

A MANUAL OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP



THE LINDSEY PRESS

A MANUAL OF
CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

THE LINDSEY PRESS
14 GORDON SQUARE, LONDON, W.C.1.

PREFACE

This little book has been prepared by the Religious Education Department of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches to fill a gap in our denominational bookshelf. Many books and pamphlets have been issued to explain our history and our theological position, but nothing has been published to state in simple language and as concisely as possible what is implied by membership of a congregation in fellowship with the General Assembly. Our method has been to try to suggest the questions about church membership which need answers, and to supply the kernel to the answer, while leaving the reader to find out more information for himself. We hope the booklet will be found useful not only by young people growing up in our tradition (whose needs, perhaps, we have had chiefly in mind), but also by older men and women, especially those who are new to our denominational fellowship, and by the Senior Classes of Sunday Schools, and study groups of branches of the Young People's League, and by Ministers' Classes preparing young people for church membership.

CONTENTS

| CHAP. | | PAGE |
|-------|---|------|
| I. | OUR HERITAGE | 9 |
| II. | WHAT IS YOUR CHURCH? | 12 |
| III. | WHAT IS YOUR CHURCH FOR? | 17 |
| IV. | WHAT IS THE DISTINCTIVE TEACHING? | 24 |
| V. | SPECIAL OFFICES AND SACRAMENTS | 31 |
| VI. | HOW IS YOUR CHURCH MANAGED? | 40 |
| VII. | WHERE DO YOU COME IN? | 48 |

CHAPTER I

OUR HERITAGE

“WHO are your saints?” a Church of England parson once asked a Unitarian when he wanted to discover the real meaning of the Unitarian faith. The most famous saints in any communion are the martyrs who suffered for their faith. The meaning of our history is revealed in the struggle of many generations of men and women to win freedom of thought and speech in religious matters, while bishops and presbyteries were trying to lay down rules of “correct” belief, rules which they wanted to compel all men and women to accept. Our “saints” were those who were prepared to suffer persecution rather than abandon the principle that if God through their conscience has shown them a certain aspect of truth which they sincerely believe, they must never conceal or deny it, though all other men should go against them.

Amongst our earliest “saints” was Francis David, bishop of the Unitarian Church in Transylvania (that debated territory sometimes ruled by Hungary, sometimes by Roumania) from 1568 to 1579, when he died in prison for his faith. The last English martyr to burn at the stake at Smithfield

was Bartholomew Legate, punished thus in 1612 for denying the doctrine of the Trinity. Later in the same year Edward Wightman was burnt at Lichfield for the same heresy. John Bidle, of Gloucester, wrote and spoke much to persuade people to examine the old beliefs in the light of



"The noble army of martyrs
praise Thee."

BURNING A HERETIC

reason, and because he rejected the accepted doctrine of the Trinity he died prematurely in prison in 1662. That year saw the "Great Ejection" of over 2,000 ministers from their parishes in England, because they could not give unfeigned assent and consent to all that was contained in the Book of Common Prayer, now made compulsory by the government of Charles II

for use in every parish church. Few of these brave 2,000 held the religious views that we hold, but they all witnessed to that love of freedom and sincerity which takes first place in our religion.

In 1689 the Toleration Act brought in a happier day, but it explicitly denied its protection to Roman Catholics and Unitarians. Not until 1813 was it lawful to speak against the doctrine of the Trinity. Yet well before 1689 there were faithful

men teaching in their private "academies" those who, on account of their faith, were denied admission to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. They taught them to examine the scriptures in the light of reason. They made them independent in thought, tender in conscience, charitable in spirit. Such men were not afraid of new teachings either in religion or politics. Great among them was Joseph Priestley, the scientist and minister, who welcomed the spirit of the French Revolution by which he hoped to see the oppressed and illiterate classes in France set free. For this sympathy he was attacked in his Birmingham home, and in 1791 his house, library, scientific laboratory, and his Meeting House, were burnt by the mob. England, our land of freedom, was still too little free for Priestley, and he found a happier home in America where he died in 1804.

To-day we proudly number such men as these among the saints of our household, and we accept the heritage of freedom for which they struggled. They earned the name of "Unitarian" because they preached the Unity of God. For us the



JOSEPH PRIESTLEY

name also implies belief in the Unity of Men in God's great family throughout the world, the Unity of Truth to which all research is leading, the Unity of Spirit which all nations, races and sects must be brought to achieve under the guidance of God. The world still needs men and women with their faith and loyalty to truth and reason.

CHAPTER II

WHAT IS YOUR CHURCH?

Now we come to the part of the Church you directly belong to—your own church, the church to which you have attached yourself and where you have found friendship; the church in which we hope you will soon be enrolled as a member. First of all we shall ask a few questions about its home, for the "church" is in the first place the whole body of men and women who worship together. In the second place the word "church" may be used for the building in which they worship. But the building may be called by various names.

1. *What is it called?*

It may be called a "church" (from a Greek word meaning "the Lord's house") which is

the traditional title for most Christian places of worship. Or it may be called a "chapel" or a "meeting-house" or a "Domestic Mission," and it is only reasonable to wonder what the distinctions are. The date of foundation or the style of architecture may suggest an explanation. You will find that most of the chapels and meeting-houses date from the seventeenth century, and all the Domestic Missions from the nineteenth.

The Meeting-Houses were originally houses where men who could not conform to the authorised forms of worship in the established church of the seventeenth century met together for prayer and preaching. The house style was preserved in some later buildings, but when the Nonconformists became finally separated from the Church of England and built their own places of worship, they generally called them "chapels"



A Suffolk Chapel

(Latin *capella*, a sanctuary), and this became accepted as the distinguishing title. In Ulster, however, the name "chapel" is used only for Roman Catholic places of worship. It was not until the latter half of the nineteenth century that the name



A Sussex Meeting House
1741



“church” became popular again. The “Domestic Missions” were intended to be missions to the *homes* of the people (especially the poor in large cities) as distinct from foreign missions. They were first started in America by the Rev. Joseph Tuckerman.

Among the pioneers of the movement in the British Isles the Rev. John Johns, of Liverpool, was perhaps the most noteworthy.

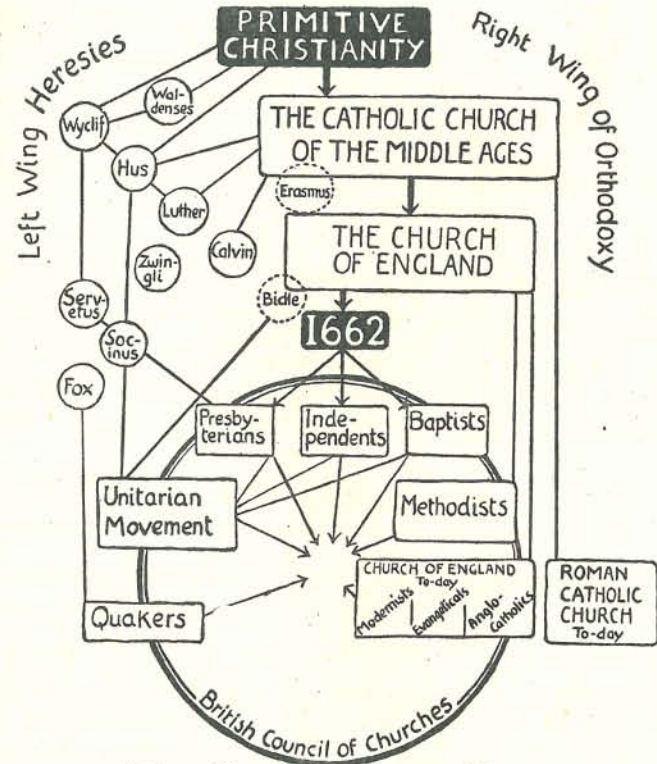
These differences of name are largely historical, and to-day they represent little, if any, essential difference in the work and worship of the churches.

2. *What is its distinguishing title?*

If yours is a church or chapel you will generally find that it has further distinction in its name. It may be called Unitarian, Free, Free Christian, Presbyterian, Non-Subscribing Presbyterian, Remonstrant, General Baptist, or just “So-and-so Chapel” (or Church), named after the place or street. Yet all these differently styled churches are united in the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. Again the reason is largely historical.

In the seventeenth century there were three Dissenting Denominations—the Presbyterians, the Independents and the Baptists. They were called

“dissenters” or “nonconformists” because they dissented from (i.e. disagreed with) the customs of



the Church of England, and declined to “conform to” its laws. The Methodists did not appear until after John Wesley’s revival movement (in the eighteenth century). The Presbyterians took their

name from their theory of Church government*, and were the largest group. The Independents shared many of the Presbyterian ideas, but differed from them on several points. Their name implied that each congregation was an independent Church: it did not need to be linked up in any wider fellowship to constitute a Church of God. The Baptists, descended from a long line of heretics who had sought for a purer Christianity, had split in 1633 into two sections, the Particular and the General Baptists, of which the latter were the more tolerant and progressive. In time many of the congregations in each denomination became more broad-minded in their religious opinions, but some retained their old title. The Independent name, however, is no longer to be found among our congregations. From the end of the eighteenth century these congregations began to be associated with the Unitarian churches that were springing up. The first of these was founded in 1774 by the Rev. Theophilus Lindsey, who came out from the Church of England when he could no longer accept its creeds. The title was taken from the doctrine that most distinguished these churches—that God is one “Person”, not three. Some of the churches felt, however, that such a title as Unitarian implied that there was a hard and fast theological belief imposed in such a church, and they preferred to use the name “Free” or “Free Christian.”

* See Chapter V.

In the North of Ireland, Presbyterianism as a form of church government still remains. The original Presbyterian churches there became divided when attempts were made to enforce subscription to creeds. One of these attempts led in 1830 to the formation of a “Remonstrant Synod”*. Later the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches of Northern Ireland, along with the two remaining congregations in what is now Eire, formed themselves into the “Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland.” The word *non-subscribing* means not accepting (“subscribing to”) the Westminster Confession of Faith. †

CHAPTER III

WHAT IS YOUR CHURCH FOR ?

YOUR Church has a purpose. What is it? It was first laid down in the Trust Deed when your congregation began, or possibly when the present building plot was acquired or the building erected. Such Trust Deeds vary a good deal, particularly in

* Founded as a “protest” or remonstrance.

† For further information the following books may be consulted:
 E. M. Wilbur: Our Unitarian Heritage.
 W. Lloyd: Protestant Dissent and English Unitarianism.
 Clement Pike: The Story of Religion in Ireland.
 R. P. Jones: Nonconformist Church Architecture.
 Anne Holt: A Ministry to the Poor.



the provisions made for church government. As a general rule you will find that the church exists (a) for the Worship of God, and (b) for educational purposes. We have a favourite saying, which you will sometimes find on church calendars: "We unite for the Worship of God and the Service of Man in the

Spirit of Jesus." This would probably be accepted in all our churches as a statement of purpose.

1. *The Worship of God.*

We usually think of this in terms of the church service. The service may take many forms, elaborate or simple, liturgical or open,* but generally the worship itself will include some or all of the following principal elements.

(a) *Thanksgiving.* This is the beginning of worship—the acknowledgment of our indebtedness to God for the many gifts and privileges that we enjoy in our lives. We are not self-sufficient.

(b) *Self-examination.* Here is a personal aspect of worship. None of us comes up to the standards of character and conduct that we believe to be

* "Liturgical" means services following a set order and including prayers to which the congregation say or sing responses.

good, and we need to look at ourselves and our lives, to see where we are failing.

(c) *Aspiration.* This follows logically from self-examination. We must reach upwards for greater knowledge and understanding, to try to discover more of the mind, heart, and will of God, to raise our standards and our aim.

(d) *Inspiration.* Worship is not necessarily an effort to raise ourselves. It must often mean a quiet attentiveness, a willingness to receive through many channels new light for our daily paths.

(e) *Resolve.* Without this, worship is in vain. Knowing our indebtedness, our imperfections, and our duty, we must earnestly resolve to amend our lives, and to live according to what we believe to be good, true, and beautiful—in other words, to fulfil the will of God.

Worship is the first purpose of the Church. It comes first, not only because it is the special activity of the Church, but because it is the mainspring of Church life and Christian living. By obliging men to relate their lives to divine purposes, and to seek after more knowledge of life and greater earnestness of living, it gives them the desire and the power to serve humanity and to create a better and happier world—one which accords more with what has been called the Kingdom of God. Before we can properly serve our fellow-men, we must make ourselves better fitted to serve.

2. *The Service of Man.*

The Fruit of Good Works. There is a test of the reality of worship in the kind of life that the worshipper lives from day to day. Individually this is demonstrated in the good that he does to those around him; collectively in the co-operation of worshippers to create a more living fellowship in ordinary life. In order to help us to do this, the church has its own special activities, its own experiments in fellowship. Together they form the training ground of the church community for the practice of fellowship. But it is expected of each member that he should serve the wider community, seeking the good of all, within or without the church.

Some Examples of Christian Service. The Christian Church has a fine record of achievement in the realm of good works. Although these things were done usually by individuals or small groups, they owed their inspiration to the teaching and fellowship of the church. In two fields—the practice of healing and the practice of education—the work of Christians has been outstanding. The first hospitals in the West were founded in A.D. 1030 by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The first (and for several centuries the only) schools were those run by the church. The list of movements for human welfare undertaken by Christians is a long one, and includes Friendly and Co-operative Societies,

Savings Banks and Building Societies. The reform of Prisons, Public Health and Industrial conditions also owed much to Christian influence, while reformist political movements have often claimed that their programmes are based on Christian principles.

What does your Church do to serve men?

(a) *For its own members.*

What institutions are there which help the members to learn and practise fellowship, and equip them for wider service? Perhaps you have a Sunday School or Junior Fellowship, Scouts, Guides, Brigades, etc., for the younger ones; a Young People's League Branch, an Adult Class, or some other organisation for those growing older. Many churches have branches of the Women's League, and some of the Men's League. Then there may be Debating and Literary Societies, and a variety of other organisations which, in so far as they draw their inspiration from the Church, may be helping the members to fulfil the second part of the church purpose.

(b) *For the wider community.*

Does your church take its share in work for public welfare? Is it represented, directly or indirectly, on the committees of charitable organisations like Hospitals, Holiday and Convalescent Homes, Prisoners' Aid Societies, District Nursing

Associations, Civic Guilds of Help, the Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and to Animals, etc.? Is it represented on any public bodies, such as the local Youth Committee? Are some of its members playing their part in local government, serving on the Town Council, Health Committee, Education Committee, etc.? Does it organise activities for the people in the neighbourhood, e.g. Boys' and Girls' Clubs? Do its members play their part in public life and respond well to outside appeals for help? We should remember that members of the Unitarian and Free Christian churches have always been to the fore in movements for human welfare.* In our own day there are many opportunities for social service. Village Institutes in the country and Community Centres in the towns and suburbs need organisers and helpers. Holiday and Convalescent Homes, the service of cripples and mental deficient, clubs and camps for poor children or for the unemployed—all these and many more activities need active help and interest of public-spirited citizens.†

The former Union for Social Service, which was formed by Unitarians to encourage social service undertaken by members of our churches, has now

* Read R. V. Holt: *The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England.*

† The war of 1939 created an important new opening for service in the establishment of "Hibbert Houses" for men and women serving in the Forces in the Middle East. The work for European refugees both before and since 1939 is well described in "Helping Others", a pamphlet on the work of the War Emergency Service Committee of the General Assembly.

become an actual department of our General Assembly. It played an important part in its early years in organising Summer Schools on Social Service, which were joined by other organisations from the other denominations, leading up to the important "COPEC" Conference in 1926,* in which all the denominations in the country took some part. The National Unitarian and Free Christian Temperance Association, and the National Unitarian and Free Christian Peace Fellowship help to focus the opinions and activities of Unitarians on Temperance and World Peace issues.

3. "*In the Spirit of Jesus.*"

Unitarians claim that their attitude to worship and their ideal of service both spring from the teaching and example of Jesus. His was an unselfish, large-minded, and helpful spirit, and we believe that although religious customs and beliefs may sometimes divide us from our fellow-Christians, we can achieve unity with them in the service of men. This service should recognise no divisions, and it is interesting to notice how often co-operation for service leads to greater mutual understanding. It was the "Life and Work Movement" (of which the "Copec" Conference was a part) that broadened the basis of the British Council of Churches to include our denomination. Since 1940 "Religion

†COPEC = initials of "Conference on Christian Politics, Economics and Citizenship."

and Life Campaigns" have in many places (though not in others) brought about a wider unity than was hitherto thought possible. Jesus himself, in his parable of the Good Samaritan, taught that humanity has a unity which rises above differences of race and creed. To those who would follow him he said, "Go, and do ye likewise."

CHAPTER IV

WHAT IS THE DISTINCTIVE TEACHING OF YOUR CHURCH*?

1. *Our Freedom in Theology and Constitution.*

Some people object to the name 'Unitarian' because they say it implies that we all have to agree to one theology, and without such agreement one could not belong to a 'Unitarian' Church. As a matter of history this has never been so, and our movement has always been proud of its real freedom from theological tests. The "Free Churches" as a whole call themselves "free" only because they are free from State control. Whereas the Church of England is responsible to Parliament, and is legally bound by parliamentary decisions, the Free Churches set up their own constitutions and determine their own beliefs.

* See "The Beliefs of a Unitarian," by Alfred Hall, M.A., D.D. 6d.

WHAT IS THE DISTINCTIVE TEACHING?

But they have their standards of belief which all their members are expected to accept. The Presbyterian Church, for instance, takes the Westminster Confession of Faith* (1643) as its standard of belief, and most of the "Free Churches" regard the Apostles' and Nicene creeds as necessary for acceptance by their members. Consequently they are not what we mean by "Free Christian" churches.

Our movement, on the other hand, like the Society of Friends, believes in the "Inner Light" which directs the thinking of a sincere man. Every man must believe what God has to say to him. This means that we have to beware of self-assertiveness, for it is very easy to think in a shallow way, and take an ill-considered opinion for a belief. When a Unitarian says, "I believe," he should have done some hard thinking first, and know why he believes it. Such a deeply held conviction is of far more value than an assent to some ancient dogma, given because it is demanded by outside authority. We call ourselves a "Free" church, in a theological



The Spirit of Man
is the Candle of the
Lord

* See "Documents of the Christian Church," World's Classics No. 495, page 344.

sense, because a minister is not asked what he believes before he is invited to the charge of a congregation. In Ireland, however, by old Presbyterian custom, he is asked to make a statement of his personal faith at his ordination. In the same way, any man or woman who wants to join a congregation as a member is not asked what he believes before being admitted to membership. It is assumed that he is in general sympathy with the views of the church, or else he would not want to join it. It is assumed especially that he approves of this spiritual and mental freedom for which our movement stands.

We see then in our movement there are *three important freedoms*. Firstly, each *congregation* is free to order its own affairs. It is responsible to no bishop, moderator, or council which can compel its obedience. On the other hand it probably belongs to a local Association as well as to the General Assembly, and these bodies can give advice and make recommendations, yet the congregation is never bound to accept them. Secondly, every *minister* is free to preach the word he receives. This freedom may be moderated by the freedom of the congregation to dismiss him if his ministration is found to be unacceptable to the majority for important reasons, but it is very rare among us for a minister to be asked to resign because his theology is considered to be "wrong." And thirdly, each *worshipper* is free to hold the faith as the spirit

of God commends it to him. This makes for a healthy variety of viewpoint in our denomination. Our controversies are without bitterness because we recognise the other man's right to express his own point of view. We are not a church in which every member is expected to hold the same beliefs, and use a single form of words, called a creed, to express it. We know that while we are searching for the truth, we can find enough of it to live by, though we hardly expect to grasp it all.

2. *We are Essentially a Lay Church.*

A "lay" person is any one who is not in the ministry as a profession. By a "lay" church we mean that though our church sets apart "ministers" to study the ways of God and preach the truth they receive, they are not regarded as a priesthood, that is to say, an order of men endowed at ordination with spiritual powers entirely unavailable to the layman. Our church certainly expects a high standard of professional competence, a high degree of spiritual capacity and discernment, from its ministers. That is why the minister, man or woman, is given the title of "reverend," which means "fit to receive reverence." The minister is the trusted leader and adviser of the congregation. While he is set apart for spiritual ministrations he has no sacramental powers which a worthy layman or laywoman might not exercise. He christens or dedicates children, he officiates at marriage,

cremation or burial services, he conducts the Communion service. In all these services he is using no powers which belong *only* to a minister. A lay person may also conduct these services with equal spiritual effect. For the effects depend on the spiritual qualities, and these are available to the sincere layman who walks humbly with God. Another way of putting it is to say, with our Puritan fore-runners, that we believe in "the priesthood of all believers."

3. *The Results of our Freedom.*

Our freedom is justified by its working. The Church of England is acknowledged to be one body though it includes a great variety of thought and practice, "high-church," "evangelical," and "modernist." It has this great variety in spite of its taking the ancient creeds as its standard of faith, and having the Thirty-nine Articles as an additional charter of faith and practice. We, in spite of our freedom from creed and articles, and in spite of our wide varieties of belief and practice, possess in our movement a remarkable unity of spirit. We include those who strongly emphasise the needs of a world religion more inclusive than the Christian tradition, and we include those who find in the revelation through Jesus Christ the centre of all their religious thinking, and who emphasise our place in the Christian tradition. We have many other varieties :—those who love colour and ritual,

and those who love plainness and simplicity in worship, and so on. But all our differences are resolved in our common loyalty to the search for truth, beauty, and goodness, and if we cannot always agree on how to express the truth, we can always agree to differ.

Our general points of agreement we might state as follows :

(a) *The Fatherhood of God.*

We worship God as "our Father." This is how Jesus taught us to worship God, without reference to any teaching about a Trinity of three "persons" in one God. (The word "trinity" is not to be found in the Bible, and of course it will not be found in any of our hymn-books and prayer-books). The members of the "orthodox" denominations which all accept the doctrine of the Trinity, believe that it can be deduced from the teaching to be found in the Bible, but their arguments are not convincing to us.

We worship God as the Creator and Ruler of the physical world. The laws of nature are his laws, and he does not vary them. When we talk about



the laws of nature, however, we should remember that men have still a great deal to learn about them.

We worship God also as the great Spirit in whom we live and move and have our being; the Spirit who also dwells in us. God is revealed in all the heights of man's discovery and creation of beauty, in all man's acts of devotion and self-sacrifice, and in the peace that passes human understanding, the peace that man finds to uphold him through all the sorrows and stresses of a difficult and dangerous life.

(b) *Reverence for Jesus.*

We look up to Jesus as a supremely inspired spiritual and moral teacher. We never worship him as God, and we do not address our prayers to him. Some of our hymns are addressed to Jesus, but when we sing them we never think we are speaking to Jesus as if he were God, any more than when singing a hymn like "Turn back, O Man, forswear thy foolish ways," we should imagine that man was therefore God. We believe that Jesus showed us the heights that human life can rise to, in his spiritual awareness, his sense of beauty, his devotion to duty, his self-sacrifice on the cross, and his capacity for sympathy and forgiveness. He was indeed a "son of God," as we who follow his way are called to be "sons of God."

(c) *The Universal Nature of Revelation.*

Though God spoke to man in the life and teaching

of Jesus, God had spoken long before that, and has been constantly speaking ever since. Revelations from God come through every great human prophet, and, though the greatest prophets may err, each contributes something to the truth. The great religions of the world may stand at different levels, being at a different stage of evolution. At their higher levels they arrive nearer the one truth. And as there is but one God, our Father, then all men are brothers, and must learn to behave as brothers, recognising no insurmountable barriers between colours and creeds and customs. We must always be ready to receive new revelations, and revise our old expressions of faith in the light of them. "The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his holy word."

We regard the Bible as a very important collection of sacred literature, but by no means the only "inspired" scripture. Some parts of the Bible seem very little inspired to-day, yet the record in the Old Testament of the slow but steady growth in spiritual understanding of a gifted people is a great possession. The New Testament records the life and teaching of Jesus, and the documents of the early church contain inspired writing that has never been surpassed. The writings were penned, all the same, by human hands, and we have the right to sift and criticise them in order to discover the truth about history.

(d) *The Way of Spiritual Health.*

"Salvation" was one of the catchwords of Christian preaching, and it used to be made to mean being "saved" from eternal punishment, which all men were believed to deserve because they were miserable sinners. For us "salvation" means the *attainment of healthy character*. We remember that the word comes from the Latin *salus*, meaning "health." No one is really saved until he is spiritually healthy. We know that we are all very far from being perfect, though we are meant, as Jesus reminded us, to become perfect. "Salvation" then can only be achieved by our faith that God will help us to make some headway towards perfection as we make use of his light. We believe in the forgiveness of God for our faults and failures, so long as we are ashamed of them, and strive to overcome them; and we cannot believe in any kind of eternal punishment, for that would contradict the idea of the Fatherhood of God.

(e) *Eternal Life.*

What the future life is, and whether it is what is called "personal immortality," is left an open question by very many. When we speak of "eternal life," we mean much more than a life that just goes on for ever. It is a quality of life in which we can share even here on earth, a level of existence which takes us above the fears and vexations and

faithlessness of mortal life. The teaching that God is our Father implies that he cares for men as persons and individuals, and though we see no need to make definite statements about the kind of future existence into which we can expect to be called, we should expect that God has further stages of life for training the character of his children when this stage on earth is over. As Whittier put it :

" We only know we cannot drift
Beyond his love and care."

CHAPTER V

THE SPECIAL OFFICES AND SACRAMENTS
OF OUR CHURCH

ALL human experiences have some sacred aspect, and all worship of God is "sacramental." The word "sacrament" comes from the name of the Roman soldier's oath of obedience, implying a solemn undertaking or self-dedication. A sacrament has also been defined as "the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." The outward act does not by itself *confer* the inward



The outward and visible
sign of an inward and
spiritual grace

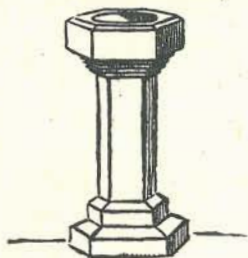
grace. In this sense shaking hands is a sacrament. It is the outward sign of friendship. If there is no feeling of friendship within, but only a feeling of hostility, it is a mockery. But it may actually help to promote friendship. When two people have quarrelled and are feeling rather bitter and hurt, yet know they ought to be friends again, the determination to make an effort and show it by shaking hands helps them to feel more friendly.

We have in our church life some special sacramental occasions, in which appropriate symbolism and action reinforce our good resolves.

(a) *Christening or Dedication of Children.*

In former times the baptism of children had, and among many orthodox Christians still has, superstitious associations.

*'And he took them in his arms
and blessed them.'*



It was the washing away of "original sin" from the newly-born baby, who was believed to be "born in sin." But for Jesus childhood was the symbol of innocence, and a baby is born morally clean. We do not believe that a baby

is sinful by nature—on the contrary it is the most innocent and sinless being, for it has not yet reached the stage of moral choice which makes sin possible. Therefore a christening is

the dedication of the child by its parents to the Christian way of life; an acceptance of their responsibilities for its Christian training. They may have invited relatives or friends to act as godparents, and the duty of godparents is to see that as the child grows up it is helped to learn the Christian way of life. If the parents die or fail in their duty, the responsibility of godparents is all the greater. The christening service is often carried out in the presence of the congregation, when it very fittingly symbolises the acceptance of the new baby as a member of the whole family of God, and his reception into the fellowship of that congregation.

(b) *Thanksgiving after Childbirth.*

In some districts the custom is strongly established in other than Unitarian households for mothers who have given birth to a child to be "churched" as soon as they are able to go out of doors. The custom has superstitious connections. Ignorant people often believe that there is something unclean about childbirth, and that "churching" removes the taint from the mother. Unitarians have never believed this, and consequently "churching" of women has seldom been provided for in their usage. However, a practice that may be quite unnecessary on some grounds may be very proper and helpful on others, and there is nothing at all surprising when mothers who have come safely

through childbirth and who love their church and all it means to them want to make their church the first place they go to when they are up and about. There, in a very simple service, they give thanks for their health and their child's and dedicate their motherhood to the service of God.

(c) *Dedication for Church Membership.*

As a boy or girl grows up there comes a stage when they want to accept the responsibilities of membership of the congregation for themselves, and to dedicate themselves as Christian disciples. Such a dedication may be undertaken at any age, provided the person is old enough to think for himself.



For young people the age of sixteen or thereabouts is probably best. Those who have been trained in our Sunday Schools will begin to find themselves ready when they are about this age to take more part in the worship and life of the congregation, for which the Sunday School is the training ground. In our "Book of Occasional Services" the service of Dedication for Church Membership provides for the minister to ask the following questions of those who come forward to join the congregation as members :

"Do you desire to dedicate yourselves to the life of Christian service, striving to be sincere, strong and upright in thought, word and deed ; to deepen your lives by prayer, and be ever ready to help all those among whom you work and live ?"

When they answer, "We do," he continues :

"To help you so to live we welcome you into the Fellowship of this Church. In the love of truth, and in the Spirit of Jesus, we unite for the worship of God and the service of man."

(d) *Marriage.*

A Christian marriage is a promise of faithfulness made by husband and wife for life. In it both are preparing to change their whole way of life, taking a step which may either fulfil the very best in the personality of each, or bring countless difficulties and troubles if they fail to live in love and faithfulness. There is no reason to be afraid of making such a life-long undertaking, for a man and woman who deliberately unite themselves in marriage for better or for worse, and trust in God's power to help them through all rough places, are the man and woman who will make a success of their home life and find its deepest happiness. A civil marriage in a registry office is of course a valid marriage, but it includes no lifelong under-



taking. To have given this promise of faithfulness until the parting of death is a real help to most sincere men and women. In the usual form of marriage in our churches, the central feature is the promise of faithfulness and the pronouncement of marriage.—“I (A. B.) do take thee (C. D.) to be my lawful wedded wife/husband.” The old custom by which the bride is “given away” by her father or other relative may still be followed if desired, but more and more it is felt to be a false note in the light of Christian teaching, since husband and wife are spiritual equals, and they give *themselves* each to the other, the wife being no longer regarded as a kind of property which is given to the husband. Each gives the same undertaking to love and cherish the other, and the word ‘obey’ is not used. That the bride’s father or relative fully approves and blesses the union is then often symbolised by the minister asking him to join the right hands of the pair before they take the vow of marriage.

(e) *The Communion Service.*

This service, never used by the Society of Friends, but generally made the test of church membership by other denominations, is used by probably not more than half of our congregations, and it is never made a test of membership. Where it is in use the observance is sometimes monthly, but more often quarterly (in Irish churches half-yearly),

taking place immediately after morning or evening service. Some congregations hold a special Communion service on the anniversary of the Last Supper, the evening before Good Friday (Maundy Thursday). The service generally follows a very simple order. In it the worshippers come together before the table and it is essentially a drawing near to the table to remember that we are all disciples of Jesus, who said, “Do this in remembrance of me.” The bread and wine are distributed to each one present by the minister, or they may be handed round among the participants. Our churches share with Nonconformists



“Do this in remembrance of me.”

in general the view that this kind of service gains in value because it is made a special occasion of infrequent use. We become so strongly accustomed to our weekly services of worship: this service requires an additional effort from us to be worthy of our discipleship. Many find it a great help. Those who do not find it helpful and therefore do not attend, find that their views are respected. It is wrong, however, to suppose, as some have been known to suppose, that only “very good” people ought to think of attending communion. When we go to any religious service we

ought to realise how imperfect we are, and resolve to do better in the sight of God.

CHAPTER VI

HOW IS YOUR CHURCH MANAGED?

1. *Our Ideal of Spiritual Democracy.*

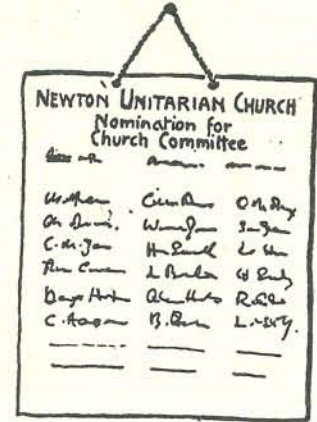
FIND out for yourselves how your congregation is managed, and who has the right to take part in its management. Customs vary from congregation to congregation. Find out what its trustees do. Many trustees of churches are never summoned to meet except in some crisis. Others meet once a year. They are responsible for the use to which the buildings are put, but probably for not much else.

What does the committee do, and how is it elected? Who is entitled to nominate and vote in its election? There is usually a lower age limit for this privilege; it may be 18 or it may be 21. Members entitled to vote must usually be those who attend the services of the church, and who pay a minimum membership subscription. It is a good thing when the responsibilities of membership are more than the financial responsibility of paying some annual subscription.

In all our congregations our ideal is to achieve a *spiritual democracy*. That is why some congre-

HOW IS YOUR CHURCH MANAGED?

gations have the nominal membership fee of one shilling a year, so that even the poorest may attain full membership, though in these cases the democratic intention is that every one should pay fully in accordance with his means. Some old trust deeds restrict committee membership to men. Modern feeling protests against such a violation of democratic principles, and ways will be sought to realise the desired democracy. The ideal committee is probably that for which there is an annual election, members being eligible for re-election for a limited number of years, then to retire for a year or more, so giving other members the benefit of



experience as committee members from time to time. It is not very healthy for a committee to be re-elected from year to year *en bloc* without any changes of personnel. It would not be any more healthy to have a complete change of members in any one year—there should be a good proportion of experienced members continuing in office each year.

2. *Various Systems of church government compared.*

What are the main differences between the congre-

gational system of government used in our own English, Scottish and Welsh Churches, and (a) the Presbyterian order, which is used in our Irish churches, and (b) the Episcopal order, which is used in the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church ?

As explained in Chapter III, Section 1, each congregation under our usual system is independent, and orders its own affairs as its committee or congregational meeting arranges, subject to the right of a certain number of members to call a special congregational meeting on any important matter of policy. The voting members of the congregation always meet to appoint a minister or to terminate his engagement.

In the Presbyterian system the congregations are organised in *presbyteries*, where the ministers and lay elders, who are ordained for the purpose, deliberate and act for the benefit of all the churches in the presbytery. The presbytery ordains new ministers, and confirms the call of a congregation appointing a new minister. When a pulpit falls vacant, the presbytery is responsible for appointing ministers to conduct the services of that congregation until the vacancy has been duly filled. This system, which is in use among our Irish churches, which long ago broke away from the orthodox Presbyterian Church, but retained its customs, also aims at achieving a spiritual democracy. In practice to-day it leaves to the local congregation

all the independence and practical initiative that it desires.

The Episcopal system is less democratic. It is government by bishops, chosen (in England) by the King on the advice of his Prime Minister. The bishops have wide powers in the organisation of their dioceses, and in the appointment of clergy to the various posts and parishes within it. The desire for a greater measure of spiritual democracy within the Church of England has resulted in the establishment of Parochial Church Councils, with certain powers in conducting the affairs of the parish.

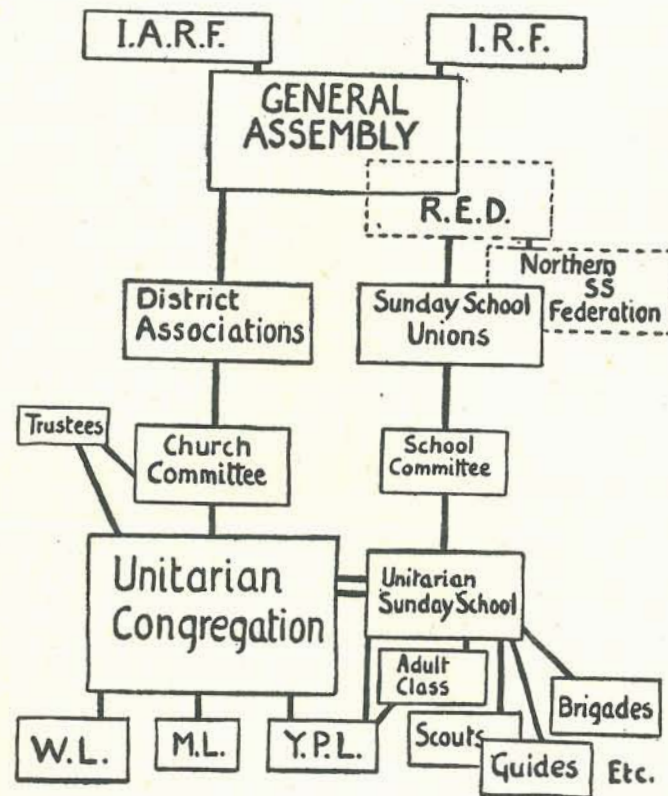
3. *What Local Organisation have the Churches in your area ?*

Most of our congregations are attached to some district Association or Union which has the power to raise funds for the benefit of the churches, and to aid the weaker churches, to devise means for assisting the various congregations, initiating missionary work in districts where there are no congregations, and so on. Congregations are represented on their councils, but as the congregations are independent they cannot be compelled to act in accordance with what the Association Council desires. Obviously, however, when financial grants are made by an Association to a congregation, its payment may be made conditional upon the acceptance of certain provisions. These councils usually meet quarterly, and the full Associa-

tion yearly or half-yearly. The Sunday Schools have a parallel organisation to the congregations.

4. *What is the General Assembly?*

The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches was formed in 1928, and held its first meetings in 1929. It was an amalgamation of the National Conference (which represented congregations and ministers) with the British and Foreign Unitarian Association (which was an association of personal subscribers). Consequently the annual meeting of the General Assembly consists of representatives of congregations and of district associations, etc., and of ministers, and personal subscribers also. This annual meeting elects a council which meets four or five times a year, and appoints departmental committees, namely the Finance and General Purposes, the Overseas and Foreign, the Church Aid and Development, the Publications Committee (known as the "Lindsey Press"), the Ministry Committee, the Religious Education Department which represents the local Sunday School Unions also, the Social Service Department, the Unitarian Service Committee, and the Youth Committee. Once in three years the Assembly must hold its Annual Meeting outside London. The Church Aid Committee makes considerable financial grants to congregations in difficult circumstances. The other departments are concerned with work without which the



denomination would be very much the poorer.

The President is elected annually, being chosen as President-elect a year before he is to assume office. He may be a minister or a layman—of either sex, and the office is highly respected throughout the country, its holder being frequently invited to visit various districts and address suitable gatherings.

5. *What is our International Movement?*

The General Assembly includes in its Fellowship congregations in the Dominions of Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, and is united with various movements in India, where it maintains a minister to work among the Unitarian churches in the villages of the Khasi Hills of Assam. Further than this we find ourselves associated with two international movements for strengthening and spreading the spirit of Free Christian Democracy. The International Association for Religious Freedom (I.A.R.F.) has a history going back to the beginning of the present century. Up to the outbreak of war in 1939, when most of its activities had to be suspended, the Association had organised a successful series of triennial conferences. Its headquarters were at Utrecht in Holland. It represented movements in the U.S.A., Great



Britain and the British Dominions, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, Germany, Holland, Hungary, Norway, the Philippine Islands, Roumania, Sweden and Switzerland. The other International Movement represents the Youth Movements of the various countries, and is known as the International Religious Fellowship (I.R.F.). Like the I.A.R.F., it had its headquarters at Utrecht. It organised annual camp conferences in various countries in turn. Both these fellowships set up emergency committees to maintain all possible contacts and to stimulate interest in our international movement during the war period.

6. *The World Church Movement.*

In what relation does our denomination stand to the "British Council of Churches" and the "World Council of Churches"? These two Councils link us up with what is called the "Ecumenical" or "World Church" movement, which seeks to represent all Christian denominations in every country. Since the World Council has a basis incorporating churches "which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour," the British Council was placed in a difficulty when it was formed in 1942. It desired to include the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches which for many years had taken an honourable part in the Life and Work Movement which was now to be taken over by the

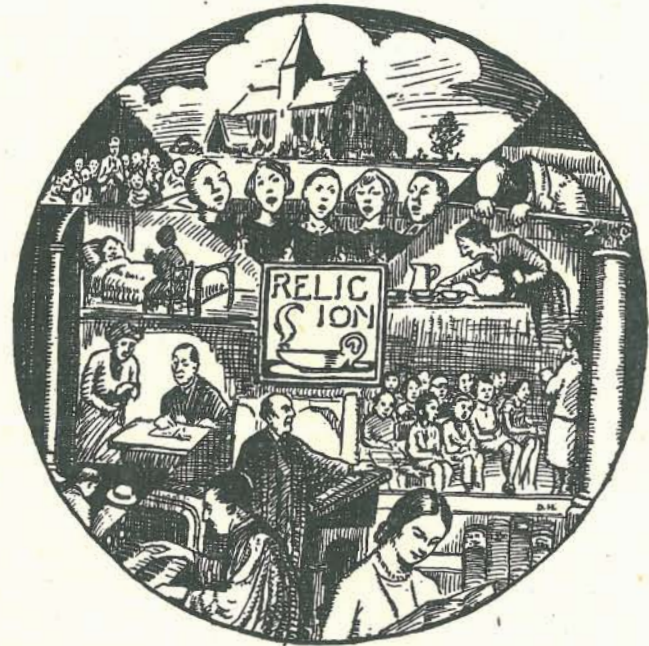
new Council. However it was resolved that although the basis of the British Council was to be the same as that of the World Council, any body which had previously been represented in the Life and Work Movement should continue in membership of the Council, if so willing, even though it did not accept the basis of the World Council. The General Assembly thereupon accepted membership, and is thus a recognised part of the World Church Movement.

CHAPTER VII

WHERE DO YOU COME IN?

IN the chapters which you have just read we have tried to give you a picture, although rather a sketchy one, of your church. We have left it to you to fill in the details that mark out its special character. This has been, as it were, a portrait of a typical member of a family—a family with a long and exciting history, a high purpose, and a noble work. There still remains one question to ask—Where do you come in?

We hope you will come in as a church member. In doing so you will be entering into the stream of a grand tradition, and will be able to share, through worship and fellowship, in the privileges and



opportunities that your church offers, and to take part in its work. There are several duties which will be laid upon you as a member.

(a) *In the Worshipping Community.*

The first *purpose* of the Church is the worship of God, and it follows that if you become a member it is also your first *duty*. The member who does not attend public worship whenever possible is failing in his duty, not only to God, but also to his fellow members; for there can be no doubt that our worship, individual though it may be in some respects, is the worship of a community. Other things being equal, worship will be at its best when all are present. Each absentee is withholding something from himself and his fellow-worshippers. The corporate act of worship is after all the community's supreme expression of its unity in fellowship, and the mainspring of its useful activity.

(b) *In the Spiritual Democracy.*

As was explained in the last chapter, we aim at being democratic in church government, giving to every member an equal status. But rights carry responsibilities, and it is our duty to see that we fulfil them. It may sometimes seem that the Church is run by the Church Committee. Now the Committee is elected as an executive body to carry out the wishes of the members. You, there-

fore, must exercise your right to vote in the election of the Committee, and when it is elected, you should encourage and help it by taking an active interest in its work.

You have also a financial responsibility. The Church needs money to carry on its work, and it is a good democratic principle that the financial burden is shared, not necessarily equally, but rather according to the means of the members. The minimum financial obligation—or membership fee—is usually small, and quite inadequate for the upkeep of the church. There are other opportunities to contribute and if you love your church and your heart is in its work you will give generously. There is an added virtue in sustained support, and if you will join the Envelope Offertory Scheme which most of our churches use, or otherwise contribute regularly, you will be helping to guarantee the future of your church and make it more effective in its service to the members of the congregation and the community around it.

(c) *In the Fellowship of Service.*

The third main duty of the church member is to take part in the active service of the fellowship. As was shown in Chapter II this is twofold—within the church and without. There is a place for every member in the institutional life of the church: some task, large or small, which he can perform as an act of service to his fellow-members.

(You might compile a list of such offices and tasks in your church). Unfortunately in practice these duties are often thrust upon the few, simply because the majority do not appreciate their own responsibilities. You are sure to have some gift that you can offer for the service of your fellow-members.

You are also called upon to serve your fellow man in the wider world. In a sense we all do this in our daily work; but "do not even the Gentiles the same?" Something more is expected of the Christian. The world is one in which he cannot rest content, for it contains many things which he knows to be evil, and it is his duty to do what he can to change it for the better; to make men more humane, more just, more charitable. The true Christian is a revolutionary, trying to overturn the false standards of the world in order to build the Kingdom of God on earth.