders.³⁴

Disputations in the pulpit frequently carried over to pamphlet warfare. The impact of Francis Cornwell's Visitation Sermon at Cranbrook in 1644, for example, can be seen not only in the numbers involved and convinced on that occasion, but also in the fact that Cornwell's version of events was later printed and distributed in London. This pamphlet was only one of a number produced by Cornwell between 1644 and 1646. He personally distributed his first, *The Vindication of the Royal Commission of King Jesus*, at the door to the House of Commons.³⁵ Other Kentish writers who contributed to the body of General Baptist literature were George Hammond of Biddenden, whose subjects included baptism, general redemption and original sin, Nicholas Crosse and William Jeffery of Orpington, Richard Kingsnorth of Staplehurst, Samuel Fisher of Ashford, and Richard Jackson of Biddenden. That such publications were a cause of concern to their non-Baptist neighbours is evident from a pamphlet by the incumbent of Sutton Valence, Hezekiah Holland. He referred to a book by George Hammond which had been dispersed in his parish and asked, 'Was it not time for me to look to my people?' Holland had himself been sent a copy by one of the local General Baptists. 'I thought', he continued, '. . . that if I should have passed it by in silence, you might have said I was such a one as yourself . . . or unable to answer you for I confess you have gotten into great repute with those who know not how to contradict you.'³⁶

From the publications of the General Baptists and their critics, it is possible to gain some idea of the development and impact of the movement as a whole. Nevertheless, in order to see the evolution of General Baptist congregations at grass-roots level, it is necessary to turn to the more specialized accounts of the surviving church books. Two church books from Kent are extant, and extracts from a third, now lost, can be found in Adam Taylor's *History of the English General Baptists*, published in 1818.³⁷ The first, commonly known as the 'Smarden Church Book', concern a congregation which usually met in Staplehurst. The second is 'A Register Booke or Record of the congregation of Jesus Christ Inhabiting in and about Speldhurst and Penbury in Kent', otherwise known as the 'Bradbourne and Sevenoaks Church Book'. The third, in its secondary form, is from the congregation at Biddenden. In addition, there is a second part to the Smarden church book, dating from the eighteenth century, which includes a four-page account of the congregation's beginnings in the 1640s, written by a deacon of the church, Daniel Medhurst.

There is a tradition that the Smarden church was founded as early as 1640.

Evidence, however, is slight and rests on a torn and undated sheet at the beginning of the first church book, which reads 'The Church was formed and the covenant signed by eight four members in the year 1640'. Since the church book is no longer in its original form and has, at some stage, been carelessly rebound, the sheet is almost certainly a later addition. Richard Kingsnorth, first elder of the church and first signatory of the covenant, did not embrace Baptist views until the beginning of 1644, and it is likely that the church was gathered some time during that year or shortly afterwards.³⁸ The 'Smarden Church Book' gives a comprehensive, if somewhat disorderly, account of the congregation which, during its formative years, met chiefly at Spilshill House in Staplehurst. It comprises details of the membership, statements of money received by the deacons, guidelines for the congregation, and the minutes of a 'quarterly meeting' held at Udimore in Sussex, probably around the year 1656.

The second surviving church book begins with the statement that 'about the yeares . . . 1646 and 1647 there was a small people of Believers Baptized that did usually Assemble at Bradbourn [near Sevenoaks], and Orpington . . . for the publique worship of God'.³⁹ At this stage a number of the believers travelled the distance of about ten miles from the villages of Pembury and Speldhurst, near Tonbridge. By 1648 and 1649, however, they had begun to hold similar meetings in their own area, assisted by the pastor of the Bradbourne congregation, William Jeffery, and two leaders from the church meeting at Spilshill in Staplehurst, Nathaniel Rowe and Richard Kingsnorth. It is unfortunate that the Bradbourne/Sevenoaks Church Book does not provide a detailed account of the day-to-day running of affairs: it contains a list of members with their place of habitation, brief comments on individual leaders, and a few notes on discipline. It is, however, invaluable for its record of the decisions of two quarterly meetings of the Kentish and Sussex 'messengers', and the minutes and signatories of a General Assembly of General Baptist churches which was held in London in 1656.

The formative years of the congregation at Biddenden remain in obscurity. From Adam Taylor's account, it appears that the church was well established by 1648 when on Christmas Day it was 'agreed for mutual accommodation, that the members . . . should meet, for public worship, and the administration of the ordinances, in three divisions, one at Cranbrook, another at Biddenden, and a third at Rolvendon'; but that in 'weighty affairs' the three congregations should consult and act as one, and 'jointly assist each other, in cases of necessity, in supplying the wants of the poor'. The cause for the division was that 'the glad tidings of Jesus the Anointed may be more propagated'. Regular meetings were to be held in order that the members might 'edify one another, and . . . watch over one another - to the end that the offices of Jesus Christ, as king, priest and prophet, may be exalted, and the discipline of Christ in each congregation be executed - and . . . communicate together in the breaking of bread'. George Hammon[d] from Biddenden and James Blackmore from Tenterden were appointed joint pastors.⁴⁰

One of the most surprising features of the church books is the numbers involved

in the congregations. According to Adam Taylor, the Biddenden congregation consisted of more than seventy members, which had risen to over 120 by 1657. The agreement at the beginning of the Smarden church book was subscribed with 150 names (though some could conceivably have been added later). Although the register for the 'Congregation of Jesus Christ Inhabiting in and about Speldhurst and Penbury' does not record baptismal dates, it is likely that there were about two dozen members by the early 1650s.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the impact of the General Baptists probably far outweighed their numerical strength, and Samuel Fisher's pen-sketch of the 'Anabaptists' in Ashford, as 'those few persons, who since they have gladly received the Word of Truth . . . do now continue in the Apostles doctrine, and fellowship', is a timely reminder of the danger in overestimating the extent of the General Baptists' appeal.⁴²

If it is difficult to assess numbers in the rural congregations, it is equally hard to discover any coherence in the types of people attracted by the General Baptists, and whether they were drawing their support from a particular stratum of society. Recent local surveys, such as Drs Wrightson and Levine's examination of the parish of Terling in Essex, and Margaret Spufford's study of rural Cambridgeshire, have demonstrated the complexities of seventeenth-century rural society, and the variations in wealth and status which could exist between those described simply by their contemporaries as 'yeoman', 'labourer' or 'husbandman'.⁴³ The identification of an individual's occupation does not necessarily enable us to determine his or her socio-economic status. Furthermore, in the absence of detailed evidence in the Kentish church books as to the socio-economic background of leaders or individual members, our main recourse is to hostile sources or secondary accounts which, naturally enough, tend to stress the lowliness and ignorance of the so-called 'mechanicks' - smiths, tailors, shoemakers, pedlars, and weavers - who took it upon themselves to preach and baptize.

The Anglican writer, David Russen of Hythe, who published his *True Picture of the Anabaptists in their Rise, Progress and Practice* at the beginning of the eighteenth century, was scathing about the poor social quality of many of the people who joined their congregations. His portrayal of a divinely-appointed, social hierarchy under threat from the ignorant and illiterate is a familiar feature of anti-sectarian writing. Their elders and teachers were, he claimed (apart from one or two notable exceptions) artisans: 'I have known a Weaver, and a Gardner, chief Rulers of a congregation and a Cobbler, Eminent for his gift of Praying', he scoffed. 'Here about, a Miller and Farmer, are their chief Governours; a Butcher than can neither Write nor Read, will dispute with the Parson, and lead away almost half the Parish. Another Butcher shall discourse of their Religion in an Ale-house . . . and a Taylor's Widow shall go from House to House, and direct the Consciences of those who are not Established in the Faith.'⁴⁴ Russen's picture is of limited value but a number of his observations are borne out by evidence from other sources. Of those whose occupations can be established, George Hammond of Biddenden was a tailor, and Nathaniel Rowe of Cranbrook the son of a broadweaver. The gardener to whom Russen referred was

probably William Britten, author of *The Moderate Baptist* (1654), and the cobbler is likely to have been Luke Howard, shoemaker of Dover, who converted to the Quakers in 1655.⁴⁵

George Hammon, leader of the congregation at Biddenden, defended his co-religionists by observing that 'Christ did chuse Mechanicks as Fishermen, and the like, and did reject the wise and learned, and yet that was a hard thing to be received in those days, and so it is in ours'. A satirical publication of 1647, entitled *The Divell in Kent*, gave an account of simple villagers and cottage industrialists involved in an 'Anabaptist' congregation near Sandwich. The sole reference to the baptism of a 'gentlewoman' in Kent occurs in the first part of *Gangraena*, cited above, while the only allusion to status in the surviving Kentish church books is the record of a business transaction between two members of the congregation - William Archer, landlord, and his tenant, Robert Thomson, a miller.⁴⁶

Not all General Baptist leaders in the south-east were of such comparatively lowly status, however, and it is an over-simplification to regard their appeal as being confined to the lowest echelons of society. They appear to have drawn their support from a cross-section of the community, attracting a number of the 'middling sort' - artisans, semi-skilled and skilled craftsmen, yeomen, and husbandmen - as well as the poor, for whom provision was made in the church books. Richard Kingsnorth of Staplehurst was a farmer or husbandman who appears to have been wealthy enough to live in Spilshill House, the large farmhouse in which the General Baptists held their meetings for a number of years. Matthew Caffyn had studied at Oxford before establishing himself as a yeoman-farmer at Southwater, near Horsham. The ex-clergymen among the congregations, mentioned above, were men of private means. In addition, it was possible for a number of the leaders to enjoy financial support from their church members, and some congregations were wealthy enough to be able to subsidize others less fortunate than themselves.⁴⁷

The provision made for the maintenance of the 'True Gospel Ministers', and the administrative links between congregations in the organization of contributions for the poor, bring us to a discussion of the organization and operation of the Kentish General Baptist churches during the 1640s and '50s. what is immediately striking is the advanced and sophisticated nature of the network which they evolved. At least by 1653, and probably earlier, the Kentish congregations had developed a hierarchical system of church meetings, quarterly associations and general assemblies, comprising supra-congregational and congregational officials - 'messengers' and 'elders' - as well as selected representatives. Although it is difficult to establish the individual congregations involved, the location of the quarterly meetings suggests that a rotating system was in operation, with different groups taking it in turn to act as host to the assembly. During the mid-1650s, meetings are known to have been held at Chatham, Biddenden, Bradbourne, Udimore in Sussex, and Cranbrook. In 1656, for example, various messengers and elders of the churches in Kent and Sussex met to decide 'wt might best conduce to the present cureing of the distractions and Devissione of, and in churches'. On 26 May of the following year, an important area meeting took place

at Biddenden to settle a number of issues, including movement between congregations, and the 'laying on of hands' controversy. Strong emphasis was laid on the principle of closed communion, as the leaders attempted to re-establish a strict orthodoxy. The leaders' decisions were transcribed and relayed to the scattered congregations.⁴⁸

The formulation of close links between groups which shared a common foundation and organization suggests that from the late 1640s the General Baptist congregations in Kent had begun to develop a distinct identity of their own. Their insistence on believer's baptism in accordance with General Baptist doctrine, the awareness of theological differences between themselves and other separatist or independent congregations, the practice of closed communion, and the frequent use of excommunication for those who failed to 'walk according to the knowledge of truth', must have played a part in establishing group identity, and providing a framework for expansion in the 1650s.

The congregational network established in the Kentish churches did not necessarily lead to insularity; on the contrary, there appears to have been frequent contact with the London churches and with the neighbouring county of Sussex. Matthew Caffyn of Horsham enjoyed a particularly close relationship with the Kentish Baptists. As well as being present at a number of their quarterly meetings and accompanying them to the General Baptist general assemblies in London, Caffyn collaborated with William Jeffery on an anti-Quaker tract which was published and sold by the General Baptist stationer, Francis Smith, in 1655.⁴⁹ The ties between London and the Kentish congregations were strong. Those in central and east Kent are readily explainable in the context of the churches' beginnings; those in the west appear to have been formed more gradually and the initiative may have been on the side of Kent. Francis Cornwell was certainly in London in 1644 (when he was imprisoned for distributing copies of one of his pamphlets), and in 1645 when he visited Lambe's congregation and advocated the doctrine of 'laying on of hands' for all believers. The issue was to be one of the most divisive which the General Baptist churches had to face. Cornwell's visits to London were reciprocated when John Griffith was present at the 'generall assembling of the elders and deacons of the Co. of Kent' at Cranbrook in July 1652, and at a further meeting at Yalding a week later, where he gave his opinion on the question of falling from grace.⁵⁰ Samuel Fisher, another Kentish figure, was well-known among the London congregations. He was responsible for the conversion of a Cornhill linen draper, Thomas Lambe, along with his friend and business associate, William Allen. These two men organized their own church in London in 1653, but their confidence was severely shaken when Fisher defected to the Quakers in 1655. The group was eventually disbanded in 1659.⁵¹ Fisher was also in contact with the congregation that met in the Exchequer, near Aldgate. In his 1650 treatise, he referred to a printed paper on the subject of 'laying on of hands for all baptised believers', which had been distributed among 'all the Churches of Christ in London and elsewhere', and which had been sent to him personally by one of the signatories.⁵² Similarly, a pamphlet by George Hammond of Biddenden was published in response to a letter 'from a friend and brother in London', asking for his

guidance on certain doctrinal issues.⁵³

Links between Kent and London did not merely operate on a personal level. By the mid 1650s, and possibly a year or two earlier, it is clear that detailed arrangements had been made to bring together a number of General Baptist leaders from the provinces. The result of this initiative was a manifesto entitled *The Humble Vindication and Representation of many of the Messengers, Elders and Brethren, belonging to the Severall Baptized Churches in this Nation*, published in 1654 at the close of a 'General Assembly' in London. Of those in attendance, it is possible to distinguish representatives from Kent, Sussex, Staffordshire, Northamptonshire, Lincolnshire, Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire, as well as from a number of the London congregations. Particularly noticeable is the strength of the Kentish contingent: Samuel Fisher, William Jeffery, Nathaniel Rowe, Richard Kingsnorth, George Hammond, John Reeve, John Parsons of Faversham, and Robert Thomson of Cranbrook all signed on behalf of their congregations.

There is no record of any similar gathering for 1655, but the Bradbourne/Sevenoaks church book contains 'The General Agreement of the Assembly . . . Mett together at London', September 1656. Guidelines for congregational organization, provision for the poor, the election of church officials, and methods for dealing with absentees or offenders were the principal issues discussed. Mixed marriages (i.e. with non-members) and 'breaking of bread with persons denying laying on of hands' were declared unlawful. The leaders from Kent appear once again to have dominated proceedings. Of the eighteen messengers and elders who signed the minutes, at least six were from that county. The others, of which Sussex, Northamptonshire, Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Lincolnshire can be identified, only sent one or two members apiece.⁵⁴

The dominance of Kent in the Assemblies of 1654 and 1656 should not lead us to underestimate the strength of the movement in other parts of the country. Buckinghamshire, Berkshire and Hertfordshire, for example, all contained a number of well-established congregations, while General Baptists had also gained considerable support in the Midland counties. It is to these regions that we shall now turn our attention.

One of the weekly news-sheets, *Mercurius Civicus*, devoted several pages in October 1646 to a description of the activities of some Baptists in Hemel Hempstead and Bourne End during the autumn of that year. Their leader was reported to be a sawyer named James Browne, 'either the second or third man of note for spirituall abilities (as the Brethren are pleased there to call them) in all that part of the Country'. Browne had formerly been a good Protestant, 'diligent in hearing of Sermons, and always seeking to hear the best men'. Within the last six or seven years, however, 'he hath quite left the Church: and instead of hearing Gods Ministers in publike, he is become a preacher and teacher of others . . . going about from house to house preaching and teaching, instructing and baptizing; (or Rebaptizing).'⁵⁵

It is not clear whether the Baptists in Bourne End were in association with other congregations in the area, such as that led by the bookseller, Stephen Dagnal in

Aylesbury, nor whether they had links with the General Baptist assembly held there in 1659. Nevertheless, the historian, Benjamin Stinton, asserted that the Baptists in Buckinghamshire 'were generally (but not all) such as followed the Remonstrants scheme in these points and went under the name of Arminians'.⁵⁶

Stinton's description of the tailor, Benjamin Keach, active from the mid-1650s as minister of a General Baptist congregation which met in Winslow, gives us an indication of the insularity of some of the county communities. Brought up in the tradition of the General Baptist congregations in the locality, it was not until Keach visited London towards the end of the 1650s that he discovered that there were differences of opinion among Baptists over the subject of general or particular redemption. Stinton, who was eventually to succeed Keach as minister of the Particular Baptist church in Horsleydown, Southwark, explained approvingly that once Keach 'had greater opportunity of consulting both men and Books', he found that 'the before Different Opinions in this Article gave a denomination to 2 parts of the Baptists'. Having examined the issues more closely, Keach decided to join the Particular Baptists.⁵⁷

In contrast with the General Baptists of Kent and Buckinghamshire, whose tightly-knit organization was more prone to insularity and who tended to operate - in the main - on a county level, the congregations in the Midlands appear to have been less conscious of their county identity and boundaries, and more aware of their common bond as members of the body of Christ. Historians such as John Morrill and Alan Everitt have shown the deep-rooted differences which existed between different counties, yet the congregations in Midland counties had much in common, especially in terms of their roots, organization and outlook.⁵⁸ The findings of Dr Margaret Spufford, in her study of rural Cambridgeshire during this period, indicate a close resemblance with the anti-clerical sentiments expressed in a series of petitions submitted to parliament from Kent in 1641. Dr Spufford observes that, in Cambridgeshire, reformed convictions had made such an impact on the rural laity by the 1630s that 'many ordinary villagers were prepared to deprive themselves of attendance at the Sacrament, which meant a great deal to them, remove to other places if need be, and raise cash to pay for lecturers' stipends, rather than to assent to practices they regarded as popish innovations.'⁵⁹

As with Kent, a number of historians have attempted to trace nonconformity in the Midland counties back to Lollard influence during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁶⁰ Certainly there was a long-standing separatist tradition in this area, upon which the General Baptists could build. The founder of the first General Baptist congregation, Thomas Helwys, was himself a Nottinghamshire gentleman, and it may be that he retained links with his native county after founding a church in Spitalfields, London, in 1612. A number of congregations in the Midlands had been established well before the outbreak of civil war in 1642. Lincoln and Coventry each possessed a congregation of 'Anabaptists' as early as 1626, when their members joined with those of London, Sarum and Tiverton in writing to the Waterlander Mennonite congregation in Amsterdam, and in 1634 an informer reported to William Laud that

'For Lincoln itself . . . there are many Anabaptists in it, and . . . their leader is one Johnson a baker'.⁶¹ Jonathon Johnson was still active as a General Baptist in the 1650s, when he engaged in a written controversy with the Quaker, Martin Mason. Henoeh Howet of Lincoln, writing against the Quakers in the 1650s, claimed that he had been a Baptist since 1630. It was probably in connection with his religious activities that Howet was summoned before the Court of High Commission in 1640.⁶²

Evidence of Baptist influence further north is slight for this early period, but correspondence between two Baptist ministers in the late eighteenth century referred to family papers which implied the existence of a Baptist congregation in Shrewsbury as early as the 1620s.⁶³

By the outbreak of war, then, there were 'Anabaptist' meetings in a few of the principal towns in the Midland counties but little evidence to suggest that they had made much impact upon the rural communities in the surrounding area. The situation was to be altered radically in the mid-1640s by a number of catalysts, which included increased freedom of expression and movement, the commencement of the London Baptist evangelistic campaigns and the influx into the area of the parliamentary forces. In addition, the desire to settle religion in accordance with the example of the 'best reformed churches' led to a challenging of traditionally-held beliefs about the nature of the Church and much 'Spirit-searching' to rediscover the New Testament ideal. In the spirit of the popular 'Root and Branch' slogan, the Baptists appeared to be cutting away centuries of tradition in order to gather churches in accordance with the primitive ideal. 'The fields were ripe unto the harvest'.

The London evangelists began their activities in Essex and moved steadily northwards. Between 1643 and 1644, Thomas Lambe, the soapboiler, Timothy Batt, a physician, Samuel Oates, a weaver, and 'one Tomlins' - all members of Lambe's congregation - visited Essex.⁶⁴ It was also during this period that Henry Denne, incumbent of the parish church of Eltisley, Cambridgeshire, was 'sent forth' by the Bell Alley congregation into Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire and Lincolnshire. In 1646 Oates, who received his call from a church in Norwich, began his evangelization of Rutland, Leicestershire and Lincolnshire, finally settling in Oakham in 1647.⁶⁵

In December 1647 a number of parish ministers from Rutland and the adjacent parts of Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire sent a letter to the House of Commons, complaining of the activities of 'divers and erronious spirits lately crept in amongst us', in particular Thomas Lambe and 'one Samwell Oates, now settling himself amongst us'. The ministers complained that Oates had been 'going up and downe from Towne to Towne Preaching and Rebaptizing verie manie' and 'drawing a concourse of people after him, Appointing his publique meetings weeklie in Barnes and Stables . . . Sometimes also breaking into Churches, & thrusting himself into our Pulpits'.⁶⁶ Nineteen parishes were represented in the petition, and their location gives some indication of the extent of General Baptist penetration of the area in the late 1640s. They range from the large and prosperous living of Allhallows in Stamford to the small and remote parishes of Thistleton and Easton. The area around

Stamford appears to have been particularly affected. Seven out of the eighteen parishes were located in this area, a feature which is corroborated by the large number of 'Anabaptist' congregations which appear in the vicinity at the beginning of the 1650s.⁶⁷ The others are nearly all from parishes within easy reach of the three market towns of Uppingham, Oakham and Peterborough, and at least two, Easton and Burley, had General Baptist congregations by 1651.

The distribution of Baptist churches in the Midlands, as with Kent, was shaped by the circumstances surrounding their inception. Congregations established in market and county towns before the outbreak of war provided a springboard for General Baptist activity which facilitated the evangelists' infiltration of the rural communities. The meetings which they organized in the scattered villages and hamlets of the surrounding area tended to comprise a few Baptist families who were prepared to travel several miles to attend meetings. Once again, the influence of individuals is most marked, and the effectiveness of an evangelist appears to have increased dramatically if he took up residence in the area: Samuel Oates who settled in Oakham, Rutland, Henry Denne of Eltisley, Cambridgeshire, James Browne of Bridgenorth, Shropshire, and Henry Haggard of Stafford all illustrate this.

The spread of the General Baptist message in rural areas in the Midlands was undoubtedly aided by the peregrinations of the parliamentary forces, some of whose regiments were reported to contain large numbers of 'Anabaptists'. In Leicestershire and Rutland alone, there were parliamentary garrisons at Bagworth, Belars, Burley on the Hill, Coleorton, Kirkby Belars and Leicester.⁶⁸ Contemporary opponents of the sectaries posited a direct link between the movements of the army and the spread of radical ideas. Thomas Edwards lamented that every town or city captured by the parliamentary forces was under threat from the errors of the sectaries, and 'every enlarging of our quarters, is an enlargement of sectarism and a multiplying of schisms'.⁶⁹

The Independent divine, Richard Baxter, resident in Coventry between 1643 and 1644, complained of the way in which the garrison - consisting 'half of citizens, and half of Countrey-men' - had been troubled by 'one Anabaptist Taylor'. In a much-quoted passage from the *Reliquiae*, Baxter recounted the difficulties he had experienced while serving as chaplain to Colonel Whalley's regiment: 'In all Places where we went, the Sectarian Soldiers much infested the Countreys, by their Pamphlets and Converse, and the People admiring the conquering Army were ready to receive whatsoever they commended to them'.⁷⁰

During the summer of 1644, Immanuel Knutton, incumbent or lecturer of Beeston near Nottingham, addressed a pamphlet to the Nottinghamshire Committee, complaining of the activities of Anabaptist soldiers in the garrison. So many people had been 'infected' that Knutton felt compelled to counteract their arguments in print, if only 'that I might hereby excite others more able than my selfe, to handle these points'. Knutton had apparently returned from Newark to Nottingham to find the garrison 'much distracted by some Separatists in it, who desert our publike Assemblies and Divine Ordinances, and have seduced too many to their way'. On

further investigation, he found their arguments 'pertinacious', and their demands unreasonable: 'If wee will renounce our calling by the Bishops; Preach at the Market-crosse, not in the Steeplehouse; and be rebaptized, they will heare us, otherwise not.'⁷¹ Thomas Edwards included reports of Anabaptist soldiers preaching at Eltislley in Cambridgeshire, Ravensdowne in Bedfordshire, and Rugby in Warwickshire.⁷²

By the end of the 1640s, congregations were well-established in Coventry, Grantham, Leicester, Lincoln, Loughborough, Nottingham, Peterborough, Stafford and Stamford, and tiny groups were springing up all over the surrounding area. The existence of these congregations is fairly well documented but, as with the Kentish congregations, it is difficult to establish numbers involved. The situation is further complicated by the fluidity of the membership and by the fact that some congregations met in a number of different places. In addition, although leaders and church officials tended to remain faithful to Baptist principles, there was a fairly rapid turnover at a lower level.

Post-Restoration estimates of the numbers of nonconformists in the Midland counties, most notably the Compton Census of 1676 and the returns to the inquiry set up by Archbishop Sheldon in 1669, have been discussed in a number of recent articles, and the limitations with regard to their use illustrated by such historians as Anne Whiteman and David Wykes.⁷³ Clearly, despite the existence of these statistics, it is difficult to build up a complete picture of the strength of nonconformity in general - and the Baptists in particular - during the 1660s and '70s. The difficulties of accurate assessment for the Interregnum, for which not even this type of evidence is available, are far greater.

For our purposes, the later statistics can be used to show a continuum in the existence of nonconformity in certain parishes. A number of villages in Leicestershire, where General Baptist congregations were known to have been formed in the 1640s and '50s, still contained substantial numbers of nonconformists a decade or so later. In 1676, eighty 'Anabaptists' were listed for Wymeswold, sixty-four for Mount Sorrel, Quorndon and Woodhouse, and forty-one for the Langtons.⁷⁴ All these areas feature in the *Faith and Practise of Thirty Congregations*, the Fenstanton records, or in General Baptist publications of the period. The figure of thirty-three nonconformists for Earl Shilton is surprisingly low, for it was here during the 1650s that the 'Anabaptist' 'Masters of division' were reported to have 'played their principall game'.⁷⁵

During the revolutionary era, it is clear from the church books that many more came into contact with General Baptist ideas than appear on the church registers, and that numbers in the congregations fluctuated enormously. For the church at Warboys in Cambridgeshire, the year 1650 was a particularly fruitful one, while during the following year there began to be 'some returning to the Lord', probably encouraged by the elders of the Fenstanton congregation who visited them as part of a counter-measure to forestall their high fall-off rate by seeking out and exhorting former members to 'return to the Lord'. Those who remained obdurate were excommunicated and 'delivered over to Satan'.⁷⁶ Both churches continued to

flourish during 1653 but, though some were added to the church during 1654-7, the full force of the Quaker onslaught began to be felt. On 6 February 1655, at a general meeting of elders in Cambridge, it was agreed that for the retaining of better order in the churches, 'we should unite ourselves into a strong combination, to meet together often . . . at such times and place as should be thought most convenient'.⁷⁷ Unfortunately for the Baptists, such moves were insufficient to stem the flow of defections. In May 1655, for example, the elders of the congregation at Littleport, along with a third of the congregation, joined the Friends.⁷⁸

As well as the fluctuations in numbers and regularity of attendance, there was also considerable variation in the wealth and social composition of different 'societies'. They ranged from the Baptists of Thaxfield, who caused resentment among the Cambridgeshire congregations because of their reluctance to assist others in caring for the poor - 'They all in that place are rich', complained the brethren of the congregation at Melbourne in a letter to the church at Fenstanton, 'and it is their opinion that every church ought to keep their own poor' - to those of Twyford in Leicestershire, who were forced to ask the Fenstanton congregation for financial assistance.⁷⁹ James Disbrowe, gentleman, patron of the Eltisley living and uncle of the army general, John Disbrowe, was an elder in the Fenstanton congregation, and the Denne family appears to have been well-educated and respectable, but the hand-outs given to 'satisfy the necessities' of some members suggest that this congregation also contained a number of the very poor, including several widows.⁸⁰

General Baptist groups in the Midlands, like those in Kent, appear to have appealed to various sections of rural society, attracting craftsmen and tradesmen as well as labourers and 'the meanest sort' into their ranks. Henry Danvers of Perry Hall, near Stafford, and James and Thomas Disbrowe of Eltisley were landed gentry. William Dalby of Burley, Rutland, who signed the *Faith and Practice of Thirty Congregations* (1651) for Burley, may have been the Treasurer of the Rutland Committee for Sequestrations. William Inge, Esq., who represented the Leicester congregation at a General Baptist assembly held in Stamford in 1656, came from a wealthy family in Knighton and - according to the the historian, Alan Betteridge - was evidently the largest purchaser of fee farm and chief rent from the Corporation of Leicester in 1670-71.⁸¹ William Franke, member of the Wymeswold congregation, was a mercer of Leicester and served as mayor 1658-59. Thomas Rogers, who signed the *Faith and Practice of Thirty Congregations* for Leicester, was registered with the company of bakers in 1649,⁸² and Henry Hartshorne, a yeoman or husbandman of Lubenham, was a member of the Langton congregation.⁸³ Henry Denne of Emmanuel College and James Browne of Oriel were former clergymen.

Other General Baptists whose occupations can be identified were William Ainsworth, a labourer; Anger, sometime member of the Life Guard; Robert Everard, an army officer; Thomas Hinde, a ploughwright; Jonathon Johnson of Lincoln and Thomas Palmer of Henley-in-Arden, bakers; Humphrey Rogers, a baker's boy; Stoaks of Coventry and Francis Loxly, shoemakers; Thomas Morris, a 'husbandman'; Henry Oakes and Samuel Oates, weavers; Joseph Paget, a dyer; William Pardoe of

Litchfield, a clothworker; Walter and John Rose, butchers; Lawrence Williams, a baker, and John Wilson of Great Eversden, Cambridgeshire, a farmer.⁸⁴

It is unfortunate that we cannot build up a more detailed picture of the membership from Baptist records, since only three church books survive for the period, and one of these - the Conningsby/Tattershall minute book - includes only a brief list of names for the pre-Restoration era. The other two church books - from the congregations at Warboys and Fenstanton in Cambridgeshire - are of utmost importance in tracing Baptist influence and growth in East Anglia and the Midlands.

The records of the Warboys church begin in 1644, although the congregation did not exist independently of Fenstanton until 1648. During that year, owing to the 'great opposition they had going to Fenystanton, by the rude people of Fenystanton and St Ives', seven men formed a 'society' at Warboys. The entries for the years 1648-55 are brief, but from 1656-9 they become a little more detailed and include information about the disciplining of members, division in the church, and decisions taken by the congregation.⁸⁵

The Fenstanton Records, on the other hand, are a remarkably full account of the concerns of the congregation meeting at Fenstanton and Caxton Pastures. They deal mainly with the discipline of members, visits and letters to and from other General Baptist congregations, including those in the Midland counties, decisions taken by the church on a wide range of issues, the choosing and appointing of church officials, the congregation's missionary ventures, and a number of quarterly meetings which were held in conjunction with other congregations in the area. As well as providing an insight into the workings of a General Baptist congregation at the most basic level, these records reveal much about the network which existed between congregations. Unlike the Independents with their strong emphasis on congregational autonomy, the General Baptists appear to have regarded themselves as part of the 'Church of Christ' in a much wider sense. For them, the 'Body of Christ' included all those congregations baptized upon profession of faith and holding the doctrine of general redemption. Congregations were separated on logistic grounds, but they were never truly 'independent', and the somewhat ill-defined authority of the 'messengers' transcended the local congregation. The Fenstanton Records provide a clear example of this: in 1653 a number of problems developed in the assembly at Langtoft and Thurlby, Lincolnshire, over the issue of laying on of hands. Some members of the congregation, hearing that Samuel Oates was in the county, requested him to come and advise them on the matter. A few months later the same congregation wrote to Fenstanton to ask for Henry Denne's assistance at a disputation with the clergy at Castor, near Peterborough, and Denne also attended a further meeting of the congregation at Helpstone 'to assist us in the putting of ourselves in order'. Difficulties continued, and members of the congregation at Peterborough, hearing of this, 'were much troubled, which put us upon the clearing of ourselves'. Two members of the Peterborough congregation were sent for, but the problems dragged on unresolved, 'whereupon the church appointed a general meeting and called into their assistance some friends from three other societies, namely Burly, Peterborough

and Surfleet'. Finally, the Fenstanton congregation was once again requested to send some of their members to try and achieve a reconciliation.⁸⁶

Another example of cross-congregational authority comes from Coventry, where seven 'Elders and Brethren' of the Baptist church drew up a list, 'shewing whom they denied to be Ministers and Members of Christ', which they then sent to a congregation in Warwickshire'.⁸⁷

The sense of common identity between geographically-diverse communities was clearly reflected in the determination of a number of General Baptist congregations to work together in the propagation of the gospel. In July 1656 a meeting was held at Stamford in Lincolnshire in response to a request from a member of the Uppingham congregation that 'two messengers be sent into the West for the work of the ministry'. Those who were set aside for the work were John Fairbrother of Ravensthorpe and William Reignolds from Peterborough. It was agreed that 'the church shall defray the charge of the messengers and their families'. The messengers were to be paid ten shillings a week for themselves and their families, and members of the Ravensthorpe and Peterborough congregations undertook to take care of and visit the wives of the two men. Representatives from the congregations at Leicester, Nottingham, Peterborough, Ravensthorpe, Whitwell and Markfield were given the responsibility of 'stirring up' the other congregations in their area by informing them of the proceedings of the meeting and persuading them to make a financial contribution. At the close of the meeting, 'several parties of our friends' were asked to 'go to end the differences in general societies, and to use the utmost of their abilities for the making them up again'.⁸⁸

Contact between the congregations was not limited to those within the immediate vicinity. A considerable degree of co-ordination and co-operation between the various baptized churches in the Midlands, either through personal contacts or on a more formal basis through organized assemblies. In 1651 the *Faith and Practice of Thirty Congregations* - the so-called 'Midland Confession' of General Baptist churches - was signed by representatives from Leicestershire (9), Lincolnshire (12), Huntingdonshire (1), Bedfordshire (1), Northamptonshire (1), Oxfordshire (1), Rutland (3) and Warwickshire (2).⁸⁹ On 1 February 1652 a letter was sent from a number of churches to Oliver Cromwell, warning of the dangers of 'seeking high or great things for yourselves', and requesting that 'the many burdens and greivances yet unremoved' should be quickly dealt with in order that there might be a 'thorough reformation'. Representatives signed the petition on behalf of General Baptist congregations in Staffordshire (Berryhill), Leicestershire (Leicester, Mountsorrel, Bitteswell, Gumley), Northamptonshire (Ravensthorpe), and Shropshire (Bridgenorth).⁹⁰

On 15 October 1659 thirty-one churches published *A Further Testimony to Truth*, an address to Lambert's Committee of Safety which had replaced Parliament earlier in the month, repeating their request of 1652 for a 'thorough reformation'. The subscribers included representatives from congregations in Leicestershire, Rutland, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Staffordshire and Shropshire. In addition, 'An assent also hereunto has been given by the Warwickshire

churches, whose subscriptions, through some miscarriage, came not timely to hand.⁹¹

The following year, on 15 March 1660, a large group of 'Anabaptist' leaders met in London and published *A Brief Confession* to 'inform all Men (in these dayes of scandal and reproach) of our innocent Belief and Practise'. The document was subscribed by forty elders, deacons and ordinary members 'in the behalf of themselves, and many others unto whom they belong, in London, and in several countie of this nation, who are of the same faith'. Of those who can be identified, Joseph Wright (Lincolnshire), John Hammersley (Staffordshire), and Benjamin Morley (Northamptonshire) represented the Midland counties.⁹²

There are, quite apart from the Fenstanton records and the joint political appeals, many other references to contacts between congregations in the Midlands. Most of the leaders appear to have travelled widely to minister to different groups and hold disputations. James Browne of Bridgenorth, Henry Haggard of Stafford, Robert Everard of Easenhall near Rugby, Benjamin Morley of Ravensthorpe, and Samuel Oates and Henry Denne can all be traced in contexts a long way from their homes.

Communication between congregations on a formal and informal basis must have created a sense of solidarity with other General Baptists in the Midland counties, but, as with Kent, the General Baptist network spread even further: many of the congregations also had strong ties with their 'brethren' in London. Samuel Oates appears to have divided his time between London and his home town. Although still based in Rutland, he signed *The Humble Representation of the congregation of Jesus Christ usually meeting at the Chequer outside Aldgate* (c.1653), along with James Browne of Bridgenorth, who was also in contact with this group. Their links with the Exchequer congregation (which moved shortly afterwards to the Stone Chapel, St Paul's Cathedral) were probably forged as a result of their work as chaplains in the parliamentary forces.⁹³ Benjamin Morley attended the 1654, 1656 and 1660 Assemblies on behalf of Northamptonshire. He was also closely connected with the congregation led by John Griffith. The two leaders joined together on a number of occasions to argue the case for the 'laying on of hands' for all baptized believers.⁹⁴ Morley was well known to the merchants, Thomas Lambe and William Allen with whom he submitted a question to the General Assembly in 1654.⁹⁵ John Griffith had a contact in Rutland who kept him informed of developments in the provinces with regard to the 'laying on of hands' issue.⁹⁶ Henry Danvers was another General Baptist who had obvious ties with London. Although retaining links with the Stafford congregation into which he had been baptized in 1649, his business and calling took him frequently to the capital. In 1653, while serving as the Member of Parliament for Leicester, he was associated with the congregation which met in the Stone Chapel in St Paul's Cathedral.⁹⁷ The soapboiler Thomas Lambe's early connections with the Midland counties have already been noted in the context of the 1647 petition from the Rutland clergy,⁹⁸ but he was apparently still active in the area in 1655, when John Denne, elder of the Fenstanton church, met him at a meeting of the congregation in Peterborough: 'Coming thither accidently we met with our brother Lambe of

London which was much joy unto us.’⁹⁹

In 1653 a member of Samuel Loveday’s gathered church at Tower Hill became a member of the Warboys congregation. This was only one of a number of connections which existed between Warboys, Fenstanton and London: on a missionary tour in September 1653 Henry Denne and his companion went to Littlebury in Essex ‘to seek out brother Ives’, [Jeremiah Ives] who was shortly to take over the leadership of the congregation at St Paul’s;¹⁰⁰ and John Denne and a member of the Warboys congregation both attended Loveday’s congregation when their business took them to London. Samuel Loveday and John Denne were also in contact by letter.¹⁰¹

Some of the visitors from London, however, were not quite so welcome, ‘there was one that came down from London, who said that he did belong unto the congregation there, but was in want’, wrote the chronicler of the Fenstanton records, ‘therefore he came down to see if we could bestow anything upon him.’ The congregation was not impressed; indeed, the importunity of a number of unscrupulous individuals appears to have been a problem for a number of congregations in the provinces. The General Baptists in West Kent took steps to tackle the issue at their quarterly meeting in Sussex, *circa* 1656.¹⁰²

A further connection between the congregations existed in the person of the printer and bookseller, Francis Smith, who, between 1654 and 1658, published exclusively for General Baptist writers. Works by Samuel Fisher, Richard Kingsnorth, Matthew Caffyn and George Hammon from the Home Counties, Thomas Lambe (merchant), William Allen, John Griffith and William Rider from London, Jonathan Johnson from Lincoln, Henry Haggar from Stafford, and Henry Denne, who was probably leading the congregation at Canterbury at the time of writing, were printed and sold at Smith’s shop in Flying-horse Court, off Fleet Street, near Chancery Lane. William Larner and richard Moone were other printers used by General Baptist authors, and Moone’s shop in St Paul’s churchyard and Larner’s near Fleet Bridge, outside Ludgate, provided other outlets for the dissemination of their ideas. There are a number of examples to indicate that this literature was distributed among friends in the country.¹⁰³

The General Baptist congregations in Kent, London and the Midland counties had much in common in terms of foundation, literature, theology and ecclesiology. The organization of the missionary campaigns, the development of an hierarchy of quarterly and general assemblies during the 1650s, and the network which existed between individuals and churches, suggests a far higher degree of co-ordination than has hitherto been granted them. While differing in political significance, geographical position, and social and economic background, their sense of identity and community as members of the ‘Baptized Churches of Christ’ appears to have been sufficient to transcend local particularism and unite them in response to the ‘Royal Commission of King Jesus’.

This paper was first presented at the Baptist Historical Society's Summer School at Regent's Park College, Oxford, in 1991. It forms part of an Oxford MLitt dissertation, R. M. Clifford, 'The General Baptists 1640-1660', 1991.

- 1 Thomas Edwards, *Gangraena or a Catalogue and Discovery of many Errors, Heresies, Blasphemies, and Pernicious Practices of the Sectaries in this Time*, (15 February 1646) (hereafter *Gang.*) I, p.46; 65-6.
- 2 *ibid.*, pp.65-6.
- 3 For further details of Edward Barber and his writings, see Chapter Two of my MLitt thesis.
- 4 Edward Barber, *A True Discovery of the Ministry of the Gospel*, 1645, p.5.
- 5 Thomas Wynell, *The Covenant Plea for Infants*, Oxford 1642, p.70.
- 6 *Gang.* II, p.10; E. B. Underhill, ed., *Records of the Church of Christ gathered at Fenstanton, Warboys and Hexham, 1644-1720*, Hanserd Knollys Society Publication, 1854 (hereafter *RCF*); p.64; House of Lords Record Office, Main Papers, 11 December 1647, *The Humble Petition of Sundry Ministers of the Countie of Rutland*; John Stalham, *The Summe of a Conference at Terling*, 1644, Epistle Dedicatory, unpagged.
- 7 *Gang.* III, pp.50-1; Joseph Ivimey, *History of the English Baptists*, 4 vols., 1811-30, II, pp.210,214-5,567-8.
- 8 *Lords Journals* IX, pp.195-6; Historical Manuscripts Commission, 6th Report, App.p.175.
- 9 C. Fowler, *Daemonium Meridianum: Satan at Noon*, 1656, pt.II, pp.50-2.
- 10 Records of the Church at Warboys in Cambridgeshire, Angus Library MS, fols 1 and 2r.
- 11 Thomas Lambe, *Christ Crucified*, 1646, A4r(sig).
- 12 Samuel Fisher, *Christianismus Redivivus*, 2nd edn., 1655, p.154. First published in 1650 as *Baby Baptism meer Babism*, and republished after Fisher's defection to the Quakers as *Christianismus Redivivus*, 1655. [All references are taken from the later edition].
- 13 Nathaniel Stephens, *A Precept for the Baptism of Infants*, 1651, p.63.
- 14 Thomas Wynell, *Covenants Plea*, 1642, To the Reader, B r(sig.); John Stalham, *op.cit.* *Gang.* I, p.66. The references to Oates and Denne are from *Gang.* I, p.147; *Gang.* II, pp.3-4; I, pp.76-6. For details of Lambe's tours, see Wynell (Gloucestershire), Stalham, *op.cit.*, and *Gang.* I pp.92-5 (Essex), *Gang.* I p.181, III p.78 (Kent), I pp.92-5 (Surrey and Hampshire), III p.30 (Wiltshire); *The Humble Petition of Sundry of the Ministers of the Countie of Rutland & the Parts Adiacent*, December 1647, House of Lords Record Office, Main Papers, 11 December 1647 (Rutland).
- 15 See G. F. Nuttall, 'Dissenting Churches in Kent Before 1700', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol.14 (1963), pp.175-189; W. T. Whitley (ed), *The Minutes of the General Assembly of General Baptist Churches*, 1909, i.xlix; *Baptist Historical Society Transactions*, 1, 172.
- 16 M. R. Watts, *The Dissenters*, 1978, p.284.
- 17 Patrick Collinson, *Godly People*, 1983; see esp. ch.15, 'Cranbrook and the Fletchers', pp.401f.
- 18 Alan Everitt, *The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion*, 1966, esp. ch.IV.
- 19 A. Everitt, 'Change in the Provinces: the Seventeenth Century', *Department of English Local History, Occasional Papers*, 2nd series, 1 (1979), pp.41-2.
- 20 *Gang.* I, p.75.
- 21 Luke Howard, *A Looking Glasse for Baptists*, 1672, in *Works*, (1704), pp.107-8.
- 22 *Gang.* I, pp.181-2.
- 23 *ibid.*
- 24 J. R. Pitman (ed.), *Works of John Lightfoot (1822-5)*, vol.XIII, *Journal of the Assembly of Divines*, p.308; *Gang.* III, p.78.
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- 26 Rochester, *Gang.* I, pp.181-2]; Dover and Canterbury [Luke Howard, *A Looking Glasse for Baptists* (1672), pp.107-8]; Sandwich [*The Divell in Kent*, (9 August 1647)]; Maidstone [Adam Taylor, *A History of the English General Baptists*, 2 vols. (1818), i, 288].
- 27 B. Reay, 'Quakerism and Society', in J. F. McGregor and B. Reay (eds), *Radical Religion in the English Revolution*, 1974, pp.141ff.
- 28 Second Smarden Church Book [MS Angus Library] fol.1r.
- 29 *ibid.*, fol 2r; Christopher Blackwood, *The Storming of Antichrist*, 1644, Epistle Dedicatory; Douglas Brown, 'Christopher Blackwood: Portrait of a Seventeenth Century Baptist', *BQ* 32, 1987-8, pp.28-38; *TBHS* 2, (1910-11), p.192.
- 30 Alumni Oxoniensis; Samuel Fisher, *Christianismus Redivivus*, p.154.
- 31 Fisher, *op.cit.* p.3.

- 32 Thomas Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists*, 4 vols., 1738-40, I pp.359-63.
- 33 Fisher, *op. cit.*, A2r(sig).
- 34 *ibid.*, p.420; John Couch, *Anabaptistarm Scrupuli: or An Answer to a Kentish Anabaptist*, Jan.1650, A2r(sig); George Hammon, *A Discovery of the Latitude of the Loss of the Earthly Paradise*, 1655, T.p., p.1.
- 35 Second Smarden Church Book, fols. 1r-2r(sig); *An Account of Some of the Most Eminent and Leading Men Among the Anabaptists*, (c.1711), fols.48-50; Gang. III, p.98.
- 36 Hezekiah Holland, *Adams Condition in Paradise Discovered*, 1656 [against George Hammond of Biddenden], Epistle Dedicatory (unpaged).
- 37 Adam Taylor, *op. cit.* I, p.283.
- 38 The first Smarden Church Book was transcribed and indexed by K. W. H. Howard (1981). Folio numbers are from this transcript. If 1640 is insisted upon as the foundation year, then the covenant must have been from a semi-separatist or non-Baptist congregation, since the elder, Richard Kingsnorth, was not baptized until 1644, previously being described as 'a Church man'. cf. Daniel Medhurst's summary of the congregation's beginnings in the second church book.
- 39 British Library ADD.MS 36,709: *A Register Booke or Record of the Congregation of Jesus Christ Inhabiting in and about Speldhurst and Penbury in Kent* [henceforth Bradbourne-Sevenoaks church book] fol 4r.
- 40 Taylor, *op. cit.*, p.283.
- 41 *ibid.*, I, p.283; First Smarden Church Book, fols 1r,2r; Bradbourne-Sevenoaks Church Book, fol 4r.
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- 43 K. Wrightson and D. Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village, Terling, 1525-1700*, (1979); M. Spufford, *Contrasting Communities*, Cambridge, 1974.
- 44 David Russen, *Fundamentals Without Foundation, or a True Picture of the Anabaptists in their Rise, Progress and Practice*, Angus Library copy, 1702, p.34.
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- 50 Gang. III, p.98; Henry Danvers, *A Treatise of Laying on of Hands*, 1674, p.58; John Griffith, *A Treatise Touching Falling From Grace*, 5 April 1653, To the Reader, unpaged.
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- 52 *Christianismus Redivivus*, p.493.
- 53 George Hammon, *Truth and Innocency prevailing*, 1660, T.p.
- 54 Bradbourne/Sevenoaks Church Book, fols 30, 31.
- 55 *Mercurius Civicus, London Intelligencer*, no.177, Thursday 8 October - Thursday 15 October 1647.
- 56 *The Humble Petition of the Baptized Congregations assembled at Ailsbury*, cited in *The Weekly Post*, 24-31 May 1659; *Commons Journal*, 7, 1651-9, pp.665-6; *An Account of some of the most eminent and leading men*, fol.68r.
- 57 *ibid.*, fol.68r.
- 58 J. S. Morrill, *The Revolt of the Provinces*, 1976; Alan Everitt, *The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion*, Leicester 1966.
- 59 Margaret Spufford, *op. cit.*, p.237. For the Kentish petitions to the House of Commons see L. B. Larking (ed.), *Proceedings in Kent*, Camden Soc. 80 (1862), pp.101-240.
- 60 See, for example, J. Crompton, 'Leicestershire Lollards', in *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archeological and Historical Society*, XLIV, 1968-9, pp.11-44.
- 61 Benjamin Evans, *The Early English Baptists*, 2 vols., 1862-4, II pp.21-44; *The Works of William Laud DD*, 7 vols, 1847-60, V, part II, p.326.
- 62 Martin Mason, *The Boasting Baptist: Sions Enemy Discovered*, n.d., n.p.; Henoeh Howet, *The Beast that was, & is not, & yet is, looked upon*, 1659, p.37 and *passim*; *Calendar of State Papers Domestic* (hereafter CSPD), 1640,

- pp.426, 431; CSPD, 1640-1, p.384.
- 63 Joseph Ivimey, *History of the English Baptists*, 4 vols, 1811-30, II, p.608.
- 64 For further details concerning these evangelists, see my MLitt thesis, particularly chapters 2 and 5.
- 65 Oates: *Gang*, I, postscript (3rd edn. 1646) p.113; *Gang*, II, pp.3-4, 10. Lambe and Tomlins: *Gang*, I, pp.92-5. Batt: Stalham, *op.cit.* Denne: *Gang*, I, *A Copy of some letters*, pp.76-7. Oates' 'lawful call' from a church in Norwich was referred to by John Drew in *A Serious Address to Samuel Oates*, 1649, pp.10-12.
- 66 *Petition to Parliament from parish ministers in Rutland and adjacent parts of Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire*, House of Lords Record Office Main Papers, 11 December 1647, 15 May 1648.
- 67 The seven parishes were Barnack, Little Casterton, Casterton Magna, Uffingham, Tinwell, Stretton, and All Hallows, Stamford.
- 68 Alan Betteridge, 'Early Baptists in Leicestershire and Rutland', *BQ* XXV, 1973-4, p.355.
- 69 *Gang*, I, p.149.
- 70 *Reliquiae Baxterianae*; 1696, pp.45, 56.
- 71 Immanuel Knutton, *Seven Questions about the Controversy between the Church and the Anabaptists*, 1645, A2r(sig).
- 72 *Gang*, I, pp.76-7; III pp.88, 250.
- 73 See, for example, Anne Whiteman, 'The Restoration of the Church of England', in G. F. Nuttall and O. Chadwick (eds.), *From Uniformity to Unity, 1662-1962*, 1962, pp.35ff; David Wykes, 'A Re-appraisal of the reliability of the 1676 Compton Census with Respect to Leicester', *Leicestershire Archeological and Historical Society Transactions*, 55, 1979-80, pp.72-7.
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- 76 *RCF* pp.270-2.
- 77 *ibid.*, p.126.
- 78 *ibid.*, pp.141, 144-7.
- 79 *ibid.*, pp.114, 167-8.
- 80 *ibid.*, pp.14, 82-3.
- 81 Danvers: see Ruth Kidson, *The Gentry of Staffordshire*, Staffs.Hist.Coll., 4th series, 11, Staffs.Record Soc., p.13; *BQ* 28, 1979-80, pp.251-6. James and Thomas Disbrow: *RCF*; Margaret Spufford, *op.cit.*, p.286. William Dalby: *Faith and Practise of Thirty Congregations*, 1651; British Library, Egerton MS 2978: note of payment by William Dalby, Treasurer; Northants R.O *Diocesan Ct. Instance Bk.*, 57 *Inst.*, July 1670; presented for non-attendance at his parish church. William Inge: Alan Betteridge, 'Early Baptists in Leicestershire and Rutland', *BQ* 25, 1973-4, p.364.
- 82 William Franke: Henry Hartopp (ed.), *Register of the Freeman of Leicester 1196-1770*, Leicester 1927, pp.125, 134, 142, 151. Thomas Rogers: *ibid.*, pp.370-1; H. Stocks (ed.), *Records of the Borough of Leicester, 1603-1688*, Cambridge 1923, p.383.
- 83 R. H. Evans, 'Non-Conformists in Leicestershire in 1669', *op.cit.*, p.130.
- 84 Evidence for occupations taken from Alan Betteridge, 'Early Baptists in Leicestershire and Rutland', *BQ* 25, 1973-4, pp.204-211, 272-85, 354-78; Thomas Hall, *The Pulpit Guarded*, 25 April 1651, T.p.; Thomas Hall, *The Font Guarded*, 1652, T.p.; *Gang*, III, p.81; *A Perfect Diurnall*, 1-8 April 1650, p.175; *The Works of William Laud DD*, *op.cit.*, vol.V, part II, p.326; R. H. Evans, *Non-Conformists in Leicestershire in 1669*, *op.cit.*, 'Leicestershire Certificates Concerning Conventicles, 1669'.
- 85 *RCF* pp.267ff.
- 86 *RCF* pp.63-8.
- 87 Richard Farnworth, *The Holy Scriptures from Scandals are Cleared*, 1655, T.p.
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- 89 *The Faith and Practise of Thirty Congregations*, 1651.
- 90 John Nickolls, (ed.), *Original Letters and Papers of State*, 1743, pp.80-1.
- 91 *A Further Testimony to Truth*, 1659, reprinted in *BQ* 25, 1973-4f, pp.279-83.
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- 93 Nickolls, *Original Letters*, pp.121-2, *The Humble Representation of the congregation of Jesus Christ usually meeting at the Chequer outside Aldgate*, c.1653. Both Oates and Browne served as army chaplains with the

- Parliamentary forces in Scotland. [*Weekly Intelligencer*, no.387, 6-13 March 1655; Firth and Davies, *Reg. Hist.* II, p.502.]
- 94 Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Rawlinson. A 18, fol 37; John Abell to — , 3 September 1654; Bradbourne/Sevenoaks Church Book, fol.30r.
- 95 John Griffith, *Gods Oracle and Christs Doctrine*, 1655, pp.61ff. Answers a paper about 'laying on of hands' 'sent from Rutland or thereabouts, by a friend there, to London, with the desire of an Answer unto them'.
- 96 MS Rawl A 18 fol 37; John Abell to — , 3 September 1654.
- 97 MS Rawl A 8 fol 127. Samuel Oates to Robert Jeffes, November 1653.
- 98 HLRO Main Papers, 11 December 1647, *The Humble Petition of Sundry of the Ministers of the Countie of Rutland*.
- 99 RCF p.153. .
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- 101 RCF pp.223-31; 234.
- 102 RCF p.16; First Smarden Church Book, fol.24.
- 103 For Smith's publications, see list in James Rutherford, *Joy of Angels*, 1658, p.21; P. G. Morrison, *Index of Printers, Publishers and Booksellers in Donald Wing's Short Title Catalogue*, University of Michigan Press 1955. For distribution of literature, see Thurloe, S. P. IV, p.720; Hezekiah Holland, *op. cit.*; Nathaniel Stephens, *a Precept for the Baptism of Infants*, 1655, p.63.

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BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

This year, because the Baptist Assembly is to be almost entirely devoted to seminars relating to MISSION as a concluding aspect of the BMS bicentenary celebrations, it was decided to hold the Baptist Historical Society's Annual General Meeting at an independent venue. We shall, therefore, hold a day meeting at Bunyan Meeting Free Church, Elstow, Bedfordshire, on Saturday, 10 July 1993. Although this will preclude some from sharing on this occasion, it will also give opportunity outside Assembly structures for other members to attend. Following the AGM at 11 a.m., the Annual Lecture, 'Fear not what men say': Bedfordshire non-conformist devotions - the Agnes Beaumont story (1674)', will be given by the Revd Dr Raymond Brown MA BD MTh, Vice-President of the Baptist Historical Society and former Principal of Spurgeon's College. The day will include opportunity to visit the Bunyan Museum. The meeting is open to all who wish to participate. Lunch can be provided at £3-50, if booked from the Secretary by 1 July.