

Meditations on the Hebden Bridge Baptist Heritage Trail

This material has been compiled for use alongside the Hebden Bridge Heritage Trail, though it can be used independent of it. The Trail visits 10 sites. These meditations focus on the four best known ones. They are the chapels at – Heptonstall Slack, Wainsgate, Birchcliffe, and Hope.

The meditations can be used by an individual or as a group exercise.

The pattern is the same at each place:

1. Information about the churches' story additional to that in the Trail, under the title: To recall.
2. Seeking to develop a point under heading, To consider.
3. Drawing out a message hopefully relevant to today with a comment from another source and a Bible passage as an aid, For reflection.
4. A short prayer, using the words of a familiar hymn, attempting to draw the threads together.

If a group uses the material, time may be broken down to share thoughts on it. It may be helpful to have a copy of the History Trail available. A map is included but more detailed information about the route is found in the Trail booklet.

Details of the trail can be found in the History section on www.hope-baptist.org.uk

Heptonstall Slack – Advance through Adversity



To recall

In the first half of the 19th century, this was the fifth largest General Baptist Church in the country with 502 members in 1844. House meetings were held in 18 different places. It established three branch causes. But trade depression and unemployment led to people leaving the area and moving into towns. One group of families settled in the Ovenden district of Halifax and started Christian witness in a cottage. In due course, this led to the founding of Lee Mount. Other causes resulting from similar dispersions were in Denholme and Bacup.

To consider

Though the members were scattered, like in the book of Acts, the church grew as members took a vigorous life and evangelical zeal with them.

To reflect

A Christian lifestyle and the good word for Jesus remain fundamental to proclaiming the gospel. When William Grimshaw of Haworth was criticised that his preaching was “a change of heart and conversion to God”, he replied “You couldn’t have put it better!” Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you”, “Go and make disciples”.

To pray

Touch, Lord, the lips that speak for Thee
Set words of truth before us,
That we may grow in constancy
The light of wisdom o’er us
Give us this day our daily bread
May hungry souls again be fed,
May heavenly food restore us.

Wainsgate – Seeking True Fellowship



To recall

“Blest be the Tie” was written in 1772 when John Fawcett decided not to accept a call to a London church but to remain at Wainsgate. But five years later, he and part of the congregation moved to Hebden Bridge, to take advantage of other opportunities. Worship continued at Wainsgate, but it was said of those remaining, “They were relieved to be able to return to their former uncomplicated existence.” For the next thirty years, little happened here.

To consider

The hymn expresses a high view of Christian fellowship, but Fawcett knew the pain also of broken fellowship and the inertia of a cosy, inward-looking one.

To reflect

To reach out and meet the challenge of today requires releasing the gifts of church members for action. A Scottish minister developing a congregation based on ministries wrote, “The church is beginning to work as a church. I wish I had set this up from the first day I entered the ministry.”

Paul wrote “Each of us has been given the gift, his due portion of Christ’s bounty to equip God’s people for work in his service, to the building up of the body of Christ.”

To pray

Teach us all the art of speaking, with the accent of thy love,
Give new hope, new strength and courage
Grant release from fears within
Let us show the Saviour’s pity, let us of his mercy tell

Birchcliffe – Co-operation not confrontation



To recall

It is remarkable that two such distinguished ministers as Dan Taylor and John Fawcett should have worked for twenty years in the same area. Though they differed theologically, they were friends and met to pray and study with an Anglican priest. At one time, when their congregations were at loggerheads, they agreed joint action, which include, on the same Sunday, preaching about the need for reconciliation. Dan Taylor acquired a reputation for resolving conflict as he achieved this in a number of churches in various parts of the country. Sadly, in the 1970s, Birchcliffe closed when the congregation split.

To consider

Sadly conflict is an inescapable part of church life. While some can be constructive, most is not and, if it becomes confrontation, is destructive. Churches at odds within and between themselves cannot speak reconciliation to a broken, divided world.

To reflect

Creating and maintaining harmony within a church is a complex matter. Handling it is not a case of damage limitation. Great maturity is needed for emotions, facts and doubts to be owned, faced and explored. Honesty and truth cannot be present unless there is trust. David Augsberger wrote, " We try to build false communities based on feigning, faking and fooling, but the quality of common life, communion of heart touching heart, is lost in the charade." Paul wrote "I appeal to you: agree among yourselves and avoid division; be firmly joined in unity of mind and thought."

To pray

Sweetly may we all agree, touched with softest sympathy
There is neither bond nor free, great nor servile, Lord, in Thee
Love, like death hath all destroyed, rendered all distractions void
Names and sects and parties fall, Thou, O Christ, art all in all.

Hope – Inheritors of a great tradition



To recall

When Hope replaced Ebenezer in 1858, there were eight Baptist churches in the Hebden Bridge area alone. That number remained until the mid 20th century. Movement of population, other economic factors and “over-chappelling” do not explain the decline.

To consider

This situation challenges how we “do church” today. Expecting people to come to church needs to be replaced by the church going to people, while witnessing to the reality of God’s love and power for both personal and social life.

To reflect

250 years ago, William Grimshaw reminded the church “Our task is proclaiming the word of the Lord in a sinful land, the application of faith to works and all this rather in the market place than in the sanctuary.” A similar challenge is ours. While pride in the story of the past and gratitude for what we have received remain, the call is to similar devotion and action if the work is to continue.

Peter wrote, “ You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a dedicated nation, and a people claimed by God for his own. To proclaim the triumphs of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.”

To pray

Heal thy children’s warring madness, bend our pride to thy control,
Shame our wanton selfish gladness, rich in things and poor in soul,
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, lest we miss thy kingdom’s goal