

**HISTORY OF  
UNITARIAN LAY PREACHING**

---

**ALAN RUSTON**

---

**A HISTORY OF LAY PREACHING IN  
THE UNITARIAN MOVEMENT**

by

ALAN RUSTON, B.Sc.(Econ.)

---

The Unitarian Lay Preachers' Association  
Essex Hall  
Essex Street, London W.C.2

1973



[www.unitarian.org.uk/docs](http://www.unitarian.org.uk/docs)

## Chapter 1 The early period

Lay preaching is by no means a new phenomenon in the Unitarian movement. Many churches in the late 18th century and early 19th century in Scotland were entirely ministered to by laymen<sup>1</sup>. Joseph Priestley strongly believed that Unitarian worship should continue whether a minister was present or not, and wrote orders of worship to be used specifically by untrained laymen<sup>2</sup>. There are several instances, in the early 19th century and particularly in the West Country, of laymen conducting services regularly without being the settled minister of the church they served<sup>3</sup>. The history of the Methodist Unitarian Movement, beginning with the expulsion of Joseph Cooke from the Methodist connection in 1806, powerfully demonstrates the place of the layman in the general work of the church<sup>4</sup>.

Perhaps it might be best at this stage to define what I mean by a lay preacher. It is a man or woman, who regularly conducts worship at one or more places of worship, but who has not been called to the ministry of a particular church, is not professionally engaged in that task, and is not recognised to be a minister by a national body. According to my definition, the first Unitarian lay preachers were to be found in the Methodist Unitarian movement in Lancashire in the early 19th century.

The earliest preaching "plan" I have found within Unitarianism is that as set out by Dr. McLachlan in his work on the Methodist Unitarian movement. Borrowed from Methodism its format has changed little over the years and remains basically the same today.

## THE PREACHERS' AND PRAYER LEADERS' PLAN

AT PROVIDENCE CHAPEL, ROCHDALE, 1812

"Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation."—  
MATTHEW xxvi. 41.

Hours	Sept.		Oct.				Nov.					Dec.	
	20	27	4	11	18	25	1	8	15	22	29	6	13
Providence Chapel . . . . .	10 $\frac{1}{2}$	2 $\frac{1}{2}$	6	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	2
New Church . . . . .	10 $\frac{1}{2}$	9 $\frac{1}{2}$	1	6	2	7	1	8	2	1	6	2	1
Paddiham . . . . .			7	10			4	5	3	4	7	6	
Littleborough . . . . .	6	6			4				6				4
Top of Toad Lane . . . . .	7		9		10	11		10	18	13		14	
Church Lane . . . . .	7	15		16	17	10	4	11	17	13	9	14	14
Lanehead . . . . .	6		13	6	11	10	4	11	14	6	18		
Broadley . . . . .	6	16		17	18	9		15	11				10
Meanwood . . . . .	7		12		12	18		12	15		10		
Broad o'th Lane . . . . .	7	17		18	9	14		12	12	13			11
Small-bridge . . . . .	7		11		13	10		13	16		11		
Fivehouses . . . . .	6	18		9	10	16		11	14		14		12
Whitworth . . . . .	6		4	11	12	6	17	4	9	10	15	6	16
Crompton . . . . .	6	4	14	10	14	6	15	13	15	4	18	16	9
Lowerplace . . . . .	7	14	15	12	16	9	17	18	16	13	11	17	13
Bagslate . . . . .	6				6			6					4

### QUARTERLY MEETING, 7TH OCTOBER

#### References

James Bowman . . . . .	1	W. Robinson . . . . .	10
John Ashworth . . . . .	2	James Wilkes . . . . .	11
Jonathan Redman . . . . .	3	James Hoyle . . . . .	12
John Mills . . . . .	4	James Driver . . . . .	13
J. Pollard . . . . .	5	Thomas Jones . . . . .	14
James Taylor . . . . .	6	Benjamin Howarth . . . . .	15
John Robinson . . . . .	7	W. Dean . . . . .	16
John Crawshaw . . . . .	8	Robert Heape . . . . .	17
James Ashworth . . . . .	9	J. Hoyle . . . . .	18

Dr. McLachlan continues "The earliest extant Plan, September-December 1812, shows a list of 18 Preachers and Prayer Leaders, and no fewer than 16 stations. The majority of the men whose names are on the Plan were Prayer Leaders, and resembled in their functions the Methodist Class Leaders. Those mainly responsible for the preaching, apart from James Bowman, were James Taylor and James Wilkinson of Rochdale, John Ashworth and Jonathan Rudman of Newchurch and James Pollard and John Robinson, of Padiham. These six are on all the four surviving plans, dated 1812, 1815, 1816 and 1817. They are also included in a list of preachers published in 1818, and are frequently mentioned in the reports of the annual meetings of the Methodist Unitarians."

This pattern continued over many years and Dr. McLachlan notes that "we may recognise, nearly 40 years after the expulsion of Joseph Cooke from the Methodist Conference, not only the names of two of Cooke's co-adjutors, but also some of the characteristic features of Methodist Unitarianism—a lay ministry with regular exchanges of preachers, a profound love of prayer, a conspicuous zeal for Sunday school work, and congregations composed, in the main, of poverty-stricken working men."

While these early and continuing features of lay preaching activities in Lancashire remain, the scene for the rest of the movement is set by a long controversy in the 'Monthly Repository' in 1821. The Monthly Repository was the intellectual Unitarian monthly of the day and it played a very important role in the movement; it was not for those of an inferior education or social class. A letter from "M.S." in August 1821 started the argument off, so giving us many of the evidences of early lay preaching in Unitarianism generally: who "M.S." was is a mystery. Many of the disputes first raised here, were to be repeated throughout the century and right up to present times.

"M.S." states "Those who feel themselves attached to the principles which more peculiarly characterise the Unitarian Dissenters, cannot be but solicitous that their ministers should be men of education, as well as of moral merit and that the performances of the sacred offices of religion by the vulgar and illiterate, which, I regret to say, has of late been countenanced in one or two chapels, should be marked by the most decided disapprobation.

When we see our minister ascend the pulpit, the beliefs of his superior attainments and more cultivated understanding, must of necessity give to his discourse both weight and authority; and while we are informed, that much which is now hidden shall one day be revealed, we are all aware the learning of the scholar and the theologian has thrown a light on many passages, from which much knowledge and improvement have been derived.

We know that the wild enthusiast and bold disclaimer are generally ignorant and that humility is found only in those whose attainments are far above mediocrity. Who, let me ask, can hope for improvement from the silly rhapsodies of a self-created minister, whose honest employment behind the counter has been abandoned in the vain hope of distinguishing himself in the pulpit, and who has unwittingly dared to pretend to give that instruction to others, which, it must be apparent, he would so long have needed himself. Is it from the hope of gaining proselytes, or from the fear of losing converts, that an enlightened and respectable minister sanctions the performance of the religious duties in a man whose situation in life is little better than a common servant? . . . It is infinitely better in the propagation of important truth to appeal rather to the reason than the passions; but the illiterate pastor is miserably ignorant both of what he is to convince and the art of convincing; and in the place of the steady, solemn manner of the Christian gentleman and minister, you are disgusted with the arrogant self-importance, and the arduous display of that mite of knowledge, which are discernable in the clumsy candidate for holy orders . . . That zeal is, I apprehend misplaced, which permits ignorance to assume information for the sake to keep together a congregation. Where proper supplies cannot be obtained, the place had far better be closed; for when it is not, the Dissenters, though they may desire to do good, meet only with derision."

Such contentious stuff really had to merit a reply, which it is certain that "M.S." expected. The liveliness of the response shows that it was a very current concern. Rev. W. Hincks in the following month's issue replies "For myself I avow that it is from the hope of gaining proselytes (I have little fear of losing converts) that, in addition to my own best exertions, I would sanction the performance of religious services by a man in any situation of life whom I believed to possess strength of mind, knowledge of the truth, zeal for its diffusion and a Christian character. I should expect the labours of such men to be peculiarly valuable among persons in their own class of life, but of different religious opinions,

and I should consider them as extending my own means of usefulness. I must also say, that I would be very sorry if societies not having ministers were to follow the advice of your squeamish correspondent, and close places of worship which might be kept open on Christian principles, through fear of the derision of bigots, or of having their ears offended by the illiterate piety and zeal of lay preachers."

In October, the famous William Frend, the expelled Cambridge Fellow and eccentric, entered the fray . . .

"For it happened that the Sunday before, I heard a sermon from one of the most respectable preachers we have, and he keeps a shop, and I cannot possibly conceive what objection can be to a person keeping a shop, if he is capable of communicating Christian instruction and speaks to edify . . . The distinction seems to me to arise more from a worldly spirit, than that which ought to manifest itself among Christians." Not being at all certain what the term "lay preacher" means, he continues "A man may be learned, and yet know nothing of the spirit of Christianity; on the other hand, a man may be unlearned, in this sense of the word, and yet be mighty in the scriptures; and for my own part, I had rather hear one of the latter description, though his phraseology should be uncouth, than the most learned discourse from one of the other description, though dressed out with the most captivating figures of eloquence."

A letter from "An occasional lay preacher" appears in the same issue. Saying that he knows many in his district (which is not stated) who are lay preachers, he asks them not to be put off by "M.S." and "to persevere in the good work they have undertaken, on all fit occasions, not suffering themselves to be diverted either by the ridicule of the learned, or the slanders of the malicious, from the faithful exercise of their virtuous endeavours." . . . "I fear there are, nay I believe it, though with much reluctance, and with the hope that I am wrong, certain among the most enlightened of Unitarians, who are not desirous that the sect should be a very numerous one, or that it should extend its proselysing to the lower orders of society. I strongly suspect M.S. to be of this number. They would confine the faith to the elect, the illuminati." J. T. Rutt also joined in the defence of lay preachers in the columns of the Monthly Repository, and the Rev. John McMillan, minister of the Unitarian Chapel, Stratford, Essex, preached two sermons, which were later published, on the issue very much in defence of the lay preacher<sup>5</sup>. The review of these sermons in the Monthly Repository in November 1822 is in support of McMillan's views and in its course makes one of the finest justifications ever made for lay preaching.

"The right to teach is created by the opportunity. Any 'two or three' that agree to hear a teacher, give him by that agreement ordination. All authority in Christian ministers beyond this appears to us to be founded on tyranny or fraud."

Thus this early argument over lay preaching, was as much about class and social standing as about learning and calling. There is always a danger today in seeing matters like this in Marxist terms, but the correspondents of 1821 equally saw it in this light even if the phraseology is not that of a later age. Space does not allow me to go further into the issue, but there is little doubt that many in the older Presbyterian foundations viewed with great alarm this new tendency of filling the poorer (and often vacant) pulpits with laymen. To spread the movement to the poorer sections of society by this means was not to be encouraged, which they saw as a dilution of the cause as much as anything else. But others recognised a lack of ministers, and a service held better than a chapel closed, and thus resulted the itinerant lay preacher.

The history of lay preaching following this early exchange can be divided into three main phases, to which we must now direct our attention.

## Chapter 2 The rise of the Unions 1859-1880

The period after 1821 until the 1850's is not rich in record of the activities of lay preachers. However from various references and obituaries of the time and later, it is apparent that laymen were not debarred from the various vacant pulpits of the Unitarian movement, and that in many places their preaching continued over many years.

However it is in the 1850's that we see increased activity and recruitment of lay preachers. They were used mainly in the field of missionary and extension work rather than in the filling of existing pulpits; they did not dream of aspiring to what an 1821 correspondent to the 'Monthly Repository' called "the highly cultivated and philosophical congregations of London, Hackney or Birmingham." Their concern was in very different areas, in extending the Unitarian witness to regions where it was unknown. One of the first activities of the North and East Lancashire Unitarian Mission, when it was formed in 1859, was to set up a lay preaching organisation. "Arrangements were made with the Unitarian Home Missionary Board for the services of students, and the rate was fixed at which they were to be paid. The same was done in the case of the Lay Preachers of whom there were several. The Committee then proceeded to arrange the Preachers' Plan for the next three months. It is not stated that this was a new arrangement, and seems rather to have been taken over from some other agency, perhaps the Bury Mission or the Bolton District Unitarian Association. As the Committee resolved to bear the expenses of the Preachers' Plan for the year 1859, and as it was then the end of the year, evidently the arrangement had been in existence some time. Copies of the plan for successive quarters are contained in the earliest minute book, and cease with the one for April/June 1864. Occasional references are found of later date, and a resolution of August 1872 is 'that the printing of the Preachers' Plan be discontinued for the present.' (Lay preachers are listed—18 in number.) There have been others in later times, but their names are not recorded. It is fitting to keep from being wholly forgotten those who, as lay preachers, helped in the pioneer work of the Mission."<sup>6</sup>

There are evidences of similar unions being set up about this time in Northumberland and Durham, the West Riding<sup>7</sup> and elsewhere, but it is in London that the main attention lies. The London District Unitarian Society was formed in 1851, partly out of the concern for the vast tracts of London with little religious witness, let alone a Unitarian one. Many consciences had been stirred in earlier years by the Domestic Mission movement, and it was felt that the distinct Unitarian message should be clearly presented to the masses. Preaching activities undoubtedly took place in the 1850's and early 1860's but it was not until 1866 that a Lay Preaching Union was set up. This Union was in fact the later model for the rest of the country, and in its early years it flourished. The 'Unitarian Herald' lists its activities in some detail as do the Reports of the London Society itself. Its first report to the Society is several pages long "The names of upwards of thirty gentlemen have been secured as lay preachers, and during the past year they have conducted in various chapels, halls, and schoolrooms, in and around London, upwards of 250 services. Over 100 persons have been qualified as members by services to this Union, and by subscriptions from £20 to 5/-; and the sum of £285 has been promised to the Treasurer for different branches of usefulness connected with this movement. The principal operations of the first year may be summarised under the following heads:— The formation of a theological library for the preachers and members of this Society, and a mutual improvement class; the distribution of religious and theological books and tracts; the holding of conferences in several parts of London on various religious subjects; a series of week-evening theological lectures and discussions; and conducting religious services in some of our older chapels and new stations."<sup>8</sup> In their second report, it is stated that "the average of persons attending the whole of our 13 Sunday services in London (at the Lay Preaching stations) in April were (sic) 470 each Sunday; more than half of these in the East End of London." Much of the stimulus for the setting up of the Union came from Rev. Robert Spears and Samuel Sharpe (the Egyptologist and Bible translator). Sharpe "thought that the difficulty in supporting small congregations might be met by educated laymen undertaking to conduct religious services and to cultivate the habit of speaking on religious subjects."<sup>9</sup>

But all this enormous activity did not go without criticism. The Editor of the 'Inquirer' in the issue of 11th June 1870 said "We cannot conceal our own conviction that the Lay Preacher's

Union—the principal branch of the missionary work—is a signal mistake and blunder, and has proved itself to be so by the miserably feeble results of its operations. Whatever may be said of various parts of the country, the metropolis, with its singularly acute and intelligent working class population, is not a fitting field for this mode of missionary operations.” Many felt that they were spreading their activities over too wide a field; however some permanent congregations were set up at this time, due mainly to efforts of lay preachers, and which still exist today.

The rest of the country, particularly the cities, took note of these efforts. Manchester set up a similar association in 1870<sup>10</sup>, and the Northumberland and Durham Association recognised the importance of the missionary work that it was undertaking.<sup>11</sup>

But in general all the efforts were short-lived, and the lay preaching unions were soon on the decline. It seems from their history that they all go through periods of strong activity, followed by quiescence, followed by virtual disappearance. Then a few years later there is a realisation of their value, and they are re-formed, so starting the cycle over again. In London, by 1875 some activities had been dropped and in 1877 the Union was discontinued. In Manchester the Union lasted an even shorter time, the Plan being discontinued in 1872. It would seem that by the later 1870's the missionary thrust among the Unitarians had declined, and although there are numerous evidences of laymen preaching in established congregations (particularly in London) the organised pattern appears to have disappeared nearly everywhere, or become moribund.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps too much was expected of the lay preachers and what they were capable of doing. They seemed to be the light of the future in the 1860's but by 1870 disillusionment had set in, and they fell away as quickly as they had risen as organisations. It was not until 1890 that they were heard of again.

### Chapter 3 The extension of the Unions and the foundation of the National Union 1890-1914

It was London again that led the way, when the Report of the London District Unitarian Society for 1890 announced the formation of a London and Home Counties Lay Preachers' Union. During the 1880's preaching by laymen in the area had been on an *ad hoc* basis, although many services were conducted in any year<sup>13</sup>. Rev. Robert Spears had organised 18 gentlemen into a form of Union in 1883, and in his report for that year said “No congregation in London, in the absence of their minister from sickness or any cause, need be in any strait about some one to conduct their devotions and to deliver a sermon, with the knowledge that we have laymen who are willing to take a duty of this kind now and then. I believe we have strength enough among us now to venture on the opening of one or more places of worship in or around London.” It is doubtful that from the 1860's with the increasing number of small, poor congregations, and little increase in the supply of ministers, whether it would have been possible to do without lay preachers. The same can almost certainly be said of other major cities elsewhere in this country.

Enthusiasm was again on the increase. For example, the chapel at St. Albans was opened by lay preachers having been closed for 25 years. Twenty-five members were on the Roll and had conducted 112 services in the previous year—1890. Most interesting of all, the objects of the Union were stated:—

- (i) To assist in supporting and extending Unitarian Christianity.
- (ii) Holding meetings and conducting religious services where there are no settled ministers when requested.

More grandly the first report states “In this connection it is also contemplated to form Unions in all parts of the country, with a view to the formation of a National Lay Preachers' Union, having its centre in London, with local centres in the country, so that our isolated churches may have at least one service every Sunday, instead of, at present, once a month, and less than that in some places.”<sup>14</sup>

This is the first augury of the National Union, to come 23 years later, the pressure for it nearly aways coming from London.

Other areas of the country took up the London offer as the report for 1892 says "if proof of the value of the Union is needed, it exists in the fact that since the London Union has been established it has called into existence some four or five other Unions in the country, and applications for suggestions and advice as to the formation." Manchester heard the call, but was unsuccessful in forming a proper Union in 1891, and their report of the Manchester District Association for 1892 says "The formation of a Union in which systematic help in the preparation of their work is given to Lay Preachers, has been taken up in London with most interesting results . . . Manchester has long been a centre of Lay Preachers' activity, and many of our more flourishing churches today owe their existence to the good work done by our Lay Preachers in the past."

The Report of 1893 states that the Manchester Union had been suspended. The London Union did not last much longer and it was moribund by 1895. If any other Unions were set up at this time, their existence must have been evanescent.

However the seeds of the idea had been effectively sown. The Essex Hall Year Book lists three Unions in 1897, London (though in fact dead), Northumberland and Durham, and Yorkshire. The Midland Association was formed in 1897 and in 1902 a North Midland Union. But 1904 was a key year when Unions were formed separately in Manchester and Liverpool. The Manchester Union lists its main function as "supplying vacant pulpits," which is an interesting and noteworthy change from the earlier missionary activities and showing clearly the commencement of the modern pattern. In 1908, the S. Wales Unitarian Lay Preachers were founded, following advice from Manchester. In 1911 the London Union was re-organised, probably in order to assist in the work of the Van Mission in extending the witness (London even had 3 women lay preachers at this time).<sup>14</sup> With the formation of the Sheffield Union in 1914, the picture of the local situation is complete before the First World War. All the Unions formed in this period (except S. Wales) have remained in continuous existence until today.

The struggle to form a National Union was a long one, occasioned by much apathy. The 'Christian Life' for 10th May 1913 tells the story. "In 1911 the London Union convened a meeting of lay preachers from all over the country and suggested the formation of a National Union or Federation to embrace the whole country. The suggestion was cordially approved, and a committee appointed to draw up a scheme. The committee invited suggestions, and after consideration it was resolved to found a national society under the title of 'The National Unitarian Lay Preachers' Union' . . . The British and Foreign Unitarian Association has approved the effort to found the National Union, and has made a grant towards the funds."

It was eventually set up in May 1913, and from the article in 'Christian Life' great things were expected. But the War brought much of the hoped-for activity to nought, and the grim task of just keeping the churches going was enjoined on everyone during the war years (the Manchester Union was drastically re-formed for this task in 1915<sup>15</sup>).

So the Unions had come and gone in this period, but altogether were stronger in 1914 than previously. Perhaps the Manchester District Association Report for 1915 best sums the matter up, "Lay preaching has had a place in our churches in Manchester and the surrounding district for probably fifty years or more; it has been admittedly a plant of small growth and varying strength." However the determination to stay in existence, like the Unitarian movement itself, could not be doubted.



## Chapter 4 The Lay Preacher 1918-1973

The War necessitated the extensive use of lay preachers in churches in every part of the country. So with the war's closure in 1918 renewed interest and involvement in the Unions resulted, which had shown distinct signs of slackening in 1914. The Southern Lay Workers Union was formed in 1920, the East Anglian Union in 1921. The local unions increased their scope and in an address to the National Union in 1919, J. W. Peterken stated "that the time had gone when there was any need to apologise for the existence of the lay preachers; his presence is not an impertinence, but a necessity." The 'Christian Life' Magazine started, in the same year, a "Lay Preachers Page" at the request of the National Union, with reports from the districts demonstrating how lively things were. It is probable that in the few years after 1919 we see the greatest amount of activity that there has ever yet been amongst lay preachers throughout the country. They even went in for verse in their regular page in the 'Christian Life' (10th January 1920).

### A Lay Preacher's Farewell

Comrades mourn not my departure  
When I pass to the Sublime,  
Life is short howe'er we live it,  
And for sorrow there's no time.

Think of me as on a journey,  
Plodding towards the heavenly bourn,  
Which same road you, too, must follow,  
Kindly think, but do not mourn.

Say, if you can say it truly,  
That he tried to do his best,  
Lived according to his knowledge,  
And the light that he possessed.

Say that preaching was a pleasure,  
Nay, a joy he fain would greet,  
And if someone praised the effort,  
It was rendered doubly sweet.

Say he had his limitations,  
Which he longed to overcome,  
And when he would speak with power,  
Then his failings kept him dumb.

Thank the friends who entertained him  
For their hospitable cheer,  
And the never-failing welcome,  
Which he knew to be sincere.

Comrades do not mourn my going,  
You have yet a work to do,  
For the fields are white to harvest,  
And the labourers are few.

—VALE.

The National Union commenced holding Easter Schools for members. Beginning in 1923 and 1925 at Manchester College, Oxford, they went to Cambridge in 1928 and 1930, returning to Oxford in 1932 and 1934, back to Cambridge in 1936 and 1938 and at York in 1939. The decision to hold the Easter School annually, with venues alternating between North and South, was the reason for the York meeting. The Second World War, however, prevented any further arrangements until 1949, when the Easter School was resumed at the Unitarian College, Manchester. It was held there again in 1950. Returning to Oxford in 1951, the alternation between North and South was resumed, the School being in Oxford in "odd" years and in Manchester in "even" years and this arrangement has continued ever since. A pattern of operation was evolved, particularly after the last war, with speakers a Sunday visit to a Unitarian church in the vicinity, at which the President preached the sermon, and which continues substantially today. The introduction of a chain of office for the president was instituted in 1962.

During the same period, study facilities by way of correspondence were introduced. The Council of the National Union in 1920 first accepted the idea, and later tutors were appointed from amongst Unitarian ministers. A typical example was the Correspondence Tuition Scheme of 1933/34, with tutors in the Old and New Testaments, Philosophy of Religion, Homiletics and Christian Sociology. This scheme was intended only for students "prepared to qualify themselves for and to render service in or for our churches." Of the 10 students who enrolled for the classes in Homiletics and Biblical Study in the autumn of 1933, 9 gained certificates, 4 gaining honours. In the year 1935/6 there were 27 students, 17 of whom gained certificates including 9 with honours.

That seems to have been a "peak year"; succeeding Annual Reports showing few students, until the abridged records of the war years. That for 1941-2/1942-3 shows 8 students gaining certificates for one or more subjects, stating that "this teaching is of considerable help in raising the efficiency of our lay preachers whose services are necessary for so many of our small churches which, without such pulpit aid, would have to be closed. Many hundreds of services are conducted every year by unpaid laymen."

A similar scheme commenced after the war, but there was little interest in the 1950's until the General Assembly Training Course commenced in 1961. The essential parts of the training course are Old and New Testament, Christian History and Unitarian Thought Today, with extra optional subjects. Tutors were appointed for these subjects. It was also recommended that Minister-Advisers be appointed by each District Association to give the practical advice needed for sermon preparation, conduct of worship, and delivery. Those satisfactorily completing the course, taking a minimum of two years, were to be awarded a Certificate by the General Assembly and admitted to Central Roll of Lay Preachers which is printed in the Assembly's Year Book. This Central Roll initially consisted of all local accredited lay preachers, and it is revised annually by a joint sub-committee. After some early teething troubles the whole scheme is now working quite well, and there is a steady flow of students and new names being added to the Central Roll.

At the local level, new Unions have come (and some gone). The Southern Union in particular has had a chequered history; the East Cheshire Union came in 1936 but does not seem to have had a continuous history. The North and East Lancashire Association was convened, mainly on the prompting of Mr. L. Procter, in 1953, and has continued actively since that date. The older Unions have had varied calls on their services; the London area in particular was very short of ministers in the 1930's, so that in 1935/6 27 members conducted the staggering number of 700 services. Pressure on some Unions has been very great at certain periods, so that the very continuance of our witness has rested on their work. Now widely recognised by the movement, they have become, so to speak, "part of the furniture" and it is difficult to see church life without them. Some see this situation as a cause for regret, but certainly the preacher (or lay leader as a modern alternative expression of his role has put it) has a definite sphere in the 1970's. An Association of "Lay Speakers"—yet another twist on a name—has been formed among our Scottish churches in 1972, another proof that the situation is not static but an ever changing scene to meet the demands of Unitarian churches as they evolve through time.

## Chapter 5 Conclusions and the Future

Modern lay preaching unions tend to follow a standardised pattern. Each quarter a preaching plan is prepared by either the secretary, a small committee, or a minister-adviser; the churches send their requirements in advance to the organiser, and the lay preachers and ministers at the same time inform him or her of what dates they are available to preach. The plan is then prepared on this basis and a copy sent to all involved. Lay preachers do not charge a fee; a charge is made quarterly by the union to each church according to the number of services taken by members which is used to reimburse their expenses. Whatever money is left over at the end of the year is returned to members in the form of book grants, etc. (the National Association also run a book grant scheme for members of local unions) or donations are made to denominational charities.

Membership of the local Union, which is essential for recognition, is entirely in the hands of the Union. The Union generally has a close connection with its appropriate District Association which in effect sponsors and guarantees its activities. Membership of the Central Roll is not a necessity for local membership, and some on the Central Roll do not have local affiliation. All members of local unions are members of the National Association and their names are listed in its Annual Report. Representation on the National Association Council is by way of local union, each sending one delegate. Exclusion from either the local or national roll is up to the body concerned but is a very rare event. Conditions of entry to local unions vary considerably from place to place.

This description of lay preacher activities is necessary to show how the system operates and as a guide to the present situation. It is obviously geared to filling the pulpits of existing churches; missionary (or extension work as it is now known) is not really covered and this original function is almost forgotten. The last real contact with extension was with the Van Mission in the 1920's, when local lay preachers supplemented the efforts of the travelling missionaries when the Van was in their area.<sup>16</sup> Thus the role of the lay preacher, as once envisaged, is now almost entirely gone, so

involved has the movement become with the maintenance of its existing structure. I for one, see the future role of lay reader (call him or her what you will) as lying in this historic direction. The task of mission, so much the concern of the orthodox churches, has been entirely left in our ranks to interested ministers and specialised committees. Surely the out-reach of the church can only really be performed effectively in new areas by the lay person; in days of severe ministerial shortage we can spread our resources too thinly if we expect this to be an extensive part of the classic minister's function.

Another area of development seen by many to be of importance is the lay pastor who has other paid employment, in addition to the ministry of a church. Many of the mainstream churches are taking up this idea with enthusiasm, but it is a situation that has existed amongst us for generations, as it has in old-style Congregationalism. The lay pastor is excluded from my definition of a lay preacher, as he has been "called" to the ministry of a specific congregation. It would be excellent if more people were willing to follow this course of activity but there is little evidence to show that many are coming forward. The future may lie more with the involved layman working through a local church or group of churches (maybe in a Group Ministry scheme) rather than in a settled ministerial position which does not, in 1973 at least, seem to have any great power of attraction for the involved layman under a certain age.

Certainly in recent years fewer people have been willing to offer their services to local Unions. Many are ready to preach in their own churches but not to travel elsewhere. This has resulted in such a shortage of available preachers in certain of our city areas that "supply" (a traditional term for the outside filling of a pulpit) has not been possible and the church members have been forced back on their own resources. This could very well be a portent; with the reduction in the ranks of lay preachers as well as ministers, it seems that many of our congregations will in the future (to borrow a modern parlance) have to "stand on their own two feet." This may be part of a new pattern developing among our churches that could be enriching, even though it is born out of necessity. A truly lay church may be evolving amongst us, which, if it happens, will be a fitting crown to the work of the lay preacher who has served our cause loyally for nearly two hundred years.

## REFERENCES

- 1 Pioneers of Scottish Unitarianism by L. Baker Short (1963) for 18th century examples: "The necessity and advantages of lay preaching among Unitarians demonstrated, and the objections generally urged against it, invalidated," 2 sermons with an appendix (Dr. Williams's Library) by Rev. John McMillan (1821). Part of the appendix records "Look at Scotland, where although Unitarianism is less widely disseminated than in England, we find lay preaching to have been illustriously beneficial. I believe that all Unitarian churches in that part of the kingdom, were founded by Laymen, and do, with the exception of two, continue to go on by their own exertions . . . I may refer to Glasgow, where, since the formation of a Unitarian church in that city, lay preachers have been numerous and have signalised themselves as 'the able yet temperate advocates of a righteous cause' . . . At Paisley, there has existed for many years a very interesting and respectable Unitarian Church under the pastoral care of a plurality of Lay-elders . . . The services of the Unitarian Church at Dundee, have for about 30 years, been performed by laymen." In fact it has been thought that it was the emphasis on the laymen conducting all the affairs of the cause that led to the early demise of many of these congregations.
- 2 Joseph Priestley: Forms of Prayer and other offices for the use of Unitarian Societies (Birmingham) 1783.
- 3 J. Murch: History of Presbyterianism and the General Baptists in the West of England (1835), page 474, speaking of Moreton-Hampstead. "In 1805, Mr. Bransby removed to Dudley; and for the next 11 years, the congregation had no pastor. During a great part of this interval, services were regularly conducted by Mr. Thomas Mardon, Thom. White, Ed. White, members of the congregation, and for the last 2 or 3 years, exclusively by the last of these gentlemen." The index calls this "Lay-preaching at Moreton."
- 4 The Methodist Unitarian Movement by H. McLachlan, Manchester, 1919.
- 5 See Reference 1; quote from sermon of Rev. J. McMillan (1821).
- 6 Historical sketch of N and E Lancs. Unitarian Mission and Affiliated Churches 1859-1909 (Jubilee Volume), Edited R. T. Herford and E. D. Priestley Evans, pages 6-8.
- 7 Reports of the W. Riding Unitarian Trust and Village Mission Society. The report for 1859 sets out the first plan, including 10 laymen which by 1861 had increased to 24 (U.C.M.).
- 8 The London District Unitarian Society Reports (1851 onwards) are now at Dr. Williams's Library.
- 9 Samuel Sharpe by P. W. Clayden (London) 1883 pages 258/9.
- 10 'Unitarian Herald' 22nd July 1870, page 236.
- 11 'Unitarian Herald' 5th September 1873, page 287.
- 12 The W. Riding Unitarian Trust Society (becoming the Yorkshire Unitarian Union in the 1880's) seems to have continued its lay preaching activity throughout this period, having a form of union in operation. In fact the list for 1872/3 contains the name of a woman (Miss Rollinson of Hunslet), perhaps the first regular woman Unitarian lay preacher. There is also evidence of activity in Northumberland and Durham at this time.

- <sup>13</sup> "During the year, 16 of our laymen have conducted nearly 200 services in all, at Deptford, Bethnal Green, Edmonton, Peckham, Stratford, Stepney and other places, in and near London. This Union, so useful, involves little labour on my part, as I simply supply the secretaries of churches with the names of gentlemen who occasionally conduct services. Fourteen churches, at least, in town and country have been helped by our lay ministers during the year; and it is pleasing to hear from all those places how acceptable such services have been." London District Report 1884 by Rev. Robert Spears.
- <sup>14</sup> Some important figures appeared on the London scene at this time. "In Channing Hall, on several occasions in 1892 and 1893, James Ramsey Macdonald, who later became the first Labour Prime Minister, was a Lay Preacher" (Richmond Church publicity handout). There is evidence of other future Labour leaders preaching at this church in the 1890's.
- <sup>15</sup> Manchester District Association Report (bound volumes) at Unitarian College, Manchester.
- <sup>16</sup> Annual Reports of the Unitarian Van Mission (up to 1932) at Unitarian College, Manchester.

#### APPENDIX

##### Presidents of the Association

1913-1943	Mr. H. G. Chancellor
1943-1945	Dr. N. Bishop Harman, M.A., F.R.C.S.
1945-1946	Mr. E. G. Green, B.A.
1946-1947	Dr. Lillie Johnson
1947-1948	Mr. Clifford V. Walton
1948-1949	Mr. J. Reece Walker
1949-1950	Mr. Alfred Benton
1950-1951	Miss M. Griffiths (Mrs. D. A. Snowling)
1951-1952 )	Dr. Frederick T. Wood, B.A.
1952-1953 )	
1953-1954	Mr. T. W. Roberts
1954-1955	Mr. C. H. Sykes
1955-1956	Mrs. B. Faulkes (Mrs. B. Haward)
1956-1957	Mr. Tom Gregory
1957-1958	Miss Helen Dixon-Williams
1958-1959	Mr. Frank Collinson
1959-1960	Mr. Leslie H. Thomas, A.T.D.
1960-1961	Mr. Leslie Procter, F.C.C.A.
1961-1962	Mr. George E. Prentice, F.C.C.S.
1962-1963	Mr. Ernest E. Laws
1963-1964	Mrs. Gertrude Sokell
1964-1965 )	Mr. M. Humphreys Winder, B.A.
1965-1966 )	
1966-1967	Mrs. Mary E. Gregory
1967-1968	Dr. Stanley H. Kennett
1968-1969	Mr. Ben Hodkinson, M.Sc.
1969-1970	Mr. Stanley Lees
1970-1971	Mr. George E. Warhurst
1971-1972	Mr. Jack Sisson
1972-1973	Mr. Alan R. Ruston, B.Sc. (Econ.)
1973-1974	Mr. W. T. Fallside

##### Officers of the Association

**Note:** The National Union of Unitarian and Free Christian Lay Preachers we re-named The Unitarian Lay Preachers' Association on the adoption of a revised Constitution in 1961.

##### Secretaries :

1913- *	Mr. S. P. Penwarden
* -1935	Mr. J. W. Peterken
1935-1940	Mr. Lewis Lloyd (died after an air-raid on his home in 1940 when his records were destroyed*)
1940-1943	Mr. J. W. Peterken
1943-1947	Mr. A. Causebrooke
1947-1956	Mr. Carl S. Butterworth
1956-	Mr. Philip J. Spencer

##### Treasurers :

1933 (or earlier)-1948	Mr. F. G. Jackson
1948-1956	Mr. Tom Gregory
1956-1960	Mr. H. R. Haward
1960-1969	Mr. Alfred Benton
1969-	Miss Leonie H. Hosegood, B.A.