

FREE CHURCH DIRECTORY

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THE CHRISTIAN BRETHREN

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THE BRETHREN, or 'Christian Brethren', take this name because they prefer to be known by a designation comprehensive enough to embrace all their fellow-Christians. There are two main groupings among them, commonly described as 'Open Brethren' and 'Exclusive Brethren'. The terms 'Open' and 'Exclusive' are intended to denote their respective principles of communion. These pages are concerned only with the people called 'Open Brethren'; the writer has no authority to write about his 'Exclusive' friends.

It may be useful to make one point in this connection, however. During the last year or two considerable publicity has been given in British newspapers to the withdrawal of a number of people called Brethren from various business and professional associations, and from universities. These people belong to one party only of Exclusive Brethren, and their policy in such matters is not shared by other Exclusive Brethren, and still less by Open Brethren. This distinction has not always been clearly observed, and the result has been considerable confusion in the public mind.

The Open Brethren have no central organisation. They belong to a large number of local churches or assemblies, spread throughout the British Commonwealth, the United States, the European continent and many other regions. Each of their local churches is independent so far as administration goes; there is no federation or union linking them together. Yet there is a recognisable family likeness between them, and their sense of a spiritual bond is strong.

ORIGINS — The Brethren movement originated around the year 1825, although the Brethren commonly insist that their roots are really in the apostolic age, for they aim as far as possible at maintaining the simple and flexible church order of New Testament times. In the earlier part of the nineteenth century the barriers separating the various Christian denominations were less easily surmounted or penetrated than they are today. The founders of the Brethren movement were a group of young men, mostly associated with Trinity College, Dublin, who tried to find a way in which they could come together for worship and communion simply as fellow-Christians, disregarding denominational barriers. They had no idea that they were starting a movement; still less had they any thought of founding a new denomination, for that would have defeated the very purpose for which they came together. For a time some of them continued to be members of their original churches, in which indeed a few of them were ordained ministers; but in general this situation did not remain practicable for long.

One of their early leaders was a Church of Ireland clergyman named John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), a man of unusual strength of intellect and personality, who envisaged the establishment of a corporate worldwide witness to the unity of the Church of Christ in an age of ecclesiastical fragmentation. His views were perpetuated by the Exclusive Brethren rather than by the Open group; when the cleavage between the two took place in 1848 it was to those who sided with Darby that the name Exclusive Brethren was given.

From Dublin the movement spread to England. In England the first Brethren assembly was established at Plymouth in 1831; hence arose the popular term 'Plymouth Brethren'. Two leaders of the Brethren's meeting at Plymouth, Samuel Prideaux Tregelles (1813–1875) and, in a lesser degree, his relative, Benjamin Wills Newton (1807–1899), were responsible for one of the best critical editions of the Greek New Testament to appear in England in the nineteenth century.

Another important meeting of Brethren was Bethesda Chapel, Bristol, which had its joint-pastors the Scottish Hebraist Henry Craik (1805–1866) and the

German-born George Müller (1805–1898), best known for the great orphanage which he established in that city in 1836 and which survives to the present day. (Dr. T. J. Barnardo was also a member of the Brethren when he founded his equally famous orphanage in London in 1870.)

OVERSEAS MISSIONS — George Müller's brother-in-law, Anthony Norris Groves (1795–1853), has claims to be regarded as the first of the Brethren. He gave up a dental practice in Exeter to become a pioneer missionary, first in Baghdad and then in India. He was a man of large-hearted sympathies, who never forgot that the things which unite Christians are immeasurably more important than the things which divide them. 'I would infinitely rather bear with all their evil,' he said of some people with whom he seriously disagreed, 'than separate from their good.' Whether those features which he thought to be evil were so in fact or not, his words express the attitude which Open Brethren acknowledge as their ideal.

The Brethren missionary movement launched by Groves continues to the present time in every continent, and over a thousand missionaries are engaged in it. Some Brethren missionaries have been pioneers in more senses than one. Among these were two Scots, Frederick Stanley Arnot (1858–1914) and Dan Crawford (1870–1926), who explored uncharted areas of Central Africa; it was Arnot who first opened up Katanga to the knowledge of the outside world in the 1880's. Brethren missionaries are located principally in Central Africa, India and Latin America; they co-operate with other missionary bodies in the practice of mission comity. Their work is registered under the designation 'Christian Missions in Many Lands'.

DOCTRINES — So far as their doctrines are concerned, Open Brethren have no peculiarities. They hold the historic Christian faith, because they find it plainly taught in the Bible, which is to them, as to all children of the Reformation, 'the only infallible rule of faith and practice'. They are wholeheartedly evangelical in their understanding and presentation of Christianity, proclaiming Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as the all-sufficient Saviour of those who put their trust in Him and as the only hope for mankind. For this reason many of them find it specially easy to co-operate in Christian witness with others who share this evangelical emphasis, and in many interdenominational evangelical causes their influence is greater than their numbers might lead one to expect. For example, they have played a full and active part in all the crusades which Dr. Billy Graham has conducted in the British Isles.

The beginnings of the Brethren movement were attended by a keen interest in the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy, and many of them are still characterised by this eschatological awareness. Their hymnody gives quite a prominent place to the Second Advent of Christ. But no single line of prophetic interpretation is held or imposed by them. Indeed, one of the features which many people find attractive about their fellowship is the spiritual and intellectual liberty which is enjoyed there in an atmosphere of brotherly love.

PRACTICES — It is practice rather than doctrine that marks them out. Among Open Brethren baptism is administered only to people who make a personal confession of faith in Christ, whether they are adults or children; and the mode of baptism is immersion. They observe the Lord's Supper every Sunday morning (and occasionally at other times), and hold that the Lord's Table is for all the Lord's people. This, in fact, is their most distinctive gathering. When they meet for communion, together with any Christians who care to join them for this occasion, their devotions are conducted by no presiding minister and follow no prearranged sequence, but are marked nevertheless by a reverent spontaneity and orderliness. Various brethren contribute to the worship by suggesting hymns to be sung, by leading the congregation in prayer and thanksgiving, or by reading and expounding a passage from the Bible.

The Brethren have no ordained ministry set apart for functions which others cannot discharge. A considerable number do give their whole time to evangelism

and Bible teaching, but are not regarded as being in clerical orders. The various local churches are administered by responsible brethren called elders or overseers, but these have no jurisdiction outside their own local churches, and inside them they try to guide by example rather than rule by decree.

STATISTICS — The Brethren have always manifested a supreme lack of interest in their numerical strength. Their numbers are difficult to assess, partly because no precise statistics are available and partly because there is no hard-and-fast line of demarcation between Brethren assemblies and other independent evangelical churches. A common estimate of their strength in Great Britain and Ireland is 100,000; but this is at best approximate. They are to be found in all grades of society and in all walks of life.

ADDITIONAL STATISTICS — There are over 1900 Assemblies in the British Isles (1381 in England and Wales, 327 in Scotland and 250 in Ireland, mainly in the north).

The number of full-time evangelists and teachers is estimated at 181, in addition there are several hundred men who devote their spare time to this work.

PUBLICATIONS — Three main publications circulating among the Christian Brethren are —

The Harvester, edited by Dr. F. A. Tatford

The Witness, edited by C. D. G. Howley

The Echoes of Service, which provides news of the mission field.

A leaflet on 'The Christian Brethren' by Professor Bruce is available from Messrs. Pickering & Inglis Ltd, 229 Bothwell-street, Glasgow C.2.

Those listed here are accepted among their brethren as being gifted teachers of the Word of God. This list is in no way complete

- Allen, Leslie Christopher, M.A., *c/o London Bible College, 19 Marylebone-road, London N.W.1.*
- Barnes, Dennis G., *Victoria Buildings, Avonbridge, Strilingshire.*
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- Burnham, A., *Shalom, Selbourne, Alton, Hants.*
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- Laird, Dr. John M., *5 Wigmore-street, London W.1.*
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- Luff, E., *Bible Depot, Frinton-on-Sea, Essex.*
- McEwan, C. W., *8 Monks-road, Exeter.*
- Newton, John W., *c/o Bible Depot, Frinton-on-Sea, Essex.*
- Rowdon, H. H., *c/o London Bible College, 19 Marylebone-road, London N.W.1.*
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- Stokes, Graham, *c/o Witness, 229 Bothwell-street, Glasgow C.2.*
- Tatford, Dr. B. B., *63 Rue St. Gabriel, Lille, (Nord), France.*
- Tatford, Dr. F. A., *16 Hillbrow, Richmond Hill, Surrey. (Tel. Richmond 2883).*
- Tryon, G., *c/o Harvester, 3 Mount Radford-crescent, Exeter, Devon.*
- Wiseman, Prof. D. J., O.B.E., M.A., B.A., *16 Downs-side, Cheam, Surrey.*