

United Church Dorchester

1978 – 2018

FORTY YEARS ON

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List of Ministers

| | |
|-----------------------------|-------------|
| The Revd. Bill Kent | 1978 – 1981 |
| The Revd. Ken Sawyer | 1978 – 1981 |
| The Revd. David Reep | 1981 – 1989 |
| The Revd. Baron Pont | 1984 – 1987 |
| The Revd. Jim Mackriell | 1987 – 1995 |
| The Revd. Barrie Snook | 1989 – 2003 |
| The Revd. Daphne Hull | 1996 – 1998 |
| The Revd. Alan Wickens | 1999 – 2003 |
| The Revd. Paul Arnold | 2003 - 2013 |
| The Revd. Brenda Stephenson | 2004 – 2012 |
| The Revd. Steph Jenner | 2013 – |
| The Revd. Peter Clark | 2014 – |

Forty Years On

The Covenant

The United Church, Dorchester, was inaugurated on Wednesday, 27th September, 1978. This union of the former Dorchester Methodist Church and Dorchester United Reformed Church was instituted at a joint service presided over by the Revd. Laurence Ashman, Chairman of the Southampton Methodist District and the Revd. Peter Chesney, Moderator of the U.R.C. Wessex Province. The order of Service included the covenant: -

“We will seek together the fulfilment of God’s will, bear one another’s burdens and share each other’s joys, welcome the stranger, befriend the needy, care for the elderly and the young, so building up this church as part of the great family of God. We promise through prayer, service and responsible giving to work out our faith in daily life, and support the Church in its total world mission.”

Distinctive History

Forty years on, it is hard to appreciate quite how extraordinary was the vision which led to this union. Although the two churches were both in South Street, Dorchester, they each had a distinctive history and tradition. The United Reformed Church (until 1972 the Dorchester Congregational Church) traced its origins back to the Act of Uniformity in 1662 and the ejection of William Benn from All Saints, Dorchester, because of his refusal to take the required oath. The earliest Methodist preaching in Dorchester was recorded in 1748 when John Haime, a close friend of John Wesley, preached to the prisoners in Dorchester goal.

Initial Steps

The union could not have happened successfully without some years of sensitive preparation. It all began with an informal meeting on 8th July, 1970, at the invitation of the Minister and a number of the Deacons of the Congregational Church with Methodist Leaders’ Meeting members. Resulting from this, formal requests were addressed to the Deacons of the Congregational Church and Leaders’ Meeting of the Methodist Church, asking for a joint consideration of the possibility of a close working together of the two churches. Both officially welcomed these spontaneous requests and six representatives from each church were appointed to a joint committee. The committee on 13th November 1970 agreed that “it was incumbent upon the churches to unite fully as soon as possible.”

Growing Together

The joint committee minute book (now stored in the Dorset History Centre) clearly reveals the complexity of their task. They were faced with a plethora of organizational, legal and

financial issues. At that time, there were very few other models from which to learn. There were divided views on the pace to proceed, whether to go full steam ahead or to take it more slowly, but the committee came to see that their paramount task must be to create opportunities for the two congregations to grow together in friendship and trust. This happened over the next eight years through joint services, joint Sunday Schools and youth activities, integration of the two church calendars and introduction of a joint church magazine.

External Commission

There remained one further key issue. The principle was quickly established that a newly united church must come together on one single site. Some preliminary thought was then given to the possibility of selling both existing sites and building a completely new church, but this was quickly rejected as impracticably expensive. In an act of great wisdom, it was then decided to invite an external joint U.R.C. and Methodist commission to examine the two properties. Taking into account the potential of each site for redevelopment, their estimated market value, and the facilities for car parking, the external commission recommended in April 1978 the sale of the Methodist Church.

Transfer of Worship

The next major step was the transfer of worship and witness from the Methodist to the U.R.C. premises on Friday, 2nd November, 1979. The service began in the Methodist Church (on the corner of South Street and Durngate Street). Then the congregation proceeded down South Street and the Methodist Minister locked the door of the Methodist Church. According to one observer, "The street was busy with shoppers and the police were there, two of them on foot, keeping the traffic back." The congregation then entered the United Reformed Church to continue the service and the presiding minister said: -

"In this challenging time for the Church, it is necessary for Christ's people to gird themselves for a more positive act of witness and service in our local community. We have seen that for us it has meant a union of our two congregations, with the consequent decision to dispose of one set of premises in order that the other may be rebuilt to meet the needs of those who follow us here in succeeding generations."

In the 'Wilderness'

From early in 1981, for a period of twenty months, the United Reformed Church became a building site and the newly formed joint congregation met for worship on Sunday mornings in the former Hardye's Boys School. Everyone was subjected to this new experience, often likened to the Israelites crossing the wilderness, but highly valued for throwing people together and opening up many new friendships. By the time the building work was complete and the church re-opened on 30th October 1982, the U.R.C. Moderator felt able to

say “Dorchester is the church where the join doesn’t show.” The church owed a huge debt at this time to the fine leadership and pastoral skill of the Revd. David Reep.

New Church Building

The transformation of the church building provided a splendidly creative blend of old and new. We owe a debt of gratitude to our Victorian forebears who built the church in 1857. Their faith and confidence is to be seen externally in the landmark spire and internally in the colourful and majestically soaring church roof. In 1981/82, the opportunity was taken to create a large foyer and to insert glass doors at the front of the church as a visible reminder that the church should be open to the needs of the world. At the same time, the church pews and lofty pulpit were replaced with more flexible furnishings, so that both traditional and new forms of worship could be enjoyed. The rear premises were completely rebuilt to provide a new church hall, kitchen, toilets, stores and six meeting rooms.

Millennium Project

The pooling of physical and financial resources hugely strengthened the work of the new United Church. In 1998, the Church took a further bold step in purchasing the next door shop and incorporating Number 51, Charles Street into the church building. This enabled the church to celebrate the Millennium by opening three major new facilities: the church shop, the coffee lounge, and the quiet room.

Expansion

Even more importantly, the formation of the United Church inspired new life and energy in the congregation. In the first eight years, the church welcomed 150 new members. The programme of activities steadily expanded, to the point where some 200 people were regularly involved in voluntary church work. The church buildings are now open for the use of both church and community on every day of the week, morning, afternoon and evening. The footfall of people using the premises has been estimated to be at least 75.000 per annum.

New Logo

One of the early decisions was to adopt the logo which now appears on all church stationery, magazines, news sheets and orders of service. The cross is, of course, the time honoured symbol of the Christian Church, but our logo combines this with some fresh and surprising angles, suggesting movement and new life, and the apex of the cross is a uniquely symbolic representation of the United Church spire.

Broad Church

The logo is representative of a church which is very much alive. From its inception, it has been broad, inclusive, ecumenical, with the addition of new members from many backgrounds. Although it remains committed to the two denominations from which the church sprang, it draws generously from many other traditions. Forms of worship are flexible, communion is open, and the guiding conviction is that God's love is for all.

Spiritual Growth

With increasing consumer choice in society, the church has gradually widened the range of services. A short midweek service caters for busy shoppers and market goers. A monthly 'Encounter' service is for those who prefer something more informal and participatory. Occasional 'Church with Choices' on Sunday mornings provides the opportunity to pursue a theme through music, poetry, drama, art, discussion or quiet reflection. On Sunday evenings, there have been occasional Taize or Celtic services. In addition, the church encourages spiritual growth in many other ways, through prayer and meditation groups, house groups and Lent courses; through Bible reading and prayer manuals; through the local church magazine 'Vision' and the national church magazine 'Reform'; and through interactive exhibitions, 'Journey to the empty tomb' and 'Journey to the Stable'. The quiet room is available at all times for anyone who needs to be still.

Pastoral Support

Pastoral needs have grown over the last forty years with more people living longer, more people living on their own, more scattered families, and greater awareness of mental as well as physical health needs. The ministers have the support of a pastoral assistant and over thirty voluntary pastoral visitors. Flowers and tapes of the Sunday morning services are taken to people who are sick or housebound. A car service is also offered on Sunday mornings. Other individual needs are met by a Solos' Group for people on their own and by a bereavement group. The church has also accommodated a number of other agencies including Cruise, Mediation Dorset, Citizens' Advice Bureau, Alcoholics Anonymous, Rethink, and Dorset Autistic Support Service.

New roles for women

The role of women within the church has been increasingly recognised and valued. Prior to 1978, ministerial and lay leadership posts were overwhelmingly male, but in the last forty years there has been a marked change. In 1980, Elizabeth Mary Davies became the first Dorchester woman to be ordained into the U.R.C. Ministry and within a few years she was followed by Margaret Oxenham and Naomi Cooke as Methodist ministers. The United Church has, in turn, warmly welcomed as ministers Daphne Hull, Brenda Stephenson and

Steph Jenner, and has also been served by a succession of capable and committed laywomen as Senior Steward, Church Secretary, Director of Music and countless other roles.

Opportunities for young people

From its inception, the United Church has aimed to be 'child friendly'. The provision for young people included cradle roll, toddler group, Junior Church and creche, Junior Brass Group, 13-18 group, a long standing Summer Camp for younger families, an annual group visit to the Greenbelt Christian Festival, and for a number of young adults, voluntary service overseas. The church has enjoyed good links with some local schools and given financial support to the Bournemouth University Chaplaincy. It has regularly supported Action for Children, including Dorset Nightstop, which provides emergency shelter and guidance for young people who are homeless. In 2001, the church was distressed to hear that each year in the UK, 100,000 children lose all contact with one or other parent, so it launched the Dorchester Child Contact Centre where, in a safe and neutral setting, relationships can be restored.

Musical Riches

The church offers an excellent acoustic for making music. The quality of congregational singing is often much appreciated by visitors. The fine organ largely dates from 1888 but it is thought that some of the pipes could be older. The church has an instrumental group, brass group, choir, singing group and a worship in dance group, all of which greatly enhance the worship. With these splendid resources, the range of church music has steadily expanded over the last forty years, though a careful balance is maintained between traditional hymns and more modern hymns and songs. The church has also become a favourite venue for concerts, music courses and rehearsals for community groups, including the Dorset County Museum Music Society, Dorset Rural Music School, Dorchester Choral Society, Dorchestra, Dorset for Singing, Local Vocals, Encore Singers, Rock Choir, Quangle Wangle Choir, Casterbridge Male Voice Choir, Viva, and Flute Choir.

Serving the Community

The Wednesday coffee morning and stall has become an institution, going back well before the formation of the United Church. It regularly attracts up to 300 people who come from towns and villages all over Dorset and beyond. Large coach parties often arrive, having been advised by their drivers, "If you want a good cup of coffee and decent toilets, then go to the United Church!" From the proceeds, donations are sent each year to a large number of mainly local charities. The church hall is also frequently in demand for charity coffee mornings and sales on Saturdays.

The coffee lounge opened in 2000 and operates on Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday (except when there is a charity event in the hall). It offers home made cakes, a wide range of

hot and cold drinks, interesting art on the walls and a warm, friendly welcome. It has become a favourite haunt, especially for people who live on their own.

The attractively arranged church shop also started in 2000 and is open each week from Monday to Saturday inclusive. It stocks a range of gifts, Traidcraft foods and chocolates, CDs, Christian books, and cards for all occasions. It welcomes browsers and is always happy to take orders. The coffee morning, the coffee lounge and the church shop are all run by teams of wonderfully willing volunteers.

Church in the Community

The church maintains close links with residential and nursing homes and with Dorset County Hospital. Until 2013, one of the ministers served in the Dorchester Prison Chaplaincy team. Another church member is chaplain to the Dorset Fire Service. Recently, the church has led a Churches Together initiative to start a Town Centre Chaplaincy, which undertakes regular visits to the town centre shops and offers a listening ear to all the shopworkers. In the newer area of Poundbury, the church strongly supported Churches Together in opening the Quiet Space, a haven where people of all faiths and no faith can find peace. In contrast, among the many thousands of people who flock annually to the Dorset County Show, some young families have been delighted to make use of the United Church tent for baby changing and young children's play facilities.

Christian Action

It is sadly true that during the time that the United Church has been open, there has been a seriously widening gap between the "haves" and the "have nots". The church has regularly supported the Women's Refuge and the Dorchester Poverty Action Group, including its offshoots, Second Chance Furniture and the now sadly closed Hub. The opening of the First Credit Union in Dorset was a really important step forward for people who were unable to open a bank account and previously often found themselves in the grip of 'loan sharks'. It has been warmly acknowledged by the Credit Union Board that without the United Church opening its door to the Credit Union for the first few years, it would probably never have got off the ground. More recently, the church has regularly supported the Dorchester Foodbank which provides emergency food supplies to people who have been referred by social agencies or churches because they have no food and no money – and shockingly, the numbers have grown year by year.

Global Concerns

In 1978, no-one knew about global warming, climate change, Fairtrade, or sustainable lifestyles! The church has played a full part since then in raising awareness of our personal and corporate responsibility to be good and just stewards of God's creation, to appreciate the interdependence of people across the world, and to safeguard the future quality of life for our children and grandchildren. The United Church was one of the earliest to be recognised as an Eco Congregation. It has an established "Green" group and has had monthly 'green' services. Church members have led the way in promoting Fairtrade, not only within the church, but also in establishing Dorchester as a Fairtrade town. There has been consistently generous support for Christian Aid's work in some of the poorest parts of the world, tackling the root causes of poverty, as well as responding to natural and man-made disasters and to the greatest number of homeless refugees the world has ever known. Other specific projects supported by the church have included Tools with a Mission (sending unwanted tools to help establish new African businesses); Samaritans Purse (sending Christmas parcels to refugee children); Halo Trust (working to eliminate landmines); Mercy Ships (providing badly needed hospital services in remote parts of Africa); Virtual Doctors (linking UK doctors and surgeons by computer to train and guide African hospitals); Water Aid and Toilet Twinning (improving health and hygiene by providing clean water supplies and water closets).

German Partnership

In 1984, the church entered into a new partnership with the German Lutheran churches of Lubbecke. This regular exchange has been of enormous mutual enrichment, always including joint worship, wonderful brass and choral music, living with host families and the warmest hospitality. In 1991, immediately following the dramatic fall of the Iron Curtain and after forty years of the Cold War, Lutheran Christians from East Germany joined their friends from Lubbecke in a visit to Dorchester, the very first time in their lives that they had been free to travel to the West. In 1995, fifty years after the end of World War II, we together gave thanks for peace and reconciliation. In 2017, we together celebrated the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's Ninety Five Theses, the start of the Reformation and the translation of the Bible and hymns from Latin into the people's own languages of German and English.

Heritage Links

A church group led by the Revd Jim Mackriell visited Israel in 1994. In a land often torn apart by racial and religious conflict, the group's visits to all the early Christian sites were greatly enriched by the kindness, knowledge and sensitive understanding of the Jewish guide. The group's visit to Jericho coincided with the decision of the Israeli Government to switch control of the city from the Israeli army to the Arab civilian police. The rejoicing Arab population were out on the streets, often expressing their joy by presenting the Dorchester

visitors with flowers and fruit. In contrast, the visit to the Jewish Holocaust Memorial was overpoweringly sad, but left the group totally resolved to resist racism in all its forms.

A few years later, another group, led by the Revd Alan Wickens, visited Iona to trace the earliest origins of Christianity in mainland Britain. They joined the pilgrimage walk around the island to visit the spot where Columba is believed to have landed in A.D.563 The group was deeply impressed, on the one hand, by the beauty and seclusion of the island, and, on the other hand, by the liveliness and energy of the young volunteers from all over the world. The morning and evening liturgies at Iona Abbey were extremely memorable for their global breadth and vision.

In 1996, the Revd Barrie Snook led a party to Dorchester, Massachusetts, following in the steps of the Puritan settlers from here who set sail for North America in 1630 to seek freedom of worship. Hosts from the First Congregational Church were proud to recall that these first settlers not only founded their church as soon as they arrived, but were also pioneers of two startlingly democratic innovations, the first American Free School, and the First American Town Meeting, which all the settlers were entitled to attend. To this day, there is still each year a re-enactment of the arrival of the first settlers, and the First Church still cherishes an hourglass, brought across the Atlantic from England in 1630, to tell the preacher that his sermon must not be less than three hours!

The United Church also has strong heritage links with the Tolpuddle Martyrs. Their trial in 1834 at the Dorchester Crown Court, held in Shire Hall, became a landmark case, nationally and internationally, in the struggle for workers to be treated justly. Five of the six martyrs were Methodists and today, within the membership of the United Church, there are still two or three direct descendants. Although documentary evidence is lacking, it seems extremely likely that their leader George Loveless, a local preacher in the Dorchester Circuit, must, on occasions, have preached in Dorchester. The martyrs are remembered and honoured every year at the Tolpuddle Festival which is attended by thousands of people from all over the country. They are further remembered in Dorchester by the opening in 2018 of the Shire Hall Heritage Centre and in Tolpuddle, by the restoration and proposed re-opening for community use of the original chapel, known to the martyrs, of 1818.

Cultural Activities

Well established cultural activities in the church include the art group which sometimes exhibits in the coffee lounge, a patchwork group, some of whose work is to be seen expressed in the church banners, and a German language group, inspired by the partnership with Lubbecke. The Thursday Night Out programme includes a wide selection of speakers. The Book Circle's choice of reading ranges widely, too.

For some years, the church provided room for the Read Easy charity to provide one-to-one support for adult non-readers. So successful was this work, that the initiative started here in the United Church has since spread to many other towns across the whole country. Other community cultural activities have included Dorchester Stitchers (responsible for the

Millennium tapestry in the Corn Exchange and the wall-hangings in the Tolpuddle Chapel); Dorchester Literary Festival, Casterbridge Readers, and the Thomas Hardy Society International Conference and Festival when people come from all over the world to enjoy Hardy's Casterbridge and to meet in a church which has interesting Hardy links. Hardy's formal education at the Dorchester British School was with Isaac Last, an outstandingly able teacher and leading member of the Congregational Church. Hardy's early professional career as an architect began in South Street in 1856 where he must have had a grandstand view of the new church being built immediately opposite. Years later, Hardy's interest in dramatising his novels was stimulated by his friendship with A.H. Evans, another leading Dorchester Congregationalist, who adapted several Hardy novels for the stage, formed and directed the nationally acclaimed Hardy Players, recruited many fellow Congregationalists for his casts, and arranged his rehearsals in the Congregational Church hall.

Health and Recreation

The church has for many years organised badminton and country dancing sessions. More recently, a group has been formed to play board games. The picnic group and the encounter group enjoy informal meals together and there are celebratory meals for the whole church for Harvest Festival time and Christmas. The church premises are hired for regular NHS blood donor sessions, aerobics, line dancing, U3A table tennis and badminton, children's dancing academy, music and movement.

Helping Disabled People

The last forty years has seen a growing sensitivity to the needs of disabled people. Since 1982, the whole of the ground floor of the church building has been fully accessible with no steps. There is a specially designed toilet for disabled people. Since 2000, the first floor rooms have been accessible by chair lift. In case of need, wheelchairs are available and space is reserved in the main body of the church for people with wheelchairs. There is a loop system in the church and large print bibles are available. Many church members have been trained in dementia awareness.

Looking to the future

The church stands strategically in the heart of our county town, but it is possible that the site may become even more strategic. The new paving in South Street, the possible move of the market into the town centre, the likelihood of further development in Brewery Square and perhaps in Charles Street, the flow of newcomers as the town continues to expand, all these may present new opportunities. In the words of a well-known hymn,

“Give praise for all that is past and trust for all that's to come.”