

Glasgow 7 Feb 2010

by **Barbara Clifford** - "In the beginning"

This year our Glasgow congregation celebrates its bi-centenary and my sermon today is focused on the beginnings and background of the Unitarian movement in Glasgow and a brief look to the future. My research for this has benefited from the book by L Baker Short, *Pioneers of Scottish Unitarianism*.

We start in late 18th century in Scotland when various Universalist and Unitarian small groups began to evolve: in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Paisley and areas in the East of Scotland. Mr Fyshe Palmer and Mr William Christie, had preached to small congregations in Dundee and Montrose but found it a struggle to form a Unitarian Movement against the strong Calvinist religion dominant in Scotland at the time. It was technically illegal to be a Unitarian until 1813, which didn't stop people attending public gatherings but may have had some effect on hopes to establish regular congregations. Dundee, as we will see, survived (just) but Montrose folk didn't meet with success until some of them moved to Edinburgh. As those who study Robert Burns's writings will know, Scotland's Kirk at the time had a vocal radical minority called the "New Light" who were savagely attacked by supporters of traditional Calvinism, the "Auld Light". Burns used his skills to attack the ideas and the hypocrisy of the Auld Light leaders.

Calvinism was a religion for extremists. It was developed on a control system and a stark theology on who would be saved. Believing that God chose people for salvation regardless of how they lived their lives, Calvin thought your fate was determined before you were born and God elected to save a few as a demonstration of his love but the vast majority were doomed to hell before they were born. While nobody was certain of whom God would save, they did believe that the few who were elected by God would come from the Reformed Church membership, hence the importance of staying on the right side of the elders.

At this time in England Unitarianism was emerging with intellectuals and radical dissenting religious groups; but the idea of rational Christianity was also spreading to working class people. Joseph Priestley was important in this development before he left England for America where he continued his scientific and religious work. Joseph Priestley, a scientist and leader in the rational dissenting tradition, was the one who brought many of the dissenting congregations together to use "Unitarian" as a common name. In his book, *The Unitarian Way*, Philip Hewett, a (now-retired) British Unitarian minister who served mostly in Canada, expressed Priestley's importance this way: "Joseph Priestley, as the 'author'

and embodiment of the Unitarian spirit of his day, played an outstanding role in the movements for social and political reform as well as in science and religion. It was his political radicalism, expressed boldly in times of growing reaction and repression, that led to the loss of his home and nearly his life in the Birmingham riots of 1791, and eventually drove him as a refugee to the United States.” (end of quote) The recent French Revolution raised a banner for Brotherhood, Equality, and Liberty inspiring hopes of many in Britain for a better future, but it alarmed the political powers of the day and this fear partially explains the treatment not only of Priestley but also Fyshe Palmer. The new American Revolution had directly affected British pride and provided another challenging political and religious model to the British establishment.

English Unitarian ministers David Eaton, a Scotsman who had moved to England, and Richard Wright, a Universalist, were two pioneers responsible for creating the Unitarian Fund in 1806. This Fund raised money to spread Unitarian literature and to employ Unitarian missionaries to preach and spread Unitarianism everywhere, especially amongst working class people.

Richard Wright was a Unitarian convert from Calvinism, via Universalism, who became a shining beacon as a Unitarian missionary. An appeal to the newly formed Unitarian Fund for missionary help had been requested by Universalist societies in Paisley and Glasgow. These groups wanted to change from orthodox to Unitarian religion. Initially the Fund sent Rev John Campbell, a Scot, as one of its first missionaries. He was also a convert from Calvinism, having previously been a teacher in Edinburgh before training for the Calvinist ministry. He had ministered for a time in Scotland before moving to a church in Newcastle-on-Tyne where he and some of his members converted to Unitarianism. Living near the borders made it easy to send him on a Unitarian missionary journey to Scotland – however, his efforts did not appear to bring about much change and eventually he moved to America to be a Unitarian minister there.

Another missionary who moved from England to Scotland was the Unitarian minister, Rev James Lyons. He became a Unitarian convert from Calvinism in 1807 when, while a Calvinist Baptist minister in Yorkshire, he heard Richard Wright preach in the area. Considering Richard Wright his spiritual father, he resigned his position as a Calvinist Baptist minister, bravely preaching about his conversion.

Richard Wright himself was a short man with an insignificant appearance but he achieved heroic status through his enthusiasm. He was an excellent speaker. In his book *Pioneers*

of *Scottish Unitarianism*, Short writes that on one occasion that Richard Wright was invited to speak at a big Unitarian dinner in London, he stood, first on a chair and then on a table, to allow him to be seen. In this speech he declared that, “even if there were not a Unitarian South of the Tweed, there would be enough North of it, to Unitarianise the world!” He may have been carried away by reports of the rapid spread of Unitarianism in Scotland.

Wright and his convert, James Lyons, envisaged Unitarianism destroying Calvinism. With financial assistance from the newly formed Unitarian Fund, Lyons visited Glasgow and Paisley in 1808 and 1810. On his second visit, in 1810, the Glasgow Unitarians formed a Society and Congregation. Lyons helped write a Constitution, complete with rules for the members declaring their Unitarian Faith. Lyons was thus in at the foundation of the Glasgow Unitarian Church. The Unitarianism professed was the “Christian Unitarianism” of the time, based on a rational understanding of the Bible as the Word of God. As I understand Ruth Gregory mentioned in her Immortal Memory address at our Burns Supper last week, we have to remember that this period was decades before the appearance of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* with its modern teachings about evolution and nature.

While Lyons worked in Glasgow and Paisley, Wright was the main missionary spreading the Unitarian religion throughout Scotland. He visited Scotland four times and on each occasion he walked almost everywhere preaching in homes, barns, gardens, public halls, chapels, and in the open air. Often he drew hundreds of people to listen to him. At that time people were looking for a more rational religion and for a religion which promised them God’s love and care.

Wright was enthusiastic about the movement and worked hard with the congregations of Glasgow and Edinburgh and frequently visited the little society in Paisley. He was admired and loved by people who came to listen to him. Wright preached in Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire and Ayrshire, Carluke, Dalry and Kilwinning and many other places urging people to form Unitarian societies. He found that people in Edinburgh were less interested in Unitarianism, but the people of Leith and Dalkeith were more receptive to his preachings, so were groups at Fife and Dunfermline.

Upon visiting Dundee he found that a small Unitarian congregation was still in existence 20 years after its founder minister, Fyshe Palmer, had been transported to Australia for 10 years, convicted of sedition for helping workers draft a petition to the King. History might

have been different if Palmer had returned to Dundee, but he died on his way back to Britain after serving his time in Australia.

Wright continued to travel the South of Scotland as a missionary, and even visited Aberdeen where he spoke and preached in public halls to hundreds of people. He encountered some opposition there from the Calvinists, but most listeners were friendly. Some of them even walked a mile from the city with him as he trod southwards. This was the beginning of Unitarianism in Aberdeen.

Travelling missionaries did not have time to strengthen and build on the enthusiasm they started by their preaching and although Wright did much missionary work trying to spread the Unitarian religion in Scotland, the practical results of his preaching were limited to a few congregations that managed to get regular pastoral support. But it is believed his words gave people food for thought, which led to the increase in Unitarianism in the 19th century.

In his travels around Scotland he found further conflict in the Edinburgh congregation which again had split, leading them to worship in different halls. So once again he preached and worked in a friendly manner with the two groups and finally succeeded in bringing them together again into one congregation. Wright continued to offer support and advice to the congregation and was delighted when, after many years without a minister, the Edinburgh congregation secured a young man who was able to build up the number of people in the Edinburgh group. In 1823 he was happy to see new Unitarian chapels built in Edinburgh and Port Glasgow.

In 1810, the first year of its existence, the Glasgow congregation and their leader James Lyons had a quarrel which led to a split. But Richard Wright's persuasive manner during a timely visit enabled the two sides to heal their conflict. He then went on to witness with pleasure the re-united congregation calling a young minister, Rev James Yates, in 1811 and building the first Church in Scotland to be called Unitarian – Glasgow in 1812. This church derived from leasing a piece of land in Union Street, Glasgow. The Church cost £1700 to build with later additions costing £600. There was insufficient funds to cover the cost and this led to difficulties in the congregation repaying the debt which led to members leaving the church. However, the Church was opened on 15 Nov 1812, even equipped with an organ, then a rare and unpopular instrument in Scotland. He began his ministry with a congregation of about 400 people.

Rev James Yates was 23 years old when he started his ministry in Glasgow and he had shown great academic ability and character. His preaching, however, while solid was not emotionally moving. Although he was not a popular preacher, he was earnest and industrious and it was these qualities that enabled him to create a stable Unitarian congregation and get a Church built in one year.

Yates was in Glasgow only five years but in addition to the Church building, he helped to found the Scottish Unitarian Association in 1813 and achieved a lot of publicity in a series of argumentative theological pamphlets and books – a dispute with a Congregationalist evangelical went on for years and Yates' scholarship in his arguments was impressive.

As you heard in the Reading this morning, in 1820 a local Paisley pastor who had heard of Unitarianism, visited one of the services at the Union Street Glasgow Church to, if possible, ridicule it for its beliefs, but after his visit he went on to preach Unitarianism in Paisley and trained to become a Unitarian minister. This person was the great, great, grandfather of Rev Andrew Hill. Andrew is the sixth Unitarian minister in his family including Mr McKean who visited Unitarians meeting in Glasgow in 1820.

Returning to Richard Wright, he retired from his missionary travels but continued in his missionary work, writing books and preaching as a minister in Wiltshire and Lincolnshire in England. He died aged 72 in 1836. Richard Wright should be remembered for his great work for Unitarianism in both England and Scotland and also his work which led to Unitarianism in Northern Ireland.

Wright was instrumental in laying the foundations for our congregation. 200 years have passed, and we have evidenced a couple different places of worship and several ministers. We have encountered settled periods and difficult struggles during this time, but overall we have managed to maintain a Unitarian group in Glasgow. This is, I believe, due to having a strong continuing community spirit within us.

As Phillip Hewett, in *The Unitarian Way*, states, "A Church has been called a Community of memory and hope".

Shared memories means that the community builds upon the work of the past, shared hopes mean that it works together in the present to build for the future. Unitarians share experiences and ideas, feelings, values and commitments. Our Glasgow community seeks ways of living in today's world with sensitivity and integrity.

A community is working together and during the past year we have witnessed the re-introduction of a choir who will sing at services; there have been more social events; and this month we see our new Website, including a monthly on-line Newsletter; a series of public lectures is planned; members regularly keep a keen eye on members who are sick and unable to attend; and our building is used by several community groups. Would Richard Wright recognize our congregation? Yes, we certainly have a community spirit. In his book, *Community and Growth*, Jean Vanier writes "Community is made by the gentle concern that people show each other every day. It is made by small gestures of caring, by saying 'I am happy to be with you'" (end of quote) Vanier believes that each of us should not just look at our own interests but to those of others, giving them a chance to discuss their burdens and problems.

Last Saturday the Scottish Unitarian Association held a meeting to discuss future preaching plans for our 4 Scottish Churches. Two of our churches no longer have a minister due to lack of finances. Because our numbers has decreased we have fewer financial contributions; the income from old trust funds has lost its value; but our determination to continue our Unitarianism has afforded us ideas of a collaborative ministry, in which we share our preaching resources. During the past few years some of our members have studied to become celebrants, giving them training and recognition to take weddings, funerals, and naming ceremonies. Then over the last year nine members from the four churches have been attending lay worship seminars led by Rev John Clifford. Our group of worship leaders and lay celebrants will enable us to continue to spread the Unitarian religion within Scotland in the absence of ministers. Keeping churches active and alive is what will bring in new members to our congregations. This is evidenced today with the welcoming of Alastair and Dorothy into our congregation.