

**‘SO PECULIARLY ITS OWN’
THE THEOLOGICAL SOCIALISM
OF THE LABOUR CHURCH**

by

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ABSTRACT

The thesis argues that the most distinctive feature of the Labour Church was Theological Socialism. For its founder, John Trevor, Theological Socialism was the literal Religion of Socialism, a post-Christian prophecy announcing the dawn of a new utopian era explained in terms of the Kingdom of God on earth; for members of the Labour Church, who are referred to throughout the thesis as Theological Socialists, Theological Socialism was an inclusive message about God working through the Labour movement. By focussing on Theological Socialism the thesis challenges the historiography and reappraises the significance of the Labour Church. Theological Socialism is examined from different vantage points: the social and ideological setting of the Labour Church in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain; the events and concepts which shaped John Trevor's religious and political thinking; the motivations and aspirations of the Theological Socialists who aligned themselves with the movement, arguing that they were a particular group within Ethical Socialism; and the issues and concerns of the Labour Church in Birmingham, a contextual study which refutes the commonly held understanding about the lifespan of the Labour Church as a movement. The thesis concludes highlighting a continuing theological imperative for the British Labour movement.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Emma, Anna and Naomi, for their love and understanding.

In memory of Dick Ellis and Tommy Forsyth, two Christian Socialists who showed me
The Way.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

C. P. G. B. - Communist Party of Great Britain

I. L. P. - Independent Labour Party

L. S. E. - London School of Economics

N. C. C. C. - National Clarion Cycling Club

S. D. F. - Social Democratic Federation

T. U. C. - Trade Union Congress

W. E. A. - Workers Education Association

INTRODUCTION – “SO PECULIARLY ITS OWN”¹

a. The Labour Church – a reassessment

Socialism descended upon nineteenth century Europe as utopia.²

The time was ripe for a prophet to emerge from the growing British Labour movement of the late nineteenth century, with its elements of traditional religiosity and aspirations for a new society. A disillusioned Unitarian minister with a strict Calvinist background called John Trevor believed that he was that prophetic figure because he could bring to the Labour movement a particular theological understanding of Socialism. This thesis argues that the distinctive feature of the Labour Church, the movement founded by Trevor, was its Theological Socialism. For John Trevor, Theological Socialism was the literal Religion of Socialism, understood to be a post-Christian prophecy announcing the dawn of a new utopian era, which he explained in terms of the Kingdom of God on earth; for members of the Labour Church, Theological Socialism was an inclusive message about God working through the Labour movement. By focussing on the message and meaning of the Labour Church for its founder and activists this thesis reappraises the significance of the organisation.

b. The Labour Question

The Labour Problem, the one problem which above all others, demands solution in an age described not without reason as “the age of the working man”.³

This quotation is taken from an 1889 edition of the *Fortnightly Review*, the influential literary and political magazine, it offers us an example of the interest among social commentators about issues affecting working class people. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, numerous

¹ John Trevor, *From Ethics to Religion* (London, Labour Prophet, 1895), 22.

² Zygmunt Bauman, *Socialism: The Active Utopia* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1976), 9.

³ D. F. Schloss, ‘The Labour Problem’, *Fortnightly Review*, volume 46, 1889, 437.

articles were published in *The Times* which focussed on the conditions of the labouring classes. An example of the growing concern of that national newspaper was the editorial of 24th February 1891 which placed emphasis on the “magnitude and urgency of the labour question”.⁴ In a study of its impact on political life, Roger Davidson argued that the Labour Question was about a range of interdependent factors: “the breakdown of industrial relations, the persistence of unemployment and endemic under-employment, and the incidence of low-income destitution.”⁵ The cause of the situation has been cited as “a new phase in the development of the economy”⁶, which historians have labelled the ‘Great Depression’, but a more accurate title would be the ‘Great Stagnation’ as the nation’s economic life began to slow and decline. During the boom period of the mid-nineteenth century industrial relations had become conciliatory between the trade unions, which were composed of skilled workers, and their employers. By the mid-1870s, Davidson writes, “the economic climate was no longer conducive to industrial consensus.”⁷

Coupled with the social and economic conditions of the time were the outcomes of a series of Acts of Parliament which had expanded the right to elementary education to all children and political suffrage to most working men. Christian denominations had taken interest in the passing of the Education Act of 1870, which established universal primary education across the nation.⁸ According to F. M. L. Thompson, the Act meant that “The masses may have

⁴ *The Times*, 24th February 1891, quoted in Roger Davidson, *Whitehall and the Labour Problem in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 34.

⁵ Roger Davidson, *Whitehall and the Labour Problem*, 35.

⁶ J. F. C. Harrison, *Late Victorian Britain 1875-1901* (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1990), 16.

⁷ Roger Davidson, *Whitehall and the Labour Problem*, 36.

⁸ Hugh McLeod, *Religion and Society in England, 1850-1914* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 92. The legislation, which attempted to strike a compromise between the Anglican and Roman Catholic argument for church schools and Nonconformist denominations’ call for local authority control, resulted in heated debates about the governance and religious nature of the education system, and once attendance became compulsory in 1880, the social impact of the primary schools became far reaching. School Board elections enabled groups disenfranchised from other political arenas to put up candidates, notably women and Socialists. All ratepayers (including single and widowed women) were eligible to vote in these elections, which broadened the

been unorganized, but they were no longer inarticulate.”⁹ What Thompson does not indicate in this quotation is the emergence of working class politics at that time. The Reform Act of 1832 enfranchised middle class men, and over the following decades the demand for universal male suffrage intensified. With successive changes to legislation the number of working men eligible to vote grew. A consequence of the 1867 Reform Act was that “the Liberal and Tory parties found themselves compelled to compete on the terrain of mass politics”,¹⁰ and then the Act of 1884 expanded this political terrain further. By the General Election of 1885 the ‘working man’ was increasingly literate and had a vote, but he also lived in a constant state of economic uncertainty.¹¹

The Church Congress of the Church of England, which meets each year to discuss current religious, moral and social topics, had the Labour Question as one issue on the agenda of its 1892 meeting. Under the heading of ‘The Church and Labour Combinations’, a series of papers was presented which addressed the expansion of trade unionism to include non-skilled workers, a development in working class association known as ‘New Unionism’, and arguments for the founding of an independent Labour party. A report about the Church Congress’ debate published in the *Church Times* included a speech given by Canon Bulstrode, who declared, “In these days of democratic voting the condition of the Church might be affected by the state and of feeling between the Church and the working class.”¹² Bulstrode continues in his address to the Congress to call for closer co-operation, “There had been too much of alienation between the Church and the working classes; the time had come

constituency of the local School Boards. Jane Martin, *Women and the Politics of Schooling in Victorian and Edwardian England* (London: Leicester University Press, 1999), 36.

⁹ F. M. L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830-1900* (London: Fontana Press, 1988), 245.

¹⁰ Matthew Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd.: Ideologies of Social Dreaming in England 1870-1900* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009 / first published 2005), 135.

¹¹ J. F. C. Harrison, *Late Victorian Britain 1875-1901*, 143.

¹² *Church Times*, October 7, 1892, 993.

when they should be brought together.”¹³ At the end of that Church Congress the Church Times concluded, “the growing influence of the Church on national life is conspicuous. In labour questions, in temperance questions she takes the lead.”¹⁴

1892 was also the year when a Royal Commission on Labour began its work, publishing its report *The Labour Question: An Epitome of the Evidence and the Report of the Royal Commission on Labour* in 1894. The Commission recognised the growth of trade unionism and the development of independent Labour politics during a time of industrial unrest, and recommended the establishment of a Labour Department to ensure improvements in working conditions and to oversee industrial disputes.¹⁵ At the beginning of the report various social and political approaches of addressing the Labour Question are outlined, such as trade unionism, co-operation, and friendly societies, which are all classified under the title of the ‘Labour Movement’. Acknowledgement is given to the emergence of one aspect of the movement, an ideology which was growing in influence on the national scene:

Of these forces, Socialism is perhaps the most important. It may be defined as belief in the blending of political and industrial functions. It contemplates the State becoming the sole landlord, the sole capitalist, and the sole employer of labour.¹⁶

c. The Socialist Revival

What caused the re-emergence of Socialist politics in Britain some thirty years after the Chartist campaigns for electoral reform is a debatable subject. For some historians the response to the economic stagnation of the Great Depression of the 1870s and 1880s was a collectivist approach to solving social issues. This approach is reflected in the appeal of

¹³ Ibid., 994.

¹⁴ *Church Times*, November 18, 1892, 1159.

¹⁵ T. G. Spyers, *The Labour Question: An Epitome of the Evidence and the Report of the Royal Commission on Labour* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co. Ltd, 1894), 232.

¹⁶ Ibid., 3.

Henry George's demand for land reform as a means of addressing the Labour Question, along with the development of 'New Unionism' within the industrial arena. George was an American social reformer who came to prominence on the British political scene through the publication in 1881 of his book *Progress and Poverty*. In the book George questions why in an age of technological advances so many remained poor, and posed the solution of a land tax levied on the rich owners.¹⁷ At the time when the campaign for land reform spread, 'New Unionism' developed as a means of collectivism, going beyond the idea of skilled workers' guilds to assert the importance of associations of semi and non-skilled workers.¹⁸

It must be recognised that collectivism did not generate a mass movement until the emergence of a new form of Socialism in the late 1880s and early 1890s. 'New Unionism', for example, was able to mobilise only 13 per cent of British trade union membership, mainly through the targeting of specific occupations.¹⁹ "Nevertheless", writes J. F. C. Harrison, "in Britain as elsewhere, the ideology of socialism allied with the organization of trade unionism provided a new form for the articulation of the wants of thousands of ordinary people."²⁰ Between 1874 and 1892, when working class leaders, particularly trade unionists, were elected to the House of Commons, a new political alliance was formed. These so-called 'Lib-Lab' candidates had aligned themselves with a radical section of the Liberal Party, which was demanding "more than a short-term improvement in living standards and some kind of

¹⁷ J. F. C. Harrison, *Late Victorian Britain 1875-1901*, 13. Reflecting back on the significance of Henry George to the development of working class politics, Edward R. Pease wrote in 1916, "To [Henry] George belongs the extraordinary merit of recognising the right way of social salvation. The socialists of earlier days had proposed segregated communities; the Co-operators had tried voluntary associations; the Positivists advocated moral suasion; the Chartists favoured force, physical or political; the Marxists talked revolution and remembered the Paris Commune. George wrote in a land where the people ruled themselves, not only in fact but also in name." Edward R. Pease, *The History of the Fabian Society*, Third Edition (New York: Barnes and Noble Incorporated, 1963 / first edition published 1916), 20.

¹⁸ Matthew Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd.*, 19.

¹⁹ Dick Geary, *European Labour Protest 1848-1939* (London: Methuen and Company Limited, 1981), 101.

²⁰ J. F. C. Harrison, *Late Victorian Britain 1875-1901*, 141.

structural reordering of the economy and of politics”.²¹ From the beginning of the 1880s the call for Labour politics to be independent of the Liberals increased in volume as more people from various standpoints joined the chorus, and Socialism became their song.²²

d. Faith in the New Social Life

British society at the end of the nineteenth century was infused with a traditional religiosity; Christianity gave a cultural setting to all aspects of the life of the nation. Biblical and theological references were used in political discourses by those who wished to connect their own ideological convictions and agendas with what were popularly regarded as common beliefs, or, at least, familiar social themes. The figure of Jesus was held in high esteem by most, with views regarding his significance ranging from him being the Saviour of the world to a great moral teacher. What these views agreed upon was that Jesus had a role to play in the concerns of late-Victorian society. With the re-emergence of Socialism on the British political scene and the development of a Labour movement, the language of religion was adopted by many Socialists to speak of their faith in a new form of politics towards a better world. Many people saw Socialism as a religion because it re-defined the meaning of life for them by re-ordering human relationships. As religious conversion leads to a change in personal perspective, so Socialism meant viewing the world in ways which challenged the conventional power dynamics of society, offering the hope of utopia and the means of realising it. In the face of social forces opposed to the cause, Socialism demanded conviction from followers, who proclaimed its message of salvation. Consequently, the phrase the Religion of Socialism was used by a wide variety of Socialists.

²¹ Dick Geary, *European Labour Protest 1848-1939*, 21.

²² Mark Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), 298.

The first use in print of the Religion of Socialism was as the title of a collection of articles by Ernest Belford Bax, published in 1886. The book contained an essay originally printed two years earlier in *Justice*, the journal of the Social Democratic Federation (S. D. F.), entitled ‘Socialism and Religion’, in which Bax writes, “Socialism is essentially, neither religious nor irreligious, inasmuch as it re-affirms the unity of human life, abolishing the dualism which has lain at the foundation of all the great ethical religions.”²³ Bax argues that Socialism acts as a corrective to the false divisions imposed on life by traditional religion, notably the separation between what is considered sacred and that secular or profane. Instead, the Socialist grounds their faith in the potential life of society:

[Socialism] brings back religion from heaven to earth, which . . . was its original sphere. It looks beyond the present moment or the present individual life indeed, though not to another world, but to another and higher social life in this world. It is in the hope and the struggle for this higher social life, ever-widening, ever-intensifying, whose ultimate possibilities are beyond the poorer of language to express or thought to conceive, that the Socialist finds his ideal, his religion.²⁴

Bax, whose upbringing was one of “narrow Evangelicism and Sabbatarianism”²⁵, converted to Socialism through his reading of the writings of Karl Marx, which led him in 1882 to join the S. D. F. under the leadership of Henry Mayers Hyndman, a Tory radical who adopted and applied his own interpretation of Marxism to the Federation.²⁶ But by the end of 1884, Bax aligned himself with a dissident group including the Arts and Crafts Socialist, William Morris, Marx’s youngest daughter, Eleanor, and her partner, Edward Aveling, as when they broke away from the S. D. F. to form the Socialist League. In collaboration with Bax, Morris wrote the manifesto for this new political party, which committed the Socialist

²³ Ernest Belford Bax, *The Religion of Socialism* (New York: Freeport, 1972 / originally published 1886), 48.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁵ Robert Arch, *Ernest Belford Bax, Thinker and Pioneer*, (London: Hyndman Club and Institute, 1927), 1.

²⁶ Mark Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism*, 73.

League to “the realisation of complete Revolutionary Socialism”²⁷ by seeking “a change in the basis of Society – a change which would destroy the distinctions of classes and nationalities.”²⁸ To that end, its members pledged “single-hearted devotion to the religion of Socialism, the only religion which the Socialist League professes.”²⁹ Through his writings and activism, Morris promoted a form of Socialist utopianism which he believed to be a continuation of what he called the “medieval Communist tradition”.³⁰ He returned to the phrase the Religion of Socialism in an article published in the League’s journal *Commonweal* in August 1886, when he wrote, “the Religion of Socialism which our manifesto speaks of does call us to be better than other people, since we owe ourselves to that society which we have accepted as the hope of the future.”³¹

For Socialists such as Morris and Bax their Religion of Socialism was about conviction, a moral code which they considered to be of the highest of human ethics and an alternative to traditional religion. Their new religion rejected all false forms of dualism by affirming the unity of human life. According to Bax and Morris, the Labour Question was answered by Socialism as it offered to the working classes and their comrades a personal and political benchmark of the “higher social life” by which society was to be judged and the sentence would be a revolutionary restructuring of Britain and the wider world. Although it originated with those who wished to turn their backs on the traditional expressions of religion, the phrase the Religion of Socialism was to be claimed by others who were content to wear certain theological labels.

²⁷ William Morris and Ernest Belford Bax, ‘The Manifesto of The Socialist League’, *Commonweal* (February 1885), 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings* (London: Penguin Books Limited, 1993), 373.

³¹ William Morris, ‘Misanthropy to the Rescue’, *Commonweal*, August 1886, 172.

e. Socialist Christians and Christian Socialists

Another dissident member of the S. D. F. who defected to the Socialist League was John Bruce Glasier. In 1892 he met a Socialist Christian called Katharine St John Conway, and they married the following year. Conway and Glasier collaborated in the writing of a pamphlet entitled *The Religion of Socialism: Two Aspects*, in which both were able to express their own interpretation of the phrase. Glasier's contribution was in the vein of his fellow Socialist Leaguers, Bax and Morris, when he states that Socialism was "an ample and sufficing religion for the life that is"³², and appealing to the memory of fallen comrades of the Russian Nihilists, Paris Commune and Chicago Anarchists, he declares Socialism to be "the Religion of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity."³³ Conway offers an alternative view by telling a parable based on the Gospel account of the rich young man seeking advice from Jesus about the way to salvation. In Conway's story the wealthy youth encounters an old teacher in a crowded street and asks for guidance:

"And I, what must I do?" asked the young man, and with the thought of the great Teacher of the Brotherhood in his mind, the old man answered.

"Go, use all that thou hast for the service of the poor, and preach the glad tidings of a better life, that the rich and poor alike may be delivered from this living death."³⁴

The point made by Conway that "a better life" was open to "the rich and poor alike" is an indication of how she saw Socialism being fulfilled in terms of the reform of society and not by a revolutionary overhaul. From the early 1890s, as a member of the Fabian Society and later through the Independent Labour Party (I. L. P.), Conway became a popular speaker on the national Socialist circuit, with her favourite topic being 'The Religion of Socialism'.

³² Katharine St John Conway and J. Bruce Glasier, *The Religion of Socialism: Two Aspects* (London: Clarion Newspaper Company / Manchester: The Labour Press Limited, n. d. – 1890s), 16.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 8.

Although she continued to speak from its platforms, Conway became critical of the Fabian Society's gradual approach to social reform and political change, just as the I. L. P. became an active force on the political scene through its campaigns and electioneering. The Fabian Society was founded between 1883 and 1884 by members of the Fellowship of the New Life, a London-based debating society grounded in the Positivist thought of Auguste Comte.³⁵ Fabians replaced Comte's 'Religion of Humanity' with Socialism, not as a utopian creed but as a practical political philosophy; consequently they were suspicious of the phrase, the Religion of Socialism. The Society stated in its first manifesto that its members were committed to the nationalisation of the land and industry of the nation, and to that end the official tract begins:

The Fabians are associated for the purpose of the spreading the following opinions held by them and discussing their practical consequences.³⁶

A number of notable Christian Socialists were members of the Fabian Society, including John Clifford and Stewart Headlam, who had tracts published by the society which related Socialism to Christianity. In a tract entitled *Socialism and the Teaching of Christ*, Clifford argues, "Collectivism affords a better environment for the teachings of Jesus concerning wealth and the ideals of labor [sic.] and brotherhood."³⁷ A paper read to the Fabian Society in January 1892 and later printed as a tract, gave Stewart Headlam the opportunity to make a case for land reform along the lines of Henry George's campaign, stating that it was "the duty of every minister of Christ to do all he possibly can to stir up a divine discontent in the hearts and minds of the people with the evils which surround them."³⁸ The emphasis of Clifford and Headlam's Fabian pamphlets was about the need for Christian Socialism and not the Socialist Christianity advocated by Conway.

³⁵ Edward R. Pease, *The History of the Fabian Society*, 18.

³⁶ George Bernard Shaw, *A Manifesto*, Fabian Tract (London: Geo. Standring, 1884), 1.

³⁷ John Clifford, *Socialism and the Teaching of Jesus*, Fabian Tract (London: The Fabian Society, 1898), 8.

³⁸ Stewart D. Headlam, *Christian Socialism*, Fabian Tract (London: The Fabian Society, 1899 / first published 1891), 5.

While Christian Socialists saw the Socialist agenda to be the means of applying Christian principles to society, Socialist Christians found in Socialism values lost to the Church which brought a relevance to the teaching of Jesus Christ. Stewart J. Brown expands upon this point when he writes that “Socialists would often claim Jesus of Nazareth as a prophet of Socialism, even if they did not accept the doctrine of eternal life.”³⁹ The clearest distinction between Christian Socialists and Socialist Christians was their relationship to the traditional Christian denominations and affiliation to their creeds. While the former group remained within the membership of the Christian Church and proclaimed their politics from that position, the latter spoke from outside the bounds of institutional Christianity. For Katharine Conway, the daughter of a Congregational minister, Socialism took her out of the church into political activism, seeing the Socialist agenda as the expression of Christianity in economic terms, a sentiment shared by many other of her contemporary Socialist Christians, most notably James Keir Hardie. A friend both to Glasier and Conway, Hardie had been brought up through Scottish nonconformity, but rejected its traditions although not the faith. According to one of his biographers, by the 1890s Hardie fused his religious and social convictions,⁴⁰ declaring that “Socialism is the modern word for Christianity.”⁴¹ In an article published in the Labour Church’s *Labour Prophet* in November 1892, Hardie writes of his controversial contribution to the Assembly of the Congregational Union which was discussing the Labour Question at the same time as their Anglican counterparts. The article entitled ‘The Christianity of Christ’ recounts Hardie’s condemnation of the Church for its Pharisaic hypocrisy.⁴²

³⁹ Stewart J. Brown, *Providence and Empire: Religion, Politics and Society in the United Kingdom 1815 – 1914* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited / Longman, 2008), 333.

⁴⁰ Caroline Benn, *Keir Hardie* (London: Hutchinson, 1992), 108.

⁴¹ Samson Bryher, *An Account of the Labour and Socialist Movement in Bristol Part II* (Bristol: Bristol Labour Weekly Publishers, 1929), 73.

⁴² Keir Hardie, ‘The Christianity of Christ’, *Labour Prophet*, November 1892, 86.

The phrase the Religion of Socialism was used by certain Socialists, who understood it to mean the application of Christian doctrine and values to a political and moral agenda. This was a re-interpretation of Christianity for their times, including the answer to the question of Labour in British society. For Conway and Hardie the Religion of Socialism addressed the Labour Question by reclaiming the message of Jesus for working class people and believing that this would lead to reform of the life of the nation. Unlike Christian Socialists, such as Clifford and Headlam, who adopted Socialism as a practical political creed in which to apply their Christian faith, Hardie and Conway proclaimed the Religion of Socialism to be Socialist Christianity: Socialism as Christianity.

f. The Labour Church

The final paragraph of Hardie's article 'The Christianity of Christ' begins, "Fortunately the young men who are now in training for ministerial work are coming largely under the influence of the spirit of the times".⁴³ Hardie may have had in mind the editor of the monthly publication to which he was contributing, the founder of the Labour Church, Reverend John Trevor. Here was a man who had been influenced by the spirit of his times. Trevor trained and served as a Unitarian minister before wrestling over how to reconcile faith in God with the Labour Question. This dilemma he resolved in his utopian vision for the Labour Church as the distinctive, corporate demonstration of the Religion of Socialism. In the first editorial article of *Labour Prophet*, Trevor clarifies the meaning of his vision when he writes,

GOD IS IN THE LABOUR MOVEMENT. This is the word of our prophecy – the message of the Labour Church and of The Labour Prophet. The great religious movement of our times is the movement for the emancipation of labour.⁴⁴

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ *Labour Prophet*, January 1892, 4.

Through the founding principles of the Labour Church John Trevor expounds on his interpretation of the Religion of Socialism, most notably in the first principle which stated “That the Labour Movement is a Religious Movement.”⁴⁵ For Trevor the Religion of Socialism given formal expression through the Labour Church was not an alternative to Christianity or a fresh version of that creed, but rather its replacement. The popular journalist A. M. Thompson, who wrote under the name of ‘Dangle’ for the Socialist newspaper *Clarion*, admitted that it was not “until the formation of the Labour Church, did I conceive it possible to for me to be associated with a “religious” body”.⁴⁶ Thompson continues that because of the Labour Church “it has become possible for honest men once more publicly to confess themselves “religious” without any inner sense of disgrace of doing so.”⁴⁷ From his experience of those who claimed to be religious, Thompson, who cited no specific religious influence on his life, goes on to explain that he “had really come to deem “religion” synonymous with cant, humbug, fraudulent banks, and every form of hypocritical, wholesale rascality.”⁴⁸ Such was his experience of institutional religion, but Thompson’s definition of ‘religious’ was in terms of human virtue, an interpretation acceptable to Morris and Bax. He would in later life comment that he had been “modestly content to base my religion on the Humanism of the man Jesus”.⁴⁹ Another writer known as ‘Thialfi’ after the Norse god of manual labour, echoed the views of Trevor’s understanding about the new religion overcoming the old.

This true religion is now showing itself in the universal desire for a better and juster state of society; for a re-adjustment of the present system in accordance with the “new conscience” of the human race.

⁴⁵ *Labour Prophet*, February 1892, 16.

⁴⁶ A. M. Thompson, ‘Our New Religion’, *Labour Prophet*, November 1893, 105.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Alex M. Thompson, *Here I Lie: The Memorial of an Old Journalist* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1937), 107.

The Labour Movement, then, is a religious movement. One of its leaders, recognising this, conceived the idea of forming a new Church to give expression to this religion.⁵⁰ In response to Trevor's vision and those who reacted positively to what this offered, historians of the British Labour movement have claimed the Religion of Socialism was the rationale of the Labour Church.⁵¹ From the perspective of Trevor and those who accepted his message, the Religion of Socialism was neither an alternative to nor a re-interpretation of traditional religion, but the belief that God had shifted focus from Christianity making the Labour movement the vehicle of grace. This was Theological Socialism, a literal interpretation of the Religion of Socialism, making the agenda and activities of the Labour movement a religious expression of a new age dawning. Thus, Trevor's vision was a particular theological interpretation of Socialism. In order to promote and protect this vision Trevor spoke about the role of a Labour Church with the understanding of how the Religion of Socialism answered the Labour Question was by placing God's commitment at the centre of working class life.

g. An overview of the Labour Church as a national and international movement

Conceived and founded during 1891 by John Trevor in Manchester on the premise that God was in the Labour movement; by the beginning of 1892 the Labour Church published its own

⁵⁰ Thialfi, 'The New Faith', *Labour Prophet*, March & April 1894, 38. Krista Cowman refers to the author of the article as being Eleanor Keeling, secretary to the Labour Church Pioneers. Krista Cowman, 'A Peculiarly English Institution': Work, Rest and Play in the Labour Church', in R. N. Swanson (editor), *The Use and Abuse of Time in Christian History, Studies in Church History*, volume 37 (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press / The Ecclesiastical History Society, 2002), 359.

⁵¹ Len Smith, in his study of the role of nonconformists in Labour politics, wrote that the Labour Church was "the principal institutional expression of the 'religion of socialism'." Leonard Smith, *Religion and the Rise of Labour: Nonconformity and the Independent Labour Movement in Lancashire and the West Riding 1880-1914*, (Keele: Ryburn Publishing / Keele University Press. 1993), 26. For Stanley Pierson, writing about the awakening consciousness which was the British Socialism of the late-nineteenth century, John Trevor "attempted to give the "religion of Socialism" an institutional form." Stanley Pierson, *Marxism and the Origins of British Socialism: The Struggle for a New Consciousness* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1973), 229.

monthly paper, *Labour Prophet*, with Trevor as the editor.⁵² The founding principles of the Labour Church were defined by Trevor in the first few months of the organisation, and as Labour Church congregations began to appear across North West England, 'Pioneer' status was granted to those who wished to join the movement but had no local congregation to attend.⁵³ With the general election of 1892 approaching, the Labour Church declared support for independent Labour candidates,⁵⁴ and when the Independent Labour Party (I. L. P.) was established in January 1893 the inaugural conference took place in the Bradford Labour Institute, a building leased and operated by the local Labour Church congregation. The Labour Church service which followed the conference attracted thousands and was attended by Keir Hardie and George Bernard Shaw.⁵⁵ In July 1893 the Labour Church Union held its first national conference in Manchester, by which point the movement included around 31 congregations meeting across communities in Lancashire, Yorkshire and the Midlands.⁵⁶

On 31st December 1893 the inaugural service of the first Labour Church in the United States was held in Lynn, Essex County, Massachusetts. The congregation was led by a young Canadian Methodist minister called Herbert Casson.⁵⁷ During August 1894 two significant events occurred in the life of the Labour Church as a national and international movement, the Administrative Council of the I. L. P. passed a resolution that all of its branches should run Sunday meetings along the lines of the Labour Church,⁵⁸ and an offshoot of Lynn Labour Church was founded in Providence, Massachusetts by Herbert Casson's brother, Charles.⁵⁹ The British Labour Church reached its peak in 1895 when 54 congregations met across the

⁵² *Labour Prophet*, January 1892, 4.

⁵³ *Labour Prophet*, April 1892, 27.

⁵⁴ *Labour Prophet*, March 1892, 20.

⁵⁵ *Labour Prophet*, March 1893, 19.

⁵⁶ *Labour Prophet*, September 1893, 92.

⁵⁷ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries', Ph. D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1958, 427.

⁵⁸ *Labour Prophet*, September 1894, 124.

⁵⁹ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 451.

country, though primarily in Northern England.⁶⁰ A Labour Church Brotherhood Conference was called in spring 1896 to develop the religious life of the movement,⁶¹ at the very time when a Labour Church congregation was founded in Melbourne, Australia by a Christian Socialist clergyman called Archibald Turnbull.⁶² That October, a Socialist Church was established in Christchurch, New Zealand by Harry Atkinson, based on his experiences of the Labour Church in Britain.⁶³ In early 1897 Herbert Casson held regular Labour Church meetings in the Arcade Hall, Boston,⁶⁴ while another congregation was formed in Marblehead, Massachusetts under the leadership of Charles Casson.⁶⁵

Due to financial pressures within the British Labour Church Union the publication of the *Labour Prophet* ceased in 1898, and was replaced by the quarterly *Labour Church Record*.⁶⁶ During the annual Labour Church Union conference of 1899 a disagreement broke out between Trevor and representatives of local Labour Churches about the preferred congregational model of their organisation,⁶⁷ this rift led to the disassociation of Trevor from the movement he had founded. In 1903 a Labour Church Union Committee was elected and a new constitution drafted.⁶⁸ The last public meeting of the Socialist Church in Christchurch, New Zealand is recorded to have taken place in May 1905.⁶⁹ Five years later a Socialist Church was founded by a retired Methodist missionary, Dr C. S. Eby, in Toronto, Canada.⁷⁰ With 13 remaining congregations in various parts of Britain, the Labour Church Union held

⁶⁰ Ibid., 311.

⁶¹ Ibid., 175.

⁶² D. Langmore, 'Turnbull, Archibald (1843-1901)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, volume 12 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1990) available at <http://abd.anu.edu.au/biography/turnbull-archibald-8880/text155955> accessed on 2nd July 2012.

⁶³ Herbert Roth, 'The Labour Churches in New Zealand', *International Review of Social History*, volume 4, 1959, 362.

⁶⁴ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 355.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 440.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 175.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 124.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 161.

⁶⁹ H. Roth, 'The Labour Churches in New Zealand', 365.

⁷⁰ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 462.

its final conference in 1914,⁷¹ and yet that July The Church of the Social Revolution was opened in Toronto, Canada by a Methodist minister, Rev W. E. S. James.⁷² After the First World War a number of Labour Church congregations re-opened, notably across parts of Birmingham in the English West Midlands,⁷³ and a Methodist minister called William Ivens held the first service of the Labour Church in Winnipeg, Canada.⁷⁴

Between 1919 and 1924 there was a rapid expansion of Labour Church congregations in several urban centres across Canada, in Providence, Calgary, Edmonton, Fort William, Port Arthur, Toronto, Vancouver and 9 congregations in Winnipeg.⁷⁵ By 1926 around 16 Labour Church congregations were meeting throughout Birmingham.⁷⁶ Although most of these local Labour Churches in Canada and Birmingham lasted a few months, the fact that a revival of meetings influenced by John Trevor's movement occurred at the same time in different parts of the world raises intriguing questions for research. This thesis will analyse the revival in Birmingham, but activities in Canada go beyond our remit. In October 1929, despite the closure of many local congregations, a new Labour Church meeting in Moseley, Birmingham is recorded.⁷⁷ By the mid-1930s the Labour Church in the West Midlands came to an end with the closure of the Birchills congregation.⁷⁸ The last surviving Labour Church congregations in Britain were in Stockport, closing during the 1940s, and Hyde, Manchester, which survived until the late-1950s.⁷⁹ An article published in the journal *Religious Socialism* in 2003 announced the founding of a Labor Church in Indianapolis under the leadership of

⁷¹ Ibid., 162.

⁷² Ibid., 463.

⁷³ George J. Barnsby, *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country 1850-1939* (Wolverhampton: Integrated Publishing Services, 1998), 353.

⁷⁴ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 470.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 318.

⁷⁶ *Town Crier*, 12th November 1926, p.3

⁷⁷ *Town Crier*, 4th October 1929, 4.

⁷⁸ Places of Worship Register, RG70/114, certificate 56826, National Archives.

⁷⁹ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 121.

Jesse Leamon, citing John Trevor and his movement as its inspiration.⁸⁰ There is no evidence to suggest that this venture has continued.

h. A review of source materials

Before an outline is given explaining how the argument of the thesis will be structured it is important to offer a critical review of the source materials available on the Labour Church movement as a basis to research. The review begins with an evaluation of the existing historiographical literature about the Labour Church. The earliest piece of research of significance into the Labour Church movement is D. F. Summers' thesis, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries'. The thesis is a detailed description of the history of the Labour Church until 1914, with interest given to the early years of the movement from 1891 to 1896, the period when John Trevor was actively involved. Through careful reading of Labour Church archival texts, especially *Labour Prophet* and Trevor's autobiography *My Quest for God*, and by correspondence with former members and their children, Summers conducted his analysis. A supplementary volume to the main text of the thesis includes charts mapping the life of local Labour Churches across Britain,⁸¹ copies of lectures and sermons⁸² and correspondence with leading members, George Burgess⁸³ and A. J. Waldegrave.⁸⁴ John Trevor is the central figure in Summers' writing, with the main argument of the thesis being that the Labour Church movement was founded on one big idea, an idea realised, expounded and shared by Trevor. The idea was that "God is in the Labour Movement",⁸⁵ and that became the basis of the five founding

⁸⁰ Jesse Leamon, 'New Light Through Old Windows: The Labor Church Yesterday and Today', *Religious Socialism*, Fall 2003, 11-13 available at <http://www.newgardenuu.org> accessed on 2nd July 2012.

⁸¹ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 311 – 476.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 529 – 595.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 673 – 679.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 680 – 690.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

principles of the Labour Church and much of its theology.⁸⁶ Such is the emphasis placed on this idea by Summers that each of his chapter headings refer to it.⁸⁷

The contribution of D. F. Summers' thesis to the fields of social history and the history of the Labour movement is as a detailed piece of research into an organisation that had been long neglected. Such is the thoroughness of Summers' work that a number of historians have used the thesis as the research source for their own writings. Hugh McLeod describes the thesis as a "fascinating reconstruction, drawing on the memories of survivors."⁸⁸ He would later claim that Summers offers a definitive study of the Labour Church movement⁸⁹ and refers to the autobiographical notes from Waldegrave at the end of the thesis in another work.⁹⁰ There are instances when Summers' research is accepted without acknowledgment, for example, Stefan Berger cites McLeod⁹¹ without reference to the research source in his comparison of the German Social Democrats with the British Labour Party at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁹² The biographical sketch of John Trevor in the *Dictionary of Labour Biography* is constructed primarily from Summers,⁹³ and both Henry Pelling and Stanley Pierson acknowledged the contribution of Summers' research to their work.

While significant in its thoroughness, Summers' thesis has its limitations. Despite its title, there is little reference to the Allied Movements, apart from some concluding thoughts about

⁸⁶ Ibid., 215.

⁸⁷ Ibid., vi – viii.

⁸⁸ Hugh McLeod, *Religion and the Working Class in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1984), 71.

⁸⁹ Hugh McLeod, *Religion and Irreligion in Victorian England* (Bangor: Headstart History, 1993), 40.

⁹⁰ Hugh McLeod, *Religion and Society in England, 1850-1914* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 208 – 209.

⁹¹ Hugh McLeod, *Religion and the Working Class in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 48- 49.

⁹² Stefan Berger, *The British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats, 1900-1931* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 205.

⁹³ J. Saville and R. Storey, 'Trevor, John (1855 – 1930) Founder of the Labour Church' in J. M. Bellamy and J. Saville (editors), *The Dictionary of Labour Biography*, volume 6 (London: Macmillan, 1982), 249 – 253.

‘The Significance of the Idea’ on wider society.⁹⁴ There is some recognition of the influences upon John Trevor’s thinking,⁹⁵ but this is restricted, and there is no critical analysis of the diverse beliefs and understandings of the members of the wider Labour Church movement. The second chapter of the thesis outlines the historical context in which Trevor realised the idea of God being in the Labour movement, but this awareness of historical context is not continued throughout the rest of the work. Summers’ thesis is a comprehensive composition of the Labour Church as a national organisation, and yet little space is given to local branches and their members’ stories in his main text, where he concentrates on the thoughts and activities of the movement’s luminaries, leaving the rest to appendices.

When revising his history of the roots of the British Labour Party, Henry Pelling looked to Summers for statistical information contained in his second volume.⁹⁶ Pelling places the Labour Church alongside other similar organisations of the time, such as the Christian Social Union, the Guild of St. Matthew, and the Christian Socialist League.⁹⁷ Drawing on *Labour Prophet*, Trevor’s *My Quest for God*, and minute books from the Bradford and Birmingham Labour Churches, Pelling argues that the Labour Church deserved the attention of historians because it expressed a transitional period, a “transfer of social energy from religion to politics.”⁹⁸ He concluded,

But the Labour Churches themselves gained support merely as a short-lived protest against the link which the Nonconformist churches had established with the middle

⁹⁴ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 266 – 300.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁹⁶ Henry Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party 1880-1900*, second edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 136.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

class, and in particular against the alliance with the Liberal Party. A purely negative protest of this sort could not last.⁹⁹

Eric Hobsbawm mentions the Labour Church by referencing the first edition of Pelling's work, which pre-dates and is used by Summers, with a footnote, "The only convenient account in print of this odd movement is in H. Pelling's *Origins of the Labour Party* (1954)."¹⁰⁰ In his study of social movements, Hobsbawm accepts Pelling's argument without question. Using Pelling as groundwork, with supplementary reading of *Labour Prophet*, Hobsbawm spells out his argument, "The chief historic interest of the [Labour] Churches is thus as one of the forms of organization developed by northern workers in the process of separating themselves, politically and ideologically, from the Liberal Party."¹⁰¹ The importance of Pelling and Hobsbawm is that they put into print the story of a movement long-forgotten or dismissed by historians.¹⁰² What limits their contribution is the narrow argument of the Labour Church being simply a vehicle for the transfer of social power from the religious realm to the sphere of politics.

Other historians who were writing during the same period as Pelling and Hobsbawm began to approach the Labour Church from another angle as they challenged the belief that it was simply a product of growing secularisation. Having acknowledged his debt to Pelling,¹⁰³ K. S. Inglis pursues an alternative interpretation. With extensive references to *Labour Prophet*, its successor *Labour Church Record* and use of the Birmingham minute books, Inglis looks at John Trevor in light of the beliefs of his age, and stresses the point that Trevor founded a

⁹⁹ Ibid., 143.

¹⁰⁰ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the nineteenth and twentieth Centuries* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1959), 142.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 145.

¹⁰² Henry Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party 1880-1900*, 139.

¹⁰³ K. S. Inglis, 'The Labour Church Movement', *International Review of Social History*, volume 3 number 3, 1958, 445.

religious organisation,¹⁰⁴ arguing that it was as a theological movement that the Labour Church spread across the country.¹⁰⁵ Rejecting the secularisation argument, he states, “The Labour Church movement was not a structure that collapsed under external blows; it subsided because the architect was never able to get it properly built.”¹⁰⁶ Inglis expounded upon this article in a later work, where he strengthens his argument that “the movement has a peculiar interest . . . as an attempt to give Labour a church of its own.”¹⁰⁷

An article by Stanley Pierson furthers Inglis’ religious interpretation. Pierson is assisted in his work by Summers, who shares information and materials with him, and this is duly acknowledged,¹⁰⁸ as well as the reading of *Labour Prophet* and a number of Labour Church tracts. The main emphasis of Pierson’s article is that John Trevor rejected the idea of setting up a sect because of the need for strict dogma to define such a group. Instead, Pierson argues, Trevor “viewed the Labor Church as a search for a truly free religion. In fact it quickly severed all ties with the traditional faith and embarked on a quest for radically new religious meaning.”¹⁰⁹ In the end, Pierson reaches the conclusion that the Labour Church failed because of “the inability of its leaders to discover new religious authority.”¹¹⁰

Similarly, Philip P. Poirier writes in *The Advent of the Labour Party* that the “politico-religious aspects of the early propaganda found its most extreme expression in the Labour Churches.”¹¹¹ By drawing on the same primary source materials as Inglis and Pierson, Poirier defines the organisation as the dispenser of religious unction,¹¹² though clarifying this

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 448.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 455.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 449.

¹⁰⁷ K. S. Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul / Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), 216.

¹⁰⁸ Stanley Pierson, ‘John Trevor and the Labor Church Movement in England, 1891-1900’, *Church History*, volume 29 number 4, 1960, 478.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 463.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 477.

¹¹¹ Philip P. Poirier, *The Advent of the Labour Party* (London: George Allen and Unwin Limited, 1958), 54.

¹¹² Ibid., 55.

by stating, “Untheological in its teachings, Nonconformist in its spiritual ancestry, the Labour Church preached a creed that was vague and materialistic.”¹¹³ Such sentiments were expressed by another historian a decade later, when Peter d’A. Jones describes the Labour Church movement as “barely Christian”¹¹⁴ in its purpose and practice. He writes, “The Labour Church was a serious attempt to create or synthesize a true working-class religion; thus its history falls under that of popular religion or of British class culture.”¹¹⁵

The emphasis on the religious nature of the Labour Church is a valuable counterpoint to the argument followed by Pelling and Hobsbawm that it was a vehicle for secularisation, and moved the debate on about the purpose and relevance of the movement. But by addressing the secular interpretation, Inglis, Pierson, Poirier and Jones developed a narrow focus on John Trevor, with few references to the wider movement. Although other religious and ethical organisations of the time are referred to, there is little by the way of analysing the relationships between these groups and the broader influences upon them. It has been within this last area of research that advances have been made since the 1970s.

An exploration of the beliefs and experiences of the Religion of Socialism was published in 1977. Stephen Yeo draws on a wide range of materials which go beyond the Labour Church, and includes the recently deposited ‘John Trevor Working Papers’ at the Modern Records Centre,¹¹⁶ reference to *Labour Prophet*, Trevor’s *My Quest for God*, and Labour Church member Hannah Mitchell’s autobiography. He acknowledges Hobsbawm and Pelling’s

¹¹³ Ibid., 54.

¹¹⁴ Peter d’A. Jones, *The Christian Socialist Revival 1877-1914: Religion, Class, and Social Conscience in Late-Victorian England* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), 13.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 29.

¹¹⁶ Stephen Yeo, ‘A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883-1896’, *History Workshop Journal*, volume 4 number 1, 1977, 50.

work, but rejects their conclusions.¹¹⁷ Instead, Yeo broadens the canvas, explaining that the phrase the Religion of Socialism was to be found on the lips of a wide range of Socialists, from mainstream Christians through to ardent atheists.¹¹⁸ Stating that the culture of late Victorian Britain used the language and style of religiosity to frame many aspects of life, particularly altruism, he argues that it is not surprising that the Socialists of this period made use of religious metaphors to describe their own beliefs.¹¹⁹ Yeo notes that historians viewed the Religion of Socialism “as an anachronistic ‘substitute’ religion”, and interpreted the Religion of Socialism “as metaphor, or as the moralising dress worn by socialists because of the historical peculiarities of British popular and middle-class culture – an apparel which did not necessarily proclaim the man.”¹²⁰ He goes on to describe the difficulty in defining what was meant by the phrase because of “the variety of theologies and anti-theologies”¹²¹ which went alongside it. Yeo dismisses the argument that the Religion of Socialism was a convenient façade for certain Socialists, instead claiming, “the presence and character of the religion of socialism during the 1880s and 1890s was so substantial that it may well have something to do with the large space subsequently occupied by the Labour Party in British socialism”.¹²² The central question of Yeo’s study was whether Socialism was replacing the role of conventional religion for people in the Labour movement.¹²³ It is within this context that Yeo understands the Labour Church, and similar organisations such as the Brotherhood Church, as a clear expression of the ‘cultus’ of the Labour movement.¹²⁴ Yeo’s article is significant because it places the Labour Church and related movements at the centre of Socialist thinking and activity in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century.¹²⁵

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 31.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 6.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 17.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 7.

¹²¹ Ibid., 17.

¹²² Ibid., 7.

¹²³ Ibid., 18.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 19.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 27.

The gap in Yeo's work is that there is little consideration given to the broader influences upon British Socialism, a point raised by Royden Harrison in a letter criticising the article, which highlights the role of the Fellowship of New Life and the importance of the earlier religious movements of Saint Simon, Owen and Comte.¹²⁶ Instead of focussing on one narrow period of history from the final two decades of the nineteenth century, Harrison looks at an over-arching theme and states that the Religion of Socialism can only be truly understood if it is regarded as part of a longer tradition of attempts to construct new religions.¹²⁷ Part of the gap identified during the Yeo-Harrison debate was addressed by Mark Bevir, who in two articles locates the Labour Church within Immanentism. In the first article Bevir looks at the influence of American Romanticism on British Socialism, with attention given to the Fellowship of the New Life, the work of Edward Carpenter, and the thinking of John Trevor. On the influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, Bevir wrote that Trevor "described Whitman as 'nearer God than any man on earth,' and just before his marriage, he began to keep a copy of Emerson's writings 'to read occasionally as a Bible.'"¹²⁸ Bevir argues that at the heart of Trevor's theology was the belief that

the basis of the unity of all is a divine love, a vital force which puts people in a

spiritual relationship with nature, and a relationship of mutual brotherhood with their

¹²⁶ Royden Harrison, 'The Religion of Socialism', letter to Editorial Collective, *History Workshop*, volume 5 number 1, 1978, 214-217.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 216. Yeo dismisses Harrison's declaration that the Fellowship of the New Life was "the most single-minded, institution of the Religion of Socialism" (Ibid., 214), instead he returns to the Labour Church as envisioned by John Trevor and its members: "At this time it seemed possible, in a participant's words, to have 'Religion the binder without Theology the separator'. The most interesting thing, in my view, about the Labour Churches was John Trevor's original impulse not to let them separate from the movement. Large-scale, mutual, associated, more or less full-time practice, with the kind of commitment sects can generate (but without some of their negative features) was being produced." Stephen Yeo, 'The Religion of Socialism', a letter to Editorial Collective in response to Royden Harrison, *History Workshop Journal*, volume 7 number 1, 1979, 217.

¹²⁸ *Labour Prophet*, July 1896, and John Trevor, *My Quest for God* (London: Labour Prophet Office, 1897), 158 quoted in Mark Bevir, 'British Socialism and American Romanticism', *English Historical Review*, volume 110, 1995, 893 available at <http://repositories.cdlib.org/postprints/2589> accessed on 9th October 2008.

fellows. More particularly, the divine life can be found in the labour movement as it battles to realize the truth of universal brotherhood.¹²⁹

Later Bevir would return to Trevor and his Labour Church in the second article, which begins with a challenge to the secularisation interpretation (citing Hobsbawm, Pelling and Pierson) by seeking the theological basis of the movement, as begun by Yeo.¹³⁰ The Labour Church, Bevir argues, was part of a growing re-assessment of religion and acceptance of the Immanentism of Emerson, Whitman and Henry David Thoreau which enabled people in late Victorian society to reconcile religious belief with evolutionary theory and historical criticism.¹³¹ The uniqueness of the Labour Church to other forms of Victorian Immanentist expressions was its claim that God was in the Labour movement.¹³² Summing up his argument, Bevir writes,

The Labour Church was neither a staging post on the way to a mature secular socialism nor an organization fulfilling the emotional role of religious faith without being tied to any doctrinal content. Rather, it was an expression of an immanentist faith.¹³³

Bevir succeeds in drawing on lines of influence upon the Labour Church from outside British society, as well as giving consideration to the relationships between some of the organisations and individuals who composed the Labour movement of the time. The main problem is a matter of focus in as far as Bevir nails the Labour Church colours to the Immanentist mast with no consideration of other influences or wider traditions.

¹²⁹ Mark Bevir, 'British Socialism and American Romanticism', 895.

¹³⁰ Mark Bevir, 'The Labour Church Movement, 1891 – 1902', *Journal of British Studies*, volume 38 number 2, 1999, 218.

¹³¹ Ibid., 221.

¹³² Ibid., 224.

¹³³ Ibid., 243.

In June 2009 a book was published under the title *The Foundations of the British Labour Party: Identities, Cultures and Perspectives, 1900-39*, edited by Matthew Worley. The ninth chapter written by Jacqueline Turner is entitled ‘Labour’s Lost Soul? Recovering the Labour Church’ and it serves as a good summary of the work of Inglis, Pierson and Bevir. Turner accepts Bevir’s interpretation of the Labour Church as being founded as a religious movement based on an Immanentist theology, she writes, “all of the [Labour] Church’s principles are synonymous with an Immanentist belief in God.”¹³⁴ The purpose of the chapter is to place the Labour Church within Labour Party history in terms of the movement acting as one of the foundation stones of an increasingly election-orientated, political machine. The changing emphasis of the Labour movement led to the ultimate distancing from the Labour Church, which Turner declares as being virtually extinct by the eve of the First World War, “The Birmingham Church was the final Church standing in 1914, acting as an independent mediator between other organizations.”¹³⁵

The chapter is also a summary of Turner’s thesis completed in 2010 which examines the claim that John Trevor’s tendency to call the Labour Church ‘the soul of the Labour movement’ was the core concept of his ideology. Turner challenges Hobsbawm and Yeo who viewed the organisation as a religio-political cult or sect, arguing that the message of the Labour Church was inclusive in its nature.¹³⁶ Where this thesis departs from Turner’s position is that it argues for the uniqueness of Trevor’s claims about the Labour Church within the wider Labour movement, recognising that his use of the term ‘soul’ to speak of the Labour Church was not of enhancing the Labour movement with a spirituality, as Turner

¹³⁴ Jacqueline Turner, ‘Labour’s Lost Soul? Recovering the Labour Church’ in Matthew Worley (editor), *The Foundations of the British Labour Party: Identities, cultures and perspectives, 1900-39* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited / Burlington, USA: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 161.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 167.

¹³⁶ Jacqueline Turner, ‘The Soul of the Labour Movement: Rediscovering the Labour Church 1893 – 1914’, Ph. D. thesis (University of Reading, 2010), 9.

claims, but rather the movement's distinctive calling to proclaim the divine purpose of the Socialist cause. Turner depends on Bevir's interpretation of the Labour Church message as her stance, while this thesis revisits and then re-interprets the movement's gospel as Theological Socialism, along with challenging Turner's understanding of its lifespan. The significance of Turner's thesis is her research into the role played by women in the movement, a detailed study that has expanded our knowledge of this important aspect of the life and membership of the Labour Church.

Over the past fifty years there have appeared pieces of work that have made reference to the Labour Church focussing on certain sociological, political or geographical contexts. While often brief in their content, these pieces have offered alternative interpretations of the movement to the arguments being posed in the larger debate. W. H. G. Armytage's book *Heavens Below* outlines a long tradition of utopian movements in England since 1560. Within that tradition Armytage located the Labour Church, describing it as a "Socialist Salvation Army".¹³⁷ The significance here is that for the first time the Labour Church movement was recognised as utopian in nature, and so to be set alongside other such historic groups in a way that went beyond Royden Harrison's challenge to Yeo. In an article about Socialist Sunday Schools, F. Reid draws comparisons with the Labour Church, which was an associated organisation. Based on his reading of Hobsbawm and Pierson, he writes, "What was new about the Labour Churches as a working-class sect was the spirit in which the movement was brought into being . . . Their aspirations were fixed not on life after death, but on the communist millennium."¹³⁸ Reid reflects on the varying degrees of interdependence between the two movements, and concludes by arguing that "by 1914 the Socialist Sunday School movement had inherited the position of the Labour Churches as the working-class

¹³⁷ W. H. G. Armytage, *Heavens Below: Utopian Experiments in England 1560-1960* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), 321.

¹³⁸ F. Reid, 'Socialist Sunday Schools in Britain, 1892-1939', *International Review of Social History*, 1966, 19.

sect of British religious life.”¹³⁹ This study of a parallel organisation gives an opportunity to view the Labour Church through another lens.

George Barnsby’s extensive research into Socialist movements across the West Midlands from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries is found in two volumes, *Birmingham Working People*¹⁴⁰ and *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country, 1850-1939*.¹⁴¹

Trawling through the minute books of local groups and articles from local newspapers, such as the *Birmingham Town Crier*, enables Barnsby to write a very detailed, though not analytical, account of his subject area. His research has unearthed some valuable information, including the existence of 16 Labour Churches spread across Birmingham in 1926.¹⁴² Another contribution to the study of the Labour Church comes from a paper presented to the Ecclesiastical History Society by Krista Cowman. Summarising the work of McLeod, Inglis and Pelling, Cowman opens a door of new understanding by her own reading of the existing materials. With the theme of work and leisure, she considers the social and cultural life of the movement, “Keeping the soul nourished was the aim of much of the cultural activity of the Labour Church, which separated it somewhat from the broader attempts at associational culture practised by other socialist groups such as the Clarion movement.”¹⁴³ Fifty years after Armytage’s work, Thomas Linehan continued in the same vein by interpreting the Labour Church through the lens of utopianism. The Labour Church “was confidently orientated towards an alternative future, believing that history was on the cusp of change in a radical direction”,¹⁴⁴ wrote Linehan in his study of late-Victorian Socialism as an expression of Modernism. He interprets the Labour Church through the

¹³⁹ Ibid., 38.

¹⁴⁰ Georg J. Barnsby, *Birmingham Working People: A History of the Labour Movement in Birmingham, 1650-1914* (Wolverhampton: Integrated Publishing Services, 1989).

¹⁴¹ George J. Barnsby, *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country 1850-1939*.

¹⁴² Ibid, 356.

¹⁴³ Krista Cowman, ‘A Peculiarly English Institution: Work, Rest, and Play in the Labour Church’, 365.

¹⁴⁴ Thomas Linehan, *Modernism and British Socialism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 41.

utopian vision of its founder, whom he believed considered himself to be the herald of a “harmonious future of human fellowship . . . He was to stand before the world as a prophet, ‘announcing the dawn of the day that is to be’.”¹⁴⁵ Although not able to produce thorough arguments because they are either too brief or too general in their content, or due to a lack of original research or detailed analysis, these writers make valuable contributions to the study of the Labour Church. By opening up new insights and interpretations, Armytage, Reid, Barnsby, Cowman and Linehan indicate avenues of research in need of further exploration and analysis.

Over the five decades of research into the Labour Church a number of trends have appeared. Two such interpretative trends faced each other during the first decade, as the secular position championed by Pelling and Hobsbawm conflicted with Inglis, Pierson, Poirier and Jones’ understandings of the Labour Church as a religious organisation. It is interesting that Summers holds both views in that he interprets the movement as being religious, but gives political reasons for its decline in 1910.¹⁴⁶ Broader perspectives were taken by historians who followed, placing the Labour Church in the context of the Religion of Socialism, alongside other contemporary groups, and reflecting about the influences upon them. Yeo and Bevir reject the narrower understandings of their predecessors and offer more facets of interpretation. Whilst these have been the most influential trends in Labour Church research, throughout the whole of this time other contributors have added to the discussion with their own particular pieces of study.

Gaps in previous research are often filled by the researchers who built upon it; but there remain two areas of Labour Church research that require further study. The first is the

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 162.

analysis of the Labour Church's theological understanding of the British Labour movement. Going beyond the work of such as Inglis, Pierson, Yeo and Bevir, and developing the arguments posed by Armytage and Linehan, the research will reassess the purpose and significance of the Labour Church by appraising the aspirations of its founder and active members. The second is a case study of one context. Although Summers, Pelling, Inglis and Barnsby used the minute books of the Labour Church in central Birmingham, no detailed research has taken place into that congregation and the numerous ones that succeeded it into the 1920s. Such a study will not only be the first thorough analysis of the Labour Church through local history, it will also challenge the belief held by historians about the life and death of the movement.

The greatest gap in primary source material relating to the Labour Church is due to the lack of documentation from the national movement. Records of the Labour Church Union's conferences and executive meetings have not been found, making reports in the movement's official press the only accessible source of information. Also, research into the local archive departments and local history sections of libraries and research centres in regions where Labour Churches met has produced few references.¹⁴⁷ Where primary source material is more available can be found in minute books from Labour Church congregations in Birmingham and across the West Midlands. In the Birmingham City Archives at the city's Central Library records are held of the first Birmingham Labour Church¹⁴⁸ and information

¹⁴⁷ The West Yorkshire Archives Service in Bradford, which holds extensive records about the Labour movement in that area, has one document which makes direct reference to the Labour Church, that being the transcript of an interview with Vic Feather, one-time General Secretary of the Trades Union Council ('Typescript copy of an interview by Eric Silver with Victor Feather', West Yorkshire Archive Service, Bradford, DB71 / C6 / 1). A search of local archive collections in Manchester, Huddersfield, Liverpool, Glasgow, Sheffield, Leeds, Powys, Bristol and those kept by the London Metropolitan Archives have revealed no relevant materials. A study of *Yorkshire Factory Times*, *Workers Weekly Record* and *Huddersfield Worker* for evidence of on-going Labour Church activity during the same period after the First World War when *Town Crier* announces the growth of the movement across Birmingham has revealed no references.

¹⁴⁸ 'Birmingham Labour Church – minutes: 1894-1910', Birmingham City Archives, Birmingham Central Library, ZZ 72 A.

on the Labour Churches in Stirchley¹⁴⁹ and Northfield.¹⁵⁰ Spreading the net wider across the archives located around the West Midlands reveals further references to Labour Churches in Wolverhampton¹⁵¹ and Dudley,¹⁵² while a search of British History Online points to branches in West Bromwich and Birchills in Walsall, both of which existed into the 1930s.¹⁵³

In terms of the national movement, the most helpful pool of resources is the printed material produced by the Labour Church Union, including its monthly *Labour Prophet*, and successor *Labour Church Record*, the four editions of the *Labour Church Hymn Book*, and several tracts. John Trevor's autobiography *My Quest for God* was published by the national movement, and offers insight to the self-perception of its founder. Memoirs and biographical studies of Labour Church activists can assist our research, so that the papers held by the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick from collections gathered by G. W. Brassington enhances the primary sources.¹⁵⁴ A neglected source is the biography of John Trevor's mentor, Philip Wicksteed, by C. H. Herford, which refers to the relationship between the two men and the origins of the Labour Church.¹⁵⁵ One local biographical source discovered in the course of this research was the note books of Frank Mathews, the secretary

¹⁴⁹ 'Stirchley Labour Church – syllabus of lectures: 1911-14', Birmingham City Archives, Birmingham Central Library, LP 19.9.

¹⁵⁰ *Labour Party – Northfield Ward, short history: 1904-54*, Birmingham City Archives, Birmingham Central Library, LP 76.22.

¹⁵¹ Wolverhampton Fabian Society, Trades and Labour Council and the Independent Labour Party, Wolverhampton Archives and Local Studies, Wolverhampton City Council, DX 427.

¹⁵² Dudley Labour Church – papers: 1908, Dudley Archives and Local History Service, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council, MP 87 S.

¹⁵³ British History Online, available at www.british-history.ac.uk accessed on 8th November 2013. The source of the reference to the Birchills Labour Church is cited as being the Places of Religious Worship Register which is held at the National Archives, with Birchills as the only place where a building is listed in the register under the title of the Labour Church (Places of Religious Worship Register, National Archives, RG 70 / 114, certificate 56826).

¹⁵⁴ 'John Trevor Working Papers', Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, MSS.143; 'Labour Church Papers', Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, MSS.143 B / 4 / 1. G. W. Brassington was writing a biography of Trevor, but died before its completion.

¹⁵⁵ C. H. Herford, *Philip Henry Wicksteed: His Life and Work* (London / Toronto: J. M. Dent and Sons Limited, 1931)

of the Birmingham Labour Church Cinderella Club.¹⁵⁶ Similarly, the posthumous autobiography of D. R. Davies reveals the founding of a Labour Church in Southport during the final years of the 1920s.¹⁵⁷ A champion of Guild Socialism in the early decades of the twentieth century who had been a prominent member of the Labour Church Union, S. G. Hobson wrote his autobiography, published in 1938, in which he reflected on his experience of the Labour Church and its theological impact.¹⁵⁸ The personal archives of prominent figures in the Labour Church were examined, collections including the ‘Glasier Papers’ containing the writings of John and Katharine Bruce Glasier at the University of Liverpool¹⁵⁹ and the ‘Snowden Collection’ from Phillip and Ethel Snowden’s libraries held by the Keighley Local Studies Library,¹⁶⁰ but no additional primary materials were discovered.

The connection between the Labour Church and local branches of other Labour organisations, particularly the I. L. P., is another avenue of exploration. Consideration of the national I. L. P. archives held at the London School of Economics for more details of local Labour Church activities yielded no further material on Birmingham, but included some references to the movement in the Black Country.¹⁶¹ Internet access to *I. L. P. News* proved to be a more fruitful source, though mainly in terms of the national Labour Church Union.¹⁶² The I. L. P. archives at the L. S. E. relating to West Bromwich have indicated that the local branch was responsible for a Labour Church with its own building which survived into the

¹⁵⁶ Frank Mathews, notebook (1890 -1892), private collection of Tony Rees.

¹⁵⁷ D. R. Davies, *In Search of Myself* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1961).

¹⁵⁸ “Some of us supported the Labour Church for a practical reason. Everywhere there were loud complaints from Liberals and Conservatives that we were taking an unfair advantage in holding our meetings on Sunday; the Churches denounced us for depleting their pews. In vain our assurances that Socialism was our religion – the religion of humanity. It was not very convincing. But when we founded our own Church, dragging in an enticing clause from the Lord’s prayer as our basis, that particular criticism was silenced. They found they must meet us on theological grounds.” S. G. Hobson, *Pilgrim to the Left: Memoirs of a Modern Revolutionist*, (London: Edward Arnold and Company, 1938), 41.

¹⁵⁹ ‘Glasier Papers ca.1879-1975’, Special Collections and Archives, University of Liverpool, GP / 1 – 8.

¹⁶⁰ ‘Snowden Collection’, Keighley Local Studies Library, City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council, BMT / KE 4.

¹⁶¹ ILP Archives, Archives Reading Room, London School of Economics, ILP 9 – 10.

¹⁶² *I. L. P. News*, available from the Center for Research Libraries at <http://dds.crl.edu/CRLdelivery.asp?tid=5120> accessed on 8th November 2013.

mid-1930s.¹⁶³ As noted previously, in his article about Socialist Sunday Schools, F. Reid acknowledges that they were cognate with the Labour Church, though distinct as organisations.¹⁶⁴ The Council of British Socialist Sunday Schools archives, which stretch from 1894 up to 1971, are now kept by the People's History Museum in Salford and offer some further references to the links between the two movements both nationally and at a local level.¹⁶⁵ In the Birmingham City Archives records are held on the first Birmingham Labour Church's Cinderella Club,¹⁶⁶ and the Birmingham Socialist Centre, a kindred organisation with many mutual members,¹⁶⁷ as well as information about local I. L. P. branches with Labour Church connections.¹⁶⁸

The British Newspaper Archive offers references to a number of congregations across Britain, including Birmingham,¹⁶⁹ whilst the Birmingham City Archives holds copies of the local Socialist newspaper *Town Crier*,¹⁷⁰ which is an important resource about the Birmingham Labour scene in the post-First World War period, and was used extensively in George Barnsby's research.¹⁷¹ An earlier reference to this primary printed source is found in a Ph.D. thesis from 1985 by John Boughton entitled 'Working Class Politics in Birmingham and Sheffield, 1918 -1931'.¹⁷² Both studies record the reports of the Birmingham Labour

¹⁶³ ILP Archives, ILP 9 / 81 – 82.

¹⁶⁴ F. Reid, 'Socialist Sunday Schools in Britain, 1892-1939', 19.

¹⁶⁵ National Council of British Socialist Sunday Schools, People's History Museum, University of Central Lancashire, NRA 16270.

¹⁶⁶ 'Birmingham (Labour Church / Clarion) Cinderella Club – annual reports: 1895-1928', Birmingham City Archives, Birmingham Central Library, L 41.23.

¹⁶⁷ 'Birmingham Socialist Centre – minutes: 1902-12', Birmingham City Archives, Birmingham Central Library, ZZ 73 A.

¹⁶⁸ *Birmingham ILP Year Book: 1908-09*, Birmingham City Archives, Birmingham Central Library, Birmingham Institutions D / 31.

¹⁶⁹ British Newspaper Archive, available at <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk> accessed on 8th November 2013.

¹⁷⁰ *Town Crier*, Birmingham City Archives, Birmingham Central Library, L 76.22.

¹⁷¹ George J. Barnsby, *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country 1850-1939*, 356.

¹⁷² John Boughton, 'Working Class Politics in Birmingham and Sheffield, 1918 - 1931', Ph. D. thesis, University of Warwick, 1985, 286.

Churches from *Town Crier*, but neither gives extensive space for further exploration into these groups or analysis of the reason for their existence.

A review of the research literature surrounding the Labour Church has revealed conflicts between secular and religious interpretations of the organisation and its decline, calls for wider understandings of the movement and its activists and the influences upon them, as well as attempts to summarise the Labour Church's nature and purpose. Accompanying the main contributors to the debate have been others who have offered insights into the life of the Labour Church movement. From that review is the recognition of the trends that have appeared during the decades of research activity. Areas for further research were identified as being the sharpening of the focus for analysis of the Labour Church movement in terms of scrutinising its own theological interpretation of contemporary Socialism, and also grounding a study in a specific place, that being Birmingham, to consider the meaning and purpose of the movement in a certain geographical context. The latter aspect of research raises a third area for consideration regarding the lifespan of the Labour Church as a relevant organisation in parts of Britain. These possibilities for research have influenced the approach to the primary sources relating to the Labour Church movement. Having acknowledged the limitations of the primary archives, recognition is given to how the published primary materials and archival records of local Labour Church congregations can be accessed. This survey of the source materials has discovered ways and means of challenging the accepted views of the Labour Church movement, and proposes opportunities for fresh analysis of its history, significance and meaning.

i. The progression and structure of the thesis

The thesis is structured so that the central question about the importance of Theological Socialism is examined from different vantage points: the social and ideological setting of the Labour Church; the events and concepts which shaped the Founder's thinking; the motivations and aspirations of those people who aligned themselves with the movement; and the issues and concerns of members from a certain place over a period of time. New insights into the Labour Church are gained by the challenges set by this study to reassess the rationale of the movement, the nature of its activists, and the duration of its meaningfulness.

Chapter 1, 'The Founder', re-appraises John Trevor by looking in some detail at his life and influences. Underlining the study is the issue of what fashioned the theology which would lead Trevor to found the Labour Church. Trevor's personal, spiritual journey started from a narrow Calvinistic upbringing, and took him through his own 'crisis of faith' to Transcendentalism and the concept of 'Free Religion', followed by his own form of Socialist utopianism. New parallels will be drawn between Trevor's ideology and those of a number of contemporary thinkers and activists, as well as recognition given to the influence of Philip Wicksteed as his mentor. The chapter furthers previous research by pursuing ideological and familial leads, and by the understanding of Trevor's ability to fuse received ideas and agendas into a distinctive theology and how he acted upon the consequences of its message by building a national organisation with international potential. The enquiry is developed by the next chapter, entitled 'Theological Socialism', by testing the argument that John Trevor received a vision for the Labour Church which brought a particular theological interpretation of Socialism to the religious and political life of late-Victorian Britain, and includes recognition of the alternative understandings of the vision held by Labour Church activists. Through the examination of previously under-analysed primary source material, the chapter

considers the ideological claims of the Labour Church as a specific movement within the life of British Labour politics, including the views of those who were inspired by the vision and gravitated to the movement.

From an understanding of the influences on Trevor's concept of the theological nature of Socialism, in Chapter 3 those people drawn to the manifestation of Trevor's vision are considered. 'The Theological Socialists' re-defines the committed members of the Labour Church movement as a certain grouping and by doing so looks at what attracted them to the Labour Church, and their broad and varied interpretations of its message. This chapter is a study of the Theological Socialists, examining the involvement, activities and achievements of these activists by questioning their expectations of the organisation they were committing themselves to. Chapter 4, 'The Labour Church in Birmingham', is a detailed case study. The chapter explores the history of the movement in the city from its establishment on New Year's Day 1893 until references cease in the local archival records by 1930. It is revealed that the Birmingham Labour Church bucked the trends of the wider national organisation and by doing so contradicts the generally accepted historiography of the movement. George Barnsby's statement which commences the chapter is reshaped into the underlining question, as to why the Labour Church was a movement of some significance in the life of Birmingham and whether Theological Socialism played a role in this.

The thesis concludes with a chapter which gives a résumé of the arguments expressed throughout the thesis, reflecting upon the tasks outlined in the introductory chapter and how they were completed. Accepted historiographical interpretations of the Labour Church movement are addressed, before the chapter offers some new directions for further explorations in research. It goes on to state how the conclusions reached by the thesis have

redefined the Labour Church as the movement of Theological Socialism, and the implications of this for how the British Labour scene of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be perceived. The implication of the research is that the Labour Church acts as a signpost to the continuous theological imperative within the British Labour movement which means that Labour history is religious history.

In a tract written in 1895 about rediscovering the ways of God through the Labour movement as a sign of the dawning of a new utopian age, John Trevor emphasises what he claims to be the unique role played by the Labour Church in that very task through its ability to move the debate about the Religion of Socialism from an ethical form of political understanding to what this thesis terms Theological Socialism. Trevor states that the reason why he believed the Labour Church was of crucial significance to his contemporary context was a divine calling “so peculiarly its own.”¹⁷³

¹⁷³ John Trevor, *From Ethics to Religion*, 22.

CHAPTER 1 – THE FOUNDER

1:1 Introduction

“... although I don’t want to exaggerate his claims, ... John Trevor could do with more rescuing than he has yet received”,¹ wrote Stephen Yeo during his debate with Royden Harrison about the nature of the Religion of Socialism. This chapter aims towards that ‘rescuing’ of John Trevor by looking at his life and influences, with the underlining question of what fashioned within him a particular perspective on the Socialist ideology, a distinctive interpretation which this thesis is calling Theological Socialism. The moment was right in the Britain of the 1890s for a Socialist prophet to appear proclaiming an overtly religious version of the Socialist creed; Trevor seized that moment. The chapter maps out the influential figures and concepts on Trevor’s life and thinking, and reflects upon his ability to fuse received ideas and agendas into a new vision, a prophecy he wanted to be proclaimed and protected by the new religious movement that he had founded called the Labour Church.

1:2 Making of a Disenchanted Evangelical

Towards the end of his autobiography, written during a period of physical and mental breakdown, John Trevor described himself as “the victim of the unfolding God”.² This brief statement offers insight into Trevor’s self-perception in the latter part of the 1890s. Trevor believed he was a victim because of the suffering he had endured throughout his

¹ Stephen Yeo, ‘The Religion of Socialism’ a letter to Editorial Collective in response to Royden Harrison, 217.

² John Trevor, *My Quest for God* (London: Labour Prophet Office, 1897), 236.

life, including illnesses, failures and bereavements. All of these troubles he considered to be trials in his quest for God, hence the title of his life-story, *My Quest for God*, an indication that he was, in his own mind, the perpetual pilgrim, a constant searcher for truth. As Trevor looked back on his life up to that point, he believed that the whole purpose of his existence was to unravel the mysteries of the divine, and with the founding of the Labour Church he felt that he had come close to discovering the truth that he sought. The journey to that moment of realisation, and the retreat from his defining achievement, constituted the days and dreams of the Reverend John Trevor.

Born in Liverpool on 7th October 1855, John Trevor was the second child of Frederick Francis Trevor, “a struggling linen draper”³, and his wife, Harriet. Liverpool, like all major British cities in the mid-Victorian period, was growing at a rapid rate, and with the increasing population came overcrowding in the city centre wards, as the 1851 census recorded.⁴ One reason for this city’s growth was that at the time Liverpool was the only port to rival London.⁵ British society was undergoing a sizeable transformation as it became the ‘Workshop of the World’ through its concentrated industrial production and colonial expansion, making the nation’s economy the richest in the world, though this was not reflected across all social classes.⁶ Five months after his birth Trevor was taken with his mother and older sister to live with his maternal grandparents in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, while his father sought opportunities in London. When Trevor senior failed in his pursuits, the family was reunited and moved to live in a cottage in Wisbech.

³ Ibid., 1.

⁴ Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 27.

⁵ Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain 1851-75* (Glasgow: Fontana / Collins, 1979), 61.

⁶ B. R. Mitchell and P. Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 366.

This Cambridgeshire town had not seen the huge increase in population as Trevor's birthplace, but what had impacted upon the life of its community was the arrival of the railways during this period.⁷ John Trevor summed up his early childhood by writing, "my earliest years were associated with poverty and sorrow".⁸

By the age of four John had lost his father, and within another five years he and his sister would be orphaned by the death of their invalid mother.⁹ Due to her long-term ill health, brother and sister had been housed with family members for several years. This exposure to personal grief in childhood began to mould the understanding of the young Trevor, who wrote over three decades later,

Suffering was to me, therefore, never a meaningless mystery, much less a horrible curse. It had its place in the divine economy, as a discipline for this life, and a preparation for the life to come.¹⁰

John Trevor's grandparents made an immense impression on his life. His paternal grandfather had been a farmer, and is described by his grandson as being "a fine old Puritan, who shaved on Saturday night to avoid needless labour on the Sabbath".¹¹ But it would be his mother's parents and her unmarried sister who would have the greatest influence as they raised Trevor. The family were members of the Johnsonian Baptists, a Protestant sect which adhered to a strict Calvinistic theology. The sect's founder, John Johnson proclaimed a message of faith being a principle of grace and not a matter of

⁷Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain 1851-75*, 88.

⁸John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 1.

⁹ Trevor wrote of his parents' illnesses and deaths, "My father, after my birth, contracted syphilis in a public closet. Unwittingly, he conveyed it to my mother. My father died when I was four years old of consumption of the bowels. My mother died when I was nine, for many years an inmate of a lunatic asylum." John Trevor, *The One Life* (Horsted Keynes: John Trevor, 1909), 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

duty.¹² The Johnsonians established a congregation in Norwich during the 1760s, where they were known as Calvinistic or Particular Baptists.¹³ From 1862 until his death in 1897, John Trevor's uncle (and father-in-law), Henry Trevor, served as the minister of the Norwich congregation.¹⁴ Eric Hobsbawm defined the Johnsonian Baptists as being "one of those small and super-pious sects of working-class or lower-middle-class hellfire puritans which were always splitting away to form more godly communities."¹⁵

Theological debates about Darwinism and biblical criticism, which preoccupied the intellectual elements of the larger Christian denominations, had little influence on the Johnsonian Baptists in one corner of mid-Victorian Cambridgeshire. Instead, the concepts of heaven, hell, redemption and damnation were a daily diet of young John's theological upbringing. It was his grandmother whose talks had a profound impression on his thinking that led the boy to fear the thought of being condemned to hell. Yet it would be this same grandmother who would introduce Trevor to the extra-biblical literary material that she considered to be acceptable, such as popular moral Christian novels and articles from the *Examiner* magazine, a weekly newspaper promoting reformist views of politics, economics and the arts.¹⁶ This introduction to wider literature would later offer a sense of release to the older John Trevor. But as a child the dread promoted by his grandmother, along with the removal of and then the permanent separation from his

¹² Kenneth Hipper, 'The Johnsonian Baptists in Norwich', *The Baptist Quarterly*, volume 38 number 1, January 1999, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion and Jazz* (London: Abacus, 1999), 65.

¹⁶ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 7.

sister, who went to live with another family member, increased the sense of isolation within the young boy.¹⁷

School life as a boarder proved to be a difficult and often menacing period in Trevor's young life. He was sent to a Dame School in Wisbech, "kept by a very heartless woman"¹⁸, and it was the fear of this 'school-keeper', the cruelty of the older boys and the background of the dread of being condemned to hell's damnation that made him grow up "a nervous, lonely and unsociable child".¹⁹ But at the time of his mother's death Trevor was relocated to another boarding school run by an elderly man who believed in encouraging his pupils to enjoy fresh air and exercise. Such pursuits remained with Trevor, and it was during times of great trial that he would retreat to places of pastoral freedom in order to find solace. The school proved to be of sufficient educational standard, enabling Trevor to pass the Cambridge local examination.²⁰ Reflecting back on these times, John Trevor wrote in a positive way in his autobiography,

To these maternal relatives, as also to my old schoolmaster, I owe much of the sanity of life – an abiding sense of humour, and of the charm and grace of things.²¹

A sense of coming from another reality into the tighter knit life of a country town, the deaths of both parents during childhood and the separation from his only sibling, along with the deep impact made by the theological perspectives of his grandparents and a

¹⁷ Ibid., 4.

¹⁸ Ibid., 12.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ R. K. Webb, 'Trevor, John (1855-1930), founder of the Labour Church' (Oxford: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2004) available at www.oxforddnb.com accessed on 3rd October 2009.

²¹ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 18.

sense of the natural world, would all become the foundations to John Trevor's self-understanding and social awareness. While there must be a recognition that our source for Trevor's early life comes from his autobiography, written at a time of personal crisis and collapse, the episodes of his childhood express a troubled existence which were based upon a belief in a God who could always be depended upon; whatever life threw at him, God was the trustworthy presence. Such a belief made an increasingly troubled Trevor aware of the dependable God who was revealed throughout the tests and trials of life, making him "the victim of the unfolding God."

Trevor was far from unique among his contemporaries, for many people the mid-nineteenth century meant 'crisis of faith'. For some, including Trevor, this was a time of "Evangelical Disenchantment".²² The life of John Trevor could have been one of the "portraits of faith and doubt"²³ in David Hempton's study of nineteenth and twentieth century figures who lived through their own faith crises after the certainties of an evangelical, Christian background. Hempton identifies various elements which culminated into such a crisis, including the widening debate on evolution, greater awareness of biblical criticism beyond academia, and exposure to contemporary philosophies and ideologies, each of which impacted on Trevor's thinking. In an earlier study of the phenomenon, Susan Budd argues that beyond the small group of intelligentsia, what impacted on the faith of many from the working and lower middle

²² David Hempton, *Evangelical Disenchantment: 9 Portraits of Faith and Doubt* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 12.

²³ Ibid.

classes were the moral and social questions of the time.²⁴ It would be Trevor's questioning of biblical authority coupled with a growing social concern that led to the ultimate break from traditional religion in later life.²⁵

1:3 Seeking Free Religion

John Trevor's upbringing shaped his self-understanding to the point that according to his autobiography the whole of his life would be a constant search for truth. Over a twenty year period Trevor pursued a quest which would take him many thousands of miles, but just as importantly, during this time he would explore and test the concepts and understandings of life and faith which were advocated by the communities, movements and individuals he encountered along the way. This exploration and testing of truths against his own thoughts and experiences meant that John Trevor was engaging in an internal quest for God and the purposes of God for his time and situation. An early indication of his restless youth was his compulsion as a schoolboy to make model ships which were released out onto the local tidal river; inspiration for this had been the sight of foreign ships in Wisbech and Liverpool. During boyhood days of unhappiness and isolation, Trevor remembered that his hobby had been a vital escape: "This saving grace arose spontaneously from within, the river and the ships being doubtless the occasion for its growth."²⁶

²⁴ Susan Budd, 'The Loss of Faith: Reasons for Unbelief among Members of the Secular Movement in England, 1850-1950', *Past and Present*, volume 36 number 1 (1967): 106.

²⁵ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 191.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

Before his fifteenth birthday in 1870, John Trevor left school and spent an extended visit with relatives on the Isle of Man. The space and time that this visit gave him allowed Trevor to discover a love for the natural world. Yet, it was this realisation that made him reflect upon the vast gulf between his understandings of God and that of the world.²⁷ Returning to East Anglia, Trevor decided to pursue a career in architecture by taking up an apprenticeship in Norwich, but this meant living alone in a number of apartments around that city.²⁸ Some 22 years later he would serialise a novella he had written in *Labour Prophet*, entitled ‘Life in Apartments’. Reflecting on a period of his younger life as a lodger in numerous rented rooms, the middle-aged Trevor wrote, “We all live in lodgings, we all have no real home, we all long for the fulfilment of conceptions which themselves seem idle and vain compared with what we think might be conceived.”²⁹

The five years of being articled to the architect in Norwich was a period when Trevor “worked, studied and brooded alone”.³⁰ For a time he resolved some of his childhood fears of judgement and hell by coming to a faith that replaced a pre-occupation with damnation as taught by his grandmother, with an obsession about the temptations of sin, something he learnt from local Baptists.³¹ Having fretted over the immanence of a doomed death, John Trevor began to realise the dangers of life, and so decided to pursue the path of holiness,

After much prayer and hesitation, I determined to make the venture of
consecration and faith which this teaching demanded. For the first time I lived

²⁷ Ibid., 28.

²⁸ Ibid., 30.

²⁹ *Labour Prophet*, December 1892, 91.

³⁰ *Labour Annual*, 1895, 88.

³¹ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 31.

wholly and whole-heartedly the Pauline Christian life. I believe that, for people of small intellectual power, of narrow sympathies, and with none of that kind of humour which is a form of mental insight, it is probably about the highest type of religious life possible, and that it makes the most of their limited powers along its limited lines. But it means walking through the world on a tight-rope, and never coming off . . .³²

While setting his focus on a life of Christian holiness, Trevor was guided by the American leaders of the Higher Life movement in Britain, Robert Pearsall Smith and his wife Hannah Whitall Smith. Their message proclaimed that “justification came through faith as the free gift of God”.³³ During this period Trevor’s physical and psychological health began to decline. He sought support in the reading of the Bible, but also in the pages of George MacDonald’s popular novel *David Elginbrod*. MacDonald’s tale of a pious Scottish peasant farmer and his daughter was published in 1863, and was known for its earthy mysticism and vivid descriptions of cottage life and the landscape of the highlands.³⁴ From this tale Trevor “realised for the first time, though but dimly, that [he] had a soul in communion with nature”.³⁵

In September 1876 Trevor reached the end of his apprenticeship at the Norwich architects, and due to his fragile state of health decided to return to the city of his birth, Liverpool, to begin his life afresh. Trevor read John Ruskin’s collection of lectures entitled *Sesame and Lilies*, which offer a statement about the nature of men and women

³² Ibid., 42.

³³ Ibid., 41.

³⁴ George MacDonald, *David Elginbrod* (London: Hurst and Blackett Limited, 1863)

³⁵ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 41.

and their duties to society,³⁶ and this had an overwhelming influence on his thinking at that time.³⁷ This was poignant because of his personal encounter with the woman who would become his wife, an event that occurred as he was preparing to leave for his birthplace. While residing in Liverpool, Trevor engaged with the ministry of Hugh Stowell Brown, the Baptist minister whose influence was described in an obituary stating that his fame “spread throughout the United Kingdom as a preacher and lecturer, and he was successful in his ministrations among the working classes”.³⁸ Trevor concluded from his exposure to Stowell Brown’s teaching that it is better “a glorified Dissenter than a glorified Churchman, though neither quite hits the mark”.³⁹ After a year searching for a fresh start in Liverpool, living on a diet of Ruskin, Stowell Brown, along with writings of Thomas Carlyle and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, he returned to Norwich on the understanding that he would be taking up his previous position with the architect.⁴⁰ But Trevor’s return led to a physical and psychological breakdown, this meant an opportunity to grasp his brooding restlessness and break away from the confines of his youth.

In August 1877 Trevor sailed from London to Australia, an experience he felt was a great education for him. During the months of the voyage he chose to spend a week working and sleeping alongside the sailors, and concluded after the encounter,

I can by no means sympathise with the man who argued that there must be a Hell, or why did God make sailors? If I were God, I should let all sailors into the

³⁶ John Ruskin, *Sesame & Lilies* (London, Glasgow and Bombay: Blackie and Son Limited, 1865)

³⁷ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 51.

³⁸ *New York Times*, February 25, 1886.

³⁹ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 51.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

Kingdom, and give them front seats. More than all my reading in Philosophy, my experience with sailors has taught me the relativity of things.⁴¹

The time aboard ship gave Trevor the time to reflect upon the nature of his Christian faith and to tussle with the issues of truth and love. It was the reading of Paul's Letter to the Romans that caused Trevor to question the foundations of his evangelical Christian faith, because he decided that the apostle deceived himself and the Church that followed him by claiming to explain the meaning of universe in his theological statements. He would reflect upon this episode some twenty years later, "I see now that Paul made the mistake of all dogmatic interpreters – he did not know where reverently and humbly to stop."⁴²

During this voyage to Australia John Trevor reached the conclusion that he could no longer consider himself to be a Christian, instead he would "live life for the love of God and of man."⁴³ Thus began his quest for post-Christian religion, though Trevor wished to retain some elements of his evangelical background, particularly the need to balance personal faith with social concern.⁴⁴

On 6th December 1877, Trevor sailed into Sydney Harbour, and so began an adventure across what was a vast imperial colony. For the first time in his life Trevor became involved in a non-religious organisation when he addressed the Free Thought Progressive Society in Sydney on the subject of "The Progress of Earnest Free Thought amongst the

⁴¹ Ibid., 72.

⁴² Ibid., 63.

⁴³ Ibid., 82.

⁴⁴ David Bebbington identified four characteristics of evangelicalism: biblical authority; crucicentrism; conversion; activism. David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989): 2-17. Although John Trevor rejected the authority of the Bible and the centrality of the crucified Christ, he maintained the need of conversion as knowledge of God, and the importance of putting faith into moral and social action.

Thoughtless”.⁴⁵ The Society had been formed by a group of anti-Christian Spiritualists, but their influence had been replaced by Secularists at the time Trevor gave his address.⁴⁶ After travelling overland to Melbourne, a city that has been described as “a Victorian Community Overseas”,⁴⁷ Trevor returned to Sydney, having decided to set sail for San Francisco.⁴⁸ Arriving there on 7th June 1878, Trevor was struck by the contrasts between the great city he had left and the one he now encountered. He concluded that Colony status leads to mediocrity because of the dependence of a place and its people upon the will of those wielding power many miles away, while the people he met in the American city were “smart, energetic, well dressed, with a precision and directness about them as of a tool of accurately adapted to its purpose, with no superfluous metal.”⁴⁹

Trevor travelled to Chicago, reaching there on 23rd June, and was introduced to two English Unitarian ministers, Dr Brooke Herford and Dr Robert Collyer. These men listened to his internal struggles and questions, and recommended that Trevor sought instruction at the Unitarian college in Meadville, Pennsylvania.⁵⁰ He spent a year at Meadville, and was challenged by the philosophy and biblical criticism taught by the college, but it would be his growing love for the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson that Trevor would be the most grateful for,

What Emerson did for me was, not to give me a formula, but to stimulate my faith

– I do not mean faith of any theological sort, but rather that commanding

⁴⁵ Ibid., 88.

⁴⁶ Edward Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), 82.

⁴⁷ Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, 277.

⁴⁸ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 107.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 110.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 128.

confidence in the soundness of life which is the first step towards true self-confidence, true courage, and true Religion.⁵¹

Emerson's Immanentist theology with its belief in the unifying nature of a Divine 'over-soul' influenced the thinking of several important figures in British Socialism, notably Edward Carpenter.⁵² Thomas Linehan has written that for Trevor the most significant aspect of Emersonian Immanentism was its "idea of history unfolding towards a higher state of unity and fellowship in line with God's divine purpose."⁵³ Beyond Meadville, Trevor was presented with openings to engage with individuals and groups that were pushing at the bounds of American society. These engagements would have a significant influence on the next phase of John Trevor's life, when he would conceptualise the Labour Church. Trevor interviewed Felix Adler, the founder of the Ethical Societies in the United States and later in Britain, on two separate occasions. He had an opportunity to meet Emerson in his home at Concord, but decided that the elderly Transcendentalist may not live up to the heights of his earlier thoughts, so declined the invitation.⁵⁴ One offer he did take up was the chance to visit the Oneida Community in New York State. The Oneida Community was a utopian commune founded by John Humphrey Noyes in 1848, and was based on the belief of living out a millennial concept of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. Although Trevor would return to the example of Oneida in 1909 when writing *The One Life* which reflected on the community's practice of 'Complex Marriage', at the time of writing his autobiography in 1897 Trevor felt that such

⁵¹ Ibid., 134.

⁵² Mark Bevir, 'British Socialism and American Romanticism', 878-901.

⁵³ Thomas Linehan, *Modernism and British Socialism*, 41.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 145.

communities had “no bearing on the great Social Question.”⁵⁵ After attempting to establish a Religious Society on the basis of Francis Ellingwood Abbot’s Liberal League, in West Chester, Chester County, Pennsylvania, Trevor ventured forth from the United States towards his birthplace once again.⁵⁶

Over the past two decades of historical research into the ideological background of John Trevor’s thinking and the theology of the Labour Church movement much has been made of the influence of Transcendentalism, notably in the articles written by Mark Bevir.

What has been missed is the impact of a contemporary figure and associate of Emerson, Francis Ellingwood Abbot. Trevor adopted the term Free Religion as he described the theological purpose of the Labour Church in its founding principles. Parallels can be drawn between the lives of Trevor and Abbot, as both rejected conventional Christianity through a ‘crisis of faith’, and reconstructed their own belief systems which they believed offered answers to their societies. Abbot believed that by applying scientific method to theology discredited the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and he was “driven by a vision of a more satisfactory world of humankind based on a philosophy of Free Religion”.⁵⁷

Rejecting the distinction between sacred and secular, Abbot argued Free Religion embraced all progressive social, economic and moral movements of the day “for the purpose of enhancing, perfecting and spiritualizing civilization.”⁵⁸ W. Creighton Peden writes of Abbot holding in tension the New Puritanism, a heritage he shared with Emerson and Transcendentalism, and the perceived consequences of technological

⁵⁵ Ibid., 146.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 147.

⁵⁷ W. Creighton Peden, *The Philosopher of Free Religion: Francis Ellingwood Abbot, 1836-1903* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 49.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 72.

advances and scientific theories, especially evolution.⁵⁹ The Free Religion that emerged from this tension was more progressive in its nature than utopian, with Abbot believing that it would have a gradual influence on a developing culture “undergirded by moral and scientific principles”.⁶⁰ It would be John Trevor who would take the concept of Free Religion and fuse it with Socialism to form a distinctive theology and utopian vision.

1:4 The Unfolding of a Utopian Vision

The experiences offered to him in the United States of America and earlier in Australia exposed John Trevor to political engagement and other movements and schools of thought that were prepared to reject the generally accepted understandings of life and its purpose; but, more importantly, these groups promoted alternative perspectives and sets of values. Trevor’s thinking would be channelled further through his encounters in Britain, as he reflected on the activity and will of God at that time and place. He had encountered what he would describe as the unfolding of God in ways he had not previously expected. The question about where God was at work would eventually lead him to conceptualise the Labour Church, particularly when Trevor found the existing churches lacking in response to contemporary social and political issues.

On his homecoming in 1879 Trevor continued to pursue opportunities of ministry in the Unitarian Church. He attended lectures at the Manchester New College in London, and began to preach from a number of Unitarian pulpits across the capital city. In one letter

⁵⁹ Ibid., 153.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 164.

written at this time Trevor expresses his understanding of what the church should be and who it must include,

Membership in a Church should not be held open to those who believe the most, but to those who are willing to do the most. I should want a Church of workers; and if a man came along and said, 'I don't believe much, but I want to help raise the fallen and feed the hungry,' he should be welcome.⁶¹

Questions in his own mind about his spiritual life and the need to create a stable financial base for his forthcoming marriage led Trevor away from church ministry and back into his earlier profession of architecture. On 28th July 1881 John Trevor married his first cousin, Eliza, who was the daughter of the Johnsonian Baptist minister and cabinet maker from Wisbech, Henry Trevor.⁶² John and Eliza settled in Folkestone, where Trevor established an architect's practice.⁶³

Within a few years the practice had failed, and so Trevor with his wife and a young son relocated to Ballingdon, Essex in 1884, a move he would describe as "Into the Wilderness".⁶⁴ It was at this time that he wrote the novella that would be serialised a decade later as 'Life in Apartments'.⁶⁵ Trevor drew on the influences from his American experience by absorbing himself in the writings of Emerson, Walt Whitman, Felix Adler, and social activist and orator, William Salter. From their thoughts he began to reflect on the nature of the church and its role in addressing the social issues of the time,

⁶¹ Ibid., 152.

⁶² In a contribution to the website of Norwich's Plantation Garden, which was established by Henry Trevor, John and Eliza's granddaughter, Kathleen Barnard, wrote that their marriage was not welcomed within the family due to the close blood ties and that John was 11 years younger than his cousin. www.plantationgarden.co.uk/history/ accessed on 29th May 2012.

⁶³ R. K. Webb, 'Trevor, John (1855-1930)'

⁶⁴ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 175.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 179.

And it was not until I came to see the relation between the religious life and social reform that I could feel that there was any sound bottom to political effort. That was the time when the conception of the Labour Church dawned upon me – a time still a few years distant.⁶⁶

By 1887 the growing Trevor family had settled in London, and John commenced formal training for the Unitarian ministry at Manchester New College.

The following year Trevor was appointed as assistant to a man who would become his mentor. Philip Henry Wicksteed was a theologian, economist, classicist, medievalist and literary critic, as well as being the minister of the Unitarian chapel in London's Little Portland Street. The intellectual influences upon Wicksteed were broad and included the French philosopher Auguste Comte, founder of the Religion of Humanity and the inspiration for the Positivist movement, the American land reformer Henry George, the political economist W. S. Jevons, and modernist Dutch theologian Abraham Kuenen.⁶⁷ While never claiming to be a Socialist, Wicksteed had a deep concern about social and economic issues, a concern he nurtured in his protégé, Trevor. Shortly after the deaths of both men, C. H. Herford wrote that Wicksteed found that Trevor to be a person "who, otherwise frail and ineffectual, possessed something of poetic and prophetic power".⁶⁸ Trevor would say of his mentor,

I cannot say how deeply indebted I am to this man who, since first we met, has remained my constant friend and helper. I have so many causes to feel grateful to him – perhaps this the chief - that, from the first, he understood what I meant by

⁶⁶ Ibid., 196.

⁶⁷ J. Saville, and R. Storey, 'Trevor, John (1855-1930) Founder of the Labour Church', 250.

⁶⁸ C. H. Herford, *Philip Henry Wicksteed: His Life and Work*, 99.

the Labour Church. Long before any one else understood, the knowledge of his sympathy with my work cheered and sustained me through many a dark hour.⁶⁹

In the summer of 1890 Trevor became the minister at the Unitarian chapel in Upper Brook Street, Manchester, which was considered to be a prestigious appointment,⁷⁰ with a history of radical ministers.⁷¹ Manchester was a centre for the development of both Liberalism and the Labour movement in Britain,⁷² and by the late-nineteenth century the city's industrial base was diversifying away from its dependence on cotton, which meant re-organising the working class population.⁷³ Within a short period of time in a new city, Trevor felt that the move had been wrong for him as he experienced the life of that respectable congregation stifling to his theological and political aspirations.⁷⁴ Trevor recognised that the church was disconnected from the issues and questions of wider society to such an extent that many people facing those challenges felt excluded from it,

I was not satisfied with a sentimental religion, a personal religion, a religion that saved the individual from the world. I wanted a religion that would place a man and a Church side by side with God, as fellow workers with him in unfolding the progressive life of Humanity. That is what I meant by wanting that Church to be a power in Manchester, and to take its rightful place in the revolution of civic affairs.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 219.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁷¹ F. H. Amphlett Micklewright, 'A Sidelight on Manchester History', *Notes and Queries*, volume 10, April 1943, 216.

⁷² James Robert Moore, 'Progressive Pioneers: Manchester Liberalism, the Independent Labour Party, and Local Politics in the 1890s', *The Historical Journal*, volume 44 number 4, December 2001, 992.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 993.

⁷⁴ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 226.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.

During an eighteen month period several significant experiences had a profound impact on John Trevor's life, while he considered the Religion of Socialism.⁷⁶ The first was his friendship with William Bailie,⁷⁷ whom Trevor described as "Anarchist, Communist, Revolutionist, Atheist, and of course very poor"⁷⁸, he was the secretary of the local Socialist League.⁷⁹ Trevor found that this man's message was more substantial in terms of meeting the needs of society than what he himself proclaimed from the pulpit, and so it was through Bailie's political activism that he became more engaged with the Socialist cause. Bailie emigrated to Boston, Massachusetts in 1891, and became a regular contributor to the Anarchist newspaper *Liberty*.⁸⁰ The second significant experience occurred while walking home from a service on the evening of Sunday, 26th April 1891, when Trevor encountered one of his church members, who explained that as a working man he felt that he did not fit into Upper Brook Street Chapel believing himself to be unacceptable to the other members. The two men parted company after they had shook hands on Trevor's promise to open a church where all would be welcomed. Trevor looked back at that evening and remembered, "I lay awake some hours that night, my brain turning over this new idea, and fell asleep with the determination that a Working-man's Church should be formed."⁸¹

⁷⁶ Chapter 27 of Trevor's autobiography *My Quest for God* entitled 'How the Idea Came' encapsulates his conversion experiences to a Socialist Utopianism. John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 233-243.

⁷⁷ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries', 6.

⁷⁸ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 233.

⁷⁹ James Robert Moore, 'Progressive Pioneers', 995.

⁸⁰ William Gary Kline, *The Individual Anarchists: A Critique of Liberalism* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1987), 65 cited in 'The Nineteenth Century Irish Anarchism' available at <http://www.wsm.ie/c/nineteenth-century-irish-anarchism> accessed on 5 February 2014.

⁸¹ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 241.

The next influence was his growing sympathy for the work of the Salvation Army. Trevor read *The Life of Mrs Booth*,⁸² the story of Catherine Booth, wife of William, founder of the movement. The book made an immediate impression on him as it spoke of a simple, yet deeply sincere faith in love and truth.⁸³ Trevor pondered on how a church could be established that was open and active like the Salvation Army, but based on wider theological foundations and with more overt political intentions. According to Victor Bailey in his article about the relationship between the Salvation Army and the Labour movement, Booth's movement "represented a significant development in the attitude of Nonconformity to the depressed strata of late-Victorian England."⁸⁴ Beginning as a form of late Methodist revivalism with its emphasis on personal conversion, the Salvation Army developed from the mid-1880s into social relief work. The publication in 1890 of William Booth's *In Darkest England and the Way Out* offered a practical agenda for social outreach, with its programme of self-help and self-sustaining communities.⁸⁵ Booth acknowledged his inspiration from the missionary zeal of those evangelising in the outposts of the British Empire and the utopian social experiments of previous decades.⁸⁶ Close parallels can be drawn between many contemporary British Socialists and Salvationists.⁸⁷

The shared concern of the Labour movement and the Salvation Army for the social conditions of the urban poor met in the life and work of Frank Smith, the Salvationist

⁸² F. De L. Booth-Tucker, *The Life of Mrs Booth* (London: The Salvation Army, 1892)

⁸³ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 238.

⁸⁴ Victor Bailey, '“In Darkest England and the Way Out”: The Salvation Army, Social Reform and the Labour Movement, 1885-1910', *International Review of Social History*, volume 29 number 2, August 1984, 135.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁸⁶ W. H. G. Armytage, *Heavens Below: Utopian Experiments in England, 1560-1960*, 318.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

Socialist who founded the Labour Army in 1891.⁸⁸ Influenced by Henry George, Smith had been appointed by Booth as the first Social Wing Commissioner, he became a political agitator for workers' rights in London,⁸⁹ and assisted William Booth's writing of *In Darkest England and the Way Out*.⁹⁰ But ideological differences between Booth and Smith became increasingly apparent; leading to the latter's resignation in December 1890. Smith's politically-engaged version of Salvationism⁹¹ established branches in London and Scotland. Reports of the Labour Army in Glasgow would be published in *Labour Prophet*,⁹² and the lead article of the September 1894 edition was written by Keir Hardie about his close ally and the first I. L. P. parliamentary candidate, Frank Smith.⁹³ Although W. H. G. Armytage describes the Labour Church as "a Socialist Salvation Army",⁹⁴ John Trevor's yearning was something more than a political movement such as the Labour Army.⁹⁵

In April 1891 Trevor attended the National Triennial Conference of Unitarian, Free Christian, Presbyterian and other Non-subscribing Churches conference in London. At one of the meetings both Philip Wicksteed and the trade unionist Ben Tillett spoke about the church and social issues. Tillett attacked the existing churches for alienating the working class, a sentiment echoed in Trevor's own experience. He left the conference

⁸⁸ Norman H. Murdock, *Frank Smith: Salvationist Socialist (1854-1940)* (Orlando, Florida: National Salvation Army Social Services Conference, March 2003), 12.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹⁰ W. H. G. Armytage, *Heavens Below*, 318.

⁹¹ The Labour Army charter of 1891 called for adult suffrage, Labour representation in Parliament, payment of MPs, land nationalisation, free education, nationalisation of key industries and utilities, and state control of working rights and conditions. *Windsor and Richmond Gazette*, 11th July 1891, 3.

⁹² *Labour Prophet*, March 1892, 24 and January 1893, 3.

⁹³ *Labour Prophet*, September 1894, 113.

⁹⁴ W. H. G. Armytage, *Heavens Below*, 321.

⁹⁵ In Chapter 4 it will be noted that Frank Smith, a re-elected Labour Party M. P., was a visiting lecturer at the Moseley Labour Church, Birmingham, in October 1929.

with the impression that he had heard the words of two prophets, though it would take several months for him to discover what had been prophesied.⁹⁶ Throughout the summer months of that year the concept of the Labour Church began to take form in Trevor's mind. The Unitarian journal *Inquirer* printed a letter written by Trevor and entitled it 'The Proposed Labour Church'.⁹⁷ D. F. Summers writes of the activities which took place in preparation for the launch of the new venture:

In the months that followed the publication of this letter Trevor gave himself to the planning of the new venture. The help and sympathy of friends were enlisted; a promotion fund of forty pounds subscribed, thousands of handbills printed and distributed. Three workmen friends from Upper Brook Street, chief among them Sam Lowdnes spent their leisure time in assisting the project. The first few Sunday afternoon services were planned, hymn sheets printed, a choir organized, and a band engaged.⁹⁸

The simple but far-reaching idea that God was in the Labour movement became the cornerstone of a religious organisation which by its existence would challenge theological assumptions within and about British Labour politics.

God in the Labour Movement – working through it, as once he had worked through Christianity, for the further salvation of the world – that was the simple conception that I had been seeking . . . Now I had a living thought which could make the organisation of fuller life possible. Now I saw how infinitely little were the dimensions of my Free Church. It became plain that I must go outside that

⁹⁶ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 239.

⁹⁷ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries', 10.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

Church, and throw myself wholly into the midst of the Self-conscious Labour Movement. In me its self-consciousness was realised as God-consciousness. My mission was to spread that realisation far and wide.⁹⁹

John Trevor believed that he had discovered what his lifelong quest had been about, the realisation of the unfolding God's will for the world: God in the Labour movement. This discovery set him on a track that led to the founding of a religious movement which would draw on all of his theological influences. The vision was for a Church that would be as committed to social action as the Salvation Army, but with a theology that was more akin to Abbot's Free Religion, affirming what Trevor considered to be the most progressive social movement of his time. Through the Labour Church the new religion of the Labour movement, which had replaced Christianity as God's agent on earth, would evolve as all of its members would grow in the knowledge of the unfolding God, as Trevor had discovered for himself. This was a literal form of the Religion of Socialism, the answer to the current Labour Question, and a utopian endeavour, in that the new movement would reflect the evolution of humanity by living out the new Free Religion in partnership with God towards the better world of God's earthly Kingdom. The disenchanted evangelical had become a visionary with a distinctive Theological Socialism. When challenged some months after the Labour Church had been founded whether he was simply trying to recreate the Chartist churches of earlier generations, Trevor replied by arguing that the purpose of the 'Christian Chartist churches' had been to draw nonconformists into the ranks of the Chartist movement, the purpose of the Labour Church was radically different,

⁹⁹ Ibid., 241.

the Labour Church is an organised expression of the individual relationship to God of the men and women in the Labour movement, and also of the collective relationship of the whole movement to God working within it. This is what I understand to be the meaning of the term – the religion of the Labour movement.¹⁰⁰

1:5 Prophet and Church of the Unfolding God

John Trevor's realisation that he believed God to be working in and through the Labour movement made that movement a religious force as well as a political one. Such a religious force needed to be expressed in an organisation that savoured and nurtured the theological aspects of the movement, Trevor argued, and this was the Labour Church. It was clear in his mind for whom this religious expression of the Labour movement should be open to and aimed at, as he wrote about the days of preparation running up to the Labour Church's founding,

The kind of working man that I wanted to associate myself with was not the Church goer, or the Circus goer, or the Music Hall goer or the Public House goer. It was what has been called the "Class-conscious" working man that I sought as a fellow worker.¹⁰¹

Trevor's inspirational Socialist friend, William Bailie, had suggested that the new organisation should not be named the Workingman's Church, because such a term would lead to the accusation that this new group was promoting class segregation. Bailie argued that in order to associate the new church with the growing movement it should

¹⁰⁰ *Labour Prophet*, February 1893, 14.

¹⁰¹ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 235.

adopt its name. Trevor was persuaded and chose the title ‘Labour Church’, a name he would be associated with from that moment onwards.¹⁰²

On 4th October 1891 the first Labour Church service was held at the Chorlton Town Hall.¹⁰³ The event, financially supported by Wicksteed and others,¹⁰⁴ had the feel of an evangelical rally with carefully chosen items which aimed to appeal to a broad audience including a string band, soloists, and a choir formed especially for the service.

Inspirational readings were delivered, James Russell Lowell’s ‘On The Capture Of Fugitive Slaves Near Washington’ spoke about the godly cause of all oppressed people, while Isaiah chapter 5 offered a challenge to the Christian Church with its faith in God breaking away from the corruption of the stale institution:

4: What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?

5: And now go to; I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down.¹⁰⁵

Rousing songs were sung, including the Socialist anthem ‘England, arise’ by Edward Carpenter, followed by the sermon delivered by John Trevor, who spoke about the need to bring the religious dimension into the struggle for the liberation of the workers. He continued by attacking the traditional churches for not supporting the cause, and then

¹⁰²D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 7.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁰⁴ J. Saville, and R. Storey, ‘Trevor, John (1855-1930) Founder of the Labour Church’, 250.

¹⁰⁵ See Appendix 1, which is a written reconstruction of the first Labour Church service.

proposed an alternative that would allow working people “to live a righteous and godly life, and yet secure the freedom for which they lived”.¹⁰⁶ Such was the positive reaction to this initial event that further services were quickly organised by Trevor, and, following criticism from within the Unitarian denomination, he resigned from the Manchester pastorate at Upper Brook Street.¹⁰⁷ The following Sunday Robert Blatchford addressed the second gathering, which attracted so many people that the congregation flowed out of the Chorlton Town Hall.¹⁰⁸ From this point the movement spread rapidly throughout Lancashire and Yorkshire, and then into the Midlands, South Wales and parts of Scotland over a five year period.¹⁰⁹ By 1893 it was felt necessary to form the Labour Church Union, an organisation to draw together the churches from across Britain.¹¹⁰

John Trevor kept Labour Church members in touch with his inner thoughts through his editorial articles for *Labour Prophet*, the first of which outlined the fundamental concept of the movement,

It is not the churches which have awakened the soul of labour, it is labour which has stirred up the sleeping churches. Labour is saving the churches far more than the churches are saving labour . . . God is in the Labour Movement – which means that He is in the hearts of those who find their inspiration and life in it, and
THESE ARE HIS PROPHETS.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ *Workingman's Times*, 9 October 1891

¹⁰⁷ R. K. Webb, 'Trevor, John (1855-1930)'

¹⁰⁸ J. Saville, and R. Storey, 'Trevor, John (1855-1930) Founder of the Labour Church', 250.

¹⁰⁹ R. K. Webb, 'Trevor, John (1855-1930)'

¹¹⁰ *Labour Prophet*, August 1893, 76.

¹¹¹ *Labour Prophet*, January 1892, 4.

Through the editorials Trevor commented on social and political issues, such as the General Election of 1892,¹¹² he addressed internal matters concerning the Labour Church, like the use of music in services,¹¹³ but often used his monthly article to promote the theological understanding of the members. In a piece in which he reflected back on his work within the movement, Trevor wrote in 1894,

What we need is men and women who have met God at first hand, and have not thereby been turned into moony fanatics. Only such get a grip of life as a whole, and only men who have a grip of life as a whole can make life worth living.

Socialism, I believe to be a step in this direction, or, at least, the Socialist movement. But Socialism alone will get us no forwarder, any more than Democracy alone can get us forwarder. With the change in form there must be a corresponding development of life, and of life with a living sense of God in it.¹¹⁴

The death of Walt Whitman in March 1892 was marked with a tribute by Trevor in the editorial article of the following month. It is clear in the piece what an impact Whitman's poetry had had on Trevor's thinking, because it has offered to him a credible alternative worldview to the evangelical Christianity he rejected. For Whitman, God was experienced both as transcendent and immanent, and within such an all-encompassing knowledge of the divine the human soul was held in an immortal process of progressive development. Whitman's concept of democracy as true freedom for individuals and society living in the knowledge of God, creation and common humanity was embraced by

¹¹² *Labour Prophet*, August 1892, 60.

¹¹³ *Labour Prophet*, June 1893, 50.

¹¹⁴ *Labour Prophet*, March and April 1894, 41.

many contemporary British Socialists,¹¹⁵ including Trevor, who writes movingly, “I think he knows more about that Life which is Religion to me than any man living. I think he is nearer to God than any man on earth.”¹¹⁶ Kristen Harris comments that for Trevor “Whitman was believed to be a visionary spiritual guide for the socialist movement.”¹¹⁷ In his article Trevor describes Whitman as a successor to Jesus, just as the Labour movement with its Labour Church was replacing Christianity, and so he encourages his readership to look to Whitman’s poetry, which he claimed “contain about all the religion I know.”¹¹⁸ Harris writes of Trevor introducing Whitman “as an alternative messianic figure”,¹¹⁹ which does not correspond with Trevor’s call for Free Religion encouraging each human being to find their own truth within the confines of God’s eternal laws. Rather, Walt Whitman had been to John Trevor a companion along the way who had shown that true freedom, or democracy, was to be found through co-operation with God in the world. The tribute concludes with Trevor addressing Whitman directly,

Thank you, Walt Whitman, for the lift you have given me along the road of life. I feel rested, contented, resolute to trudge on my way and not turn back.¹²⁰

As John Trevor shared his thoughts with the Labour Church, he frequently expressed his fears about the religious dimension of the movement being diluted and lost as the broader Labour movement became more engaged in the electoral processes.¹²¹ What brought things to a head, drawing out distinct lines between Trevor’s vision for the Labour

¹¹⁵ Kristen Harris, ‘The “Labour Prophet”?: Representations of Walt Whitman in the British Nineteenth-Century Socialist Press’, *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, volume 30, 2013, 115.

¹¹⁶ *Labour Prophet*, April 1892, 28.

¹¹⁷ Kristen Harris, ‘The “Labour Prophet”?’, 125.

¹¹⁸ *Labour Prophet*, April 1892, 28.

¹¹⁹ Kristen Harris, ‘The “Labour Prophet”?’, 125.

¹²⁰ *Labour Prophet*, April 1892, 28.

¹²¹ *Labour Prophet*, April 1893, 29.

Church and the desire to make the organisation into a solely political force, was the election of Fred Brocklehurst as the General Secretary in 1893. Trevor had welcomed Brocklehurst's appointment at the beginning by noting that he has "for some time shown an active sympathy with the Labour Church movement."¹²² But later that year at a Labour Church Union conference the two men were at loggerheads over the very purpose and future of their movement. D. F. Summers wrote about the incident,

Trevor's mission was the development of "the inner life of the Labour Movement" while Brocklehurst emphasized the need for practical expression of one's religious enthusiasm. There seems to be no necessary clash of ideas here, but apparently the difference in emphasis was accompanied by a difference in personalities.¹²³

While S. G. Hobson recalled that one major task of each Labour Church Union conference and council meeting was to pacify both parties.¹²⁴

For a few years from 1892 until 1895, John Trevor was an accepted figure on the national Labour movement in Britain. He would consult with its leaders, such as Keir Hardie and Robert Blatchford, conversations that were often retold in the editorial articles of *Labour Prophet*.¹²⁵ The inauguration of the Independent Labour Party in January 1893 took place in a disused chapel shared by the local Labour Church, Fabians and Labour Union,¹²⁶ and Trevor was responsible for organising the celebration Labour Church service in St. George's Hall on the afternoon of Sunday, 15th January. The service

¹²² *Labour Prophet*, January 1893, 4.

¹²³ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 158.

¹²⁴ S. G. Hobson, *Pilgrim to the Left: Memoirs of a Modern Revolutionist*, 41.

¹²⁵ *Labour Prophet*, November 1892, 84.

¹²⁶ Henry Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party 1880 - 1900*, 134.

attracted over 5,000 people, who heard Keir Hardie, George Bernard Shaw and Edward Aveling address them.¹²⁷ But in time Trevor's temperament and fragile health affected his role as a leader of a national organisation. His frequent withdrawal from public life because of illness and personal tragedy, with the deaths of both his son and wife Eliza in 1894,¹²⁸ had an impact on the Labour Church, as most local congregations became self-sufficient groups.¹²⁹ Shortly after Eliza's death, Trevor married a family friend, Annie Jones Higham, in 1895, a move criticised by many leading figures in the Labour movement, including Keir Hardie,¹³⁰ who felt that a respectable period of grieving had not been observed before the new marriage.

Trevor and his family moved to Horsted Keynes in Ashdown Forest, Sussex in 1897, when he wrote *My Quest for God*. Trevor was following a contemporary trend among public figures in penning their autobiographies as attempts to explain their personal trials and tribulations towards "a flowering of artistic or intellectual development."¹³¹ Apart from its promotion within Labour Church circles, *My Quest for God* had little impact on the life of the British Labour movement, although it had a wider influence in the United States.¹³² In 1902, the American psychologist and philosopher William James extracted substantial paragraphs from Trevor's life story in his *The Varieties of Religious*

¹²⁷ *Labour Prophet*, February 1893, 16.

¹²⁸ R. K. Webb, 'Trevor, John (1855-1930). According to family history Eliza died of breast cancer at the age of 51 years, www.plantationgarden.co.uk/history/ accessed on 29th July 2012.

¹²⁹ J. Saville, and R. Storey, 'Trevor, John (1855-1930) Founder of the Labour Church', 251.

¹³⁰ Caroline Benn, *Keir Hardie* (London: Hutchinson, 1992), 144.

¹³¹ Russel Whitacker (editor), 'Victorian Autobiography – Introduction', *Nineteenth Century Literary Criticism*, volume 152 (Gale Cengage, 2005), eNotes.com accessed on 2nd November 2012.

¹³² John Trevor's autobiography *My Quest for God* was reviewed in *American Fabian*, May 1898: 1-3, 12.

Experience, a series of lectures on the nature of religion.¹³³ The passage which caught James' attention was found near to the conclusion of the book when Trevor recounts a mystical experience that took place in the summer of 1894 after a walk in the hills near to Macclesfield on a Sunday morning:

On the way back, suddenly, without warning, I felt that I was in Heaven – an inward state of peace and joy and assurance indescribably intense, accompanied with a sense of being bathed in a warm glow of light, as though this external condition had brought about the internal effect – a feeling of having passed beyond the body, though the scene around me stood out more clearly, and as if nearer to me than before, by reason of the illumination in the midst of which I seemed to be placed. This deep emotion lasted, though with decreasing strength, until I reached home, and for some time after, only gradually passing away.¹³⁴

William James notes, “The writer adds that having had further experiences of a similar sort, he now knows them well.”¹³⁵ Trevor's frank retelling of his life up to that moment, with its painful expressions of family tragedies and personal torments, offers a justification for his self-definition as “the victim of the unfolding God”¹³⁶ and indicates the weariness of this 42 year old man, who had endured so much throughout his life.

At Horsted Keynes Trevor had a smallholding and studio, and he kept in touch with the Labour Church into the early years of the twentieth century by running a summer school. The July 1899 edition of *Labour Church Record* carried an invitation card to his school

¹³³ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1902)

¹³⁴ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 268.

¹³⁵ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 397.

¹³⁶ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 236.

which would “give help to young men in the Labour Churches in meeting the difficulties of religious problems, and in the development of their own religious life.”¹³⁷ The October edition printed a report from one of the young men, Arthur E. H. Atkinson, who wrote about the diet of Emerson, Mazzini, Whitman and Wordsworth, concluding that Trevor’s summer schools made members of the Labour Church “better fitted for the work we have started to do.”¹³⁸ In April 1900 Trevor issued another invitation:

Our Summer School . . . is not a School of instruction, but a school for the development of Life. It is not a School of Science or Theology, but a School of Art – the supreme Art of Life. It lays down no rules and imposes no bonds. Our Religion gives us the Freedom of the Universe and makes us at home with God.¹³⁹

But by January 1901 a statement is printed in *Labour Church Record* from Trevor announcing his withdrawal from the movement he had founded almost ten years previously, citing financial difficulties as the reason for resigning.¹⁴⁰ These few brief paragraphs indicate a sad departure from the organisation he had dreamt would bring a new religion to the working people; now he tried to make a living as a chicken farmer.¹⁴¹

Some words from his novella ‘Life in Apartments’, written several years before founding the Labour Church, expresses something of the journey John Trevor would take with the movement that he would nurture and defend, before his fragile physical and psychological health meant the end of his leadership. By the time he bowed out from the national organisation in 1901, Trevor had seen the Labour Church become the Sunday

¹³⁷ *Labour Church Record*, July 1899.

¹³⁸ *Labour Church Record*, October 1899, 4.

¹³⁹ *Labour Church Record*, April 1900.

¹⁴⁰ *Labour Church Record*, January 1901, .5.

¹⁴¹ 1901 Census, available at www.1901censusonline.com

meetings of local Socialist political parties in many locations, a fear he had shared with the readers of *Labour Prophet* from the early years of his movement. The final thoughts of his fictional character in Trevor's novella have a prophetic ring when reflecting upon his hopes, trials and final resignation from the Labour Church:

And I suppose life will always be a struggle, and the great soul of man will never be filled. We dream and dream, and dreaming is very easy, but action always means strife; indolence and inability at least have always to be overcome. But I have thought that we need not always be engaged in civil war, that the arts and virtues of peace might be given a chance. Surely it is not necessary, as some teach, that a house should be divided against itself in order to stand. Surely the Universe is not against our making life on life more homelike, and less like life in apartments.¹⁴²

1:6 Death of a Visionary

After a year of chicken farming, a period in which he regained good health, John Trevor moved to Clerkenwell, East London in 1902. In the November of that year he attempted to re-establish links with the Labour Church with the issue of a prospectus for a Labour Church Settlement, which he intended to be a centre for the social and intellectual life of the movement.¹⁴³ Inspired by the settlement movement which began in the 1880s in London, the Labour Church Settlement was to offer accommodation and higher education, in other words, Trevor's summer school but on a more permanent basis. D. F. Summers comments about this venture that "like most of his projects, it was abandoned

¹⁴² *Labour Prophet*, December 1892, 94.

¹⁴³ J. Saville, and R. Storey, 'Trevor, John (1855-1930) Founder of the Labour Church', 25.

before its promise showed forth results”,¹⁴⁴ and so Trevor would eventually relocate himself and his family to Hampshire in 1909, where he tried to earn a living as a professional photographer. It was during this move that he returned to writing in order to express his growing vision of another form of residential community.

As noted earlier, Trevor visited the Oneida Community in New York State during his American excursion in 1878. At the time, this utopian Christian group remained under the leadership of its founder, John Humphrey Noyes, but this would change a year after Trevor’s visit when Noyes fled in the night to exile in Canada because of mounting accusations and the threat of criminal charges.¹⁴⁵ While the departure of Noyes led to the eventual demise of the community, what Trevor experienced during his brief visit was an attempt to create an equal society among men and women. Oneida rejected the belief that life on earth was a vale of tears, and instead pursued common happiness in the name of Jesus Christ.¹⁴⁶ As one biographer of the community has written,

Noyes and his followers believed that, in a community of true Christians, God did not intend that love between men and women should be confined to the narrow channels of conventional matrimony. All the men at Oneida were therefore considered to be married to all the women. Within certain limitations – protracted love affairs, for example, were prohibited as obstructions to the free flow of love – any man was at liberty to have sexual relations with any woman who consented to be his partner. Noyes and his followers thus routinely, and as a matter of

¹⁴⁴ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 46.

¹⁴⁵ Spencer Klaw, *Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community* (New York: Allen Lane / The Penguin Press, 1993), 3.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

religious principle, violated the outside world's laws against adultery and fornication.¹⁴⁷

This practice of 'Complex Marriage' was to form the foundations of Trevor's proposal for a new religious community.

In an occasional paper published in 1909 entitled *The One Life*, John Trevor outlined his plans for 'Oasis', a community that would develop a way of life which was unattainable by any other system, including Socialism, a redemption of life and love from all forms of tradition.¹⁴⁸ Trevor proposed the formation of a society in which all conventions would be discarded so that its members could discover a free and natural life. Sexual relations would be emancipated along the lines of 'Complex Marriage' as followed at Oneida. His growing preoccupation with sexual matters seems to have given some members of Trevor's family considerable embarrassment, particularly after the publication of his booklet.¹⁴⁹ Maybe because of the reaction of people close to him, Trevor recommended that the new community could begin to gather recruits in subtle ways by forming a correspondence club, and he would produce watercolour paintings depicting what he now considered to be the unity of flesh and spirit.¹⁵⁰ No evidence has been found about the existence of any correspondence club emerging from his proposals, and certainly no trace of a residential community,¹⁵¹ but there is proof of the damage this episode did to Trevor's reputation within the Labour Church and the wider Labour movement.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴⁸ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 47.

¹⁴⁹ J. Saville, and R. Storey, 'Trevor, John (1855-1930) Founder of the Labour Church', 251.

¹⁵⁰ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 48.

¹⁵¹ J. Saville, and R. Storey, 'Trevor, John (1855-1930) Founder of the Labour Church', 251.

¹⁵² D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 49.

Settling with his family in rented rooms in Hampstead, London, the death of his second wife, Annie, at the age of 51 in 1919, made John Trevor an increasingly isolated figure from both political and church life. His financial situation worsened to the point that he agreed to act as a supply minister for the Unitarian Church in Newbury, Berkshire for a year in 1922.¹⁵³ Trevor's connection with the Unitarians remained loose for the rest of his life probably because of his constant need to belong to a common cause, and that all of the attempts to create a spiritual home for himself and other like-minded people had come to nothing. He made no objection when his youngest daughter, Marie, became a Roman Catholic during the 1920s, Trevor may have been envious that she had found something he had failed to find during his lifetime quest.¹⁵⁴ Marie would confide in D. F. Summers several decades after her father's death, "My father was almost a saint, though he could be troublesome as all saints can. He could have been happier and more effective if he could have belonged to a religious community."¹⁵⁵

Up until his final days, Trevor remained consistent with the beliefs that had inspired his vision for the Labour Church. He attempted to create a library "for the use of people questing for truth"¹⁵⁶ after his brief ministry in Newbury, but there is no evidence that he succeeded. During 1929 he corresponded and met with a Unitarian minister, Rev. Leonard Baker Short, who had been dismissed from his pastorate in Shrewsbury because of his own Socialist beliefs. Short wrote to Rev. G. W. Brassington, who was compiling notes for a biography of John Trevor in the early 1970s, and described a sad and bitter old

¹⁵³ *Inquirer and Christian Life*, 18th January 1930, 36.

¹⁵⁴ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 50.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁵⁶ *Inquirer and Christian Life* (1930), 36.

man who still held to the understanding that “God is working outside of the churches”.¹⁵⁷ His views on sexual practices did not seem to wane in his later years, either. There is an account of the shock Trevor caused at a polite tea party when he voiced his opinions on such matters.¹⁵⁸

Increasing poverty made the last years of his life a very difficult experience.¹⁵⁹ John Trevor died on 7th January 1930, at the age of 75 years, in the St. Marylebone Workhouse. His death was registered by Marie, who recorded her father’s occupation as retired Unitarian minister.¹⁶⁰ Some articles about Trevor have claimed he was buried in Highgate Cemetery,¹⁶¹ but there is no record of this, and an extensive search of other local cemeteries and crematoria has not found his final resting place.¹⁶² Years before finding notoriety on the national stage of the Labour movement, Trevor places these poignant words in the mouth of a young poet in his novella:

Strangely enough, I still have to go back to that sad past for all the truths that I have learned and would teach. It seems to as if my present content only enabled me to feed on that, and stopped all inlets of higher experience. There is the text of my life, all the rest is but commentary; there the Revelation, the rest but the

¹⁵⁷ John Trevor Working Papers, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, MSS.143/3/1/2/14.

¹⁵⁸ John Trevor Working Papers, MSS.143/3/4/3/2.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., MSS.143/3/4/3/7.

¹⁶⁰ Certified Copy of an Entry of Death, St. Marylebone, St. Mary, County of London, 8th January 1930, Application Number 4195180-1 / Entry Number 100.

¹⁶¹ J. Saville, and R. Storey, ‘Trevor, John (1855-1930) Founder of the Labour Church’, .252. This incorrect information is also given in the Historical Note to the ‘John Trevor Working Papers 1892-1968’, MSS.143,

[http://dscalm.warwick.ac.uk/Dserve/dserve.exe?&dsqIni=Dserve3.ini&dsqApp=Archive&dsqDb=Catalog&dsqCmd=show.tcl&dsqKey=RefNo&dsqSearch=\(RefNO="TRV"\)AND\(Level='Collection'\)](http://dscalm.warwick.ac.uk/Dserve/dserve.exe?&dsqIni=Dserve3.ini&dsqApp=Archive&dsqDb=Catalog&dsqCmd=show.tcl&dsqKey=RefNo&dsqSearch=(RefNO=) accessed on 24th May 2013.

¹⁶² It is possible that John Trevor was buried with his second wife, Annie, in Hamstead Cemetery as he had bought a double grave plot when she died in October 1919. But there is no archival evidence in the records of the Islington and Camden Cemetery Services.

unfolding of it. It is as though the Infinite Spirit could only touch the lonely and desolate heart.¹⁶³

These words speak for much of the life and times of the founder of the Labour Church, as can be gathered from his writings and from those of the people who knew him personally. The experience of the unfolding of God was a constant theme in the life of John Trevor, the tragedy was that on each occasion he attempted to give expression to that experience, his own life unravelled.

Nine days after the death of John Trevor, the newspaper of the Unitarian Church in Britain, *Inquirer and Christian Life*, carried two obituaries in his memory. The first by H. V. H. gave a summary of Trevor's life before concluding, "Unstable he was not, but he was always restless and unsatisfied."¹⁶⁴ The obituary that followed was a paragraph in length, written by J. A. P., it also noted the restlessness in Trevor. The final sentence of this tribute expresses something of the reason for his unsettled life, "Many people will renew their feeling of gratitude for this man whose executive ability was never equal to the ideas he cherished."¹⁶⁵ The image of John Trevor as a restless spirit was re-enforced by C. H. Herford when he wrote of Trevor, "There was something in him of the poet, something of the prophet. But the thirst for the divine found in life, and in the world and Nature, only transient moments of satisfaction."¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ *Labour Prophet*, September 1892, 67.

¹⁶⁴ *Inquirer and Christian Life* (1930), 36.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ C. H. Herford, *Philip Henry Wicksteed: His Life and Work*, 217.

1:7 Conclusion

This harmonious future of human fellowship Trevor saw clearly. He was to stand before the world as a prophet, ‘announcing the dawn of the day that is to be’, rather than as a ‘preacher of the established Church.’¹⁶⁷

John Trevor was a disenchanted evangelical who became a utopian visionary. From a strict Calvinist upbringing among the Johnsonian Baptists and his exploration of the evangelical Christian faith, to the exposure to different world views and values through his travels around the world, and the realisation of social need by his encounters with numerous political ideologies, Trevor’s life was a continuous process of unfolding. His major achievement was his ability to fuse together received ideas and agendas into Theological Socialism, a literal Religion of Socialism. As the next chapter will explore further, the crux of Trevor’s guiding concept was that God was working through the Labour movement, the successor to Christianity, in order to create a new world, which he described as the Kingdom of God on earth. The fact that he acted upon this guiding concept and build an organisation that stretched across Britain and beyond makes Trevor a significant religious and political figure. When lines were being drawn between religious and secular principles within the Labour movement, Trevor attempted to hold the theological and political in tension, arguing that both were required to free society and the individuals within it. This was his Socialism as collective individualism, which was to be fulfilled in the Kingdom come.

John Trevor founded a movement that is comparable to the boldness of the Salvation Army of William Booth but with the radical thinking along the lines of the Free Religion

¹⁶⁷ Thomas Linehan, *Modernism and British Socialism*, 41.

of Francis Ellingwood Abbot. While the Labour Church was compared to the earlier Chartist churches, the later movement proved more successful in its political and social activities, grounded as it was in a heady mixture of theologies, philosophies and political theories drawn from Whitman, Wicksteed, Emerson and Bailie. Although visionaries do not necessarily make good leaders, that does not take away the significance of John Trevor and his vision of a new society with a new religion being revealed through the Labour movement, a religion to be realised in the formation of the Labour Church, which was for him a unique and crucial organisation proclaiming a distinctive Theological Socialism. Here was 'a visionary of the unfolding God'.

CHAPTER 2 – THEOLOGICAL SOCIALISM

2:1 Introduction

“The Gospel of the Labour Church is that God is in the Labour Movement . . .”¹

Theological Socialism was a literal interpretation of the Religion of Socialism adopted by John Trevor, who viewed the Labour movement as essentially a religious manifestation. The aim of this chapter is to define Theological Socialism further by examining the founding principles of the Labour Church and the thinking expressed through the official publications of the movement. The argument is that Trevor’s understanding of the Religion of Socialism was a post-Christian theology which claimed the Labour movement to be the successor to the Christian Church, acting as the vehicle of God’s grace. The debate stirred by Trevor in 1896 about the relevance of Jesus for contemporary society revealed a diversity of belief among Labour Church members. The chapter moves on to consider how Theological Socialism was interpreted by leaders of the Labour Church after John Trevor’s departure from the movement. A third aspect of Theological Socialism is that for Trevor it was a utopian ideology, a prophetic message proclaiming the dawn of a better society, defined as the Kingdom of God on earth, and the ways to prepare for its realisation. This is explored by placing the vision of the Labour Church into the context of late-Victorian utopianism and through the analysis of a contemporary commentator, Moritz Kaufmann.

¹ John Trevor (editor) *Labour Church Hymn Book* (Manchester: Labour Church Institute, 1892), 2.

2:2 Founding Principles

The founding of the Labour Church in October 1891 attracted the attention of two local newspapers, *Manchester City News* and *Manchester Times*, both of which attempted to convey the core message of this fledgling organisation. In its recording of the main address at the founding event, *Manchester Times* expresses the understanding of the correspondent and the audience, both of whom heard at first hand the potential founder of a new movement declare his aspirations:

The Labour Church meant to help the workers to secure this progress, so that there should be no need to go back to old and desperate measures. (Hear, hear.) To do this they would bring religion into the struggle. Some would say in the past religion had not helped them – (hear, hear) that the churches of the country were against them, and that the power of Christianity to this day was not in any appreciable degree on the side of the emancipation of labour. (Applause) He knew it all and he would tell them how to get religion and the churches to take a more just view. It was to start a religious movement of their own outside the churches which should allow them to live a righteous and godly life and yet secure the freedom for which they lived.²

These words were spoken as part of John Trevor's address to the first Labour Church service on Sunday, 4th October 1891, and they offer an early glimpse of his emerging vision. Trevor declares his desire to build a religious organisation which aimed to address the pressing issues of the age, and he expands upon his message as the Labour Church begins to grow. In his first editorial article of *Labour Prophet* Trevor clarifies the meaning of his vision, stating that God was in the Labour movement.³

² *Manchester Times*, 9th October 1891. See Appendix 1, which is a written reconstruction of the first Labour Church service.

³ *Labour Prophet*, January 1892, 4.

By the next edition of *Labour Prophet* in February 1892 Trevor felt it necessary to explain the ideological basis of his emerging movement by outlining a series of founding principles. Less than two months from the event which launched the Labour Church, this list of political and theological statements was produced, setting the parameters and a focus to the organisation, and offering a framework by which an examination of the credentials of Trevor's vision and subsequent movement can begin. Under the slogans 'God is Our King', 'Thy Kingdom Come on Earth!' and 'God and Liberty', *Labour Prophet* recorded that the Labour Church is based upon the following principles:

1. That the Labour Movement is a Religious Movement.
2. That the Religion of the Labour Movement is not a Class Religion, but unites members of all classes in working for the Abolition of Commercial Slavery.
3. That the Religion of the Labour Movement is not Sectarian or Dogmatic, but Free Religion, leaving each man free to develop his own relations with the Power that brought him into being.
4. That the Emancipation of Labour can only be realised so far as men learn both the Economic and Moral Laws of God, and heartily endeavour to obey them.
5. That the development of Personal Character and the improvement of Social Conditions are both essential to man's emancipation from moral and social bondage.⁴

The theological and political agenda expressed in the founding principles of the Labour Church are the product of two major intellectual streams coming together in the thinking of its compiler. These streams, the crisis of Christian faith, particularly its Evangelical wing, and the rise of Socialist politics, met in the latter decades of the nineteenth century across

⁴ *Labour Prophet*, February 1892, 16.

Europe, its colonies and the United States. The first of the founding principles is Trevor's breakthrough concept, and the basis of his vision for the Labour Church. It is the fusion of his theological and political ideologies into a simple phrase which was the whole rationale of the movement. According to D. F. Summers, it was this big idea which defined both Trevor and his organisation for about five years from 1891⁵, and it would be the interpretation of Theological Socialism which was the cause of internal debate.

Religious certainties were being questioned within the public arena throughout the latter decades of the century, and the consequence of this challenge to Christianity was a 'crisis of faith' which manifested itself in personal struggles and open debates. The change in the intellectual climate of the nation was gauged by the discourses of the 'Churched' and secularists, as well as those within artistic and scientific circles.⁶ The term 'evangelicalism' refers to a theological stream which ran through many of the nonconformist denominations and the 'low-church' wing of Anglicanism. David Hempton offers a definition of the characteristics of this ecumenical trend, arguing that it includes "moral earnestness, a desire to witness and preach, a commitment to social activism on behalf of disadvantaged people, and a concern for the truth."⁷ Such characteristics were brought into question by the appearance of Biblical scholarship, particularly from Germany and the Netherlands, while developments in philosophical theology, and advances in scientific knowledge, which were popularised through the controversy surrounding Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, also challenged Liberal and Catholic forms of Christian faith.⁸

⁵ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries', 1.

⁶ J. F. C. Harrison, *Late Victorian Britain: 1875 – 1901*, 120.

⁷ David Hempton, *Evangelical Disenchantment: 9 Portraits of Faith and Doubt*, 194.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 195.

Royden Harrison wrote that the broad concept labelled the Religion of Socialism was attractive to certain people at the end of the nineteenth century because it enabled a synthesis of diverse views which confronted the challenges of the time.⁹ John Trevor was a product of evangelicalism, and his spiritual journey was shaped by his own personal ‘crisis of faith’ which reflected the wider public debate. His Theological Socialist vision for the Labour Church expresses his own response to the decades of challenge to the foundations of the theological certainties of his youth, building in their place something he considered to have more integrity and be more durable to address the demands of a new age. D. F. Summers summarised the fusion of concepts in the Labour Church vision,

Trevor’s proposed venture came from the combination of two ideas: (1) The goal of evolution is God-Consciousness, and (2) The present point of evolutionary advance is the Labour Movement. From these propositions came the idea of a new church. It was to be a ‘church’ for it was to stimulate and express the corporate experience of the group; it was to be a church for ‘labouring folk and all who could see the justice of Labour’s claims’ for it was intended to be an integral part of the Labour Movement.¹⁰

The denial that the Labour Church stands for class politics in the second principle reflects the reformist nature of the agenda being proposed. The statement is a summary of the first lead article of *Labour Prophet* written by Trevor’s mentor, Philip Wicksteed. In what seems to be a bold denial that this new organisation called the Labour Church was not proposing to be a divisive or revolutionary movement appealing only to the working classes of British society. Instead, Wicksteed in his headline article of January 1892 answers the question, ‘Is the Labour Church a Class church?’ with an unequivocal reply that it was not. Wicksteed

⁹ Royden Harrison, ‘The Religion of Socialism in Britain’, 1883 -1896’, letter to Editorial Collective, 215.

¹⁰ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 6.

expresses the importance of the philanthropy of the professional classes in the service of the workers, as such selfless giving creates democracy, he argues.

The labour movement and the labour church, then, are not a class movement and a class church, but a movement and a church that GIVES WARNING TO ALL

“CLASSES” that they have no right to exist except so far as they serve the masses and make their life fuller and greater.¹¹

The prominence given to this statement, both in terms of the first edition of *Labour Prophet* and its place as the second founding principle, reveals the importance of Trevor’s vision for the Labour Church to hold a reformist political programme.

The reference to Free Religion in the third principle is an indication of the influence of Francis Ellingwood Abbot on Trevor’s thinking. Trevor was introduced to the thoughts of the philosopher of Free Religion while studying at the Unitarian Meadville College in Pennsylvania by a fellow student who had attempted to form a local branch of Abbot’s Liberal League.¹² From that point Trevor adopted the concept of religion advocated by Abbot, who wrote, “The central idea and great inspiring sentiment of Free Religion is faith in Man as a Progressive Being.”¹³ An explanation of Abbot’s philosophy is given by W.

Creighton Peden:

Free Religion is generally defined as the universal religious sentiment running through all special religions. While each special religion demands obedience to a particular ideal, free religion requires obedience to one’s own ideal in its natural and unperturbed state.¹⁴

¹¹ *Labour Prophet*, January 1892, 1.

¹² John Trevor, *My Quest For God*, 144.

¹³ Francis Ellingwood Abbot, “What is Free Religion”, *The Index*, January 15, 1870.

¹⁴ W. Creighton Peden, *The Philosopher of Religion: Francis Ellingwood Abbot, 1836-1903*, 71.

Peden continues in his definition by stating, “Free Religion asserts the principle of freedom in religion and religion in freedom”¹⁵, which is echoed by Trevor in his article about the religion of the Labour movement in the second edition of *Labour Prophet*,

FREEDOM IN SOCIETY AND FREEDOM IN RELIGION must go hand in hand, the essential things in this freedom being that there shall be “neither arrogance nor servility in the relation of human beings,” [Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backwards*, Chapter 26] and that every man shall “stand straight before God” [ibid.]. The time for such freedom is not yet; but the Labour Church, in frankly espousing the cause of the weak and poor and enslaved, in supporting the toilers in the practical methods they adopt for their emancipation, and developing a sense that God is working through the means they use, is endeavouring to hasten its advent.¹⁶

The fourth principle which brings a moral code to economics is another sign that Wickseed loomed large in the framing of the ideology of Trevor’s vision for a Labour Church. In 1884 Wickseed wrote one of the earliest critiques in English of Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital*, where he set out to destroy the foundation of Marx’s economic reasoning by rejecting the claim that commodities have only ‘abstract labour’ in common.¹⁷ This article was the first indication to British economists of Wickseed’s interest and emerging theories.¹⁸ Four years after stirring a debate about Marx, Wickseed’s *The Alphabet of Economic Science* was published. The basic thesis of the book was his theory of demand which was expressed in mathematical terms as a marginal theory of value.¹⁹ C. H. Herford emphasises the influence of how Wickseed’s father’s dissenting spirit and the principles of his mother’s domestic philosophy

¹⁵ Ibid., 73.

¹⁶ *Labour Prophet*, February 1892, 13.

¹⁷ Philip H. Wickseed, “Das Kapital”, *To-day*, volume 2 (October 1884): 388-409.

¹⁸ C. H. Herford, *Philip Henry Wickseed: His Life and Work*, 204.

¹⁹ Philip H. Wickseed, *The Alphabet of Economic Science*, (London: Macmillan, 1888).

as she raised nine children had a great influence upon his attitude to life and subsequent thinking on the morality of economics.²⁰

While the first of the Labour Church founding principles is a statement offering a certain take on the Labour movement as being predominantly religious, the fifth and final principle reflects the view of the broader political scene in which it dwelt. This is what Stanley Pierson first defined as “Ethical Socialism”,²¹ holding in tension the individual and the social need for improvement, and the interdependence between them to achieve profound and lasting reform. The term Ethical Socialism refers to the moral dimension of its adherents’ political ideology, which was often pursued with the fervour of those on a religious crusade.²² By contrasting the first and final Labour Church principles reveals a certain theological interpretation of Socialism with a literal take on the Religion of Socialism, that Socialism was the new religion heralding the dawning of a utopian age. The fifth principle places the Labour Church within the broad Ethical Socialist category of the contemporary Labour movement, which has been the ideological niche favoured for the organisation by historians. Unpacking the background to the founding principles suggests that the Labour Church was about a particular offering to its wider, contemporary Socialist scene.²³

2:3 The message of official publications

Primary printed sources produced by the Labour Church movement will be the basis of this section, which questions the message being projected by Trevor and those who followed him in leadership regarding the purpose and aspirations of their organisation. The official

²⁰ C. H. Herford, *Philip Henry Wicksteed: His Life and Work*, 21.

²¹ Stanley Pierson, *British Socialism: The Journey from Fantasy to Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 2.

²² Michael Robertson, *Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 225.

²³ Stephen Yeo, ‘A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883-1896’, 34.

publications of the Labour Church as a national movement stretch across twenty years, from 1892 until 1912, and during that period a regular journal, occasional tracts and several editions of its hymn book were produced. Scrutiny of the monthly *Labour Prophet*, which later became the quarterly *Labour Church Record*, will concentrate on the editorial passages, as these articles express the thinking of Labour Church leadership during the first decade of the movement's history.

In his first editorial article of *Labour Prophet* Trevor outlined the principles upon which his movement was to be based. The following month he begins to define the terms of his vision by describing the new religion championed by the new Labour Church. Trevor prefaces his article with extracts from Edward Bellamy's utopian fantasy *Looking Backward, 2000 - 1887*, in which a late-nineteenth century time traveller finds himself in the Socialist society of the year 2000. The final quotation of Trevor's extracts reads, "There was no more either arrogance or servility in the relations of human beings to one another. For the first time since the Creation every man stood up straight before God."²⁴ These words of Bellamy describing a utopian society of the future set the tone for the article, with Trevor criticising the Christian denominations for theologising a historical figure who had addressed social issues from 1800 years in the past.

It is this conception of religion which is responsible in a large measure for the alienation of so many of the workers from the churches, and also the backwardness of some sections of the workers in taking up the task of their own emancipation. The Labour Question is A QUESTION OF THE 19TH CENTURY. Religion is made a question of the first century.²⁵

²⁴ Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000 – 1887* (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1888) quoted in *Labour Prophet*, February 1892, 12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Trevor uses the parable of Jesus about new wine in old wineskins to condemn those denominations which in the name of Jesus attempted to contain the movement of God by outmoded structures and beliefs. “Meanwhile,” he writes, “we organise the Labour Church, because we protest against the assumptions of other churches in religion and their feebleness in social reform.”²⁶

In order to develop the thinking of Labour Church members a series of tracts was produced, beginning in 1892; these tracts gave John Trevor the space to expand upon the ideas he mooted in *Labour Prophet*. In the first two tracts Trevor outlines the theological and political agenda of his movement. Under the title *God in the Labour Movement*, Trevor expands the argument behind the statement. Appealing to his readers from a Christian background, Trevor offers a bold interpretation of the Judeo-Christian tradition, describing Jesus as “the stubborn revolutionary Christ”, and concluding that, although God may have abandoned Christianity, “God has not yet changed sides”²⁷:

We must learn that God is not antiquated and used up, that he is ever young, ever virile, ever fighting on the side of the weak and oppressed, ever modern and more advanced than the most advanced cause of our time.²⁸

Such words echo the growing influence on Trevor’s thinking of the poetry of Walt Whitman but with a more political edge. It was the political dimension of the Labour Church that is addressed in the next tract, *An Independent Labour Party*. This was a call to all activists in the Labour movement to turn away from the alliance with the Liberal Party²⁹ and to form a separate political party,

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ John Trevor, *God in the Labour Movement*, tract (London: John Heywood / Glasgow: Labour Literature Depot, 1892), 15.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Henry Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party 1880-1900*, second edition, 143.

By being independent I do not mean that you must turn yourselves into cynical brutes, with no faith in God or in Man. Your independence must be large-minded and large-hearted; it must have a strong and generous soul in it, which will enable you to fight this battle without losing your temper, and yet with that determination and utter fearlessness which will alone carry you to victory. Man has to walk on a narrow ridge to Freedom.³⁰

In the editorial article of the June 1892 *Labour Prophet*, John Trevor reflects upon his concept of religion, and the outcome is a message of personal spirituality which is rooted in Christianity, but distanced from that creedal faith. Trevor writes of a religious and political ideology which differed from the collectivism of many Socialists in the contemporary Labour movement, instead, he indicates a different route taken:

The end of Socialism is Individualism, the end of organisation is Labour, is the emancipation of Labour, the end of Law is Liberty, and the end of the means of Livelihood is Life. After all our enthusiasm for each other, there are moments when we return to ourselves, and find the end of our being there.³¹

With references to Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son and his trials in the Garden of Gethsemane, Trevor draws the conclusion that the human condition means facing up to our true selves as individuals, and then states that the "only remedy is Religion. Religion is life lived with God."³² What is actually meant by this brief definition of religion is expounded by Trevor through the words of a poem by Walt Whitman, including the line, "I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least."³³ Trevor wonders in the closing paragraph of his editorial whether the pantheistic mysticism of a poet of individual liberty

³⁰ John Trevor, *An Independent Labour Party*, tract (London: John Heywood / Glasgow: Labour Literature Depot, 1892), 7.

³¹ *Labour Prophet*, June 1892, 44.

³² *Ibid.*, 44.

³³ Whitman quotation cited in *ibid.*, 44.

may have caused confusion among his readership. With that concern in mind, Trevor declares his hope that the members of his movement will comprehend the sentiments of the article, because “if they don’t, they won’t understand what the Labour Church means – at least, to me.”³⁴

During the first year of operation, the Labour Church produced a variety of publications outlining the ideological precepts of the organisation, particularly in terms of the vision of its founder. The official material of 1892 included *Labour Prophet*, two tracts, and the first edition of the *Labour Church Hymn Book*. The last publication is an under-researched primary source, although it has been recognised as a significant contribution to the collections of Victorian hymnody.³⁵ Trevor edited the hymn book, and gave the framework to the hymns contained within it by printing the founding principles of his movement on its opening page and through the words of the preface. What is written in the preface defines the terms of the Labour Church for those people outside of its membership, because it was Trevor’s hope that the book may be of use to a broad audience.³⁶

The Labour Church is an organised effort to develop the religious life inherent in the Labour Movement, and to give to that Movement a higher Inspiration and sturdier Independence in the great work of personal and social regeneration that lies before it. It appeals especially to those who have abandoned the Traditional Religion of the day without having found satisfaction in abandoning Religion altogether.

The message of the Labour Church is that God is in the Labour Movement, and that without obedience to God’s Law there can be no Liberty.

³⁴ Ibid., 45.

³⁵ Ian Bradley, *Abide With Me: The World of Victorian Hymns* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010 / first published 1997), 188.

³⁶ *Labour Prophet*, November 1892, 85.

The Gospel of the Labour Church is that God is in the Labour Movement, working through it for the further emancipation of man from the tyranny, both of his own half-developed nature, and of those social conditions which are opposed to his higher development.

The Call of the Labour Church is to men everywhere to become “God’s fellow-workers” in the Era of Reconstruction on which we have entered.³⁷

Trevor’s preface gives us a clear definition of Theological Socialism, summarised as God in the Labour movement.

This first edition of the *Labour Church Hymn Book* was acknowledged to be a descendent of the hymn book produced by the Christian Chartist churches of a previous generation.³⁸

Although each of these religious organisations existed in different times with significant changes to the social context taking place during the interim, notably the issues around the ‘crisis of faith’, both the Labour and Chartists churches were part of wider political movements caught up in debates about the role of religion to further their cause. The first hymn was the ‘Union Hymn’, “[s]ung by 150,000 at a Mass Meeting of Political Unions, at Birmingham, in connection with the agitation which preceded the passing of the First Reform Bill, 1832.”³⁹ Trevor had sought a greater appreciation of this historically close ancestral movement in the May 1892 edition of *Labour Prophet*,⁴⁰ and identified a connection with activists who had shared common religious and political goals in the past, thus relating the Labour Church to a historical tradition. The Union Hymn resonates with Trevor’s concept of religion being freedom in God:

³⁷ John Trevor (editor) *Labour Church Hymn Book* (1892), 2.

³⁸ O. Ashton, R. Fyson and S. Roberts (editors), *The Chartist Legacy* (Rendlesham, near Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Merlin Press, 1999), 186.

³⁹ John Trevor (editor), *Labour Church Hymn Book* (1892), 3.

⁴⁰ *Labour Prophet*, May 1892, 40.

God is our guide! no swords we draw,
We kindle not war's battle fires;
By union, justice, reason, law,
We claim the birthright of our our sires.
We raise the watchword, Liberty!
We will, we will, we will be free!⁴¹

The belief held by Trevor that he and his contemporaries were standing at the edge of a new utopian era which would bring about the emancipation of the working classes through a complete reform of society and its citizens is reflected in several of the hymns. Hymns such as “Come, gather, O people, for soon is the hour”, “Day is breaking, earth is waking”, “Forward! the day is breaking” and “The Day of the Lord is at hand”, express the dawning of the new era. These hymns would have sounded familiar to those from a nonconformist and evangelical Christian background, because their words declare an eschatological hope, maybe of the coming of the Kingdom of God or a new Socialist world, or both.⁴²

“The Day of the Lord is at hand” was written by the Christian Socialist and novelist, Charles Kingsley, who joined other well-known writers as contributors to Trevor’s hymn book, including the American Unitarian hymn-writers, James Russell Lowell and Samuel Longfellow, Quaker anti-slavery campaigner, John Greenleaf Whittier, and a contemporary Socialist poet and activist, Edward Carpenter. While Kingsley’s hymn declared that “The Day of the Lord is at hand”, Carpenter’s popular anthem “England, arise!” announces “Arise, O England, for the day is here”⁴³ which reflects a subtle shift from the ‘not quite yet’ to the awakening of the new dawn. There is also an emphasis on the cause of Labour being part of a long tradition with numerous references to their forerunners, in hymns such as “Our fathers’

⁴¹ John Trevor (editor), *Labour Church Hymn Book* (1892), 3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 5.

faith, we'll sing of thee", "Our fathers to their graves have gone", and "Our fathers were high-minded men".⁴⁴

The name of Jesus occurs only once in the collection of hymns, but the word 'Freedom' is frequently mentioned in the verses, as Trevor makes the case for a Free Religion, outlined in the preface, not restrained by traditional creeds but obedient to one's own ideals and God's eternal Laws. The rejection of Jesus's religious authority is a remarkable feature of Trevor's thinking and rhetoric because of the elevated status given to the figure of Jesus within late-Victorian society. For Trevor, Jesus is a historical figure, while the revelation of God was a continuous reality throughout human history. From the hymns contained within the first edition it would seem that the assumptions made about God's Laws is based upon a Judeo-Christian moral code from the Ten Commandments and Jesus' instructions to love God and neighbour as oneself.⁴⁵

It is Joseph Whittier who is given permission by Trevor to name Jesus in his hymn, which begins,

What is the service the benignant Father
Requireth at His earthly children's hands?
Not the poor offering of vain rites, but rather
The simple duty man from man demands.⁴⁶

In these lines is the declaration that traditional religious practice is not enough to address the social and moral issues of the time, instead, it is in answering the needs of humanity that fulfils the commands of God. It can be argued that Trevor's choice of Samuel Longfellow's hymn "One holy Church of God appears through every age and race" was to vindicate the

⁴⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 30.

calling of the Labour Church as the successor to the Christian denominations in God's new movement. The final verse of the hymn reads,

O living Church! thine errand speed,

Fulfil thy task sublime;

With bread of life earth's hunger feed,

Redeem the evil time!⁴⁷

John Trevor uses the editorial of the April 1893 *Labour Prophet* to reassert the role of the Labour Church in the face of critics who questioned the validity of a religious organisation within a political movement. Trevor returns to the core of his Theological Socialism, that God is to be found in the Labour movement, and states his belief that wherever that movement flourishes then a Labour Church is needed to act as the promoter and protector of its religious nature and purpose.

The Labour Church does not attempt to bring into the Labour Movement any new thing from outside in which the movement is wanting. Its first principle is that the Labour Movement is a religious movement. It insists on the fact that, consciously or unconsciously, the religion is there – God is there, and man is co-operating with God there – so far as the work is going on upon right and true lines.⁴⁸

An interesting issue arises about the use of public prayer in Labour Church services. Trevor was aware that the subject had become divisive amongst the membership of some local Labour Churches, which is an indication of the varied routes taken by these activists and the different understandings that they brought with them. Trevor is not prescriptive in his advice, but rather recommends that each branch be honest about the feelings of its members, though he felt that prayer was “as natural and inevitable a thing for many of us as the budding of the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁸ *Labour Prophet*, April 1893, 28.

trees in the Spring and the song of the lark in the sunshine.”⁴⁹ Issues such as prayer and the conducting of funeral services brought into the light certain expectations of an organisation bearing the name ‘church’, and Trevor was concerned that his organisation did not fall back on traditional forms or rituals.⁵⁰

The lead article of the October 1893 *Labour Prophet* enabled the General Secretary of the Labour Church Union, Fred Brocklehurst, to outline his own vision for the national organisation. What Brocklehurst advocates is a contrary message to that of the movement’s founder, because his belief in the purpose of the Labour Church emphasises “Socialism, with its conception of a Brotherhood of humanity redeemed from selfishness and vice”,⁵¹ words reminiscent of Bax and Morris’ definition of the Religion of Socialism. In answer to the question about “the peculiar mission of the Labour Church”, Brocklehurst writes, “the Labour Church Programme should be the Labour Programme at its best,”⁵² and goes on to spell out its role in realising social ideals based on humanitarian principles. John Trevor responds to the General Secretary with a bold statement which furthers his own concept of the Labour Church as a national movement:

The Labour Church is an opportunity for laying the foundation of a real personal and national religious life. It is an opportunity for providing a living religion of every-day fact, as the present religion of tradition and of creeds fails. This can only be done through the work for social regeneration which Mr Brocklehurst has sketched out for us. But we miss the real significance of the work for social reform in our time if we see nothing but what is commonly called a practical programme in it.

⁴⁹ *Labour Prophet*, May 1893, 39.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵¹ *Labour Prophet*, October 1893, 93.

⁵² *Ibid.*

Social regeneration is only of permanent value as it brings with it the opportunity of living a higher and nobler and freer life. But are we to wait to live until the Kingdom of Heaven comes to earth?

This is the question, above all others, which the Labour Church has to answer. And the real work of the Labour Church for the world to-day is to teach the individual how to live the fullest and best life now, and to inspire him in his efforts towards living it. And to realise this life, confidence in the ultimate worth of life to each of us is needed. And at bottom this will be found to be confidence in God, and a deep sense of His presence in the midst of the struggle in which we are engaged. It means the development of our faculties for seeing far more deeply into the facts of life than we do at present. It means a far deeper sense of the significance of our moral struggles and defeats and victories than we yet have. But these things are attainable to man; and their attainment is the real work of the Labour Church, the work that no other organisation has set itself to do.⁵³

It is clear in the previous paragraphs that John Trevor wishes to claim a unique position for the Labour Church. Although the aim of the statement is to refute Brocklehurst's purely pragmatic approach to the organisation, Trevor emphasises the Labour Church's distinctive message of the divine nature of the Labour movement, which was preparing people for the dawning of a utopian society. This is more than Ethical Socialism with its balance between personal morality and social justice, rather, this is Theological Socialism because of the theological underpinning of Trevor's vision which gives the core purpose to his movement.⁵⁴

Throughout 1894 Trevor stepped up his campaign to revitalise the Labour Church as a religious vanguard to counter the pressure from Brocklehurst to diminish the theological

⁵³ Ibid., 100.

⁵⁴ In Chapter 3 we will consider the unique nature of Labour Church activists as a particular group within Ethical Socialism.

dimension of the organisation so that it could participate more fully in Labour politics. At the beginning of the year Trevor announced in his editorial article the formation of a missionary class to train activists, because he feared that there was “little real understanding of [the] great truth” contained within the Labour Church’s first principle.⁵⁵ Trevor called for those members who sought the Kingdom of God on earth to come forward for training:

We want hundreds of such men scattered throughout the civilised world; for our opportunity is worldwide, and we must not be satisfied until the Labour Church becomes thoroughly international in character.⁵⁶

As well as wishing to broaden the reach of the Labour Church across the world, Trevor began to stress the need for “the development of personal life”, writing that it “is possible for the men and women of the Labour movement to enter into relationship with the moving power, and to consciously work out the divine possibilities of it.”⁵⁷ After nearly two and half years of operation, the founder and figurehead of the Labour Church began to express his doubts as to whether his vision was shared among its members. “My message,” wrote Trevor, “has been but half understood.”⁵⁸ In May 1894 Trevor’s tract *Man’s Cry for God* was published, a direct appeal to Labour Church members not to lose sight of their religious foundations, and calling them to become “Prophets and Saviours” for their present age:

A Prophet does not discover a book. He discovers some new and unexplained portion of life itself, and finds God therein. So you are safer taking your place in the great movements of to-day, than sitting at the feet of those who can only deal out to you the traditions of men. You are nearer the Living God in the Labour movement than you would be in almost any church in the land. For it is of first rate importance for you to

⁵⁵ *Labour Prophet*, January 1894, 9.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁷ *Labour Prophet*, March and April 1894, 41.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

understand and take your part in what God is doing to-day, and only of secondary importance for you to understand what God did two thousand years ago.⁵⁹

At the annual conference of the Labour Church Union in November 1894, Brocklehurst proposed the deletion of the founding principles of the movement. The defeat of his proposal, coupled with a financial dispute, led to Brocklehurst's resignation and departure from the Labour Church.⁶⁰ The battle between the two men may have been fuelled by conflicting personalities, but at its heart was a struggle over ideology. Trevor fought to keep alive his dream of a church that would bring individuals, and then the whole of society, into a deeper relationship with the unfolding of God. Throughout 1895 three tracts were written for the Labour Church by Trevor and one by Wicksteed, these continued to remind the members of the importance of the religious aspects of their organisation which in turn should act as an example to the wider Labour movement of the theological dimension of its political struggle. The first tract, *Theology and the Slums*, was published in the January as a call to reclaim theological understanding for the cause of Socialism,

God has certain ways of doing things. It is for us to understand his methods and work with them. This is Religion. This is God's service. This is to enter into divine relations. This is to become both saved and a saviour. The purpose of a Living Church will be to draw men and women together into a working fellowship in which these divine methods are reverently studied and followed.⁶¹

This theological argument about religion being a rediscovery of the ways of God is developed in the March publication of *From Ethics to Religion*. In the footsteps of the Transcendentalists, Trevor commends the lessons that can be drawn from Nature, as they

⁵⁹ John Trevor, *Man's Cry for God* (London and Manchester: *Labour Prophet*, 1894), 26.

⁶⁰ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 160.

⁶¹ John Trevor, *Theology and the Slums* (London / Manchester: Labour Church, 1895), 14.

proclaim the essence of God and the freedom this knowledge brings. He writes of the uniqueness of his historical context as being “this New Age of the world”⁶², and that the ethics of the contemporary Labour movement would offer the “raw materials” to create “a free and living Religion”⁶³ for a utopian society. The religion of the Labour Church is “the New Free Life”,⁶⁴ Trevor argues, echoing the theology of Abbot, and in doing so claims a theology of Socialism for his own movement.⁶⁵

Two months later the tract *Our First Principle* returned the Labour Church to its founding concept, thus reiterating the religious dimension that Brocklehurst had attempted to remove from the movement some seven months previously. Trevor concludes this series of theological tracts reaffirming his belief that,

[T]he Labour Church is founded in a living movement in accordance with an eternal principle – that God is most to be found, not where he is most talked about, but where human life is being most forwarded, and human energy most aroused from within to fresh conquests over material conditions. Only when human life on earth becomes one vast harmonious whole will it be possible to discover God equally in all human institutions.⁶⁶

To mark the fourth anniversary of the founding of the Labour Church, Trevor uses his editorial article of the October 1895 *Labour Prophet* to re-emphasise the distinction between his religious movement and that of Methodism and the Salvation Army. Rather than trying to breathe new life into old doctrines, Trevor writes of finding and co-operating with God in the world, which he defines as the Kingdom of God on earth: “To-day I believe we have set up

⁶² John Trevor, *From Ethics to Religion*, 19.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶⁶ John Trevor, *Our First Principle* (London: Labour Prophet, 1895), 47.

that kingdom in the midst of the Labour movement. Hence the Labour Church.”⁶⁷ Reference to the Kingdom of God would have appealed to Christian Socialists and Socialist Christians alike as it was re-claimed for the Labour cause. But, as will be noted, Trevor wished to distance this theological concept of a new society from the figure of Jesus, and caused a fierce debate within the Labour Church by doing so.

Philip Wicksteed’s final major contribution to the Labour Church movement was a tract written in the autumn of 1895 in celebration of the fourth anniversary, entitled *What does the Labour Church stand for?* This is an expansion of the first front page *Labour Prophet* article, in which Wicksteed refutes the accusation that the Labour Church existed to create more social division and applies his economic theories to explain the differences between producers and consumers, “The Labour Movement is the attempt to organise society in the interests of the unprivileged producers”⁶⁸ whereby the producer brings about “the existence of such things as are desired by men”⁶⁹ and that consumption can lead to slavery.⁷⁰ Basing his thesis on Comte’s principle that “the proletariat is not a class but the body of society itself”⁷¹ Wicksteed argues that the Labour movement needs its own church because the existing churches accepted the unjust order of society and only welcomed working class people into their midst on the terms of the privileged consumers.⁷² Without its own church expressing the religious aspect of its cause, the Labour movement would surely fail, a point that Wicksteed shares with Trevor, who had argued fiercely over that point with the General Secretary the previous year. Embracing its religious dimension would ensure that the Labour

⁶⁷ *Labour Prophet*, October 1895, 154.

⁶⁸ Philip H. Wicksteed, *What does the Labour Church stand for?* (London: Labour Prophet Office, 1895), 4.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 7.

movement would “advance with sure and rapid steps to victory”,⁷³ declared Wicksteed, concluding,

The rise of the Labour Church, then, should be received as glad tidings, not because it will delay the advance of the working classes to material victory, but because, so far as it shows itself strong and genuine, it will guarantee that the victory will be permanent, and will usher in a new era of human happiness and goodness.⁷⁴

Such was the importance of Wicksteed’s tract for Trevor in his continuing attempt to keep the Labour Church true to its core concept of God in the Labour movement, that the October 1895 *Labour Prophet* carried both an advertisement for the tract and a summary of its argument. Trevor concentrated his efforts into editing *Labour Prophet* and overseeing the production of the second edition of the *Labour Church Hymn Book*, which was published in March 1896. This was virtually a reprint of the first edition of 1892, with some correction to the tunes and text. One subtle revision was to “There’s good in everything we do”⁷⁵ which became “There’s good in everything we view”⁷⁶, shifting the emphasis from the righteous cause to an affirmation of life as a whole.

2:4 A post-Christian theology

Between 26th July and 1st August 1896 the Second International met as a Socialist Workers’ and Trades Union Congress in London,⁷⁷ offering an opportunity to promote the Labour Church message on a global platform. The Congress is remembered for being the occasion when the anarchist faction was expelled from the Second International, despite the fact that their leaders, including Domela Nieuwenhuis and Louise Michel, had been welcomed by the

⁷³ Ibid., 14.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ John Trevor (editor) *Labour Church Hymn Book* (1892), 26.

⁷⁶ John Trevor (editor) *Labour Church Hymn Book*, second edition (London: *Labour Prophet* Publishing Offices, 1896), 71.

⁷⁷ G. D. H. Cole, *The Second International 1889 -1914* (London: Macmillan and Company Limited, 1963), 18.

British hosts and spoke at the public rally in Trafalgar Square.⁷⁸ While 64 British delegates were present at the previous Congress held at Zürich in 1893, numbers swelled to 476 out of the total number of 782 representatives, 159 of which came from British trade unions. Along with the I. L. P., S. D. F., the Fabian Society, Trades Councils, Women's associations and local Socialist societies, the Labour Church Union was represented.⁷⁹ In the report of proceedings published by *Labour Leader* the Labour Church delegates were listed as being Mary A. Foster of Leeds, Edwin Halford of Bradford, and H. C. Rowe from Manchester.⁸⁰ Of the three delegates, there are records that two of the Labour Church representatives made significant contributions to the business of the London Congress. Mary Foster, who also acted as a delegate for Leeds East branch of the I. L. P.,⁸¹ wrote an account of the involvement of women at the Congress, which was printed as part of the official report.⁸² Another Labour Church Union delegate, Edwin Halford, was one of sixteen British Socialists who signed a petition against the expulsion of the Anarchists.⁸³ The presence of the three members is an indication that the Labour Church Union was recognised by the British section of being worthy of representation at the worldwide conference, and eligible to prepare a report for publication in the proceedings record.

Separate reports were received and printed from the S. D. F., I. L. P. and Fabian Society, and although there is no record of a submission from the Labour Church Union. John Trevor's leadership of the Labour Church Union was acknowledged by the printing of his portrait on

⁷⁸ Chris Wrigley, 'The ILP and the Second International: the Early Years, 1893-1905' in David James, Tony Jowitt, and Keith Laybourn (editors), *The Centennial History of the Independent Labour Party* (Halifax: Ryburn Academic Publishing, 1992), 301.

⁷⁹ G. D. H. Cole, *The Second International*, 27.

⁸⁰ Second International, *Full Report of the Proceedings of the International Workers' Congress, London, July and August, 1896* (London: The Labour Leader, 1896), 61.

⁸¹ Michel Winock (editor) *Congrès International Socialiste des Travailleurs et des Chambres Syndicales Ouvrières : Londres 26 Juillet – 2 Août 1896*, volume 1 (Genève: Minkoff Reprints, 1980), 261.

⁸² Second International, *Full Report of the Proceedings of the International Workers' Congress*, 82-84.

⁸³ Michel Winock (editor) *Congrès International Socialiste*, volume 1, 575.

the front cover of the seventh edition of the Congress' official newspaper,⁸⁴ but he was not in attendance during the debates. Instead, Trevor produced "An Unspoken Address to the Foreign Members of the International Socialist Congress, London, July, 1896"⁸⁵ which was made available to Congress delegates in both French and English.⁸⁶ Trevor used the address to distinguish his movement and its message from other British groups, most notably the Christian Socialists, and by doing so caused a backlash from his membership. At the heart of the 'Unspoken Address' lies his appeal to recognise the dawning of a new utopian era brought about through the evolution of human history, "[t]he epoch is passing away when great principles can live only through association with great names. We are emerging from that stage of the world's childhood."⁸⁷ Trevor continues by defining his movement over against other advocates of the Religion of Socialism in order to align the Labour Church with progressive thought and practice.

The continuous effort of the old life to swallow up the new is one of the greatest menaces to human progress, and one against which every young movement must jealously guard itself. That is why it is necessary to make it clear to you that the Labour Church is not a Christian Socialist Church, but is based simply on the conception of the Labour movement as being itself a Religious movement. The attempt to bring the thought of Jesus into the life of to-day as a guide and a standard is an anachronism, fatal to any complete development. It is an endeavour to associate a reactionary principle with a revolutionary one. We cannot go forward with one leg while we try to go backward with the other.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Ibid., 332. *The Conference Record*, 1 August 1896.

⁸⁵ John Trevor, *The Labour Church in England* (London: Labour Prophet, 1896), 49.

⁸⁶ Michel Winock (editor) *Congrès International Socialiste des Travailleurs et des Chambres Syndicales Ouvrières : Londres 26 Juillet – 2 Août 1896*, volume 2 (Genève: Minkoff Reprints, 1980), 565-585.

⁸⁷ John Trevor, *The Labour Church in England*, 53

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Once published as a Labour Church tract the ‘Unspoken Address’ stirred a debate within the ranks of the movement about the ideological basis of their organisation, the like of which had not been encountered since the dispute between Trevor and Brocklehurst. The response to Trevor’s ‘Unspoken Address’ began with *Labour Prophet* publishing a letter from John C. Kenworthy in its edition of September 1896. Kenworthy, a Tolstoyan Socialist and leader of the Brotherhood Church, had been a member of the first Labour Church Union national council, and he criticised Trevor’s dismissal of Jesus, “The truth we are trying to spread through the Labour Churches is the thought of Jesus (not his alone, but still his)”.⁸⁹ In his editorial Trevor wrote that he welcomed the debate because his “ideal of the Labour Church is that it should be the home of perfect religious freedom”⁹⁰ and he promised to make a considered response to Kenworthy’s comments. Due to illness Trevor was unable to keep his promise, and it was left to R. A. Beckett to defend his position, stating “now we feel that the faith of Jesus is a nobler thing than faith in Jesus”.⁹¹

The debate continued for several months; Annie Thurston wrote of the need in the Labour Church for the message of “The Christ, the God-soul [who] lives in every man in whose soul is born the yearning after higher things,”⁹² while R. Morley of Halifax argued, “Christianity must go, and a humane, lovable, and progressive religion must take its place.”⁹³ Francis Sator, secretary of the International Social Democratic Club, dismissed all religion as “the means of the enslaving and starvation of the masses”.⁹⁴ Henry Scott Holland, leading Anglican Christian Socialist and founder of the Christian Social Union, condemned Trevor’s theological position by stating, “For us Christians Jesus Christ is our Fact – our Creed . . .

⁸⁹ *Labour Prophet*, September 1896, 137.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁹¹ *Labour Prophet*, October 1896, 156.

⁹² *Labour Prophet*, November 1896, 178.

⁹³ *Labour Prophet*, October 1896, 162.

⁹⁴ *Justice*, 26th September 1896 reprinted in *Labour Prophet*, November 1896, 175

This is a message which meets the case; which is what a creedless religion can never do.”⁹⁵

In Trevor’s absence, A. J. Waldegrave responded to Scott Holland by highlighting the irrelevance of the Christian Church to the lives of many working class people, and claimed that the Labour Church stood for a “new Collective Faith”.⁹⁶ A moderate tone was set by a letter from Labour Church member Sam Brooks, when he pleaded “for more tolerance and more charity in our movement, for more sympathy for those who do not happen to believe exactly as we ourselves believe.”⁹⁷

The fallout from Trevor’s ‘Unspoken Address’ to the London Congress of the Second International revealed that Labour Church members were not in one mind when it came to the role of Jesus in Theological Socialism. What John Trevor had hoped was a launch pad for the Labour Church to become a truly international movement by inspiring the Congress delegates with his message, instead lead to visible schism within his own ranks, when certain activists stated that they were not prepared to abandon Christianity altogether while others upheld the vision of their founder. D. F. Summers argued that the controversy stirred by the debate was a both a symbolic and actual turning point in the ideological journey taken by the Labour Church as a national organisation.

The results were a rather sudden falling away of the Labour Church in agnostic and atheistic directions. It prepared the way for the 1906 revisions of the Labour Church principles in which the religious nature of the Labour Movement was made a supplementary notion to appeal to the few who liked it, rather than as a foundational principle giving meaning to the whole idea of the Labour Church.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ *Commonweal*, November 1896, 373.

⁹⁶ *Labour Prophet*, December 1896, 189.

⁹⁷ *Labour Prophet*, January 1898, 3.

⁹⁸ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 229.

The 'Jesus debate' was a turning point in the thinking of the movement, creating a distance from Trevor and his views, but not because the path taken was agnostic and atheistic. As Chapter 4 will argue, the attitude of the Labour Church in Birmingham, which campaigned for the revision of the founding principles, was that the movement needed to be inclusive of all Socialists, stepping away from a literal towards a more liberal interpretation of the Religion of Socialism, and thus extending the theological view of Socialism given to them by John Trevor.

Trevor's Theological Socialism is post-Christian; the belief that Christianity no longer held the monopoly on the movement of God in the world and that a new era of human maturity was being heralded by another means of grace. For Trevor, humanity was emerging from the world's childhood to be able to live in freedom and equality. Reading Trevor's writings from the founding of the Labour Church through to the latter years of the 1890s, he is consistent in his understanding of the divine purpose of the Labour movement and the Labour Church as the champion of his vision. What unfolds in his articles and tracts is the desire to advance the message of his theological understanding of Socialism which leads him to a position that was regarded by some Labour Church activists as being not post-Christian but anti-Christian. The realisation of a theology which saw God working beyond traditional religion in order to inspire a political movement towards radical social change was John Trevor's source for the conceptualisation of the Labour Church.

Throughout the official publications produced by the Labour Church, Trevor used the biblical concept of the Kingdom of God to give expression to his vision of the new society which he believed was on the horizon of his time and the fulfilment of the Labour movement. An early slogan of the Labour Church was 'Thy Kingdom Come on Earth!', a theological assertion

that God was at work in the wider movement. The hymn books edited by Trevor and published in 1892 and 1896 included hymns such as “The Day of the Lord is at hand”, which announced the dawning of the new society. By 1895 Trevor claimed that the Kingdom of God was being experienced in the Labour movement because of the work of the Labour Church, which preached the need to find and co-operate with God in the world.⁹⁹ Although he distanced himself from other Christian creeds and concepts, most particularly Christological, Trevor accepted the potent nature of the language of the Kingdom of God for those from a nonconformist and evangelical Christian background and other Christian Socialists or Socialist Christians attracted to the vision of the Labour Church.

At the height of the controversy John Trevor resigned from the position of editor of the *Labour Prophet*, citing ill health as his reason for the decision.¹⁰⁰ In 1897 Trevor wrote his autobiography, *My Quest for God*. This frank retelling of his life up to that moment, with its painful expressions of family tragedies and personal torments, offers a justification for his self-definition as “the victim of the unfolding God”.¹⁰¹ Of his supreme achievement and contribution to the political and religious life of Britain, John Trevor writes of what his movement meant to him and its prime purpose.

[M]y method of work in the Labour Church is based on the invincible conviction that I am now able to consciously co-operate with God in the process of human evolution. This method was followed instinctively, or sub-consciously, at first. Now the meaning of it is revealed to me. Now I know what to do. This is the Method of Life.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ *Labour Prophet*, October 1894, 154.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁰¹ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 236.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 243.

2:5 Theological Socialism in the post-Trevor Labour Church

In 1898 Trevor returned to the Labour Church after a twelve month absence, through the editorship of the successor to *Labour Prophet*, *Labour Church Record*. But he discovered that his organisation was changing. In April 1899 Trevor called for new preachers to come forward in order to promote the religious message of the Labour Church, proposing a summer school which he would lead to further the theological knowledge of young men within the movement.¹⁰³ But reminders by their founder of the founding principles were not always well received by members. At the annual conference of the Labour Church Union, which met on the 17th and 18th July 1899, John Trevor and his wife were welcomed as visitors.¹⁰⁴ Trevor was allowed to address the conference about the forthcoming summer school, and he used the opportunity to expound on his editorial article of the previous April, calling for preachers of Socialism, and he argued for a body of trained and paid ministers to resource the Labour Church.¹⁰⁵ Ernest Williams, a delegate from Croydon, described this suggestion as a “retrograde position”, stating that he believed that Trevor “had started with the idea that the Labour movement was itself a religious movement, and now he spoke of awakening the religious faculties of those who were engaged in it.”¹⁰⁶ Before he preached at the eighth anniversary service of the first Labour Church in Manchester, Trevor led the harvest festival at his former pastorate of Upper Brook Street Free Church, where he was challenged by a member about the success of his movement. His response was in terms of the organisation continuing to move forward, “like pioneers in a new country,” who “can present to all the world our new and living gospel – no repeaters of a creed, no disciples of a Master, but men in whose veins the life of God is flowing.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ *Labour Church Record*, April 1899, 1.

¹⁰⁴ *Labour Church Record*, July 1899, 1.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰⁷ *Labour Church Record*, October 1899, 1.

The beginning of a new century meant the post-Trevor period for the Labour Church as he began to withdraw from frontline leadership, once again. To mark the eighth anniversary of the Labour Church Union, its president, Jim Sims, addressed the annual conference in July 1900. With the title, ‘What is the message of the Labour Church to the people?’, Sims delivered an open-ended challenge, which was reminiscent of the founding principles it alluded to, but with less of a focus. Sims commended “any message from the Labour Church to the people that is to rouse their consciences, warm their hearts, and enlighten their minds.”¹⁰⁸ Some six months later, in the January 1901 edition of *Labour Church Record*, a statement from John Trevor was printed in which he resigned from all responsibilities, including the Editorship; this was passed to Allen Clarke, a Bolton member and editor of the *Northern Weekly*.¹⁰⁹ Clarke made the most of his new position, using his first editorial article to propose the complete rebranding of the movement as the “Goodwill Church”, with the argument that “the word “labour” stands in the way” to admitting “all friends and sympathisers”.¹¹⁰ In an article addressing the question, “Is there any need for religion in the Labour movement?” Clarke attempts to redefine the emphasis of the organisation. Even though the founding principles state that the Labour movement is a religious movement and sets out to unpack the meaning of that religion, Clarke writes of “the need of religion in the labour movement”.¹¹¹

We believe that good character is the best equipment for any reformer or preacher to possess. It should be made the test of leadership. No man who has not first made himself good can do much in doing good for others. And the object of the Labour

¹⁰⁸ *Labour Church Record*, July 1900, 3.

¹⁰⁹ *Labour Church Record*, January 1901, 5.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

Church religion is to make good men, women, and children. There can be no question as to the need for such a religion.¹¹²

Allen Clarke was not successful in his rebranding, as it was the Labour Church Union (later extended to 'Socialist and Labour Church Union') which was to publish the final official publications of significance, the third and fourth editions of the *Labour Church Hymn Book*. Just as the previous two editions were closely related, with John Trevor acting as compiler of both, so were the volumes published in 1906 and 1912, though collated by different people. The utopian sentiment of the previous editions is maintained in the later hymn books, often through different songs to their predecessors, though the works of writers such as Whittier, Lowell and Carpenter still feature. The continuity of particular themes and the works of certain hymn writers between the earlier and later editions indicate that Trevor's vision was still shared by others who followed him in leading the Labour Church, though interpretation of that vision was varied. Indicating a greater focus on social morality rather than theological principles, in the later editions of the hymn book there is emphasis on the perfectibility of humanity in hymns such as "A nobler order yet shall be"¹¹³ and "Faith comes in moments of heroic love".¹¹⁴ But the utopian dream is not lost with the heightened acknowledgment of the dawning of a new age:

Bide your time – the morn is breaking,
Bright with Freedom's blessed ray;
Millions from their trance awaking
Soon shall stand in firm array.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ John H. Belcher, W. Mitchell, and T. A. Pierce (editors) *Labour Church Hymn Book* (Bradford: Labour Church Union, 1906), 33; T. A. Pierce (editor) *Labour Church Hymn and Tune Book* (Nottingham: Labour Church Hymn and Tune Book Committee, 1912), 84.

¹¹⁴ John H. Belcher, W. Mitchell, and T. A. Pierce (editors) *Labour Church Hymn Book* (1906), 80; T. A. Pierce (editor) *Labour Church Hymn and Tune Book* (1912), 208.

Man shall fetter man no longer!
Liberty shall march sublime!
Ev'ry moment makes you stronger –
Firm, unshrinking, *bide your time*.¹¹⁵

In Chapter 3 it is argued that for most of the people who became active members of the movement, what appealed to them was not a detailed theological treatise, but its simple summary that God was in the Labour movement. This rallying cry by which the Labour Church gathered, offered both clarity and open-endedness in so far as it expressed a religious understanding broad enough to be interpreted in many ways.

2:6 Late-Victorian Utopianism and the Labour Church

According to Matthew Beaumont in his study of “utopian consciousness”¹¹⁶, the latter decades of the Victorian era was a time suspended between two social ideologies: on one hand the Liberal perspective of social order being individualistic; on the other the emerging understanding of society as collectivist, with the growing appeal of Socialist theories.¹¹⁷

After the demise of Chartism as a political force in British politics by the mid-nineteenth century, Beaumont argues that the vacuum left by that reformist movement was filled by an utopianism which was encouraged by the changing nature of the middle and working classes, this meant that the state of the nation and concerns for the future were critical issues of popular debate.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵John H. Belcher, W. Mitchell, and T. A. Pierce (editors) *Labour Church Hymn Book* (1906), 43; T. A. Pierce (editor) *Labour Church Hymn and Tune Book* (1912), 112.

¹¹⁶ Matthew Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd.: Ideologies of Social Dreaming in England 1870-1900*, 189.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

Beaumont gives passing credit to Moritz Kaufmann for establishing a methodology for the study of utopian thinking.¹¹⁹ Kaufmann, a German-born Anglican priest who had converted from Judaism through the London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews, became a chronicler of and commentator on the rise of Socialism. Beginning in 1874 with *Socialism, its Nature, its Dangers, and its Remedies Considered*, Kaufmann offered a critical, though ultimately sympathetic, analysis of the emerging theories from a Christian perspective. Five years later his work *Utopias or Schemes of Social Improvement – from Sir Thomas More to Karl Marx* was published, and in its preface Kaufmann explains the methodology referred to by Beaumont,

The aim of the writer has been throughout to present the several schemes for social improvement in the light of contemporary history, to show how far they reflect the spirit of the times, and what were the causes in the condition of the people which gave rise to the Utopian speculation they contain.¹²⁰

Kaufmann believes that he is breaking new ground with this approach, and explains his reason for doing so as a corrective to the prevalent perception held by his contemporaries that Socialist writing contained “nothing but idle dreams and fancies quite unworthy of serious attention”¹²¹. His motivation is to allow those thinkers who were currently dismissed as fanciful to be heard in terms of the social issues of the day. From the outset Kaufmann states that he regards Socialism “as a consecutive movement developed in the course of time”¹²² and relating to the evolutionary stages of human history, a view promoted by Marxist theory. Beginning with Thomas More’s satirical novel *Utopia*, Kaufmann traces the history of European utopianism through the writings and activities of figures such as Francis Bacon,

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 6.

¹²⁰ Moritz Kaufmann, *Utopias or Schemes of Social Improvement – from Sir Thomas More to Karl Marx* (London: C. Kegan Paul and Company, 1879), vi.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., v.

Henri de Saint-Simon, Robert Owen, and bringing the thinking up to date by the theories of Karl Marx,¹²³ with whom he had corresponded in October 1878.¹²⁴ He concludes that the most recent forms of utopianism were superior to their predecessors by grounding the dreams and fancies into practical agendas, making Socialism a form of applied utopianism.

Utopian fictions have developed into Socialist facts, vague speculations have assumed the form of theorems, and the hazy conceptions of the earlier authors of Utopias have been crystallised into hard dogmas which challenge refutation or acceptance at the hands of economists and statesmen.¹²⁵

Kaufmann unpacks his interpretation of applied utopianism by describing contemporary, notably Marxist, Socialist theories in terms of their “more systematised and tangible manner of stating grievances and demanding redress”¹²⁶ than earlier schemes of Saint-Simon and Owen, which he considered to be limited in their application to society. Not wishing to dismiss the relevance of utopian visions for social change, Kaufmann appeals for a scientific analytical approach to the Socialist agenda which he argues solidifies the dreams into practical solutions. He writes that Socialism “not only reflects in lurid colours social disease and decay, it becomes also the interpreter of the noblest thoughts and highest aspirations of the race,”¹²⁷ but the means of realising those hopes and aspirations will be impractical and worthless without applied, systematic strategy.

¹²³ Kaufmann expresses his admiration for Marx’s thinking, although his praise is not blind to the philosopher’s tone of writing: “Karl Marx is a star of the first magnitude among the constellations of modern Socialism, but, in some respects, resembles Byron’s “melancholy star”.” Ibid., 224.

¹²⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, volume 45, Letters, January 1874 - December 1879, 333 – 334 reference from <http://marxists.org/archive/marx/works/cw/volume45/index.htm> accessed on 25 January 2014.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 258.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 265.

Kaufmann continued his analysis of Socialist thought with *Socialism and Communism and Their Practical Application* of 1883. For ten years he concentrated his attention on the thoughts of the previous generation of Christian Socialists, notably Frederick Denison Maurice and Charles Kingsley, before returning to a broader study of contemporary Socialism in 1895. During the 1880s and early-1890s the Labour movement had grown in influence to become a significant presence in the social and political life of Britain, and that within that movement the views of Socialist thinkers were gaining ground. In the opening paragraph of the introduction to *Socialism and Modern Thought* he reiterates the methodology adopted for the writing of *Utopias*, an approach Kaufmann feels had not been utilised by the numerous writers who offered commentary on the recent growth of Socialism. To know the intellectual landscape is to begin to grasp contemporary Socialist thinking, Kaufmann argues.

[T]he true meaning of the socialist movement cannot be understood without some comprehensive view of the age we live in, its philosophy of life, its leading scientific theories, its ethical conceptions, its peculiar mood of agnostic pessimism, its determined effort to perform the practical duties of life in spite of the weariness of spirit which comes of lost faith, its willingness to take up a standpoint on the sure ground of positive fact only, and its consequent preference for the Religion of Humanity or the Religion of Culture as substitutes for traditional creeds.¹²⁸

It is within that rather non-utopian, rationalist interpretation of the contemporary intellectual context that Kaufmann examines the foundation and spread of the Labour Church across parts of his society. The question being addressed is about the need for religion at a time when the arguments surrounding the ‘crisis of faith’ debate were scrutinising traditional

¹²⁸ Moritz Kaufmann, *Socialism and Modern Thought* (London: Methuen and Company, 1895), vii.

beliefs and values. Kaufmann looks to the earlier Socialism of Saint-Simon and its emphasis on the importance of religion in the life of any society, and then considers the Labour Church as a current Socialist movement which was “an illustration of the truth that the spiritual side of human nature cannot be satisfied without religious ideals and the inspiration of religious thought and feeling.”¹²⁹ Ultimately, after reflecting upon the intellectual landscape of modern thought, Kaufmann returns to his understanding of Socialism as applied utopianism, which in its broadest sense can incorporate religious and moral beliefs by addressing current issues in the “hope to help forward the social movement of our race in its confused aims and generous aspirations, preparing the way for the evolution of the society of the future.”¹³⁰ Kaufmann writes about the Labour Church in terms of it being a religious organisation within a broader movement of applied utopianism. It is that broader political context which gives the Labour Church its rationale and purpose, Kaufmann claims, as it stands for the inherent religious nature of the Labour movement.¹³¹

2:7 Conclusion

John Trevor wished to stake a unique claim for the Labour Church, with its message of the divine nature of the Labour movement, preparing all people for the dawning of a new utopian society, which he defined as the Kingdom of God on earth. For Trevor to state that God was in the Labour movement meant a literal interpretation of the Religion of Socialism as the successor to Christianity, making his Theological Socialism a post-Christian prophetic message. While holding together the need to perfect the nature of both individual and corporate life, Trevor’s vision for the Labour Church went beyond Ethical Socialism, as he claimed that its context had to be theological because the Labour movement was a religious

¹²⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 180.

¹³¹ Ibid., 15.

movement. According to the analysis of Moritz Kaufmann, the Labour Church gave religious expression to the applied utopianism of Socialism.

Trevor's vision was underpinned by a theological understanding that the Kingdom of God was being realised in the Labour movement, and this gave the rationale to his Labour Church movement as the promoter and protector of this specific prophetic message. While based on Christian theology, Trevor rejected the centrality of Jesus in his concept of God's Kingdom on earth, replacing it with Free Religion, a belief in the fulfilment of human evolution. But it has been recognised in this chapter that Trevor's Theological Socialism was interpreted in different ways by Labour Church members, and the debate within the organisation about Trevor's 'anti-Jesus' stance highlighted the ideological tensions between Theological Socialists. Trevor had a clear vision for the Labour Church as a movement with its theology of Socialism, which was a divine calling he described as being "so peculiarly its own."¹³²

¹³² John Trevor, *From Ethics to Religion*, 22.

CHAPTER 3 – THE THEOLOGICAL SOCIALISTS

3:1 Introduction

With the revival of socialist and independent labour politics at the end of the nineteenth century, it is clear that a high proportion of labour activists were drawn from a church and chapel background, and that many of them articulated their socialism in Christian terms. Again, the formation from 1891 onwards of Labour Churches reflected the fact that many socialist activists who had become disillusioned with the many mainstream churches still wanted to affirm the religious basis of the labour cause.¹

Disaffected dissenters, fledgling Labour leaders, frustrated educated workers, and impassioned women campaigners were drawn to the possibilities of the Labour Church. John Trevor's vision for the Labour Church was not to form a Socialist substitute for nonconformist Christianity, or build a vehicle to further the secularisation of Labour politics, or create the base for British Transcendentalism. Instead, Trevor's dream for the Labour Church proclaimed Theological Socialism, a new revelation of God's purpose in the world. It would seem reasonable to suppose that the people drawn to Trevor's movement were content to be aligned to its theological interpretation of their own contemporary social context, hence Theological Socialists. For the sake of clarity, Theological Socialists mean those committed members of the Labour Church who associated themselves with the movement that claimed to represent the birth of a new religious understanding, that God was in the Labour movement, a movement which had

¹ Hugh McLeod, *Religion and Irreligion in Victorian England*, 39.

succeeded traditional religion, most notably Christianity, as the means of divine grace, and thus the sign of the dawning of a utopian age, defined as being the Kingdom of God on earth.

This chapter is a consideration of the Theological Socialists, as the involvement of these activists is examined by questioning their expectations of the organisation they were committing themselves to. The chapter is divided into three main sections in which how the Theological Socialists were envisaged is assessed, who they were in practice, and the nature of their beliefs. The first section is an assessment of Labour Church activists as envisaged by John Trevor, these were Socialists who shared his own particular theological interpretation of Socialism, that the Labour movement was religious and hence the need for its own church as a guardian of belief. Such a way of viewing the members of the Labour Church regards them not as simply part of the Ethical Socialist grouping, but as a very distinctive component to that broad category of contemporary Socialists. In the second section of the chapter is the consideration of a number of Labour Church activists who committed themselves to what was a thriving movement in its first few years. This section will concentrate on certain figures who played prominent roles at the national level of the organisation and on others who were active in local congregations, asking what attracted them to the Labour Church. The period of interest is the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century, with particular regard given to several affiliations that interacted with the Labour Church at both institutional and individual levels. Finally, the third section is an assessment of the extent that John Trevor's original concept for the Labour Church was furthered or abandoned by its most

active participants. The question being posed is did the Theological Socialists actually share the Theological Socialism proclaimed by their founder.

3:2 Theological Socialists – as envisaged

In the previous chapters the origins and development of John Trevor's theological interpretation of Socialism was traced by setting it within broader social and personal contexts. Just as his concept of God unfolded through his experiences of life, so the vision of a new Socialist age heralded by the religious cause of the Labour movement dawned on Trevor over time and changed through its application in the Labour Church. But research has revealed that Trevor began to gradually distance himself from his movement in the mid-1890s, so that by the turn of the new century the leadership of the Labour Church had different aims for the organisation which was at a variance from that originally held at its birth. This first section asks questions about the sort of people John Trevor wanted to attract to his movement, and, once they were involved, what he expected from them.

The challenge from William Baillie to John Trevor was to start a Workingman's Church, where those working class people who were struggling for political and economic emancipation would be welcomed and nurtured.² Although it would be Baillie who would suggest the name 'Labour Church' as being more class-inclusive,³ the social group that Trevor wanted to attract to his new church was those working men and women who felt alienated from the Christian denominations but wanted to find a spiritual home. This

² John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 241.

³ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries', 7.

was the message of the inaugural address at the first Labour Church service on 4th October 1891, when Trevor criticised the retrograde attitude of the churches to the Labour Question, and committed his proposed Labour Church to the struggle.⁴ He sought the ““Class-conscious” working man”,⁵ and to that end he appealed to politically aware working people to join his movement which was fusing political goals with religious fervour. In his editorial article of the March 1892 edition of *Labour Prophet*, Trevor argues for independent representation of Labour interests in Parliament as the nation prepared for the General Election that July. He writes of “the great movement among the working classes as a whole”⁶ and appealed for unity through the founding of an Independent Labour Party, declaring that the Labour Church’s contribution to the cause of Labour politics was that “we have UNFURLED THE FLAG OF A RELIGIOUS WAR.”⁷ Trevor summarised his concept of what we call Theological Socialists when he writes about the first of the Labour Church Pioneers who became the founders of new congregations as being men and women “anxious to serve God and Humanity.”⁸

With the 1892 General Election approaching, Trevor continued to argue for unity within the Labour movement for the sake of working class interests, but not to the point of delaying political campaigns for social reform. Quoting from a poem by James Russell Lowell which asks whether “our gin’rals” (political leaders) were concerned about the welfare of their advanced guard of foot soldiers who were the political activists (“the

⁴ *Manchester Times*, 9th October 1891.

⁵ Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 235.

⁶ *Labour Prophet*, March 1892, 20.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Labour Prophet*, April 1892, 27.

folks in front”) or more attentive to the needs of their troops not at the battle lines (“the folks behind”), Trevor writes,

When I commenced the Labour Church movement I determined to consider “the folks in front more than the folks behind.” I don’t pretend to be able to give my reasons for this. It was instinctive, I suppose. I liked the company in front better, felt more at home with it, more inspired by it, more certain of doing good work so. I believe I thought, too, that it was the men in front who were leading the world’s march, while the parsons and the politicians and the philanthropists were claiming all the credit of leadership, and wondering what the silly masses would do without their help and guidance.”⁹

Trevor called for the members of his Labour Church to stand alongside the ‘advance guard’ of the Labour movement by living out the principles of Socialism and not compromising for the sake of greater political unity. His warning focusses on the ideological bedrock of the Labour Church as encapsulated in its First Principle, “That the Labour Movement is a Religious Movement”, stating “Above all, let us not trouble about those who say they would join the Labour Church but for its First Principle”¹⁰ because he considered them to be the laggards who halt progress. Thus, John Trevor expected those who commit themselves to the Labour Church to be the vanguards of the Labour movement in Britain by advocating Theological Socialism, a literal interpretation of the Religion of Socialism that understood the cause of Labour to be a religious mission.

⁹ *Labour Prophet*, July 1892, 52.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

The appeal to “Advanced Men”¹¹ of the working class is stated most clearly in the first Labour Church tract *God in the Labour Movement* written by Trevor and published in March 1892. In it he explains, “I am convinced that the great inspiring Power of Life is manifesting Himself in the growing effort towards emancipation which characterises our age”,¹² and calls those who had abandoned the Christian churches in order to pursue justice for the working class as “GOD’S TRUE PROPHETS of the coming of His Kingdom on earth.”¹³ As noted in previous chapters the influence of the Salvation Army upon John Trevor’s thinking and activism, but in this tract he is critical of William Booth’s reluctance to develop his organisation’s concern and activities from “Philanthropy to Social Reform”, stating this “indicates that the limit of his work has been reached.”¹⁴ Then appealing to both Christian Socialist and Socialist Christian sentiments Trevor claims the cause of Jesus for his own movement when he calls the founder of Christianity “A REVOLUTIONARY WORKING MAN”¹⁵ arguing that God’s means of grace as shown in Jesus remained true¹⁶:

Emancipation through self-sacrifice has always been His rule, and it is this rule which we find obeyed more than anywhere in the great Labour Movement. If we would find to-day the men who are “heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ” we must search the ranks of those who “suffer with him” in the fight for emancipation from the commercial slavery which divides us into oppressors and oppressed. And if we would enter into working fellowship with the great God of

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² John Trevor, *God in the Labour Movement*, tract, 5.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 9.

¹⁵ Ibid., 10.

¹⁶ Ibid, 15.

Life and Liberty and Love, we must cast in our lot with these men, and be ready, if necessary, to take up our cross and bear it along the weary road that leads to victory through failure and the scorn of a foolish world.”¹⁷

In response to the criticism that he was “prostituting religion to political purposes” John Trevor writes, “I am consecrating it to the sacred cause of the people – to the poor and the heavy-laden, the over-burdened mothers, and the helpless and cursed children of our land. I don’t care if the Labour Church gets its skirts dirty, so long as it does so in God’s service.”¹⁸ By the beginning of 1894 Trevor is calling for missionaries to advance the cause of the Labour Church, regardless of the presence or influence of its then close ally the I. L. P.:

It is a question of developing missionaries – living souls with a living word on their lips.

THE PROPHETIC SPIRIT IS NEEDED

to dare all for God and our suffering brothers and sisters.¹⁹

The formation of the Missionary Class encouraged its members to discover their own personal mission based upon the Principles of the Labour Church.²⁰ Later that year, in the May editorial of the *Labour Prophet*, Trevor announced that the Missionary Class had been renamed the Pioneer Class, explaining,

We want to build up individuals in the Churches and out of the Churches, who shall become living embodiments of the principles for which the Labour Church

¹⁷ Ibid. Trevor quotes directly from Romans 8:17.

¹⁸ *Labour Prophet*, April 1893, 29.

¹⁹ *Labour Prophet*, January 1894, 10.

²⁰ *Labour Prophet*, February 1894, 31.

stands. This is the work which our movement now demands, and without which it cannot make any real progress.²¹

A year later Trevor reports of enquiries about starting Labour Churches in various communities across Britain. Although these requests are welcomed, he is clear that certain questions must be addressed before an endeavour begins, to be faithful to the principles and purpose of the Labour Church and the calling of its Theological Socialists. John Trevor asks the enquirer: “Is there an earnest desire to awaken and develop a real religious life through the Labour movement? Is there a supreme conviction that a living Church is still needed?”²² Such questions offer the benchmark to Labour Church activists so that their congregations do not become “little more than “the Labour movement on Sunday.”²³ It was this distinction that Trevor intended to state in his address to the Second International’s London Congress of July 1896. As noted previously, even though the address was not given at the Congress its publication as a tract caused uproar amongst certain members of the Labour Church who interpreted its message to be anti-Christian because of Trevor’s views on the figure of Jesus. With an international Socialist audience in mind, Trevor speaks of the advent of a new utopian age when life and thought are shared democratically without dependence on great figures such as Darwin, Marx or Christ.²⁴ He wished to distance the Labour Church from what the Marxists labelled the Utopian Socialism of the British radical activist Robert Owen and the French philosophers Charles Fourier and Henri Saint-Simon. Rather than

²¹ *Labour Prophet*, May 1894, 56.

²² *Labour Prophet*, June 1895, 88.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ John Trevor, *The Labour Church in England*, tract, 53.

specific experiments as means of liberating society, Trevor speaks of a ‘broad Church’ “seeking no separate salvation apart from the great mass of the people.”²⁵ The address concludes with the sentence:

It is the function of a Prophet to give eyes to blind energy and direction to aimless discontent; and this, not so much by religious or political leadership, as by the stimulus of his message, which he leaves the people free to accept or reject at pleasure.²⁶

The Labour Church activist, or Theological Socialist, as envisaged by John Trevor, was a person who lived by the central tenet of Labour Church teaching that God was in the Labour movement, making its work a religious mission for the social, economic and personal liberation of the working class. Thus, the Theological Socialism of the Labour Church was broader than Christian Socialism and Socialist Christianity, both of which placed Jesus Christ at the centre of the political struggle, just as it was broader than Marxism or Ethical Socialism, because it claimed the Labour movement to be the means of God’s grace replacing Christianity and other traditional religious creeds. According to Trevor, a Theological Socialist had to live out their belief in the religious nature of the Labour movement and, in turn, promote the significance of the Labour Church’s role in preserving and proclaiming that belief. Even though Trevor considered himself to be a prophet of the Religion of Socialism, he was not wishing to displace great leaders in order to establish himself in their position, nor was he preaching an Ethical Socialist gospel which talked of moral and social freedom. Trevor’s Socialism was thoroughly

²⁵ Ibid., 56.

²⁶ Ibid., 64.

theological as he announced that the Labour movement was ordained by divine will to realise a new age for humanity.

3:3 Theological Socialists – in practice

The [Labour] Church was socialist in nature and was built on the ethical principles of egalitarianism and freedom of conscience, principles that sat comfortably with socialism and were shared by the emerging I. L. P. As such, the Labour Church's theology, doctrine and socio-political function made it fundamentally different from its contemporaries and predecessors.²⁷

Jacqueline Turner examined the claim that John Trevor's tendency to call the Labour Church 'the soul of the labour movement' expressed his interpretation of Socialism. While she acknowledges fundamental differences between the Labour Church and other Socialist bodies of the period, Turner challenges Eric Hobsbawm and Stephen Yeo who looked at Trevor's organisation as being a cult and a sect. She argues that,

The Labour Church congregations were no more a sect or cult than members of the ILP, Fabian Society or SDF, no more than the Guild of St Matthew, the New Life or the Brotherhood Churches, and certainly a lot less than the Salvation Army and other socio-religious organizations.²⁸

The main basis to Turner's argument is that the Labour Church did not demand the exclusivity of a sect or cult, as its theology emphasised personal development, social collectivism and political co-operation. But what is not taken seriously is the uniqueness of Trevor's claims for the Labour Church within the wider Labour movement, claims

²⁷ Jacqueline Turner, 'The Soul of the Labour Movement: Rediscovering the Labour Church 1893 – 1914', 9.

²⁸ Ibid., 76.

which when taken seriously made the organisation not a cult or sect, as Yeo and Hobsbawm claimed, but a new religion. Turner points to the non-doctrinal and non-sectarian statements of the Labour Church's founding principles to refute that it was cultic in nature, but to highlight Trevor's belief that his organisation was the soul of the Labour movement is to assert a distinctive theology which sets the Labour Church apart from other Socialist groups and the Christian denominations. Turner is right to argue that "Trevor wanted to create a truly egalitarian and ethical, socialist-inspired church dedicated to righting social injustice."²⁹ But the foundation of the Labour Church, she claims, was "Ethical rather than Christian Socialism",³⁰ and while that may be true with regard to the latter ideology, this chapter argues that Ethical Socialism is not an adequate definition of the background and development of the Labour Church movement.

Although they would be generally classified as Ethical Socialists, who made their politics into a form of religious crusade,³¹ the Labour Church's Theological Socialists were distinct in their beliefs. While accepting Jacqueline Turner's argument that "the emergence of ethical socialism forms the backdrop to the birth of the Labour Church",³² this thesis rejects her conclusion that it was the 'bedrock' of the organisation as this loses sight of the Labour Church's theological understanding. This section tests our own perception of the Labour Church by looking at who the Theological Socialists were in practice, the reasons why they felt drawn to the movement, and their contributions to it. Such was the diversity of Labour Church members that the section is sub-divided into

²⁹ Ibid., 79.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Michael Robertson, *Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples*, 225.

³² Jacqueline Turner, 'The Soul of the Labour Movement', 77.

particular categories so that the breadth of interests amongst the activists is acknowledged.

3:3 (i) The Mentor

John Trevor wrote about Philip Wicksteed, “that, from the first, he understood what I meant by the Labour Church.”³³ The reasons why such a man understood Trevor’s vision for the Labour Church has not been fully examined. To understand the significance of Philip Wicksteed to Trevor and the Labour Church requires an examination of his background. Wicksteed descended from a family of notable English nonconformists who took pride in their religious independence.³⁴ His father-in-law, Henry Solly, had been a Christian Chartist in the 1840s,³⁵ whose greatest achievement was the founding of the Working Men’s Club and Institute Union in 1862.³⁶ From Wicksteed’s student years at University College, London, under the tutelage of the College Hall’s Warden and Professor of History, Edward Spencer Beesly, he appreciated the significance of Positivism as a way of life based on social responsibility, something that he felt was not found in the Christian denominations of Britain.³⁷ This led him to commit time to the University Extension Programme, for which he gave nearly three hundred lectures across Britain from 1887 until 1918.³⁸ He became involved with ‘The New Brotherhood of Christ’, which was inspired by *Robert Elsmere*, a novel written by Mary Augusta Ward

³³ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 219.

³⁴ C. H. Herford, *Philip Henry Wicksteed: His Life and Work*, 2.

³⁵ A. Rushton, ‘Henry Solly (1813-1903)’ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), accessed on March 5, 2010, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/37991>

³⁶ M. K. Smith, ‘Henry Solly and the Working Men’s Club and Institute Union’, *Encyclopaedia of Informal Education*, (2001), accessed on March 7, 2010, www.infed.org/thinkers/solly.htm

³⁷ C. H. Herford, *Philip Henry Wicksteed*, 189.

³⁸ Ian Steedman, ‘Wicksteed, Philip Henry (1844-1927), Unitarian minister and economist’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (2004), accessed on April 14, 2008, www.oxforddnb.com

with its emphasis on the social ideals of Jesus. The purpose of the New Brotherhood was to raise the lives of its working class members to more improved levels of cultural understanding and moral relationships.³⁹ But Wicksteed is remembered for his interest in the impact of economics on people's welfare. He developed his own economic theories over thirty years, expressing a committed belief that it is humanity, both as individuals and as society, which shapes and drives the economic system and not the system that determines itself.⁴⁰

In 1874 Wicksteed succeeded James Martineau, the eminent and influential Unitarian philosopher and church leader, as the minister of Little Portland Street, which was recognised to be "one of the focuses of spiritual religion in London."⁴¹ The congregation, many of whom had themselves descended from the same nonconformist family as Wicksteed, and still held Martineau in membership, was challenged by, and in return, challenged, their new minister. Wicksteed's 23 year ministry to that congregation offered up many opportunities, including the nurturing of a young minister called John Trevor. Trevor came to Little Portland Street in November 1888 to act as Wicksteed's assistant. During the 17 months of their shared ministry, Wicksteed had encouraged Trevor's thinking about the relationship between religion and politics as he grappled with the role of the church addressing social problems.⁴² By the end of that period in London, Trevor

³⁹ Timothy Sprigge, 'Mrs. Humphry Ward', *Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Historical Society*, (1999), accessed on May 28, 2008, <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/maryaugustaward.html>

⁴⁰ Philip H. Wicksteed, *The Common Sense of Political Economy, including a Study of the Human Basis of Economic Law* (London: Macmillan, 1910).

⁴¹ C. H. Herford, *Philip Henry Wicksteed: His Life and Work*, 77.

⁴² John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 219.

described himself as a Socialist, though he noted that Wicksteed “would not accept the name without considerable qualification.”⁴³

As the minister of Upper Brook Street Free Church in Manchester, John Trevor returned to London in the spring of 1891 for the Triennial Conference of Unitarian and other Free Churches. The final meeting of the conference was held under the title of ‘The Church and Social Questions’, and, as noted in a previous chapter, Wicksteed shared the platform with Ben Tillett, the trade union leader. Trevor wrote of the meeting, “Wicksteed was magnificent. Tillett burst on the audience like a Titan . . . both these men almost prophesied the Labour Church”.⁴⁴ Wicksteed and Tillett had condemned the practice of the established denominations for supporting the unjust systems of British society, resulting in the alienation of the working class. Tillett argued that if this situation was not resolved by the churches then “the workers would provide churches for themselves”.⁴⁵ Within a matter of months Trevor had conceived the concept of the Labour Church and turned to the man who had become his mentor for approval and support.

The germinal impulse was given and a talk with a working-man, who enjoyed Trevor’s sermons but could not stand his congregation, sufficed to strike out the idea of a Labour Church. Wicksteed instantly accepted an idea, which was, in effect, the keystone of the arch he was himself rearing, and gave it from the outset

⁴³ Ibid., 220.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 239.

⁴⁵ Stanley Pierson, ‘John Trevor and the Labor Church Movement in England, 1891-1900, 465.

the support of his incomparably richer experience, larger culture, and weightier thought.⁴⁶

The Labour Church as ‘the keystone of the arch’ Wicksteed was rearing is his biographer’s reference to the commitment to those causes which addressed injustice and promoted self-improvement and self-help. C. H. Herford expounds on this point, the Labour Church “was to create wants rather than to relieve them, to discipline as well as to console.”⁴⁷ It has been acknowledged, Wicksteed’s understanding of the new movement is outlined in the very first front page article of *Labour Prophet* ‘Is the Labour Church a Class Church?’, in which he denies that the new organisation was an attempt to deepen class divisions, rather, the Labour Church arose to re-address the priorities of British society, “WE HAVE A STATE OF SLAVERY in which the worker has not his fair share of life, and the man who has a rich life does not do his fair share of work.”⁴⁸ Wicksteed argued that democracy would be achieved only when the professional classes, such as doctors, public officials and directors of industry, focussed on the needs of the workers.

On the 3rd February 1892 Philip Wicksteed travelled north to address the third Labour Church gathering in Manchester, and his account of the occasion was published in *Labour Prophet*, describing “the purposeful air with which the six or seven hundred members of my congregation gathered.”⁴⁹ This article by Wicksteed is reproduced in Appendix 2, as it gives us a contemporary description of an early Labour Church event.

⁴⁶ C. H. Herford, *Philip Henry Wicksteed*, 219.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁴⁸ *Labour Prophet*, January 1892, 1.

⁴⁹ *Labour Prophet*, February 1892, 10.

Back in London he brought together a group of University Hall students in order to convey his impressions of the Labour Church.⁵⁰ Wicksteed paid tribute to his former assistant,

[Labour Church] has been shaped by a single man, and he a man with little physical strength, with no pretence to eloquence, with no means, and with no influence, save such as spring from absolute devotion and singleness of purpose and the passion inspired by a great idea.⁵¹

What Wicksteed admires is Trevor's "great idea" that "GOD IS IN THE LABOUR MOVEMENT. This is the word of our prophecy",⁵² as Trevor explained in the first edition of *Labour Prophet*. This simple concept appealed to Wicksteed, the nonconformist Radical and subjective economist, because it spoke of

the attempt to abolish slavery and realise the brotherhood of man, so that no class of society shall exist for the purpose of looking after the material wealth of another class, but that things shall exist for the sake of men, and not men for the sake of things.⁵³

Wicksteed was a regular contributor to *Labour Prophet*; articles, sermons and quotations were published, along with a children's story by his son, Joseph Hartley Wicksteed, for the Cinderella Supplement⁵⁴ and advertisements for pamphlets written by his brother Charles addressing land nationalisation.⁵⁵ In an extract from a sermon entitled 'The

⁵⁰ C. H. Herford, *Philip Henry Wicksteed*, 222.

⁵¹ *Labour Prophet*, February 1892, 11.

⁵² *Labour Prophet*, January 1892, 4.

⁵³ *Labour Prophet*, May 1892, 35.

⁵⁴ *Labour Prophet*, February – April 1895.

⁵⁵ *Labour Prophet*, October 1892, 80.

Hope of the People', Wicksteed links faith in the coming of the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus with the emancipation of humanity through democracy. He condemns the pessimism of the privileged "old order" and places his hopes in the "new order" because "its hope is founded upon faith."⁵⁶ 'Religion and Life' is an essay in which Wicksteed draws on Comte, Dante, Wordsworth, Charles Wesley, Francis of Assisi, Coleridge and William Morris to express the notion of divine altruism:

The bearing of Religion upon our views of Society and the social relations and duties is in a certain sense indirect. For the primary significance of Religion is to be found in its revelation to us of a personal life which is, in and for itself, supremely worthy . . . The formula "live for others" implies a life worth living.⁵⁷

In this simple message is found the bedrock of all of his convictions, the very motivation of his concern for economics, his tireless lecturing for University Extension, and his commitment to the Labour Church. Although the label Socialist was not something Wicksteed would have adopted without clarification, his passion was for an egalitarianism which he championed through his writing and addresses. Wicksteed concludes 'The Advent of the People' with the words,

The Democratic movement of the day is based on a new confidence in the broadening and deepening power of fellowship, bearing with it a heightened sense of the possibilities of life, a new vision of the promised land, and renewed faith in the kingdom of God on earth. In a word, it is a new Messianic movement.⁵⁸

Philip Wicksteed's final major contribution to the Labour Church was the tract *What does the Labour Church stand for?*, in which he refutes the accusation that the movement

⁵⁶ *Labour Prophet*, July 1893, 58.

⁵⁷ *Labour Prophet*, May 1894, 57.

⁵⁸ *Labour Prophet*, September 1894, 119.

existed to create more social division, instead, arguing that it would “usher in a new era of human happiness and goodness.”⁵⁹

John Trevor’s temporary departure from the Labour Church as an organisation in 1896, seems to mark the disassociation of his mentor from a movement which he held with such high hopes that it would “usher in a new era”. Wicksteed’s commitment to Trevor and his vision for the Labour Church indicates the attraction across a broad social and political spectrum of the Labour movement during the 1890s. Wicksteed was not comfortable with the term Socialist due to its association with Marxist theory which he had argued against, but he still affiliated himself with a cause that had the potential of furthering democracy in Britain by establishing an egalitarian society in which the welfare of all citizens was the priority. This vision was embraced by a diverse group of people who had varied interests and agendas, whether these were universal suffrage or vegetarianism, and the consequence was the emergence of numerous organisations, some of which held to a very clear focus on one specific cause, while others welcomed the diversity. The Labour Church was a movement with a particular theological take on the Socialism that attempted to include and nurture the variety of the wider Labour movement for the greater good. For a person of wide interests and passions, such as Philip Wicksteed, the Labour Church epitomised a true religious organisation as it sought the economic, educational and social improvement of the working class, which is why he can be classified as a Theological Socialist, even though he may not have used the term for himself.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁶⁰ C. H. Herford, *Philip Henry Wicksteed*, 227.

3:3 (ii) The Clarion Phenomenon

Within weeks of the first Labour Church service being held, Robert Blatchford published the first issue of a new penny Socialist weekly called *Clarion* on 12th December 1891 from a small office situated on the city's Corporation Street. These two events, so close in time and location, would lead to the development of intertwined movements; while the Labour Church was launched with a gathering of four thousand people, the first issue of *Clarion* was hampered by its publicity posters being washed away by heavy rain.⁶¹ Yet the immediate success of the newspaper was based upon Blatchford's established popularity as a journalist for the Manchester newspaper *Sunday Chronicle*, writing under the penname 'Nunquam Dormio' ('I never sleep'), shortened to Nunquam.⁶² Robert Blatchford, the son of strolling actors, joined the army for steady employment at the age of twenty and rose to the rank of sergeant major. His army career fashioned his patriotic views, which would in later life lead Blatchford to become an ardent Conservative, but it was as a journalist reporting on the conditions of the slums of Manchester during the 1880s that turned his thoughts to Socialism.⁶³ As Nunquam, Blatchford gained a working class readership because of his gift of being "able to write movingly about injustice and inequality and to present a Socialist argument clearly."⁶⁴ During the early 1890s Robert Blatchford was a relentless advocate of the possibilities of the growing British Labour movement.

⁶¹ Anonymous. *The Clarion Movement, 1891-1914* (Salford: Working Class Movement Library, 2008), accessed on June 16, 2009, www.wcml.org.uk/group/clarion.htm

⁶² J. F. Laird and J. Saville, 'Blatchford, Robert Peel Glanville (1851-1943) Socialist Journalist' in J. M. Bellamy and J. Saville, J. (editors) *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, volume 4 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 1977), 35.

⁶³ J. W. Osborne, 'Robert Blatchford: Neglected Socialist', *Journal of the Rutgers University Libraries*, volume 58 (1997): 62.

⁶⁴ Anonymous. *The Clarion Movement, 1891-1914*.

In 1895 *Clarion*'s editorial office left its Manchester base and relocated to London's Fleet Street, where the headquarters of Britain's national press were to be found. This symbolic move to the neighbourhood of mainstream newspapers indicated the growing popularity of Blatchford's weekly, the circulation of which would increase steadily to reach over 80,000 by 1908.⁶⁵ From 1891 until the outbreak of the First World War, *Clarion* became a phenomenon within the broader Labour movement as it inspired a wide range of activities and organisations, including choirs, rambling clubs and dramatic societies, many of them with direct links to local Labour Churches.⁶⁶ But as Krista Cowman has noted, the two organisations remained separate though conjoined in a number of places.⁶⁷

The spirit of the *Clarion* movement was inherited from the thinking of Blatchford's "older socialist contemporary, William Morris, that life should be harmonious."⁶⁸ A high point for the *Clarion* movement came with the publication of Blatchford's *Merrie England* in 1893, which was a collection of letters, originally serialised in *Clarion*, addressed to an imaginary 'John Smith of Oldham' in which he argues the case for Socialism.⁶⁹ John Trevor reviewed *Merrie England* in *Labour Prophet* with the opening sentence, "I question whether there exists anywhere a nobler defence of Socialism than this."⁷⁰ Two million copies of *Merrie England* were sold worldwide,⁷¹ and, over half a

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ J. F. Laird and J. Saville, 'Blatchford, Robert Peel Glanville', 37.

⁶⁷ Krista Cowman, 'A Peculiarly English Institution: Work, Rest, and Play in the Labour Church', 365.

⁶⁸ J. W. Osborne, 'Robert Blatchford: Neglected Socialist', 64.

⁶⁹ Robert Blatchford, *Merrie England* (Manchester: The *Clarion* Press, 1893), 123.

⁷⁰ *Labour Prophet*, December 1893, 124.

⁷¹ Anonymous. *The Clarion Movement, 1891-1914*.

century after its publication, it was stated “that for every British convert [to Socialism] made by *Das Kapital* there were a hundred made by *Merrie England*”.⁷²

The most far reaching outcome from the partnership between the Clarion movement and a local Labour Church resulted with the founding of the first Clarion Cycling Club. In February 1894 at the Labour Church meeting on Constitution Hill in Birmingham, six young men met to combine their two great delights, cycling and Socialism.⁷³ The leader of the group was Tom Groom, who would later lead the Birmingham Labour Church and then gain a national profile through Socialist sports associations. The relationship between the new cycling club, which was named after the members’ favourite Socialist newspaper, and the Labour Church was of significance in the early days of the new Clarion venture. Stephen Jones’ work on working class sport and politics writes of that relationship, “Not only did the club co-operate ‘harmoniously’ with the Labour Church, but also was ‘empowered to vote any surplus cash to the Labour Movement’.”⁷⁴ Clarion Cycle Clubs spread from Birmingham to the Potteries, Liverpool, Bradford and Barnsley within a matter of months, so that by 1895 there were thirty local clubs and seventy by 1897.⁷⁵ These cycling groups led to a flowering of activities with the development of the propagandist Clarion Scouts and Clarion Vans. Robert Tressell’s novel *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* is a celebration of the influence of Blatchford’s writings on the promotion of the Socialist cause, and offers an insight into the work of the members of

⁷² Laurence Thompson, *Robert Blatchford: Portrait of an Englishman* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1951), 101.

⁷³ Anonymous. *The Clarion Movement, 1891-1914*.

⁷⁴ S. G. Jones, *Sport, politics and the working class: Organised labour and sport in interwar Britain* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1988), 31.

⁷⁵ Anonymous. *The Clarion Movement, 1891-1914*.

Clarion Cycle Clubs in this passionate pursuit.⁷⁶ The spirit of these early utopian days of the British Labour movement, as expressed by both the Labour Church and *Clarion*-inspired activities, was kept alive by Tom Groom. He became the chairman of the national Clarion Cycling Club, which brought him into contact with international Socialist sports federations. A “convinced internationalist”,⁷⁷ as Stephen Jones describes him, Groom continued to proclaim a message of ‘Peace through Sport’ into the 1930s.⁷⁸

Robert Blatchford’s *Clarion* and his writings, which inspired a wide variety of activities leading to a movement that functioned as a Socialist network, had close ties to the Labour Church, both nationally and locally. In many parts of the country where the Labour Church and Clarion movements co-existed there was an agreement that during the winter period the Labour Church would take the lead in organising its services, lectures and other activities, but when the weather became more pleasant it would be the local Clarion Cycling Club and associated rambling club that would arrange the pursuits for Labour activists.⁷⁹ Although both organisations were founded within weeks of each other, and depended upon one another for mutual support and shared responsibility for the promotion of the cause of the Labour movement, by the end of the 1890s tensions were becoming evident. D. F. Summers writes about the disentanglement of the movements initiated by two close associates, Trevor and Blatchford, writing “it is true that Clarion activities diverted attention of members away from the church.”⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Robert Tressell, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1955 / first published 1914), 462.

⁷⁷ S. G. Jones, *Sport, politics and the working class*, 75.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁷⁹ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 117.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

The partnership between the Labour Church and the network of Clarion activities was of mutual benefit during the first half of the 1890s, as between them a wide programme of moral and spiritual lectures, political campaigns, philanthropic projects and leisure pursuits was promoted. But the Clarion movement's emphasis on fellowship and pleasure began to challenge commitment to the earnest convictions of the Labour Church. In his thesis on the Socialism of Blatchford and *Clarion*, L. J. W. Barrow offers an explanation for the inevitable conflicting interests between the two Labour organisations, that being the emphasis of Blatchford's Socialism on collectivism while Trevor stressed the importance of individualism.⁸¹ Although Barrow's conclusion does not acknowledge that both men recognised the tension between corporate and personal commitment; it is clear that by the 1900s local Labour Church members were deciding whether their own Socialism was broadly Ethical or specifically Theological.

3:3 (iii) Creating an Independent Press

Robert Blatchford's conversion to Socialism in the late 1880s was reflected in his articles for *Sunday Chronicle*, "to the growing dismay of its proprietor", Edward Hulton.⁸² Eventually the newspaper owner confronted his popular journalist and insisted that he toned down the political aspects of his writings, to which Blatchford is reported to have replied, "You will not have Socialism in your paper – and I won't write anything else."⁸³ His resignation was an inevitable acceptance that the mainstream British press was not the vehicle for new, radical political theories, because the established newspapers

⁸¹ L. J. W. Barrow, 'The socialism of Robert Blatchford and the 'Clarion' 1889 – 1918', (Ph. D. thesis, Birbeck, University of London, 1975), 209.

⁸² J. F. Laird and J. Saville, 'Blatchford, Robert Peel Glanville', 35.

⁸³ Anonymous. *The Clarion Movement, 1891-1914*.

expressed the opinions of their affluent owners. Blatchford realised that if Socialist ideas were going to reach the working class then there was a need for independent newspapers that were not reliant on rich benefactors for their survival. His departure from *Sunday Chronicle* was followed by the resignations of four other members of its staff: Alex Thompson ('Dangle') the staff artist, and journalists William Palmer ('Whiffly Puncto'), Montagu Blatchford – Robert's brother ('Mont Blog') and Edward Francis Fay ('The Bounder'). With Robert Blatchford as editor, these four men became his staff team of the new *Clarion*.⁸⁴

A month after the first edition of *Clarion* rolled off the printing presses, John Trevor launched "The Organ of the Labour Church", *Labour Prophet*.⁸⁵ Trevor had also recognised the need for a means of communicating with the growing numbers of Labour Church members across Britain, and that this means had to be free of external editorial control and the biases of financiers, so with the support of friends and close associates, including Philip Wicksteed, an independent monthly publication became the channel of news and views for the spreading movement under the editorship of Trevor, himself.⁸⁶ Blatchford became regular contributor to *Labour Prophet*, which boosted the sales of the monthly because of his large readership and the increasing popularity of *Clarion*.⁸⁷ Blatchford had aligned himself with the idea of the Labour Church by being the speaker at the second service, when he had addressed an over-crowded hall with a lecture entitled

⁸⁴ J. F. Laird and J. Saville, 'Blatchford, Robert Peel Glanville', 36.

⁸⁵ *Labour Prophet*, January 1892, 4.

⁸⁶ J. Saville, and R. Storey, 'Trevor, John (1855 – 1930) Founder of the Labour Church', 250.

⁸⁷ J. F. Laird and J. Saville, 'Blatchford, Robert Peel Glanville', 36.

‘Sunshine and Shadows’.⁸⁸ For the first four years of *Labour Prophet* the name of Robert Blatchford or Nunquam were frequent features, through articles, advertisements and other references. In the June 1893 edition, Trevor paid tribute to his colleague and regular contributor in the article ‘How Nunquam Does It’ in which he describes that through years of hard graft Blatchford had honed his writing skills, making him the most popular voice of contemporary Socialism among working people.⁸⁹ Trevor uses the example of the admired Nunquam to appeal to the readers of *Labour Prophet* to discover their own dormant skills and to develop these for the sake of the broader movement as expressed by its independent press.

The person who would take over the editing of *Labour Church Record* from Trevor in 1901, Allen Clarke, began his career as a journalist with his own independent publication *Labour Light*, which began in 1890. Clarke’s biographer, Paul Salveson, writes,

Like many bright young working class intellectuals he wanted to nudge his people out of their seemingly docile acceptance of landlordism, the factory system and supine leaders. The *Labour Light* was an attempt to convert the masses to socialism, with all the enthusiasm of youth.⁹⁰

Clarke founded *Teddy Ashton’s Journal*, later renamed *Teddy Ashton’s Northern Weekly*, in 1896, and it would be this newspaper that established his reputation as a Socialist journalist beyond his native Lancashire on to the national scene.⁹¹ A strong friendship was struck up between Clarke and Blatchford as they shared both the same political

⁸⁸ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 12.

⁸⁹ *Labour Prophet*, June 1893, 51.

⁹⁰ Paul Salveson, *Lancashire’s Romantic Radical: The life and writings of Allen Clarke / Teddy Ashton* (Huddersfield: Little Northern Books, 2009), 29.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

outlook and the belief in an independent Socialist press to be the means of propagating the movement. But their friendship was damaged by Blatchford's support for the Boer War and re-armament, which Clarke opposed.⁹² Clarke was active within local Labour politics, being selected as the joint I. L. P. and S. D. F. parliamentary candidate for Rochdale in 1900, and a committed member of the Bolton Labour Church which was led by Jim Sims.⁹³ Both Clarke and Sims took up leadership roles within the Labour Church Union in the early-twentieth century. Allen Clarke promoted the cause of the Labour Church through his writings, including reference to the 'Equality Church', which was based on the Bolton Labour Church, in his novel *For a Man's Sake*, the tale of a woman mill worker who becomes politicised at one of the church's meetings.⁹⁴ As noted in a previous chapter, Clarke tried to re-launch the Labour Church as a national organisation under the banner of the 'Goodwill Church' as editor of the *Labour Church Record*,⁹⁵ a reflection of his own libertarian belief in a broad form of Socialism, which he shared with contemporary figures such as Edward Carpenter.⁹⁶ The diverse culture of British Socialism was reflected in the pages of *Teddy Ashton's Northern Weekly* between 1896 and 1908, as Clarke published articles about the works of Carpenter, Whitman and Tolstoy.⁹⁷ Salveson writes of Allen Clarke's spiritual beliefs as "broad, inclusive and tolerant. His world view was a simple but consistent one, with compassion at its core."⁹⁸

⁹² Paul Salveson, *Socialism with a Northern Accent: Radical traditions for modern times* (London: Lawrence and Wishart Limited, 2012), 94.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁹⁴ Salveson, *Lancashire's Romantic Radical*, 33.

⁹⁵ *Labour Church Record*, January 1901, 5.

⁹⁶ Paul Salveson, *Socialism with a Northern Accent*, 100.

⁹⁷ Paul Salveston, *Lancashire's Romantic Radical*, 37.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

In 1898 John Arthur Fallows returned to the place of his birth, Birmingham, and became very actively involved in the Socialist activities of the city, including the local Labour Church and Socialist Centre.⁹⁹ From June 1899 to February 1902 Fallows edited a free quarterly publication called *Pioneer*, which aimed ‘to unite all Midland Socialists’.¹⁰⁰ He had recognised the need within the West Midlands for an independent means of informing and connecting the various organisations and clubs that were associated with the local Labour movement. *Pioneer* contained reports from the different groups and acted as a constantly updated directory of the contact details for each organisation, which would have been a great benefit to the smaller organisations. The quarterly *Labour Church Record* which began in 1898¹⁰¹ had in its January 1901 edition a short advertisement stating,

The Pioneer (a quarterly magazine for Midland Socialists), gratis, edited by Arthur Fallows, M.A., in its current issue contains articles on “Trade, and How to Improve it”, “The Verdict of the People”, by Rebecca Wicksteed, etc. It may be had, for the cost of postage (½d.) from the Editor, 110 Hill-street, Birmingham.¹⁰²

Fallows’ newspaper could not be sustained, finishing just over a year after the publication of the advertisement,¹⁰³ but it serves as a good example of a local, independent Labour paper, which followed in the shadow of the nationals, such as *Clarion* and *Labour Prophet*, but with a regional agenda offering a similar service to the Socialists of

⁹⁹ D. E. Martin, ‘Fallows, John Arthur (1864-1935) Clergyman, Socialist Councillor and Journalist’ in J. M. Bellamy and J. Saville, (editors) *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, volume 2 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 1974), 133.

¹⁰⁰ George J. Barnsby, *Birmingham Working People*, 361.

¹⁰¹ J. Saville, and R. Storey, ‘Trevor, John (1855 – 1930) Founder of the Labour Church’, 250.

¹⁰² *Labour Church Record*, January 1901, 2.

¹⁰³ George J. Barnsby, *Birmingham Working People*, 361.

Birmingham as Allen Clarke's *Teddy Ashton's Northern Weekly* catered for Lancashire and the North West of England.

The creation of an independent press within the Labour movement meant that there were clear channels for communication and co-ordination between organisations and their members. The Labour Church attracted journalists such as Blatchford, Clarke and Fallows as it offered another opportunity to communicate the message of the Labour movement. Each of these men became Theological Socialists in the 1890s for different reasons. Blatchford was a populist and opportunist who saw in the Labour Church an opening to connect with a nonconformist culture which framed much of northern working class life. Later, he would publically distance himself from Christianity with the publication in 1903 of *God and My Neighbour*, where he advocates “the religion of Humanism [which] concerns itself solely with the good of humanity”.¹⁰⁴ Clarke and Fallows were drawn to the Labour Church as it gave them the opportunity to communicate and associate with others who wanted to relate theological belief to their political convictions. For all three of these proponents of the independent Socialist press, the Theological Socialism of the Labour Church offered a breadth and depth of understanding from across the Labour movement which opened up creative engagement for rigorous debate.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Blatchford, *God and My Neighbour* (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2010 / first published 1903), 185.

3:3 (iv) The Cinderella Clubs

The strongest bond between the Labour Church and Clarion movements was their involvement in the Cinderella Clubs. Robert Blatchford had founded the first Cinderella Club in Manchester while working at *Sunday Chronicle* during the autumn of 1889. The purpose of the club was to offer social and educational activities for the children living in the slum communities of the city.¹⁰⁵ The club's work was adopted by the Manchester and Salford Labour Church in 1892,¹⁰⁶ and other clubs were formed, including expanding the work in Bradford.¹⁰⁷ The following year in the May 1893 edition of *Labour Prophet* a new *Cinderella Supplement* was added for younger readers. John Trevor wrote in that month's editorial about the new addition, stating that its contents were "dealing with all matters relating to the physical and mental development of slum children."¹⁰⁸ The first supplement included Charles Perrault's story of Cinderella,¹⁰⁹ poems, readings and a report of the work in Manchester and Salford and an upcoming conference for activists in the various Cinderella Clubs.¹¹⁰ In an appeal to the Theological Socialists, the writer of an article entitled 'Cinderella Schools: A New Departure' wrote,

Every Labour Church should make it one of its first duties to care for poor children. For the members themselves it will be far better and more profitable work than a deal of spouting on platforms. Our movement, so far has been chiefly puffed up. The time has come when we must resolutely set our hands to build it up. Let us make a start with the children.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ J. F. Laird and J. Saville, 'Blatchford, Robert Peel Glanville', 37.

¹⁰⁶ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 127.

¹⁰⁷ *Labour Prophet*, May 1893, 43.

¹⁰⁸ *Labour Prophet*, May 1893, 38.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

Such appeals, reports of activities in different cities, and the contribution of stories from Nunquam in the Cinderella Supplements, led to the growth of the work of Cinderella Clubs across parts of Britain through the commitment of Labour Church members.¹¹² The number of clubs increased well beyond the turn of the century, and from 1897 the Cinderella Club in Birmingham was recognised to be was the largest in the country.¹¹³ The significance of the Cinderella Clubs to the life of the Labour Church was that they appealed to those Socialists who wanted to put their convictions into practice in ways that were tangible and measurable. The Labour Church's Cinderella activities expressed a visible application of Theological Socialism, the belief that God was working in the Labour movement for the sake of the most vulnerable within society.

3:3 (v) Disillusioned Clerics

Eric Hobsbawm, in his first assessment of the Labour Church, summed up the movement and its founder in a few short sentences:

After a period of childhood pietism [Trevor] lost his faith in the middle 1870s, but regained it, after a period of doubt, in the form of an extremely attenuated deism. The 1880s added a social conscience to his theological perplexities. He tried, with the help of Philip Wicksteed, to find a niche in Unitarianism, but grew dissatisfied with all organized religion and founded the Labour Church. Its theology is difficult to describe, because it hardly existed. It was certainly not Christian in any traditional sense.¹¹⁴

¹¹² D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 133.

¹¹³ *Labour Prophet*, December 1897, 261.

¹¹⁴ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, 143.

Founded by one, other disillusioned clerics would play important roles in the leadership of the Labour Church at national and local levels. J. H. Belcher, who served the Labour Church Union as its president and treasurer, trained for the Presbyterian ministry before working in the Congregationalist and Unitarian denominations, and another president of the Union, D. B. Foster, was a former Wesleyan local preacher.¹¹⁵ Fred Brocklehurst assisted the vicar of St Luke's Church in Barrow-in-Furness as a lay reader and parish worker, before entering Queen's College, Cambridge in 1890. He took a curacy in West Acton during 1892, but his experience of the poverty in Barrow and his theological studies which led him to ask social and political questions meant that Brocklehurst abandoned his plans of priesthood in the Anglican Church.¹¹⁶ He met Trevor at the inaugural service of the Labour Church, a meeting recalled in the editorial article of *Labour Prophet* in January 1893, when Trevor announced to the movement that Fred Brocklehurst was to serve as the General Secretary of the Labour Church Union, replacing H. A. Atkinson. Writing of Brocklehurst's previous clerical career, John Trevor wrote,

. . . I have no doubt that if he had remained in the English Church he would have reached a very good position in it. However that may be, I know that in joining us he is making very serious social and financial sacrifices, which are a sufficient proof of the sincerity of his purpose. Those who know what it is to break away from old religious and political associations, and to join a new and despised

¹¹⁵ K. S. Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England*, 308-309.

¹¹⁶ N. Reid, 'Brocklehurst, Fredrick (1866-1926) Socialist and Secretary of the Labour Church Union', in J. M. Bellamy and J. Saville, (editors) *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, volume 6 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 1982), 39.

cause, will understand and sympathise with the position in which he finds himself.¹¹⁷

The term “despised cause” would become an internal reality, when Trevor locked horns with the new General Secretary over the soul of the Labour Church. Another young former curate, J. A. Fallows, worked in the parish of St Andrew’s, Stockwell before becoming the curate at St Mary’s in Huntingdon. An active member of Stewart Headlam’s Christian Socialist organisation the Guild of St. Matthew, Fallows was ordained into the Church of England in 1891 but renounced Holy Orders and embraced Unitarianism, becoming a minister of that denomination in Guildford.¹¹⁸ His growing interest in Socialism led Fallows to return to Birmingham, when he became increasing involvement with the city’s Labour groups, including the Labour Church to which he acted as secretary.

That people who had understood a sense of vocation for their lives should become both disillusioned with the institution in which they had committed themselves, and then determined to discover a new home where they could express their ideals, is not surprising because of the standards to which they set their values. But what is more confusing is why disillusioned clerics would align themselves with a new home called ‘Church’. The prevalent socio-cultural acceptance of the Christian meta-narrative in late nineteenth century Britain meant that those who rejected the concept of Christianity and looked to other sources for inspiration would often appeal to the Christian narrative to

¹¹⁷ *Labour Prophet*, January 1893,.4.

¹¹⁸ D. E. Martin, ‘Fallows, John Arthur (1864-1935)’, 133.

give credence to their new cause because of the recognition that the use of familiar concepts would connect their listeners or readers to their aspirations.

James William Wallace, leader of the Whitmanite Eagle Street College in Bolton, who became associated with the Labour Church,¹¹⁹ spoke of his fellowship in ecclesiastical terms months before the first Labour Church meeting, “Let us make our little *College* a church! a church where, without formulas or ritual, with honest freedom of opinion and speech, we may nevertheless meet ‘in His name’.”¹²⁰ The reference to ‘His name’ was about deference to Walt Whitman and not Jesus Christ, and the phraseology regarding no formulas or rituals connected to the basic concept of the Labour Church as envisioned by John Trevor. A prevalent understanding was that every society needed an institution traditionally called ‘Church’ to be the proprietor of shared beliefs, aspirations and rituals, particularly at times of social change. It would seem that some former Christian ministers became Theological Socialists because they found a natural home in the Labour Church movement as an organisation that both welcomed a wide understanding of Socialism and unified this diversity by sanctifying the overall ideal.

3:3 (vi) The Carpenter Circle

England, arise! The long long night is over,
Faint in the east behold the dawn appear;
Out of your evil dream of toil and sorrow
Arise, O England, for the day is here.

¹¹⁹ Michael Robertson, *Worshipping Walt*, 226.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 217.

From your fields and hills

Hark! the answer swells:

Arise, O England, for the day is here.¹²¹

One of the songs that was included in each of the four editions of *Labour Church Hymn Book* published between 1892 and 1912 was “England, arise!” by Edward Carpenter. Its message is one of stirring the nation to awaken to the dawn of a new utopian era, and it remained a popular anthem within the British Labour movement for several decades.

Carpenter was a writer and social activist, who with the publication of his frequently revised, free-verse poem *Towards Democracy* gained the reputation of being the ‘English Walt Whitman’.¹²² Originally published in pamphlet form in 1883, Carpenter’s poem declares the need for personal freedom within a democratic society, and the literary work grew in influence as Socialism developed across Britain. In her biography of Edward Carpenter, Sheila Rowbotham has written of the importance of *Towards Democracy*:

During the early 1890s the egalitarian mysticism which had been the impulse behind *Towards Democracy* struck a profound chord among the growing numbers joining the labour movement. The ILP, Clarion and the Labour Church movement were attracting a new generation of upper-working-class and lower-middle-class spiritual searchers. In moving away from the established Christian churches, they still articulated their socialism in quasi-religious terms. Moreover they wanted not only economic changes but new kinds of human relationships in society and personal life.¹²³

¹²¹ John Trevor (editor), *Labour Church Hymn Book* (1892), 5.

¹²² Michael Robertson, *Worshipping Walt*, 179.

¹²³ Sheila Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter: a Life of Liberty and Love* (London and New York: Verso, 2008), 173.

A consequence of the growing popularity of the poem and its message to new Socialists was that Carpenter drew a circle of followers and admirers around him, including members of the Eagle Street College and those who appreciated him from afar, such as Labour Church activists Allen Clarke and Frank Mathews, secretary of the Birmingham Cinderella Club. From the 1880s, Carpenter began to explore involvement in some of the small Socialist societies, as he “was more comfortable amidst the more non-aligned organisations that appeared alongside or flourished on the periphery of the ILP”¹²⁴ including the Labour Church, to which he was a frequent speaker for congregations across the country. *Labour Prophet* was one of the publications that became an outlet for Carpenter’s writings in the 1890s, as it promoted a breadth of ideological and theological positions embraced within contemporary Socialism and was not aligned to one specific political party.¹²⁵ In his autobiography, *My Days and Dreams*, Carpenter makes a specific reference to one article he wrote for *Labour Prophet* in which he recalls “the genesis of *Towards Democracy*”.¹²⁶ In 1899 Carpenter published a series of essays based on articles and lectures he had given over the preceding years, including those delivered to Labour Church congregations. In one essay the urgency of his utopian vision is expressed, “We are approaching a great culmination of the human race. We are approaching a period when mankind will rise to something like a true understanding of Life, and to the subjugation of Materials to the need of Expression.”¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Ibid., 172.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 173.

¹²⁶ Edward Carpenter, *My Days and Dreams, Being Autobiographical Notes* (London: George Allen and Unwin Limited, 1916), 108.

¹²⁷ Edward Carpenter, *Angels’ Wings: A Series of Essays on Art and Life* (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Company Limited, 1899), 215.

It can be argued that the Labour Church expanded the Carpenter Circle by making his writings accessible to the readership of *Labour Prophet*, and thus promoted his own libertarian Socialism with a very diverse agenda of vegetarianism, sexual liberation and anarchist communism. As Sheila Rowbotham wrote in an earlier work on his life and thought, “For Carpenter socialism and the inner life were not alternatives.”¹²⁸ Carpenter was surrounded by similarly broadminded individuals in one of his Socialist ventures, the Sheffield Socialist Society, a group that included Raymond Unwin, described by Carpenter as “a young man of cultured antecedents, of first-rate ability and good sense, healthy, democratic, vegetarian, and now I need not say a well-known architect and promoter of Garden Cities.”¹²⁹ This future town planner of Letchworth and Hampstead Garden Suburb, spent time with Carpenter in his home at Millthorpe during the late-1880s, and became a Socialist street preacher for the Sheffield Socialist Society and then later a Labour Church speaker. During these informative years, Unwin rejected Marxism and replaced it with “a reformist and technical view of socialist progress, which he never henceforth abandoned”¹³⁰ throughout his career as an architect and town planner. Carpenter included Unwin’s name in the list of English radicals of the late-Victorian period, when he wrote in 1916, they “were giving their lives to the furtherance of some tributary of the great movement, and each of them represented hundreds or perhaps thousands of others who were doing the same. One felt that something massive must surely emerge from it all.”¹³¹ Edward Carpenter and many of his circle were Theological

¹²⁸ Sheila Rowbotham and Jeffrey Weeks, *Socialism and the New Life: The Personal and Sexual Politics of Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), 47.

¹²⁹ Edward Carpenter, *My Days and Dreams*, 131.

¹³⁰ Andrew Saint, ‘Unwin, Sir Raymond (1863 – 1940)’, *Oxford Dictionary of Nation Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004 / online edition, January 2008), accessed on June 27, 2013 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36613>

¹³¹ Edward Carpenter, *My Days and Dreams*, 246.

Socialists by the very nature of their interests and beliefs because they looked to Socialism as the means to a new era of spiritual awakening, and they found in the Labour Church an organisation broad enough to include them. Although libertarian Socialism may not have been shared by great numbers of the active members, D. F. Summers comments that such counter-cultural views were not rejected because “it was a rather unconventional thing even to belong to a Labour Church.”¹³²

3:3 (vii) Leadership of Labour Churches

The national leadership of the Labour Church Union was focused on its founder from its genesis in the October of 1891 until January 1901 when he had distanced himself from the movement.¹³³ During the first year of operations Trevor had been working alongside H. A. Atkinson, who served as the first General Secretary of the Labour Church Union. Atkinson saw his position within the organisation to be the assistant to the man who was both founder and editor of *Labour Prophet*.¹³⁴ The appointment of Fred Brocklehurst to that national office led to a direct challenge to the understanding of the role of General Secretary and, more significantly, to the fundamental purpose of the Labour Church. Financial pressures within the Labour Church Union led Brocklehurst to earn his living from prolonged lecture tours, which took him away from the co-ordination of the national organisation.¹³⁵ By the end of 1894 the second General Secretary tendered his resignation but was persuaded by the Annual Conference in November to continue.¹³⁶ At the national gathering of the Labour Church Union twelve months later, Brocklehurst’s

¹³² D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 257.

¹³³ *Labour Church Record*, January 1901, 5.

¹³⁴ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 157.

¹³⁵ N. Reid, ‘Brocklehurst, Fredrick’, 40.

¹³⁶ *Labour Prophet*, December 1894, 176.

resignation was submitted and accepted¹³⁷ and the post of General Secretary was abolished for financial reasons.¹³⁸ Although money became the practical factor that determined the fate of the position, the issue of the accepted central creed of a movement that claimed to have no creed apart from 'God is in the Labour Movement' became a critical factor in the national leadership of the Labour Church by the mid-1890s.

The most prominent women activists to serve the Labour Church at a national level held offices within the Pioneer Programme and the related Correspondence Class.¹³⁹ At the first Labour Church Union Conference held in July 1893, Miss K. M. M. Scott was elected the Pioneer Secretary,¹⁴⁰ with the task of keeping in touch with those people who were committed to the Labour Church, but who lived too far away from a local church to be able to attend, these were the so-called 'Labour Church Pioneers'.¹⁴¹ Scott was charged by the conference to pursue a pro-active Pioneer Programme which offered co-ordination amongst the Pioneers and to produce monthly reports of their activities for publication in *Labour Prophet*. Closely linked to the Pioneer Programme was the Correspondence Class which was formed at the second national conference in November 1893 under the leadership of H. C. Rowe with the aim of extending adult education throughout the Labour Church movement.¹⁴² For a short period from the May until the late autumn of 1894, the trade union and Fabian Society activist Eleanor Keeling succeeded K. M. M. Scott as the Pioneer Secretary, but due to ill health she was forced to

¹³⁷ N. Reid, 'Brocklehurst, Fredrick', 40.

¹³⁸ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 161.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁴⁰ *Labour Prophet*, September 1893, 92.

¹⁴¹ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 146.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 149/

step down.¹⁴³ Her successor was Mary G. Burnett, who as Honorary Secretary combined the Pioneer and Correspondence Class work with great success.¹⁴⁴ One factor which contributed to the strengthening of the programmes was the regular ‘Our Correspondence Class’ articles in *Labour Prophet* which announced Mary Burnett’s new position and responsibility in October 1894.¹⁴⁵ The role of women in leadership across the Labour Church will be discussed further in a later section, but now it is noted how certain women were entrusted with significant positions to further the movement by the advancement of its membership.

Because the Labour Church had become a national Union in 1893, each local church functioned autonomously on a congregational model. This meant that the local Labour Church could determine its own ideological focus, and structure itself in ways that suited the membership. While smaller churches tended to hold meetings open to all members, the larger congregations elected a management group, such as the Executive Committee of the Birmingham Labour Church. But for each local Labour Church the office of secretary was of great importance both as a resource person to the local membership and as a link with the national organisation. Two leading figures in the life of the Labour movement in the West Midlands who served as secretary to the Birmingham Labour Church were Tom Groom and J. A. Fallows. Groom was instrumental in the amalgamation of the city’s Fabian Society with the Labour Church in 1895 while acting as the secretary of both groups,¹⁴⁶ and he was a founding member of the Birmingham

¹⁴³ *Labour Prophet*, December 1894, 172.

¹⁴⁴ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 151.

¹⁴⁵ *Labour Prophet*, October 1894, 139.

¹⁴⁶ George J. Barnsby, *Birmingham Working People*, 257.

Socialist Centre in 1897, along with other active members of the Labour Church.¹⁴⁷

Fallows served as the secretary of both the Socialist Centre and the Labour Church from 1899¹⁴⁸ until 1901, when Tom Groom stood against him as Labour Church secretary.

The vote at the Annual General Meeting was split with both men receiving thirteen votes each, which gave the Chairman the casting vote, which he used to elect Groom.¹⁴⁹

J. A. Fallows was the first Socialist candidate to win a seat on Birmingham City Council when elected to the Bordesley ward in 1902.¹⁵⁰ He continued as secretary of the Socialist Centre until November 1904 when his proposal to merge it with the local Labour Church was defeated at its monthly meeting.¹⁵¹ In 1905 Fallows lost his council seat to a Liberal Unionist, and this signalled the end of his career in Birmingham Labour politics, as he would leave the city shortly afterwards.¹⁵² Probably a greater loss to the city's Labour movement was the departure of Tom Groom and his family to London in 1909. He and his wife were elected as Honorary Life Members of the Birmingham Labour Church in appreciation of their service. George Barnsby comments on his significant contribution, "Groom deserves recognition as a local leader of equal stature with national leaders of the time."¹⁵³ This quotation acts as a reminder that throughout the Labour Church those in leadership at national and local levels were constantly attempting to ascertain the direction for their movement which meant defining the purpose of its membership. That being said, the congregational model of organisational structure adopted by the Labour

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 262.

¹⁴⁸ D. E. Martin, 'Fallows, John Arthur', 133.

¹⁴⁹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book number 4, ZZ 72 A, 17th October 1901, 170.

¹⁵⁰ D. E. Martin, 'Fallows, John Arthur', 134.

¹⁵¹ Birmingham Socialist Centre, Minute Book, ZZ 73 A, 7th November 1904.

¹⁵² D. E. Martin, 'Fallows, John Arthur', 134.

¹⁵³ George J. Barnsby, *Birmingham Working People*, 350.

Church in 1893 led to direction and purpose being determined by the perceptions and priorities of local Theological Socialists which broadened, and possibly diluted, the original aims of the founding principles.

3:3 (viii) A Literary Canon

The role of the Correspondence Class with one Theological Socialist and published writer, Mary G. Burnett,¹⁵⁴ at the helm became an important vehicle for the Labour Church Union to instruct its members in the intellectual concepts, including theological and political understandings, which informed the movement's leadership at a national level. By guiding the students of the Correspondence Class, and the readers of *Labour Prophet* who could take note of the books being studied for their own personal study, Burnett was fashioning a recommended library for those who had the financial resources to purchase books and an authorised reading list for those who would have to source their literature through other means. The diverse economic situation of the students and readers was acknowledged in the 'Our Correspondence Class' article in the *Labour Prophet* which announced Mary Burnett as the new secretary in October 1894 by giving the prices of the books and informing people that "Some books will be found in Public Libraries."¹⁵⁵ What was being recommended in that article were books that focussed on theological issues from a post-Christian position, including humanist works such as *The Childhood of Religions* by Edward Clodd and F. J. Gould's *A Concise History of Religion*, Socialist writings such as *Fabian Essays* and works by Edward Carpenter, and *Working Men Co-operators* by A. H. D. Gardiner and Benj. Jones, plus popular radical

¹⁵⁴ Mary G. Burnett, 'Mrs Gladstone and her good works', *McClure's Magazine* (August 1893): 235-241.

¹⁵⁵ *Labour Prophet*, October 1894, 139.

reading of the time, *Silas Marner* by George Eliot and Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*. In addition to tracts by John Trevor and Robert Blatchford's *Merrie England*, there was medical literature about hygiene and *Notes on Nursing* by Florence Nightingale.

Although theological works were post-Christian in nature, it is interesting to note the inclusion on the October 1894 authorised list of *The Puritan Revolution* by S. R. Gardiner, which connects the Labour Church with the history of British religious utopianism. The book is summarised as "A history of the efforts made by the people of England to overthrow absolute monarchy and establish representative government, and of the struggle for liberty of thought and speech in politics and religion."¹⁵⁶ While the other literature of the Correspondence Class referred to the thinking of the second half of the nineteenth century, S. R. Gardiner's book took the Theological Socialists of the Labour Church movement to the earlier thoughts of their radical ancestors.

By July 1895 the recommended reading list had been expanded to include *Unto This Last* by John Ruskin and works on geology, chemistry, physics and astronomy,¹⁵⁷ when in her monthly report as secretary Burnett wrote,

The past month has been one of renewed hope, for no less than five new members have joined us, one of those being a woman. Our class now stands at 48 members, of whom six are women. I wish there were more of the latter, as they are quite as able to understand social questions as men are, and they have equal

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ *Labour Prophet*, July 1895, 109.

opportunities of influencing their acquaintances, friends, and neighbours to take a living share in transformation of our state from one of selfish and cruel competition, to one of Socialism, with equal justice and opportunity for all. I am very hopeful, as time goes on, that the proportion of women belonging to this class may increase.¹⁵⁸

This introduction to the official bibliography outlines the motive behind the work of the Correspondence Class, to educate Labour Church members so that they may be Theological Socialists with a post-Christian perspective, who could persuade others to join their cause, and for Mary Burnett this work was as much for women as for their male comrades. To complement the more formal agenda of the Correspondence Class, John Trevor used his editorial privilege to introduce Labour Church members to the writings of Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson and James Russell Lowell.¹⁵⁹ What was being formed was a literary canon composed of the views and beliefs of those poets, novelists, scientists, historians and political writers who shared the general vision promoted by Trevor for the Labour Church.

The biographer of Frank Mathews, Tony Rees, gave me unlimited access of Mathews' notebooks, which offered an insight into the reading of a local Labour Church member and the influence of literature on their thinking. Mathews meticulously recorded the lectures he attended, including one given by John Trevor entitled 'The Labour Church' at Essex Hall, the Unitarian centre in Central London, on Friday, 24th June 1892, along with the books he read, or intended to read, between 1890 and 1900. What is encountered in

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ John Trevor, *My Quest for God*, 198.

the pages of the notebooks are the titles from the approved literary canon of contemporary Socialists, particularly those with an Ethical Socialist sympathy, ranging from the authorised reading list of the Labour Church (*Fabian Essays*, *The Story of an African Farm*, *Silas Marner*, works of Ruskin, Carpenter and Blatchford), and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, to the novels *Robert Elsmere* by Mary Augusta Ward and *The True Story of Joshua Davidson* by Lyn Linton, and the writings of William Morris, Henry George and Henry David Thoreau. At certain points between the book titles Frank Mathews scribbles a quotation that has struck him during his personal studies, a good example comes from *Fabian Essays*, "It is better to have a poor ideal and to attempt to realise it; than to have a great one and not to attempt to place it before men."¹⁶⁰

The Labour Church appealed to educated working men and women, who had benefitted from the Education reforms which had taken place in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Many of these people had been raised in communities conditioned by chapel culture, but who wanted their intellectual horizons to be stretched beyond the literature of Evangelical Christianity. What Mary Burnett was offering local Labour Church members, such as Frank Mathews, was a post-Christian Socialist curriculum of what was becoming the standard texts for the British Labour movement. The curriculum made a statement in terms of the Theological Socialist as a widely read activist, who was keen to plunge the depths of theology, philosophy and political theory, as well as wanting to push the boundaries of understanding and engagement.

¹⁶⁰ Frank Mathews, notebook (1890 -1892).

3:3 (ix) The role of women activists

Although this thesis has been critical of Jacqueline Turner's understanding of the nature of the Labour Church in terms of placing the movement unquestionably within the ranks of contemporary Ethical Socialism, her research into the role played by women in the movement has expanded our knowledge of this important aspect of its life and membership. Turner wrote, "If the Labour Church fulfilled a cultural need that other churches could not provide, it also gave women an educational opportunity and a political platform that was not easily found elsewhere."¹⁶¹ She is critical of the male bias to the previous studies of the Labour Church, which, she argues, "mostly relegated women to the role of tea-makers."¹⁶² With the development of the campaign for female suffrage during the early years of the twentieth century, Turner recognised the significance of the Labour Church in engaging and supporting what she describes as 'ordinary' or 'average' women, particularly those from a northern working class background, within the militant feminist cause as it enabled them "to cut their public-speaking and political teeth."¹⁶³

The Old Woman regarded marriage as "the family washtub, in which we girls are the soap," as Björnser puts it – the New Woman regards marriage as the best and most sacred form of comradeship.

This is the difference between them. Surely the New Woman, the intelligent, questioning human being, is the one we want in the Labour movement; and

¹⁶¹ Jacqueline Turner, 'The Soul of the Labour Movement', 85.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 90.

surely, therefore, one of the chief objects of the movement is to produce such a woman.¹⁶⁴

These are the closing paragraphs of Isabella Ford's lead article in the December 1894 *Labour Prophet*, entitled 'Woman in the Labour Movement'. Ford, who in 1903 would be the first woman to address a Labour Representative Committee conference as an official delegate of the I. L. P.,¹⁶⁵ argues that the traditional model of women as subservient wife is a major barrier to their politicisation because of the social pressures upon them to conform. What must be emphasised is the importance of the institution of marriage within Victorian society, as a woman's whole identity was defined by it.¹⁶⁶ It is within that cultural context that Ford appeals for the Labour movement to proclaim to women the religious dimension of its cause which was being developed by the Labour Church, instead of continuing "to preach to them chiefly about pounds, shillings and pence and such matters." Isabella Ford's point is that the movement needs to appeal not only to the practical needs of a woman, but also to her soul; "throughout each century women . . . have joined in the religious movements of the world with unflinching ardour and heroism".¹⁶⁷

Labour Prophet often carried articles by leading women Socialists of the British Labour movement. In addition to Isabella Ford, national figures such as Katherine St John Conway,¹⁶⁸ Enid Stacy,¹⁶⁹ Margaret McMillan¹⁷⁰ and Caroline Martyn¹⁷¹ were all

¹⁶⁴ *Labour Prophet*, December 1894, 162.

¹⁶⁵ J. Lawrence, 'Ford, Isabella (Ormiston) (c.1860-1924)', *The Europa Biographical Dictionary of British Women* (London: Europa Publishing Limited, 2003), 173.

¹⁶⁶ P. Levine, "'So Few Prizes and So Many Blanks': Marriage and Feminism in Later Nineteenth-Century England', *Journal of British Studies*, volume 28 (April 1989): 150.

¹⁶⁷ *Labour Prophet*, December 1894, 162.

¹⁶⁸ *Labour Prophet*, May 1893, 33.

frequent contributors to the Labour Church's monthly publication. Each of these women were regular speakers at local Labour Churches in various parts of the country, and their written articles offered a sense of their spoken addresses delivered at the Sunday meetings in numerous provincial halls. In an article entitled 'What can Women do?' Enid Stacy, who has been described as "one of the best-known female propagandists for socialism in the 1890s and did all she could to further the advent of women into politics",¹⁷² makes a clear case for the important role played by women in the Labour movement:

All of us who have the interest of Socialism at heart should do our best to encourage the spread of Trade Unionism among our own sex. Mothers can persuade and advise their daughters of their duty in joining their trade association if there is one; if not, of doing their best to form one. Women working in factories can not only join unions themselves, but can do their best to bring a new life and hope into the minds of their companions by talking to them of the real meaning of the word Socialism; a word which no worker can perfectly understand without feeling an outburst of fresh hope and energy, something to work for into which they can put their heart.¹⁷³

A common thread running through the articles by Socialist women is a warning that the Labour movement was reflecting the dominant culture of wider society by being a male bastion. The challenge which these Socialists posed to the Labour Church and the wider

¹⁶⁹ *Labour Prophet*, February 1894, 18.

¹⁷⁰ *Labour Prophet*, October 1893, 95.

¹⁷¹ *Labour Prophet*, July 1895, 97.

¹⁷² J. Hannam, 'Stacy (married name Widdrington), Enid (1868-1903), socialist and campaigner for women's rights', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (2007), accessed on April 7, 2010 www.oxforddnb.com

¹⁷³ *Labour Prophet*, August 1893, 71.

political movement is that if Socialist organisations were to offer an alternative way of life to people then there must be a modelling of the ideals and principles by which they stood, and that this meant addressing the issue of equal gender representation and participation at all levels of their structures.

The important position held by Mary Burnett as the Correspondence Class secretary for the Labour Church Union has been noted, and of her regular pleas to the women readers of *Labour Prophet* to become students of that educational course so that they may be active participants in the life and development of the movement.¹⁷⁴ One tension that was felt by those Socialist women who became active in a political group was between the demands of home and the growing pressures which came from following their beliefs. An example of the immense “toll that combining active itinerant speaking with motherhood and domestic responsibilities”¹⁷⁵ took on by certain Socialists was Enid Stacy who died in 1903 aged thirty five years old. In terms of the local life of the Labour Church, the representation and participation of women varied considerably from place to place. Some local Labour Churches strove hard to offer fellowship for Socialist women, and as a consequence, reached out into local neighbourhoods and workplaces to recruit women to their congregations and the wider Labour movement. *Labour Prophet* reported examples of Women’s Guilds, sewing classes, and Women’s Committees being formed by local Labour Churches, including the attempt in Leeds to form a Women’s

¹⁷⁴ *Labour Prophet*, July 1895, 108.

¹⁷⁵ Krista Cowman, “‘You might be more useful together.’ The search for a perfect socialist marriage in fin de siècle Britain’, (2006), accessed on April, 6, 2010 www.iisg.nl/womhist/cowman.doc

Independent Labour Party, but this was felt by members to have been a detrimental step towards political segregation.¹⁷⁶

A significant Labour Church member in Lancashire was Hannah Mitchell, who was born in rural poverty in the Peak District of Derbyshire, and described by Jacqueline Turner as being “a prominent example of suffragette, socialist, non-conformist and Labour Church stalwart.”¹⁷⁷ The publication of her autobiographical writings, *The Hard Way Up*, in 1968 gave a voice to a working class woman Socialist who had been an activist in the formative years of the British Labour movement. In the preface to the 1977 edition, Sheila Rowbotham wrote, “She knew socialism must mean a different division of labour between the sexes – for she had seen how labour consumed the spirit.”¹⁷⁸ Jacqueline Turner adds, “Her story to some extent symbolizes that of the working classes, and in particular married women, throughout the end of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her struggle was to improve the quality not only of her own life but that of her community.”¹⁷⁹ Hannah Mitchell had attended the Labour Church in Bolton from 1894, and when she moved with her family to Ashton-under-Lyne in 1900 she was instrumental in founding a Labour Church congregation there, and then another in Stockport.¹⁸⁰ It was among the members of the Ashton Labour Church that she received the support to enter local politics on the Board of Poor Law Guardians.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁶ *Labour Prophet*, September 1894, 127.

¹⁷⁷ Jacqueline Turner, ‘The Soul of the Labour Movement’, 93.

¹⁷⁸ Geoffrey Mitchell (editor), *The Hard Way Up: The Autobiography of Hannah Mitchell, Suffragette and Rebel* (London: Virago Limited, 1977 / first published 1968), 12.

¹⁷⁹ Jacqueline Turner, ‘The Soul of the Labour Movement’, 93.

¹⁸⁰ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 699.

¹⁸¹ Geoffrey Mitchell (editor), *The Hard Way Up*, 122.

The history of British Socialism from 1870 to 1914 can now be seen as a complex and fragmented story, but its central theme has long been recognized as the outcome of an evangelical, non-conformist, humanitarian concern rather than the result of clear-cut Marxist economic theories. It is the story of the ‘old I.L.P.’ that the spirit of these years can be best recalled, rather than in the annals of the Fabian Society, the S.D.F, and the Socialist League. It may, however, be helpful to set this story in perspective and to provide a context to Hannah Mitchell’s role in it.¹⁸²

Geoffrey Mitchell writes this introduction to his grandmother’s autobiography, and by doing so sets out his understanding of the context and composition of Socialists like Hannah, many of whom were Theological Socialists because of their association with the Labour Church. Hannah herself echoes Geoffrey’s analysis of the situation by writing that the Labour movement of the final decade of the nineteenth century, and particularly the I. L. P., “promised the New Jerusalem.”¹⁸³ She continues in her recollection of the period, “It was truly a movement, most remarkable for the quality of communal life which it brought to its members. It was never doctrinaire and thus encouraged wide-ranging discussion on political, social, cultural and religious topics.”¹⁸⁴ Of the Labour Church, Hannah Mitchell recalled that the congregations were responsible for a Sunday which was “a semi-religious service run by local Socialists”¹⁸⁵ as the movement had been founded by John Trevor to meet the “the need for some compromise between the purely

¹⁸² Ibid., 25.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 26.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 97.

religious service and the stark materialism of the Socialist propaganda meeting.”¹⁸⁶ She explains that the appeal of the Labour Church was its openness to different views and understanding which meant that a prime purpose of the organisation was the expansion of knowledge among certain local Socialists.¹⁸⁷ Writing to D. F. Summers in 1953, Hannah Mitchell recalled her days with several Labour Church congregations, which “did a vast amount of propaganda work in the north, besides meeting the spiritual needs of those who were not attracted to the Labour movement by the stark Marxian theories of the S. D. F. school of thought.”¹⁸⁸ She goes on to blame an influx of secularists into membership for the demise of the Labour Church movement.

An example of a Theological Socialist who was a member of the Birmingham Labour Church during the 1890s is Edith Holden,¹⁸⁹ whose name became very well known in Britain with the publication of her work under the title *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady* in 1977, nearly sixty years after her death.¹⁹⁰ The Holden family were prosperous Unitarians, whose wealth had been made through a manufacturing company, Arthur Holden and Sons Limited, a firm which still exists in Birmingham today. Edith’s father, Arthur was elected onto Birmingham Town Council on a Radical Liberal ticket in 1873,¹⁹¹ but by the 1890s the whole Holden family were active members of the

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 116.

¹⁸⁸ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 699.

¹⁸⁹ Edith Holden is probably the best known figure outside of the circle of the Labour movement to be active within the Labour Church, though she is not mentioned by Jacqueline Turner in her research.

¹⁹⁰ Edith Holden, *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady* (London: Michael Joseph Limited / Exeter: Webb and Bower Limited, 1977).

¹⁹¹ Ina Taylor, *The Edwardian Lady: The Story of Edith Holden – Author of The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady* (London: Michael Joseph Limited / Exeter: Webb and Bower Limited, 1980), 21.

Birmingham Labour Church.¹⁹² Edith's brother, Kenneth, became a leading figure on the Birmingham Socialist scene, particularly through the Labour Church and Socialist Centre committees. It was the philanthropic initiatives supported by the local Labour Church which gave Edith and her sisters Evelyn and Effie the greatest opportunity to express their beliefs in practical terms. The work of the Cinderella Club, which their father supported financially and provided a holiday cottage, absorbed the time of the Holden sisters for a number of years – to such an extent that Evelyn would eventually marry the main organiser, Frank Mathews.¹⁹³ The example of Edith Holden and her sisters demonstrates that even though the Labour Church advocated an equal contribution from women members, in practice many Socialist women were guided towards charitable pursuits while the political aspects of the organisation were left to the men. Holding in tension the often conflicting needs of domestic and public life, Enid Stacy promoted some traditional roles for women in her case for the need of greater female participation when she stated that women members should be encouraged to make for every Labour Church and similar Socialist group “a suitable and handsome banner.”¹⁹⁴

Women were attracted to the Labour Church because it offered them the opportunity to explore a broad agenda and within that agenda discovered openings to cut their teeth as orators, organisers and politicians. At a national level Mary Burnett was the Correspondence Class secretary, and leading women Socialists such as Enid Stacy and Katherine St John Conway contributed to the life of the movement by the articles they

¹⁹² Ibid., 35.

¹⁹³ Tony Rees, *An Obscure Philanthropist: Frank Mathews 1871-1948* (Ludlow: Castle View Books, 2009), 70.

¹⁹⁴ *Labour Prophet*, August 1893, 71.

contributed to *Labour Prophet* and by lecturing to local congregations. Within the local Labour Churches women found a variety of opportunities, from the radicalism which nurtured Hannah Mitchell to the philanthropy favoured by Edith Holden. For those women who associated themselves closely with the Labour Church and became Theological Socialists they looked to it to model equitable gender politics not only for the sake of wider society, but, just as importantly, to be an example to the Labour movement of their expectations of a Socialist society.

3:3 (x) The I. L. P.

When retelling the story of the Theological Socialists, the founding of the Independent Labour Party in 1893 is a pivotal point in terms of the influence of the Labour Church within the wider Labour movement, and an indication of a change in focus for many Labour Church members. During 1892 a number of Labour Churches and around ninety local Fabian branches, plus many other independent Labour groups who followed an Ethical Socialist agenda, began to call themselves Independent Labour Parties. This name declared the need for definite political representation of the growing Labour movement away from local and national pacts with the Liberal Party. The call to form a national party came from one of the three independent working class Members of Parliament who had been elected at the General Election in July 1892, this was Keir Hardie, M. P. for South West Ham. He addressed the Trades Union Congress Conference in Glasgow during September 1892, and appealed for the establishment of an independent Labour organisation.¹⁹⁵ The inaugural conference of the I. L. P. took place between the 14th and 16th January 1893 in Bradford where around 120 delegates from the

¹⁹⁵ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 78.

various Labour groups gathered to found the new party.¹⁹⁶ As noted, the building used to host the conference was the Bradford Labour Institute, leased by the local Labour Church,¹⁹⁷ and after the official business, John Trevor was responsible for a Labour Church service which took place at St George's Hall.¹⁹⁸ Trevor had argued for an independent party throughout 1892 as he threw the support of the Labour Church behind its formation.¹⁹⁹

What underpinned the I. L. P. were ethical and humanitarian motives, with the “elimination of avoidable misery of the poor, ill health, semi-starvation, etc., and a desire to assist the ‘underdog’” being the main objectives.²⁰⁰ With such broad aims, often labelled as ‘Ethical Socialism’, many Theological Socialists of the Labour Church had no issue with affiliating themselves, their local congregation and national movement, to the political activities and aspirations of the I. L. P.²⁰¹ Many figures associated with the Labour Church became active members of the I. L. P., such as Robert Blatchford, Fred Brocklehurst, Enid Stacy, Katherine St John Conway, and Edward Carpenter. While serving as General Secretary of the Labour Church Union, Brocklehurst was also on the Administrative Council of the I. L. P., which in August 1894 passed a resolution at the request of the national council of the Labour Church Union, “That branches of the Independent Labour Party, wherever practical, should run a Sunday meeting on Labour

¹⁹⁶ David Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party 1888-1906* (Manchester: Manchester University Press / New York: St Martin's Press, 1983), 485.

¹⁹⁷ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 79..

¹⁹⁸ Leonard Smith, ‘Religion and the I. L. P.’, in D. James, T. Jowitt., and K. Laybourn, (editors) *The Centennial History of the Independent Labour Party* (Krumlin, Halifax: Ryburn Academic Publishing, 1992), 260.

¹⁹⁹ *Labour Prophet*, March 1892, 20.

²⁰⁰ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 79..

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

Church lines.”²⁰² Henry Pelling writes about this resolution and the relationship between the founder of the Labour Church and the political party,

Trevor had not merely helped to form the I.L.P., first of all by persuading Blatchford to establish a local organization in Manchester, and then by helping to sponsor the Bradford Conference; he went further, and as a *quid pro quo* he obtained a recommendation of the Council of the party to all its local branches to found Labour Churches.²⁰³

D. F. Summers questions this point by stating that it is not clear whether Trevor approved of the resolution at all, as “it was his constant opinion that they should maintain strict independence one of the other.”²⁰⁴

This cry for both organisations to remain separate is made even louder by Trevor after the I. L. P.’s devastatingly poor results in the 1895 General Election. July 1895 was a turning point in the life of the I. L. P., when all twenty eight of its candidates were defeated, including Keir Hardie.²⁰⁵ The party realised that it could not depend on what had been perceived to be a growing enthusiasm for the Socialist cause amongst the British public, and that if it was to have any influence on the affairs of the nation it had to become a political machine. Trevor’s response to the election defeat was a warning to his own movement about close affiliation. He wrote in the September 1895 editorial of *Labour Prophet*,

²⁰² *Labour Prophet*, September 1894, 124.

²⁰³ Henry Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party 1880-1900*, 137.

²⁰⁴ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 159.

²⁰⁵ David Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party*, 477.

Those churches which exist merely as adjuncts of the Labour Party will go out of existence, at least as churches. Those that are determined to develop more and more into religious organisations will have a difficult time before them; but if they will remain faithful to their ideal, they will be the salvation of the whole movement.²⁰⁶

For many Socialists who were active in both the I. L. P. and the Labour Church, the General Election of 1895 was something of a wake-up call after which they had to decide where to place the main emphasis for their time and efforts. Stanley Pierson puts it bluntly in terms of the severance of fantasy from real politics,²⁰⁷ whether the situation was quite that stark in people's minds, there was certainly a sea-change when activists began to consider their priorities.

The situation in Birmingham reflects the links between the Labour Church and the I. L. P. in that many people associated with the former were also very active in the latter. Tom Groom and J. A. Fallows were elected officers of the Birmingham I. L. P. Federation,²⁰⁸ and Fallows was elected onto the Birmingham Council in 1902 as an I. L. P. candidate. The relationship between the Birmingham Labour Church and the I. L. P. was close throughout the 1890s, and this link was furthered with the opening of the Socialist Centre at the turn of the twentieth century. The cross-over of membership between those local Labour groups was high and indicates the interdependence of Socialists in Birmingham at that point in the city's history. At a national level, some historians have argued that the relationship between the I. L. P. and the Labour Church meant the eventual disappearance

²⁰⁶ *Labour Prophet*, September 1895, 136.

²⁰⁷ Stanley Pierson, *British Socialists: The Journey from Fantasy to Politics*, 1.

²⁰⁸ George J. Barnsby, *Birmingham Working People*, 343.

of the religious organisation with the growing need for political campaigning, which was what John Trevor had feared would happen.²⁰⁹ Yet, in terms of the political life of Birmingham, it was the local branches of the I. L. P. that kept the name and spirit of the Labour Church alive well into the late 1920s.²¹⁰

Both the Labour Church and the Independent Labour Party were built upon an Ethical Socialist agenda which placed great emphasis on the moral welfare of the most vulnerable members of society in conjunction with economic theories. Just as the partnership with the Clarion movement reaped benefits in the early years, the close relationship between the Labour Church and the I. L. P. benefitted both as Theological Socialists committed themselves to working within the party political system towards the goal of a Socialist society, while Ethical Socialists were encouraged to form local associations which claimed by the name they bore that God was in the Labour movement. The 1895 General Election was a moment when loyalties were tested in terms of Church or Party, but the example of Birmingham indicates that the relationship had the potential to be longer lasting. John Trevor was right to fear the influence of the I. L. P. on his religious movement, because in many places the local Labour Church was the Party's Sunday meeting.

This section of the chapter has shown that the Theological Socialists were a diverse group of activists who associated themselves with the Labour Church. What attracted them to an organisation that claimed God was in the Labour movement varied considerably.

²⁰⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion and Jazz*, 65.

²¹⁰ *Town Crier*, Friday 7th January 1927, 2.

There was a familiarity to Labour Church services and activities for those raised within Christian denominations, and the movement offered potential to those who wanted their own knowledge expanded and sought opportunities to participate in Labour politics. One draw of the Labour Church was its inclusivity and promotion of non-partisan political beliefs which attempted to maintain a broad Socialist agenda. Then there was the vision of a new age seen through a particular theological lens. The next section considers the beliefs of the Theological Socialists and how these related to John Trevor's defining concept of the Labour Church.

3:4 Theological Socialists – by conviction

A letter printed in the correspondence section of *Labour Prophet* in January 1893 was published by two other newspapers under the title of 'The Lady Missioner and the Labour Church: an interesting letter'.²¹¹ The letter claimed to be written by a young member of a local Labour Church, who had formerly been a member of an evangelical Christian Mission congregation. Reproduced with its original grammar, spelling and punctuation, the letter relates to a conversation between the correspondent and a missionary from his former church. This missionary was concerned about his welfare since leaving the Mission and so she made a pastoral visit, during which a theological debate began between them about the salvation of the poor.

This Sunday in question she came to take Tea with us and our Conversation turned upon the Labour Church She wanting to know what it is and what was its ultimate object me having one of our membership Forms by me i took it out and read to Her the Principles as laid down there in and also quoted some passages

²¹¹ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 29th December 1892 and *Birmingham Daily Post*, 30th December 1892.

from the Labour Prophet and other Pamphlets and I explained the Work which the Labour Church has undertaken to do to the best of my abilities. This Lady remarked all this sounds very well but will it save the workers Souls. I answered that it had quite as good chance of saving the people as the Churches and in fact i believe it has a better as the Labour Church preaches the Whole Gospel But the other Churches keep part of it Back.²¹²

This letter offers to the reader the beliefs of one Theological Socialist who speaks of “the Whole Gospel” in terms of the divine message of social liberation as proclaimed solely by the Labour Church.

Towards the end of the introduction to this chapter the question was posed whether Theological Socialists shared the Theological Socialism as proclaimed by their founder. By their commitment to the Labour Church, Theological Socialists advocated an ideal that would be fulfilled through the Labour movement as indicated by its own Church. Summers aptly summaries the significance of the Labour Church for its members,

The Labour Church had a distinctive message of its own which made a direct appeal and which explains its spontaneous acceptance by a large section of the Labour Movement . . . The Labour Churches provided a motive and a deeper meaning for socialistic economic theory by giving it a religious basis. To be active in the political or economic labour movement was to be active in God’s service.²¹³

Summers attempts to indicate what bound together such a diverse group of Socialists into the organisation. But the question remains about whether the Labour Church activists

²¹² *Labour Prophet*, January 1893, 7.

²¹³ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 90.

remained true to the original vision as perceived by Trevor, or departed from it to pursue other agendas.

A distinction needs to be made between individual Labour Church members and the organisations affiliated to the Labour Church, even when membership was shared. The close ties between the Labour Church and the Clarion movement were of mutual benefit during the early years of the 1890s, but the latter did little to promote the religious aspects of the Labour movement which was at the heart of the Labour Church as an organisation. Robert Blatchford's Socialism was populist and nationalistic, and as a new century dawned he pursued a more anti-religious stance with the publication of *God and My Neighbour*.²¹⁴ The main emphases of the various Clarion groups, whether the cycling clubs, choirs or dramatic groups, were propaganda, fellowship and recreation – God in the Labour movement was not on the agenda. Even the Cinderella Clubs that occupied so many Labour Church members, notably in Birmingham, may be perceived to be more of an expression of late-Victorian philanthropy than religious Socialism, though the motive behind the Labour Church activists' commitment to the Cinderella Clubs would have been inspired by their religious beliefs. To align oneself with the Labour Church meant association with the message of God working through the Labour movement, which may have not been a belief shared by the leaders of the Clarion movement or fellow philanthropists supporting a Cinderella Club, but it indicated the motivation for the Labour Church member's commitment to affiliated groups.

²¹⁴ J. F. Laird and J. Saville, 'Blatchford, Robert Peel Glanville', 39.

John Trevor had a clear concept of Labour Church activists as Theological Socialists, but within that concept was an understanding that they would have a breadth of insight between them. A consequence of Trevor's acceptance of a multiplicity of beliefs amongst his members was that, while a Socialist newspaper like *Clarion* clearly expressed the views of its editor, *Labour Prophet* gave space to a diversity of thoughts and opinions. The articles, letters and reports from the Pioneer Programme and Correspondence Class printed in *Labour Prophet* reveal the breadth of beliefs held by Theological Socialists who wanted their politics to be religious, and appealed to others in the Labour movement to think likewise. But the fact that *Labour Prophet* was the only regular channel of communication for the Labour Church as a national movement and that its theological and political understandings were not taken up by other publications, including the independent Labour newspapers, with the exception of Allen Clarke's journals, restricted the spreading of the Labour Church message, making it a marginal view within the wider political debate.

There was much criticism by the British Labour movement of the Christian denominations for propping up the status quo by not confronting the injustices of the capitalist system. This was a main motivation for Trevor's disillusionment with his own denomination, leading to the founding of a new religious organisation, and the reason why the Labour Church was an attraction to other disillusioned clerics, such as Fred Brocklehurst and J. A. Fallows, as well as church members whose politics were frustrated within their religious traditions. The growth of the Labour Church during the first half of the 1890s indicates that there was a need for an ecclesiastical expression within the

Labour movement, especially for those passionate believers who had abandoned the traditional religious institutions.²¹⁵ The fierce debate between Trevor and Brocklehurst over the future of the Labour Church Union was not simply a clash over a religious emphasis against the secular; rather both men recognised the importance of the religious dimension of Labour politics but disagreed as to whether the focus should be on the personal or the corporate development. Brocklehurst felt that the personal religious impetus was enough and that the Labour Church needed to concentrate on being a political tool, but for Trevor the Labour movement needed the Labour Church as a religious body to act as a reminder of its true purpose.

The work of the Correspondence Class was the promotion of the Labour Church ideal as it strove to create and develop Theological Socialists. Whilst the Class's approved reading list was composed of the literature shared by many in the broader movement, including the Carpenter Circle of Socialists, it was in line with the post-Christian thinking that underpinned John Trevor's political theology. As noted in a previous chapter, Trevor's 'Unspoken Address' intended for the 1896 London Congress of the Second International brought the original theological vision of the Labour Church into a wide public arena and stirred a debate about the purpose of the movement. What became evident was that for many activists God had not abandoned Christianity, and Jesus was more than a moral teacher from the past. The contribution of Mary Burnett to the Correspondence Class was significant in promoting the Labour Church ideals by encouraging all members, particularly women, to deepen their knowledge and understanding. The Labour Church attempted to embrace the cause of women by

²¹⁵ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 89.

confronting the male dominance within its own structures and throughout the life of the Labour movement as a whole. The contributions of women activists were valued and encouraged nationally and in many local Labour Churches, Hannah Mitchell's activism being a testimony to this. Some felt that the religious message of the movement would have a particular appeal to women, rather than what could be considered to be a cold rationalism of politics,²¹⁶ though the women activists studied in this thesis indicate a diverse spectrum of reasons for their engagement and commitment.

The role played by the Theological Socialists in the Independent Labour Party and the impact of their commitment to the political party on the Labour Church has been debated by several historians. The general consensus has been that though the religious vision of the Labour Church drew many people into Labour politics, the I. L. P. would take them into the realms of secular electioneering in the pursuit of power.²¹⁷ The defeat of all of the I. L. P. candidates at the General Election of 1895 concentrated the minds of many Socialists, including Labour Church activists. For some there was a stark choice between their beliefs, which were nurtured by John Trevor and his movement, and the need to dedicate themselves to the struggle of party politics, or, as in the case of Birmingham, forging broad political alliances among local Socialists. From 1895 pressure increased on the Labour Church to shift from the religious to a more political agenda.²¹⁸ This was the same year that Trevor's mentor, Philip Wicksteed, had the tract published entitled *What does the Labour Church stand for?*, a treatise which reminded Labour Church

²¹⁶ *Labour Prophet*, February 1893, 11.

²¹⁷ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, 145.

²¹⁸ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 162.

members of the founding principles of the movement. It was also at this time when Trevor used his editorial articles to reassert the original vision.²¹⁹

Throughout 1895 Trevor worked on the idea of establishing a Labour Church Brotherhood that would deepen the religious life of the organisation by training members to become speakers and leaders of local congregations.²²⁰ Labour Churches that survived into the new century gained a new impetus by tying their fortunes with the I. L. P..²²¹ Henry Brockhouse, who was president of the Labour Church Union in 1907 and a member of the National Administrative Council of the I. L. P., wrote in *Clarion*,

As a flank movement the Labour Church is more effective in destroying the opposition of the orthodox churches to Socialism than is a direct frontal attack on orthodoxy itself. Its services with hymns, readings and general orderliness and decorum are a concession without loss of principle to the susceptibilities of our one time orthodox brethren who are gradually weaned from narrower views.²²²

While Brockhouse's statement has some connection with Trevor's theology, the sense that the Labour Church is the religious heart of the Labour movement has been lost to it becoming an agency for recruiting Christians to the Socialist cause. It was during this time of the movement's history that a series of amendments were made to the founding principles, notably the replacement of Trevor's third principle which speaks of the Free Religion of the Labour Church with the statement "That the Religion of the Labour Movement is not theological, but respects each individual's personal convictions upon

²¹⁹ *Labour Prophet*, October 1895, 153.

²²⁰ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 174.

²²¹ Stanley Pierson, *British Socialists*, 129.

²²² *The Clarion*, 20th July 1906.

this question.”²²³ Such a change of understanding to the basis of Labour Church belief corresponds with Hannah Mitchell’s condemnation of what she regarded to be a secularist influence on the life of the movement; in reality the Labour Church remained a religious organisation, regardless of the reworded principle, because it continued to place the question of God working through Labour politics at the heart of its purpose and practice. Trevor’s original vision had appealed to those Theological Socialists who wanted their politics to be a religion, a decade and a half later his successors wanted Theological Socialists to make their religion political.

In answer to the question about the faithfulness of the Theological Socialists to John Trevor’s founding concept of the Labour Church, the movement’s activists in their diversity of beliefs both accepted the original vision as well as claiming the organisation for their own ends. Summers wrote of the conviction of Labour Church members, “we cannot say they followed Trevor, rather, his appeal found a ready response.”²²⁴ If Trevor had been a more effective leader then it could be argued that the Labour Church would have had a more consistent ideology to which members could have adhered,²²⁵ rather than him not responding effectively to the changing climate of the wider movement.²²⁶ And yet, along with other similar organisations, such as the Labour Army and Brotherhood Churches, the Labour Church was a consequence and a casualty of the rapidly changing political scene.

²²³ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 264.

²²⁴ Ibid., 190.

²²⁵ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, 143.

²²⁶ Ian Sellers, ‘Unitarians and the Labour Church Movement’, *Transactions*, volume 12 number 1(1959): 6.

As discussed in the introductory chapter, the Religion of Socialism manifested itself in many groups in different ways, but the Labour Church was the most overt expression of this theologically political belief.²²⁷ This chapter has shown that the active members were more liberal in their understanding of the Religion of Socialism than their founder, as they practiced the diversity of understanding which Trevor claimed to encourage. The Theological Socialists of the Labour Church were attracted to a religious organisation that epitomised the religious sense of Socialism in the early years of the last decade of the nineteenth century, but they found themselves in the late-1890s facing the dilemma of squaring religious conviction with political necessity.

The internal debate for the Labour Church activists focussed around matters of following the spirit or the letter of the founding vision. The conclusions that each person reached, particularly working class Theological Socialists with little free time, meant a decision about their allegiance to either Church or Party, or it led to a fusion of the two in their own activism which meant closer union of the religious and political organisations, from individual commitment to national co-operation. While Ethical Socialists would often talk in pseudo-religious terms of their conversion to the cause, the faith of the Theological Socialists was that they had found God working in and through the Labour movement towards the dawning of a new era, and their Labour Church was the champion of this new Gospel. Such conviction was the common factor which drew together a diverse group of Socialists into one organisation, and is what distinguishes these Theological Socialists of the Labour Church from their contemporaries.

²²⁷ Stephen Yeo, 'A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883-1896', 6.

3:5 Conclusion

The concept of the Labour Church as the religious expression of the wider Labour movement grabbed the imagination of a wide range of Socialists during the early years of the 1890s. John Trevor envisaged Labour Church activists to be Theological Socialists who lived out their own beliefs in the religious nature of the Labour movement. This research has shown that in practice and by belief the members of the Labour Church adhered to a theological interpretation of Socialism which was often considerably more open ended than the original model of Theological Socialism offered by John Trevor. Although they shared the belief of a broad group of Ethical Socialists, that Socialism was a cause worthy of religious conviction, the Theological Socialists took this understanding further by their commitment to an organisation that strove to preserve the theological dimension of Labour politics in the belief that God favoured the Labour movement to initiate a new age, though the post-Christian dimension of Trevor's message remained a contentious issue amongst them.

Particular milestones can be identified in the development of the Labour Church which effected the direction taken by the movement. The founding principles of 1892 declared John Trevor's Theological Socialism and the expectations of the Theological Socialists who he hoped would commit themselves to the Labour Church. But the founding of the I. L. P. meant many Theological Socialists were faced with a decision about prioritising their time between church and party demands, a dilemma increased by the defeats of the 1895 General Election. Although he supported independent Labour candidates and the establishment of the political party, Trevor had warned his movement about the dangers

of a close affiliation with the electoral system, which he felt compromised the religious nature of the Labour Church. For the Theological Socialists it was a matter of the most effective means of realising their utopian aspirations, which meant a wide variety of commitments and pursuits often under the banner of the Labour Church. The congregational approach to the governance of the Labour Church Union, along with Trevor's frequent absence from the position of leadership, meant that the publication of the 'Unspoken Address' in 1896 revealed contradictory understandings of Theological Socialism between founder and members.

So, why did the idea of the Labour Church resonate with so many people who did not necessarily share the whole of Trevor's original vision of a new Socialist religion? For most of those who became active members within the movement, what had appealed to them about Theological Socialism were not the detailed treatises composed by Trevor or Wicksteed, but the simple summary, God in the Labour movement. This was the rallying cry by which the Labour Church gathered, as it offered both clarity and open-endedness, expressing a religious understanding broad enough to be interpreted in many different ways without undermining the significant challenge of the statement. The committed members of the Labour Church were quite distinct within Ethical Socialism in that they looked to a specific religious organisation founded within the Labour movement to advance the Religion of Socialism, though in a more liberal sense than that advocated by John Trevor.

Drawing together disaffected dissenters, fledgling Labour leaders, frustrated educated workers, and impassioned women campaigners, the Labour Church was a home to particular Socialists who struggled to express their beliefs fully through other organisations and wanted a broad, inclusive agenda which reflected their political perspectives, utopian aspirations and religious convictions. As one Theological Socialist put it, “The Labour Church is a good idea. The Church people won’t have us because we are Labour, and Labour people won’t have us because we are religious.”²²⁸

²²⁸ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 89.

CHAPTER 4 – THE LABOUR CHURCH IN BIRMINGHAM

4:1 Introduction

So by 1926 the Birmingham Labour Church movement was stronger than ever with sixteen functioning churches . . . it is clear that we are dealing with a movement of some significance in the life of Birmingham.¹

This chapter is a detailed case study of the Labour Church movement in Birmingham, which examines the meaning of Theological Socialism for activists within a specific context. The development of the Labour Churches in Birmingham proved to be the contradiction to the life of the movement across the rest of Britain. When the Labour Church thrived in various cities and towns during the 1890s, the Birmingham congregation struggled to fulfil its responsibilities; but by the time the movement was a long-forgotten dream in those places where it had once blossomed, the Labour Church was spreading across numerous neighbourhoods throughout Birmingham. The history of the Labour Church movement in Birmingham is explored from its establishment on New Year's Day 1893 until it fades from the archival records in 1930. Along with describing the activities and preoccupations of the members, the chapter proposes theories as to the reasons why this local organisation bucked the trends of the wider movement, with an interest in solving the mystery of the revival during the early 1920s. George Barnsby called the Labour Church a movement of some significance for the city, so the question is posed as to whether Theological Socialism answers the contradictory nature of the Labour Church in Birmingham.

¹ George Barnsby, *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country 1850-1939*, 356.

4:2 Nineteenth Century Birmingham

During the nineteenth century, Birmingham became a focal point for political agitation and a model of social reform. Birmingham was dominated by its middle classes, with local leaders being business men and industrialists, and no significant local aristocracy to claim rights of authority. To stand up for the best commercial interests of Birmingham was the rallying point that united the middle class.² Within that context, Birmingham led the rest of the country in its pressure on Parliament to extend the political franchise for middle class citizens.³ In 1830 Thomas Attwood, a local banker, founded the Birmingham Political Union, an organisation campaigning for cities and large town to be directly represented in Parliament. While Birmingham is often regarded as a radical place at that time, it is worth noting that Attwood was a supporter of the Tory party, “whose main interest in reforming parliament was a means of achieving currency reform.”⁴ Yet, the pressure exerted by the Political Union influenced the passing of the Reform Act of 1832 which gave the vote to men of the growing middle class.⁵ By then “Birmingham became gripped by the Socialism of Robert Owen”,⁶ and the revival of the Birmingham Political Union in the late 1830s “helped to shape the infant Chartist movement”.⁷ A meeting on the 6th August 1838 at Holloway Head in central Birmingham has been described as being “the official beginning of the Chartist movement”,⁸ with a few prominent local business figures breaking away from their peers by becoming involved with reforming political activity,⁹ as the majority of the activists

² Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City, 1850-1939* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing Limited, 2001), 23.

³ F. M. L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830-1900*, 15.

⁴ Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 23.

⁵ W. B. Stephens (editor) *A History of the County of Warwick, volume 7: The City of Birmingham*, Victoria County History, 1964 available at www.british-history.ac.uk

⁶ George Barnsby, *Radical Birmingham* (2010) available at www.gbpeopleslibrary.co.uk

⁷ W. B. Stephens, (editor) *A History of the County of Warwick*

⁸ M. Hovell, *The Chartist Movement* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press / London, New York, Bombay: Longmans, Green and Company, 1925), 107.

⁹ Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 23.

were from the ranks of traditional manufacturing workers.¹⁰ Birmingham has also been credited with launching what Dorothy Thompson called “female Chartism” through local women’s organisations.¹¹ The Bull Ring riots of 1839, which resulted from attempts by the town authorities to break up a Chartist meeting by force, quickened the momentum of the national movement.¹²

Another contribution made by Birmingham to the history of Chartism was the formation of the Christian Chartist Church by Arthur O’Neill in December 1840.¹³ O’Neill had been active in the organisation of Christian Chartism in his native Scotland for several years before moving to Birmingham, when he was offered the pastorate of a Methodist Association chapel on Newhall Street in the town’s centre. Accepting the position, O’Neill proceeded to recruit a congregation from local Baptist and Methodist chapels of working people sympathetic to the Chartist cause.¹⁴ While the founding of this congregation divided the Chartists of Birmingham between the National Charter Association and the Chartist Church, both groups worked closely together towards their common goals.¹⁵ The Birmingham Chartist Church was the only one of its kind in England to survive for any length of time due to O’Neill’s strong leadership, which continued until his death in 1896. The Chartist Church set out to promote temperance, personal and social morality, and adult education, as well as forming a political association, running several schools and a club for the assistance of the sick.¹⁶ In 1848 forty men and women separated themselves from O’Neill’s congregation to form The People’s Chapel in Hockley. This church was distinctive from the Chartist Church in as far

¹⁰ Dorothy Thompson, *The Chartists* (Hounslow, Middlesex: Maurice Temple Smith Limited, 1984), 91.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹² *Ibid.*, 69.

¹³ George Barnsby, *Birmingham Working People: A History of the Labour Movement in Birmingham, 1650-1914*, 88.

¹⁴ W. B. Stephens, (editor) *A History of the County of Warwick*.

¹⁵ Dorothy Thompson, *The Chartists*, 140.

¹⁶ W. B. Stephens, (editor) *A History of the County of Warwick*.

as it was governed democratically among its members, without a professional minister.¹⁷ The People's Chapel exists to this day, a tangible reminder of the radical nonconformist tradition of Birmingham.¹⁸ For over fifty years Arthur O'Neill and his Chartist Church played an important role in the radicalism of Birmingham, striving for the increase in democracy, social welfare and international peace. The town's Christian Chartists paved the way for the following generations of Birmingham radicals, as Dorothy Thompson wrote, "Arthur O'Neill's Christian Chartism . . . was tolerated – even encouraged – within the radical city of Birmingham".¹⁹

While Christian Chartism was adopted and championed by people of the town, the 'Civic Gospel' was born and raised in Birmingham's chapels and chambers, then offered to other contemporary industrial centres as the prime example of municipal responsibility, the pinnacle of Christian civilisation for mid-Victorian society.²⁰ The names most closely associated with the Civic Gospel of Birmingham were those of three nonconformist ministers. George Dawson, who was ordained into the Baptist denomination, was minister of the nonconformist Church of the Saviour which he opened on Edward Street in the town centre in 1847. Dawson was the focal-point of the church, it was where he preached a message of civic renaissance,²¹ with his congregation instrumental in the call for urban re-birth.²² In 1869 H. W. Crosskey became the Unitarian minister of the Church of the Messiah on Broad Street, and he was a fervent advocate of the Birmingham Caucus of Radical

¹⁷ E. P. Hennock, *Fit and Proper Persons: Ideal and reality in nineteenth century urban government* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers Limited, 1973), 99.

¹⁸ The People's Chapel, www.peopleschapel.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/History/1848.html

¹⁹ Dorothy Thompson, *The Chartists*, 278.

²⁰ Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, 238.

²¹ W. B. Stephens, (editor) *A History of the County of Warwick*.

²² E. P. Hennock, *Fit and Proper Persons*, 73.

Liberalism.²³ But it was Robert Dale, minister of the Carrs Lane Congregational Church, from 1854 until his death in 1895, who coined the term ‘Civic Gospel’, by which he meant a positive municipal response to the social, economic and moral needs of all Birmingham’s citizens. According to E. P. Hennock, Dale’s contribution to the nonconformist influence on local civic issues was intellectual, with his emphases of concern for both municipality and church.²⁴ Although Dale was firmly located within contemporary nonconformist Liberalism, in an article about his political beliefs Clyde Binfield argued that many of his statements on the Civic Gospel can be interpreted as being close to the aspirations of the following generation of Socialists.²⁵

Politically, the dominant figure in the life of mid- to late Victorian Birmingham was Crosskey’s disciple, Joseph Chamberlain. This radical liberal transformed not only the city in which he served, but also set the ideal standard for municipal governance across Britain and beyond. Before Chamberlain came to prominence, a Tory radical called Joseph Allday dominated Birmingham politics in the 1850s. Allday’s political philosophy was that all reforms were too expensive so that the council should spend as little money as possible. As a consequence he and his followers were known as the ‘Economy Party’, and their role and that of their conservative successors in local political life meant that improvement of services and reform of processes were not pursued rigorously in Birmingham.²⁶ It became the main focus of Joseph Chamberlain’s agenda to address these shortcomings. Facing opposition from within his own Liberal party and other conservative opponents, with experience of

²³ Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, 198.

²⁴ E. P. Hennock, *Fit and Proper Persons*, 168.

²⁵ Clyde Binfield, ‘Dale and Politics’ in Clyde Binfield (editor), *The Cross and The City: Essays in Commemoration of Robert William Dale, 1829-1895* (Cambridge: United Reformed Church History Society, 1999), 106.

²⁶ Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 51.

campaigning for the National Education League,²⁷ Chamberlain emerged from the Birmingham Caucus of radical Liberals proclaiming the local nonconformist message of Civic Gospel, which he applied to programmes of education, sewage, clean water, gas supply and promotion of the arts.²⁸ Chamberlain's leadership of Birmingham council as a municipal pioneer providing essential services for its people led some to consider him to be a 'Gas and Water Socialist'.²⁹ His biographer, Peter T. Marsh, writes of Chamberlain's politico-economic crusade, "Other towns had set the precedent for civic management of the gas supply, but none of them had elevated their action to this philosophic plane."³⁰

Such was the impact of Chamberlain's 'Gas and Water Socialism' that one commentator declared, "Municipal reformers look to Birmingham as the eyes of the faithful are turned to Mecca."³¹ These 'Municipal Socialists' were in favour of the local authority taking over the responsibilities of a range of services, including utilities, which had been delivered by private companies, if at all, but they tended to be against state ownership of the same services. For the majority of Chamberlain's supporters, the best form of good government was local, both within and beyond his city. Questions have been raised about the self-interest of these people in the pursuit of local improvements and reforms, and that in certain respects Birmingham was lagging behind other places in terms of utility services and amenities. In the words of Eric Hopkins, "The Civic Gospel therefore merely repaired omissions rather than made innovations."³² But such was Joseph Chamberlain's flair in leadership that the changes to the functions and facilities of Birmingham and the philosophy behind the advances caught the

²⁷ E. P. Hennock, *Fit and Proper Persons*, 175.

²⁸ Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, 222.

²⁹ Tristram Hunt, *Building Jerusalem: The Rise and fall of the Victorian City* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004), 250.

³⁰ Peter T. Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain: Entrepreneur in Politics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 84.

³¹ F. Dolman, *Municipalities at Work*, independent report (London, 1895), 1.

³² Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 54.

imagination of the wider public.³³ In 1889, by royal approval Birmingham was granted city status in recognition of various factors, including its size of population, contribution to the economy of the nation, and the nature of its local governance. Asa Briggs quotes from an American writer called J. Ralph, who described Chamberlain's Birmingham, with its Municipal Socialism, as being "the best governed city in the world."³⁴

Both his flair in leadership and the notion of self-interest played their role in the next chapter of Chamberlain's life. By the final decade of the nineteenth century, he had established himself as a national politician as M. P. for Birmingham and a former government minister. His political beliefs had swung from the Radical Liberalism of his council days to the conservative leaning Liberal Unionism, and he took much of his working class support with him, particularly with the rise of Imperialism at the century's end when Chamberlain served as Colonial Secretary as the Boer War broke out.³⁵ The so-called 'Cloth-capped Chamberlainism' which was prevalent across Birmingham for many years is epitomised by the close alliance between the Birmingham Trades Council and Chamberlain's political allies, a policy that was maintained "to the point of subservience".³⁶ An assessment of the political lives of Birmingham and Manchester from the late-eighteenth century, prompted G. M. Young to write, "Birmingham, experimental, adventurous, diverse, where old Radicalism might in one decade flower into lavish Socialism, in another into a pugnacious Imperialism."³⁷

³³ E. P. Hennock, *Fit and Proper Persons*, 172.

³⁴ Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, 232.

³⁵ George Barnsby, *Birmingham Working People*, 374.

³⁶ John Corbett, *The Birmingham Trades Council: 1866-1966* (London: Lawrence and Wishart Limited, 1966), 37.

³⁷ Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, 185.

By the 1850s the trade union movement had not spread widely across Birmingham, and where unions are found they were confined predominantly to skilled craft workers, who were in a financial position to be able to pay the subscription fees covering strike pay and out-of-work benefits.³⁸ In May 1866 twenty five delegates, representing nearly 5,000 trade union members, founded the local Trades Council.³⁹ Trades Council membership grew in Birmingham throughout the 1870s, though still within the bounds of the established craft unions. It would be from the latter years of that decade that 'New Unionism' emerged on the national scene and would consequently have an impact on the life of Birmingham's working people as trade unionism began to embrace unskilled and semi-skilled workers.⁴⁰ The new unions were led at a national level by independent Socialist agitators such as Tom Mann and Annie Besant, a sharp contrast to the phenomenon of industrial relations in Birmingham. The Alliance system, which came to prominence in the 1890s, sought to end competition between local companies by agreeing prices between them and working in close co-operation with the appropriate trade unions to guarantee a 'closed shop' restricting employment to union members.⁴¹ A Board of Conciliation was formed in 1892 to ensure that the Alliance was maintained.⁴² In 1900 the secretary of the Brassworkers' Union in Birmingham, W. J. Davis, explained the Alliance system:

We represent a community of interest. The employers find the capital, business capacity and enterprise, and should have the lion's share of the profit. We find the technical skill and muscle which the product requires. Therefore you must apportion fairly the profit between Capital and Labour.⁴³

³⁸ Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 77.

³⁹ John Corbett, *The Birmingham Trades Council*, 25.

⁴⁰ Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 79.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴² John Corbett, *The Birmingham Trades Council*, 56.

⁴³ W. A. Dalley, *The Life Story of W. J. Davis, J. P.: the industrial problem, achievements and triumphs of conciliation* (Birmingham: Birmingham Printers, 1914), 211.

This close co-operation between the local trade union branches and the employers of the city, along with the influence of Chamberlainism, meant that, in the words of E. P. Hennock, “Birmingham was not a fertile area for the idea of independent Labour representation.”⁴⁴

The nineteenth century saw the growth in prominence of the Birmingham middle classes in business and industry, and in local politics, which gained a reputation for having a radical edge. From this emerged Joseph Chamberlain and his brand of ‘Municipal Socialism’, a pragmatic creed influenced by the Civic Gospel proclaimed from several influential dissenting pulpits. The support given to Chamberlain and his allies by the workers of Birmingham is reflected in the conciliatory nature of local industrial relations. From this it can be argued that the influence of radicalism on the shaping of Birmingham was profound, as it evolved from being a rapidly growing town at the centre of a new industrial age into a world city which was held up as a model of municipal governance. The radicals “were the leaven and in Birmingham the leaven were plentiful and worked the dough.”⁴⁵ It was this context in which grass-roots Socialism reappeared some forty years after the peak of Chartist activity in the area. In time one organisation would serve as a bridge between many of the new Socialists from the wide variety of political parties and associations that were established across Birmingham. The Labour Church became that meeting point for the city’s Labour movement.

4:3 The First Birmingham Labour Church

The 1890s were pioneering days of the English socialist movement, and Birmingham had its share in the adventure. They were days of street-corner oratory, of collection

⁴⁴ E. P. Hennock, *Fit and Proper Persons*, 53.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 176.

boxes, and Merry England fairs . . . [a] co-ordinating force and main centre of the labour movement in the city was the Birmingham Labour Church, founded in September 1892. While the Liberals had their caucus, the Socialists had their church. It attracted not only Socialists, but social reformers of all shades of opinion, and aimed at bringing them together.⁴⁶

The birth of this ‘movement of some significance’ did not occur in September 1892, as Asa Briggs states in the quotation given above, but several months later, on New Year’s Day 1893. The inaugural service of the Birmingham Labour Church was planned to take place during November 1892, and it was expected that John Trevor would officiate at the event, but due to his inability to attend other arrangements were made.⁴⁷ D. F. Summers wrote that the service had been delayed by three months because of Trevor,⁴⁸ though the source of this information is not cited. When it did occur on the first day of the following year, in what was likely to have been premises in Frederick Street within the city centre,⁴⁹ the General Secretary, Fred Brocklehurst, lectured on the founding principles of the movement and contrasted them with the beliefs of orthodox Christianity.⁵⁰ Despite unfavourable weather, it was reported that “the opening service attracted a sufficiently large audience to insure future success of the movement.”⁵¹ Birmingham’s first Labour Church began with forty five founding members⁵² and they were confident on building on that number, though that was to prove much more difficult than they had envisaged.

⁴⁶ Asa Briggs, *History of Birmingham volume II: Borough & City, 1895-1938* (London / New York / Toronto: Geoffrey Cumberlege /Oxford University Press, 1952), 195.

⁴⁷ *Labour Prophet*, November 1892,.88.

⁴⁸ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries’, 332.

⁴⁹ George Barnsby, *Birmingham Working People*, 258.

⁵⁰ *Labour Prophet*, February 1893, 16.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 332.

Several months before preparations began to launch the Labour Church in Birmingham, John Trevor had made reference to its radical nonconformist tradition, with reference to the Christian Chartist Church. It was his mentor Philip Wicksteed's father-in-law, Henry Solly, the founder of the Working Men's Club Association and active member the Chartist movement, who had directed Trevor's attention to the work of Arthur O'Neill and the Christian Chartists. Solly wrote to him,

O'Neill's Christian Chartist Society was virtually a Labour Church, though never called that by name. Mr. O'Neill was a zealous 'Moral Force' Chartist, but a good deal more; and he felt deeply the importance of bringing Christian influences to bear on his fellow-Chartist workmen.⁵³

It should be noted that O'Neill and his Chartist Church remained within mainstream nonconformity, unlike the Labour Church, but Solly wanted to draw parallels between the two radical groups. He continues to write of the opposition to the Chartist Church in its early days and how opinion changed to a greater appreciation of O'Neill's congregation due to "the brotherly Christian spirit which animated the members of his society and which was manifested in various labours of love among the surrounding people."⁵⁴

When the minute books of the first Labour Church in Birmingham were deposited in September 1942 by Percy Broadhurst, who had been an active member in the earlier decades of the century,⁵⁵ it was noted that the minutes of meetings from its founding on 1st January 1893 until June 1894 were missing.⁵⁶ Relying on reports submitted to *Labour Prophet* to bridge the gap, as they offer an insight into the issues facing the congregation in the first

⁵³ *Labour Prophet*, May 1892, 40.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 331.

⁵⁶ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 2., Birmingham Central Archives, Birmingham Central Library.

eighteen months of its existence. In the March 1893 *Labour Prophet*, Frank Humphreys reported on plans to invite several national speakers to the local meetings, including Keir Hardie and Katherine St John Conway. The idea behind the invitations seems to have been about trying to draw crowds to ‘big names’ of the British Socialist movement as a means of recruitment to the new organisation. Humphreys comments, “After Keir Hardie has been I shall be able to tell you whether or not the Labour Church is likely to become a great institution in this proud city.”⁵⁷

By May 1893 Humphreys reported that the idea of the Labour Church had not yet “caught on” in Birmingham, as numbers at meetings held in Frederick Street varied considerably from week to week.⁵⁸ A number of factors contributed to the increase in membership by the end of the church’s first year; the beginning of a programme of social evenings,⁵⁹ the securing of new rented premises in a former Wesleyan Chapel in Bond Street, with a seating capacity of five hundred,⁶⁰ and the first of the Labour Church’s annual meetings in Birmingham Town Hall on Sunday, 8th October. The Birmingham Town Hall was opened in 1834, and hosted music festivals, concerts and religious and political events over the decades.⁶¹ The first Labour Church meeting in the Town Hall was deemed to be a great success by local members, with speeches from Keir Hardie, Katherine St John Conway, James Bruce Glasier, and Pete Curran. The secretary of the Birmingham Labour Church, A. K. Constantine, summarised what occurred on that occasion in his report to *Labour Prophet*,

On the evening of Sunday, October 8th, the Labour Church here held a most successful re-opening service in the great Birmingham Town Hall, which seats nearly

⁵⁷ *Labour Prophet*, March 1893, p.24.

⁵⁸ *Labour Prophet*, May 1893, 37.

⁵⁹ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 332.

⁶⁰ *Labour Prophet*, October 1893, 104.

⁶¹ Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 115.

3,000 people, and which was filled to over-flowing . . . As an indication of the impression which this meeting produced, it is worth mentioning that the local press, which hitherto ignored the socialist movement in Birmingham, and has done its best to discredit Keir Hardie and all his doings, gave very good reports, and in some cases made very sympathetic comments. Altogether, the meeting was a real success, and well repaid all the labour expended in its organisation.⁶²

The significance of the Town Hall meeting was that it placed the Labour Church on the Birmingham political scene.⁶³ Constantine concluded his account of the event on the 8th October with words of great optimism, “[S]o far there is every reason to hope that we shall be able to establish the Labour Church in Birmingham as firmly as it has been established in some of the more northern towns. We are about to start a Cinderella Club”.⁶⁴

By the end of the first year, membership of the Birmingham Labour Church had grown from 45 to 130,⁶⁵ and the move to the Bond Street Chapel was proving popular with an increase in attendance at the Sunday evening meetings. An afternoon discussion group began by January 1894 which attracted up to forty people, and it is interesting to note that almost all of the active members of the congregation attended the weekly Fabian class for the study of Socialism, which was the main reason for the local Labour Church not attempting to start their own class.⁶⁶ While the secretary considered attendance at the evening meetings to be “still not very good”,⁶⁷ he could report the number of 120 people gathering in Bond Street each week. The attraction of other national figures to speak at the Birmingham Labour Church, including Margaret McMillan and Leonard Hall, helped to improve the numbers. A.

⁶² *Labour Prophet*, November 1893, p.116.

⁶³ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 333.

⁶⁴ *Labour Prophet*, November 1893, 116.

⁶⁵ George Barnsby, *Birmingham Working People*, 259.

⁶⁶ *Labour Prophet*, January 1894, 16.

⁶⁷ *Labour Prophet*, February 1894, 32.

K. Constantine's dissatisfaction was based on the success of the Labour Church across parts of Yorkshire and Lancashire, where local branches could attract several hundred people to their weekly meetings. But, while the first Labour Church in Birmingham would average a membership of around one hundred, its core activists played vital roles in the promotion and activities of local Labour politics.

The second minute book records meetings that occurred from June 1894. It was noted at the monthly gathering of Labour Church members on 22nd June that "income had not quite balanced the expenditure."⁶⁸ Financial difficulties were a constant issue for many years to come, though efforts were made to prevent this from effecting the development of the church's work, such as the support given to its own "Children's Church".⁶⁹ There was an appreciation of the importance of good publicity, so each month a hundred large posters advertising the forthcoming month's programme were issued and advertisements were placed in every Saturday issue of two local evening newspapers. The contribution to the Sunday evening meetings of Socialist songs and hymns was acknowledged by the Birmingham Labour Church with the commissioning of its own Labour Church Song Book.⁷⁰ At the first Annual Meeting, held on 30th November 1894, it was announced that the membership had grown to 130 people.⁷¹ Such increase in numbers can be considered alongside a fall in attendance at Birmingham churches and chapels of various Christian denominations by the 1890s. A local religious census of 1851 reported that 36% of the population of Birmingham attended a Christian place of worship, but this had dropped to 32.4% in 1892.⁷² While the rise in the local population and boundary changes during that forty year period must be taken

⁶⁸ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 2, 22nd June 1894, 5.

⁶⁹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 2, 28th September 1894, .45.

⁷⁰ *Labour Prophet*, September 1894, 128.

⁷¹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 2, 30th November 1894, 71.

⁷² Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 109.

into account, the overall attendance in Birmingham held up relatively well compared to other similar places such as Liverpool, Sheffield and Nottingham, and half of all Birmingham's school age children attended a Sunday School in 1892.⁷³ Although research conducted by Hugh McLeod into local censuses conducted by newspapers between 1881 and 1892 revealed that in terms of Birmingham people classified as poor and working class their church attendance was below that of other industrial cities, with the exception of Bradford.⁷⁴ It must be noted that the inclusion or exclusion of Sunday School children in the various census figures skews the findings, an indication of an on-going role of the church for elementary religious instruction in many communities.

From the earliest days of the Birmingham Labour Church, its members were active in the wider Labour movement, whether through involvement on the Joint Socialist Committee which supported I. L. P. candidates in local municipal elections,⁷⁵ or the hosting of a Social Democratic Federation (S. D. F.) conference in the Bond Street Chapel.⁷⁶ The first S. D. F. branch in Birmingham was founded in 1886 by the trade unionist Tom Mann, who fought in several local elections but with no success.⁷⁷ While the S. D. F. failed to secure its own councillors, the party's message of an independent voice for working people appealed to many younger activists.⁷⁸ A number of local trade unionists were elected to the Birmingham council during the 1880s, forming a Lib-Lab group that would culminate in two Lib-Lab candidates standing in Birmingham constituencies during the General Election of 1892.⁷⁹ Although both candidates were unsuccessful, there was a taste of political potential which

⁷³ A. Bryman, A. (editor) *Religion in the Birmingham Area: Essays in the Sociology of Religion* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, Institute for the Study of Worship and Religious Architecture, 1976), 21.

⁷⁴ Hugh McLeod, *Religion and Irreligion in Victorian England*, 57-58.

⁷⁵ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 2, 19th October 1894, 53.

⁷⁶ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 2, 14th December 1894, 84.

⁷⁷ Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 81.

⁷⁸ John Corbett, *The Birmingham Trades Council*, 68.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

fuelled a fierce debate within the Birmingham Trades Council about the need for independent Labour representation.⁸⁰ Among the growing number of people who were aligning themselves with Socialist political bodies and causes was the will to co-operate against the traditional forces of the city, one outlet for joint working being shared candidates for the local School Board.⁸¹ The desire for unity amongst local Socialists was shared by the Birmingham Labour Church, so that during the monthly meeting of members in January 1895 a resolution to that effect was passed, with unanimous support given to it by the 45 members present. The resolution read,

That the Birmingham Labour Church is in accord with the formation of One Socialist

Party and favors [sic.] the idea of the Amalgamation of the existing Socialist Bodies.⁸²

There is also an indication of the congregation's sympathy with the Christian Socialists of the city with the acceptance of several local ministers as speakers. Rev. A. Charlesworth⁸³ and Reverend Edward Sale⁸⁴ were included on the approved list of lecturers, along with consideration of other Christian speakers, such as W. B. Bond of the Salvation Army.⁸⁵ An interesting minute refers to the donation to the Labour Church of one hundred photographs of the late Dr. Robert Dale, the champion of the Civic Gospel.⁸⁶

The second Town Hall meeting took place on Sunday, 21st October 1894, with Keir Hardie and Pete Curran returning as speakers, joined by Enid Stacy. The numbers of people wishing to attend the event were so numerous that the seating capacity of 3,000 was soon reached and the doors of the Town Hall were closed. Such was the size of the crowd of people who were

⁸⁰ Ibid., 70.

⁸¹ Ibid., 71.

⁸² Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 2, 25th January 1895, 123.

⁸³ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 2, 3rd August 1894, 25.

⁸⁴ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 2, 14th December 1894, 84.

⁸⁵ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 2, 18th January 1895, 115.

⁸⁶ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 2, 22nd March 1895, 159.

unable to attend the official gathering that an impromptu meeting was held in Squirt Square, where local Socialist orators spoke.⁸⁷ A. K. Constantine wrote about the evening in his report for *Labour Prophet*,

What the effects of the Town Hall meeting will be we are not yet able to judge, but we can expect that it will have made the Labour Church and its principles known to a large number of people who previously knew nothing about the matter . . . There are unmistakable signs of greatly increased activity among the Birmingham Socialists, and we are looking forward with considerable hope to a vigorous winter campaign.⁸⁸

The annual meeting had established itself to be an event that achieved two objectives; the raising of the profile of the Labour Church across Birmingham, and a rallying point for a cross section of local Socialists. The Town Hall event remained a significant occasion for the members of the Labour Church for over a decade, and they put many resources into its preparation to ensure its continuing success. Although, a dependence on ‘big speakers’ to pull in the crowds could backfire on the organising of the meeting, as when the event planned for 4th October 1896 was cancelled because of Keir Hardie’s unavailability on that date to be the keynote speaker.⁸⁹

By April 1895 the financial situation of the Birmingham Labour Church was described as “unsatisfactory”⁹⁰ because of the congregation’s deficit of £30. A range of fundraising events were organised, such as a ‘Merrie England’ Bazaar.⁹¹ But money troubles did not dissuade the managing committee of the Birmingham Fabian Society from voting to amalgamate with

⁸⁷ *Labour Prophet*, November 1894, 159.

⁸⁸ *Labour Prophet*, November 1894, 159.

⁸⁹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 28th August 1896, 104.

⁹⁰ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 2, 29th April 1895, 175.

⁹¹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 2, 12th May 1895, 197.

the local Labour Church,⁹² a recommendation that was approved by the church's members' monthly meeting on 31st May 1895.⁹³ The identity of the local Fabian Society was not lost completely as its Socialist Class continued.⁹⁴ On the back inside cover of Minute Book No. 2, someone has written "Debt and arrears throughout", a sad reflection on the state of the Labour Church in Birmingham after 18 months of its existence. Yet, this must be balanced with an appreciation of the extent of the congregation's work; listed under the sub-committees, again scribbled on the inside cover, are the following areas of work: Musical; Finance; Cinderella; Children's Church; Women's; Social; Reading; Fayre.⁹⁵

For several years from 1895, the internal affairs of the Birmingham Labour Church can be categorised into three specific areas of concern; the on-going financial crisis, the engagement with Christian Socialists and the problem of premises. Wider activities of the congregation continued through their allegiances to other Socialist groups and a very active Cinderella Club. But the minutes of the meetings express recurring themes regarding organisational matters. There is a comment made at the annual members' meeting that the merger with the local Fabian Society had increased the scope of the church's work, but that membership had remained static,⁹⁶ which is an indication of the crossover of membership between the various Socialist organisations in Birmingham.⁹⁷ It was reported in March 1896 at a meeting of the executive committee, composed of the elected officers, about the "smallness of the collections recently."⁹⁸ This was followed by reports of the decrease in attendance at Sunday evening meetings, and the fact that the financial accounts were not balancing for both the

⁹² Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 2, 24th May 1895, 201.

⁹³ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 2, 31st May 1895, 205.

⁹⁴ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 2, 23 August 1895, 234.

⁹⁵ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 2.

⁹⁶ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 29th November 1895, 24.

⁹⁷ Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 124,

⁹⁸ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 6th March 1896, 62.

Labour Church and its Cinderella Club.⁹⁹ The deficit of the church went from £16 in July 1896¹⁰⁰ to over £26 by the following September.¹⁰¹ The lack of financial resources restricted commitment to national affiliations, from an inability to contribute to the work of the Land Nationalisation Society¹⁰² to the resolution that the Birmingham branch should separate from the Labour Church Union because the annual subscriptions could not be guaranteed.¹⁰³

This financial situation culminated in a decision reached by the members' monthly meeting in March 1898 to remove 32 people from membership for not paying their subscription fees,¹⁰⁴ leaving 72 on the list. One implication of the financial difficulties was the problem of paying rent on the Bond Street Chapel. The building, which had been built originally for a Baptist congregation before becoming a Methodist place of worship,¹⁰⁵ gave to the Labour Church a suitable ecclesiastical setting from which to base their activities. This nonconformist chapel on Bond Street helped to legitimise the Labour Church as a religious organisation in the minds of many with a background in institutional Christianity. But with an increase in the rent, and the bad state of repairs of the building,¹⁰⁶ it became increasingly clear that alternative accommodation was required. Notice for termination of the tenancy was given in March 1897,¹⁰⁷ and the following summer was spent seeking new premises, including the Bijon Theatre, Queen's College and the Prince of Wales Assembly Rooms.¹⁰⁸ From October 1897, the Labour Church was located at the Oozells Street Board Schools,

⁹⁹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 27th March 1896, 68.

¹⁰⁰ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 31 July 1896, 96.

¹⁰¹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 25 September 1896, 113.

¹⁰² Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 6 March 1896, 61.

¹⁰³ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 5 March 1895, 156.

¹⁰⁴ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 17th March 1898, 206.

¹⁰⁵ W. B. Stephens, (editor) *A History of the County of Warwick*.

¹⁰⁶ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 28th February 1896, 59.

¹⁰⁷ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 12th March 1897, 158.

¹⁰⁸ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 3rd September 1897, 185.

where its annual general meeting was held,¹⁰⁹ before moving to a more permanent arrangement at the Bristol Street Board Schools the following June.¹¹⁰

One Labour Church member, referred to as Comrade Baldwin, suggested the establishment of a Sunday morning class along the lines adopted by the Church of the Saviour.¹¹¹ While there is little information given on this and no decision is recorded, the fact that there was interest in the practices of the Edward Street congregation founded by George Dawson indicates the continuing influence of radical nonconformity. Anglican priest, hymn writer and committed Socialist, Percy Dearmer, was invited to speak in early 1896, but due to other commitments he declined, and suggested the names of Conrad Noel, the future 'Red Vicar of Thaxted', and the founder of the Guild of St. Matthew, Stewart Headlam.¹¹² Conrad Noel agreed to speak, and this was arranged for 7th June 1896.¹¹³ Noel's lecture seems to have been well received as his name was retained on the approved list of speakers¹¹⁴ until New Year's Day 1897, when the executive committee removed it with no explanation given in the minutes.¹¹⁵ It is worth noting that Tom Groom had been a member of the Guild of St. Matthew before joining the Labour Church.¹¹⁶

While D. F. Summers attempted to imagine himself at a Labour Church service taking place in a northern town during the 1890s,¹¹⁷ the Sunday evening meetings held in the Bristol Street Board Schools were recreated by the Aston-born literary critic and writer, Walter Allen. In

¹⁰⁹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 19th October 1897, 187.

¹¹⁰ George Barnsby, *Birmingham Working People*, 258.

¹¹¹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 3rd January 1896, 36.

¹¹² Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 24th January 1896, 42.

¹¹³ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 7th February 1896, 51.

¹¹⁴ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 12th June 1896, 88.

¹¹⁵ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 1st January 1897, 141.

¹¹⁶ W. B. Stephens, (editor) *A History of the County of Warwick*.

¹¹⁷ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries', 97-109. See Appendix 3 for the full extract.

his semi-autobiographical novel *All in a Lifetime*, Allen writes of the Socialist world of his father who was a Labour activist in Birmingham from the 1890s. While not complimentary about the nature and concerns of the Labour Church, Allen does place the organisation at the heart of local Socialist activity. Writing of the venue for the weekly meetings,

[W]e met in the assembly hall – three classrooms with shutters between them removed – of the Menai Street Infants School: dark-brown pitch-pine and dark-green walls, with narrow ecclesiastical windows and desks into which we cramped our adult bottoms. Uncomfortable and dingy enough; but it is exactly in such surroundings that dissent has always thrived.¹¹⁸

Allen goes on to describe the understanding of Socialism as a way of life. Having rejected the ways and institutions of wider society, Allen argues in his novel that many Socialists “deemed it necessary to have a religion and church likewise.”¹¹⁹

We had our hymns; there was even a little book called Socialist Hymns; but they were very few in number: ‘The Red Flag’, ‘When Wilt Thou Save the People’, ‘The Land for the People’, and one or two others; and since we were accustomed to sing them at our public meetings as well they scarcely sounded a religious note. The bulk of the proceedings consisted of some kind of entertainment and an address. Sometimes the entertainment and the address were one and the same thing.¹²⁰

An insight into Allen’s understanding of the political beliefs of those who were members of the Labour Church is gained from a description given in an earlier unpublished novel written in 1930s entitled *Tomorrow is Another Day*. In a section about the father of the main character, he writes,

¹¹⁸ Walter Allen, *All in a Lifetime* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986), 145.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

His Socialism was of a naively idealistic type, the fruit of early reading of Ruskin, Carlyle and William Morris, and his vision of the future was derived in part from Morris's utopias and in part from Walter Crane's cartoons. He thought of bearded men and grave-eyed full breasted Walter Crane women when he pictured the coming world. It was to be an age of craftsmen and Kropotkin peasant-farmers . . .¹²¹

By the latter months of 1898 the financial crisis had worsened due to the extent of members' arrears on their subscriptions.¹²² So severe was the situation that the closure of the Birmingham Labour Church was considered at the Annual Meeting held on 2nd November, when both the treasurer and the financial secretary resigned.¹²³ After the proposal to close was debated, it was decided to defer the final decision in order to allow the following general monthly meeting to reach its conclusions.¹²⁴ The general meeting, which occurred some four weeks later, took the decision not to close.¹²⁵ Economic surveys of British society in the second half of the nineteenth century have indicated an increase in income for working people, helped by the fall in the cost of living during this period, and an improvement of working conditions, with shorter working hours and better standards in the workplace.¹²⁶ The exception to this trend was the Great Depression of the 1870s and 1880s, which had a major impact on the industries of Birmingham,¹²⁷ though the impact on the town was mitigated by an increase in municipal and other building work.¹²⁸ By the time the Labour Church had established itself in the city during the 1890s the Birmingham economy was prospering and

¹²¹ 'Papers of Walter Ernest Allen (1911-1995) Novelist and Literary Critic', Special Collections, University of Birmingham, MS2/2/1, 58.

¹²² Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 5th October 1898, 9.

¹²³ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 2nd November 1898, 13.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹²⁵ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 7th December 1898, 21.

¹²⁶ Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 71.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹²⁸ John Corbett, *The Birmingham Trades Council*, 44.

workers were benefiting from being able to participate in the rise of a consumer society.¹²⁹

What the surveys do not indicate because of their use of average figures of income is the continual struggle of “the lower ranks of the working classes, the residuum, the denizens of the slums”.¹³⁰ Such people in Birmingham had suffered from the closure of many workshops located close to their homes in the centre of the city during the Great Depression and the need to travel a distance to factories of the new industries which meant longer working days and often the need to pay for public transport. No lists of members’ names and addresses have survived, which means that it is not possible to determine their socio-economic circumstances. That being noted, what remained a challenging financial situation for some working people of Birmingham in the 1890s would have restricted their ability to contribute to the costs of an organisation like the local Labour Church.

Such was the financial burden that when amalgamations with associated organisations were raised then serious attention was given to the proposals. There was a suggestion that the Labour Church may wish to share premises with the Birmingham Socialist Centre,¹³¹ an organisation formed in 1897 to help co-ordinate Socialist activity across the city.¹³² While this attempt at closer co-operation did not come to fruition due to the Centre’s wish to employ its own organizer,¹³³ the close links between both of these local groups would be strengthened over the years mainly because of joint members. The question of the Birmingham Labour Church becoming a member of the Union of Ethical Societies was discussed at some length over several years,¹³⁴ which is interesting due to the non-Christian stance of that Union and the close ties between local Christian Socialists and the Labour

¹²⁹ J. Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain, 1880-1980* (London: Longman, 1994), 12.

¹³⁰ Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 72.

¹³¹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 1st February 1899, 30.

¹³² George Barnsby, *Birmingham Working People*, 262.

¹³³ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 1st March 1899, 36.

¹³⁴ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 1st February 1899, 34.

Church. The leader of the Ethical Union, Stanton Coit, was very keen to recruit groups “with which politically concerned ethicism had natural affinities, like the Labour Churches”.¹³⁵ Coit was beginning to consider developing an Ethical Church along Labour Church lines “as a ‘Democratic Church’ for the masses, to serve them as the established church served the ruling class”.¹³⁶ Eventually, the decision was made that the Birmingham Labour Church would join the Ethical Union and it would retain the name ‘Labour Church’.¹³⁷ One member, E. D. Foster, opposed the affiliation,¹³⁸ but this was not supported by the majority as Stanton Coit was invited to speak at the Town Hall event in October 1902.¹³⁹ During the discussions about closer ties with both the Socialist Centre and the Ethical Union, the name of John Arthur Fallows appears as a proposed speaker.¹⁴⁰ Fallows, the son of Alderman Fallows who had been Mayor of Birmingham, as noted in the previous chapter, became a significant figure in the life of the Labour Church in Birmingham.

Throughout its history, the Birmingham Labour Church was an active supporter of the May Day demonstrations organised jointly by local Socialist organisations, including the I. L. P. and the S. D. F., and held in a number of city public parks. It was reported that the May Day event in 1899 was attended by 5,000 people,¹⁴¹ but, despite the success of such an occasion, attempts to create a unifying Socialist Federation during that period failed because of major disagreements between the S. D. F. and the I. L. P..¹⁴² R. A. Wright writes of the lack of co-operation being a major hindrance to the advancement of Labour politics in the city where

¹³⁵ I. D. MacKillop, *The British Ethical Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 114.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 3rd April 1902, attached letter.

¹³⁸ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 31st July 1902, 196.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹⁴⁰ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 1st February 1899, 33.

¹⁴¹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 7th June 1899, 71.

¹⁴² Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 5th July 1899, 80.

Chamberlainism dominated.¹⁴³ Frustrated by this, the Birmingham Labour Church remained convinced of the need for firmer links and continued to work for such. In 1900, the Labour Church played an important role in securing a Socialist candidate for the city's School Board¹⁴⁴ and worked closely with the Socialist Centre, I. L. P. and S. D. F. to have a candidate elected to the Board of Guardians.¹⁴⁵

For four years from 1896 no delegate was sent to the annual Labour Church Union conference because of the financial difficulties faced by the local membership.¹⁴⁶ The main preoccupation of the congregation was local city politics to the point that the ties with the national organisation were severely weakened, so that when it informed the Labour Church Union that yet again no delegate would be sent to the conference in Bradford on 19th and 20th May 1900,¹⁴⁷ the Union responded swiftly. By the beginning of May the Labour Church Union agreed it would pay the expenses of a Birmingham delegate, and so J. A. Fallows, then the local secretary, was sent to Bradford.¹⁴⁸ At this time, and possibly reflecting the relationship with the wider Labour Church movement, the Birmingham branch debated changing their name to 'Birmingham Socialist Church'.¹⁴⁹ This suggestion was not accepted, though the idea would re-emerge after a few years.

While the relationship between Birmingham and the Labour Church Union became fragile, the movement was slowly growing across the West Midlands. The Potteries-born novelist Arnold Bennett offers us an interesting insight in one of his short stories to the place of the

¹⁴³ R. A Wright, ' Liberal Party Organisation and Politics in Birmingham, Coventry and Wolverhampton 1886-1914, with particular reference to the development of Independent Labour Representation, Ph. D. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1977, 234.

¹⁴⁴ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, February 1900, 118.

¹⁴⁵ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 6th December 1900, 147.

¹⁴⁶ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 29th May 1896, 84.

¹⁴⁷ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, March 1900, 121.

¹⁴⁸ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, May 1900, 127.

¹⁴⁹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, March 1900, 122.

Labour Church in that part of the region at the beginning of the twentieth century. Bennett described the aim of the Labour Church as being “to establish the new democratic heaven and the new democratic earth by means of a gradual and bloodless revolution.”¹⁵⁰ In December 1900 an appeal was received from members of the West Bromwich Labour Church who wished to build their own hall,¹⁵¹ this was agreed the next month by the general meeting.¹⁵² The following October assistance was required from the Birmingham members at the opening of the West Bromwich Labour Church building, Tom Groom and several others volunteered to help their Socialist neighbours.¹⁵³ The opening event occurred on Sunday, 10th November 1901, an achievement made possible with the support of the Birmingham Labour Church.¹⁵⁴ It is worthy of note that in March 1901 eight Trades Councils affiliated to the new Labour Representation Committee (the forerunner of the parliamentary Labour Party) including the largest, and once staunchly Liberal, Birmingham Trades Council.¹⁵⁵

By 1903 the I. L. P. branches in Bordesley and West Birmingham had both founded their own Labour Church meetings, and some people began to transfer their membership from the central congregation to one of the newer groups.¹⁵⁶ Such was the concern of the impact on attendance at the Sunday evening meetings at the Bristol Street Board Schools that a minute was taken expressing the views of the executive committee: “an effort should be made to increase the number of members at the “Mother Church” and bring the attendance up to at least its former standard.”¹⁵⁷ It was agreed that a sub-committee should be established to look into how the original Birmingham Labour Church could co-exist alongside the new

¹⁵⁰ Arnold Bennett, *Tales of the Five Towns*, Large Print Edition (Charleston, South Carolina: Biblio Bazaar, 2006 / first published 1905), 44. See Appendix 4 for the full extract.

¹⁵¹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 6th December 1900, 148.

¹⁵² Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 3rd January 1901, 149.

¹⁵³ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 3rd October 1901, 173.

¹⁵⁴ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 7th November 1901, 176.

¹⁵⁵ John Corbett, *The Birmingham Trades Council*, 72.

¹⁵⁶ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 10th February 1903, 222.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 223.

meetings which were beginning to sprout up around it.¹⁵⁸ From 1903 until 1910 the minute books record a steady attendance at the Sunday evening meetings, which averaged around 150 people each week.¹⁵⁹ But the fragility of the church's finances continued to affect its commitments.

In spite of financial hardship, at the beginning of 1904 G. F. Berry appealed to the members' quarterly meeting for more assistance with the weekly Sunday School.¹⁶⁰ This request was heeded, and along with greater support, the Sunday morning activity relocated from the Lyceum Theatre to premises in Cambridge Street, leading to an increase in the number of pupils some three months later.¹⁶¹ By the first month of 1905 such was the success of the Sunday School that the quarterly meeting decided to adopt the work as its own: "It was unanimously agreed that for the future this [Sunday School] be officially recognised as a branch of the work of this Church."¹⁶² Such a minute would not be a strange entry in the records of a Methodist Society, though the following one would raise serious questions in a Wesleyan or Primitive Methodist context: "The general aim of the school is moral instruction irrespective of theology, the only creed being "to do good is our religion".¹⁶³

At the same meeting it was recorded that the 57 children would be offered a diet of anything from *Alice in Wonderland* to the novels of Charles Dickens, depending on their age, while the adults, some eight in number, were taught art appreciation and the thoughts of Friedrich Nietzsche, which is a somewhat unusual choice of subject for a Socialist group with Christian

¹⁵⁸ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 337.

¹⁵⁹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 6th March 1906, 253.

¹⁶⁰ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 21st January 1904, 47.

¹⁶¹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 21st April 1904, 75.

¹⁶² Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 19th January 1905, 151.

¹⁶³ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 18th April 1905, 186.

Socialist sympathies because of Nietzsche's atheism and elitism.¹⁶⁴ While this would not be the usual fare offered at a usual nonconformist Sunday School, the fact that the Birmingham Labour Church Sunday School drew from Lewis Carroll, Dickens and even Nietzsche themes of solidarity and co-operation would have resonated with the Christian Chartists and Civil Gospelers. With regard to the Sunday School's savings bank, self-help organisations played an important role in the history of Birmingham in the nineteenth century, with 213 friendly societies registered in 1849, the movement continued in membership in the second half of the century. The growth of trade unionism in the city had an impact on the local societies as the unions provided welfare provision for their members.¹⁶⁵

At an executive committee held on 4th September 1906 at Coleridge Chambers on Corporation Street a minute was taken, "The Secretary reported that the Lecture List was not complete owing to an unprecedented number of refusals from Lecturers."¹⁶⁶ These refusals were not due to a bad reputation of the local Labour Church, for that organisation was held in regard by the Socialists of Birmingham at that time, but because of the congregation's difficulty in paying travelling expenses and lecturing fees. It is worth noting that throughout the life of this Labour Church there remained a consistent policy about the suitability of speakers, the criteria for removing a person from the approved listed was "excessive cost, uninteresting delivery style, or needless length of lecture",¹⁶⁷ but not opposition to the speaker's opinions. The Birmingham Labour Church relied on the completion of its Lecture List around three months before the new programme began so that cards, flyers and posters and newspaper advertisements could be prepared. In certain respects the Lecture List acted like a Methodist preaching plan for members and interested outsiders. It seems that the

¹⁶⁴ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 18th April 1905, 186.

¹⁶⁵ Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 83.

¹⁶⁶ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 4th September 1906, 285.

¹⁶⁷ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 332.

formula of the Sunday evening service had not changed from that described previously by Walter Allen. Issues of expenses and the content of the Sunday service are addressed on notepaper given to each lecturer, a copy of which is attached to minutes of the Birmingham Labour Church from June 1907:

Services held on Sunday evenings at Bristol Street Council Schools. Doors open at 6; service commences punctually at 6.30.

Lecturers are invited to arrive not later than 6.15, and to kindly inform the secretary in advance what their fee for lecturing is (if any), and whether they desire hospitality to be provided. The Lecturer's travelling expenses will be refunded to them.

The Lecture or Address should be about 40 minutes' duration. It is followed by questions, but not by a discussion.¹⁶⁸

What is requested is a lecture or address, but not a sermon. There was to be no discussion because the Labour Church was not a debating society.

The annual Town Hall events held each October helped to maintain a high profile for the Birmingham Labour Church amongst the Labour movement across the city and the West Midlands. Speakers from the national Socialist or social reform scene attracted crowds of several thousand, figures such as Philip Snowden in 1903,¹⁶⁹ Liberal social reformer and researcher into poverty in York Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree in 1904,¹⁷⁰ and Keir Hardie at the 1905 event.¹⁷¹ Snowden returned to the Birmingham Town Hall on 4th November 1906, with James Bruce Glasier as the chairman¹⁷² and Pete Curran was the main speaker the

¹⁶⁸ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 4th June 1907, 92.

¹⁶⁹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 3rd November 1903,.1.

¹⁷⁰ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 16th November 1904, 122.

¹⁷¹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 7th November 1905, 226.

¹⁷² Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No.5, 2nd October 1906, 296.

following year.¹⁷³ But 1908 was to prove to be a problematic time for the organisation of the annual event. The year began with suggestions that either Ramsay MacDonald, Parliamentary Labour Party M. P. for Leicester, or the Christian Socialist, Rev. R. J. Campbell, should be approached.¹⁷⁴ When it was discovered that neither was available¹⁷⁵ another Labour M. P., Victor Grayson was contacted to be the speaker, with Robert Blatchford to preside.¹⁷⁶ Then the executive committee found out that the Town Hall was not available when required in October, and so Tom Groom was sent out to find alternative premises, including local theatres.¹⁷⁷ At the executive committee of 18th June 1908 it was minuted that the Hippodrome had been booked for the annual meeting on 15th November, but then nine days before the event the following was recorded,

[The Secretary of the Hippodrome Company is] greatly agitated to find that Grayson and Blatchford were to be the speakers. He feared damage to the Co.'s reputation and their property and would have liked to cancel the engagement if possible.¹⁷⁸

The Hippodrome was the leading music hall in Birmingham city centre, and a popular venue for mainly working class audiences,¹⁷⁹ which raises the question of why the company's management was opposed to a Socialist event in its premises. The issue may have been Blatchford and Grayson's reputations as wild men of Labour politics, as the minute implies. But there has to be recognition given to the dominance of Chamberlain's Unionism as political force within the city, and the wide ranging influence beyond the political sphere.¹⁸⁰ It was only through the reassurances given by the Labour Church executive, the intervention of a magistrate and the confidence of the Chief Constable that the event happened at all. The

¹⁷³ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 5th September 1907, 102.

¹⁷⁴ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 8th January 1908, 127.

¹⁷⁵ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No.6, 5th February 1908, 131.

¹⁷⁶ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 11th March 1908, 138.

¹⁷⁷ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 1st April 1908, 143.

¹⁷⁸ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 6th November 1908, 211.

¹⁷⁹ Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 113.

¹⁸⁰ Peter T. Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain: Entrepreneur in Politics*, 672.

final minute on the matter expressed the opinion of Percy Broadhurst, which was probably shared by all concerned, “that it was somewhat doubtful whether we should have the use of the Hippodrome again.”¹⁸¹

The attitude of the Hippodrome’s management to the Labour Church event expresses something of the attitude towards the Labour movement and Socialism that was held in certain quarters of society, notably the working class Tories of Birmingham. Many local working people had followed Joseph Chamberlain into supporting the Unionist–Tory cause through the Birmingham political phenomenon of ‘Cloth-capped Chamberlainism’, a factor which was at play in the position taken by the Hippodrome management. While it had been external forces that caused the disruption to the 1908 gathering, it was to be internal issues that would have an impact in 1909. The Birmingham Labour Church was a committed member of the city’s Joint Socialist Propaganda Committee, which included the uncomfortable bed-fellows of the I. L. P. and the S. D. F..¹⁸² When Philip Snowden, who had agreed the previous March to be the main speaker,¹⁸³ discovered that the event was to be a jointly sponsored occasion he withdrew himself from it, stating that he did not wish to be associated with organisations “with whom he had no sympathy.”¹⁸⁴ The event went ahead without him, at the Hippodrome! Such controversies indicate that the tensions between the S. D. F. and the I. L. P. were more pronounced among their leaders than the members at the grassroots level of activity.¹⁸⁵ Reflecting upon this local diversity, R. A. Wright notes that the “Labour movement in Birmingham appeared to speak with a number of voices”.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸¹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 5th December 1908, 221.

¹⁸² Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 18th May 1909, 260.

¹⁸³ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 5th March 1909, 236.

¹⁸⁴ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 29th June 1909, 265.

¹⁸⁵ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 19th October 1909, 286.

¹⁸⁶ R. A. Wright, ‘Liberal Party Organisation and Politics’, 354.

In addition to the annual events, the Birmingham Labour Church presented itself to the wider movement and general public through its advocacy of a number of political issues that were being debated nationally. All of the M. P.s for Birmingham constituencies were petitioned by the Labour Church arguing that they should support the Women's Suffrage Bill of 1905,¹⁸⁷ though the responses from the local M. P. s were not positive.¹⁸⁸ With regard to proposals from the Workers' Educational Association which called for compulsory evening classes for young people, the Birmingham Labour Church gave a considered reply,

As an alternative to compulsory attendance at Evening Schools the Labour Church would suggest that a better method would be to keep all children at Day School until sixteen years of age – half the time between fourteen and sixteen to be devoted to such instructions as would fit the children for the occupations they had to follow.¹⁸⁹

Other matters championed by the members included the working terms and conditions of shop assistants,¹⁹⁰ the plight of unemployed people and the right to work,¹⁹¹ and the public ownership of land.¹⁹² On the back of the 1904 Town Hall event flyer was printed a public statement which announced the intent of the Birmingham congregation:

The Labour Church is founded on the belief that the Political and Industrial life of a nation should be the outcome of its highest Religious Ideal.

Its Members claim that sincere belief in the Fatherhood of God or the Brotherhood of Man must lead to a Political and Industrial Democracy . . . Socialism is Religion.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁷ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 6th June 1905, 200.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 201.

¹⁸⁹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 1st May 1907, 71.

¹⁹⁰ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 8th January 1908, 125.

¹⁹¹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 1st April 1908, 145.

¹⁹² Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 5th December 1906, 17.

¹⁹³ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 124, attached flyer.

The theological understandings expressed in the statement from 1904 give an interesting insight into the broad beliefs of the Birmingham Labour Church's members at that stage in their history. The Fatherhood of God and Brotherhood of Man are not considered to be two sides of the same coin, as had been promoted in the early years of the national movement by John Trevor,¹⁹⁴ but have been separated out to enable each member to choose one or both. Birmingham asserted its desire to keep its theological options open by departing from the founding principles of the Labour Church when it was noted in *Labour Church Record* of July 1900 that its people were required to accept "the moral and economic laws that may be adduced from the Fatherhood of God or the Brotherhood of Man" as means of securing membership.¹⁹⁵ Such ideological positioning by the Birmingham Labour Church is not a denial of Theological Socialism, but rather the desire to welcome those who did not take a literal interpretation of the Religion of Socialism. By broadening the ideological basis of the organisation the Birmingham congregation was maintaining its role as a gathering point for a cross section of the city's Socialists, including Theological and Ethical. While this more inclusive position was taken to reflect the local political scene, it had an impact on wider links. The relationship between the Labour Church Union and its Birmingham congregation can be discerned from the latter's minute books, particularly when it comes to issues around the constitution of the national body and content of its hymn books; in their pages are discussions about the fundamental perception and purpose of the Labour Church by local members from one major city.

The relationship at the turn of the twentieth century between the Birmingham Labour Church and the national Labour Church Union was fragile, a situation brought to a crisis point by

¹⁹⁴ Peter d'A. Jones, *The Christian Socialist Revival 1877-1914: Religion, Class, and Social Conscience in Late-Victorian England*, 317.

¹⁹⁵ Mark Bevir, 'The Labour Church Movement, 1891 – 1902', 235.

troubled finances but compounded by theological differences. Just at the time when schism was occurring, the Honorary Secretary and treasurer of the Union was J. Herbert Shaw, a resident of Aston Manor in Birmingham, but not an active member of the local branch.¹⁹⁶ In March 1906 the Labour Church Union met for its conference in central Birmingham at the Pitman Hotel, a vegetarian restaurant known for hosting meetings of the city's Socialist and radical groups, and also at the Bristol Street Board Schools. In preparation for welcoming their comrades from across Britain, a special meeting of the executive committee of the Birmingham Labour Church was called for 25th January when six resolutions were passed to be raised at the conference. These resolutions included an alteration of the fourth clause of the Union's Aims and Principles, which read, "That the Emancipation of Labour can only be realized so far as men learn both the Economic and Moral Laws of God, and heartily endeavour to obey them."¹⁹⁷ The alternative wording being:

The Religion of the Labour Movement declares that the improvement of social conditions and the development of personal character are both essential to emancipation from social and moral bondage; and to that end insists upon the duty of studying the economic and moral forces of society.¹⁹⁸

This statement steps away from the literal Religion of Socialism which was the particular theological lens through which John Trevor had wished the Labour Church to view the Labour movement. Instead, the revised principle widens the understanding of the term making it a declaration of Ethical Socialist belief. The revisions to the Labour Church Union's constitution offered by the Birmingham members found favour at the 1906 conference when a new set of principles was adopted.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 1st December 1903, 30.

¹⁹⁷ *Labour Prophet*, August 1893, 76.

¹⁹⁸ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 25th January 1906, 244.

¹⁹⁹ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 261.

The following year the Birmingham members took the opportunity to engage further with their national organisation by proposing to the forthcoming conference at Stockport the deletion of Clause 2 of the Union's Aims and Principles, which stated, "The Religion of the Labour Movement is not theological, but respects each individuals personal convictions on this question."²⁰⁰ The preparations for the 1908 national conference took the Birmingham members to a radical departure from the founding theological and sociological principles of the movement by declaring their desire for:

all hymns in the Labour Church Hymn Book containing 'Theological References' [to] be deleted" and "That the name of the Labour Church be changed to that of Socialist Church and that the aims and principles be altered accordingly."²⁰¹

By 1910 Birmingham was determined to assert its stance upon the wider organisation by stating that the change of name to the 'Socialist Church' should be obligatory to all local branches that wished to be affiliated with the national Union and that the Aims and Principles of the movement should be rewritten to reflect the name change.²⁰²

During this period when the Labour Church in central Birmingham was calling for the freedom of members to decide their own theological beliefs and a call to purge all hymns with any theological content from official Labour Church hymn books so that all members could sing each song with conviction, there is still a clear desire from the local members for ceremonial ritual. A copy of a burial service offered by the Labour Church Union for approval by its branches is attached to the minutes of the executive meeting from 1st May 1907. The proposed rite included biblical readings (1 Peter 1:24, Numbers 23:10 and Psalm

²⁰⁰ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 21st February 1907, 63.

²⁰¹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 5th February 1908, 132.

²⁰² Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 6th January 1910, 296.

10) and recitations from Thomas á Kempis, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Plato, and concluded with words at the graveside,

We are reminded that our individual life is not an end in itself, but forms a part in the building up of the future race. May we at this moment renew our vows as comrades of the Labour Church and the great Socialist Cause to let the light of our common faith shine brightly that it may attract men and women into one great bond of brotherhood.²⁰³

At the same executive committee meeting that requested that the Labour Church Union should remove all theological hymns came the approval for the official publication of the burial service.²⁰⁴ This may seem strange as the order of service was not a great departure from similar rites followed by Protestant denominations. It may be that while the members of the Birmingham Labour Church wished to define the Religion of Socialism in more inclusive terms, when it came to the death of a comrade, they found themselves needing to resort to familiar words and concepts.

The Labour Church played a pivotal role in the life of the Labour movement in Birmingham throughout the first decade of the twentieth century. The congregation supported the Joint Propaganda Committee, which promoted the causes of a diverse group of Socialists, and the local Labour Church was prepared to lose national favour, such as the refusal of Philip Snowden to be the main speaker at the annual meeting, in order to work towards greater solidarity in the city. A telling moment about the Labour Church in Birmingham Socialist politics was the preparation for the May Day demonstrations in 1906. There was a history of the congregation being invited to support these annual events, but this year the requests came

²⁰³ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No.6, 1st May 1907, 73.

²⁰⁴ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 5th December 1908, 223.

flooding in. The Aston Manor Labour Association invited the Labour Church to join them at its demonstration at Whitehead Road in Aston on 6th May at 11 am, the I. L. P. Federation requested the congregation's attendance at its event at Small Heath Park at 3 pm, and the day would conclude with a Town Hall meeting at 7 pm, to which the Trades Council asked for support.²⁰⁵ A key element of the Labour Church's self-perception was to act as a bridging point for the Labour movement in Birmingham. This understanding is clearly expressed in a letter from the executive committee to the local Clarion Scouts, who proposed to hold a meeting on 27th October 1908 in the Town Hall two weeks before the Labour Church's event at the Hippodrome. Concerned that the earlier demonstration would distract from its own high profile gathering, which was fraught with difficulties that year, but not wishing to undermine their Socialist comrades, the executive committee wrote,

The Labour Church has always endeavoured to act as a unifying influence in local Socialistic activity, and will have the greatest pleasure in assisting, in every possible way, in the Scouts' forthcoming meeting, which they hope will be entirely successful. The Committee will be grateful if the Scouts, in their turn, can lend their assistance in the Hippodrome meeting.²⁰⁶

As stated previously, in 1899 there had been conversations with the Socialist Centre about sharing premises, while this did not occur, the idea that the two organisations should work ever closer together continued to be considered mainly due to their increasingly common membership and by both groups seeking unity amongst local Socialists. On 9th November 1903 the Socialist Centre's executive committee, followed by the members' monthly meeting, discussed the possible amalgamation of their organisation with the Birmingham

²⁰⁵ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 1st May 1906, 260.

²⁰⁶ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 7th October 1908, 203.

Labour Church. It was decided to take the proposal to a joint meeting of the executives of both groups.²⁰⁷ Three days later the issue was raised at the Labour Church's annual meeting, and it was agreed that the executives should meet to discuss the idea.²⁰⁸ The minute books of both organisations record the joint meeting of their executive committees on 17th December 1903, when it was decided to form a sub-committee, which included Tom Groom and other joint members. To bring a focus to their considerations, the suggestion was made that the amalgamation could enable the opening and running of a Trades Hall.²⁰⁹ Through the first six months of 1904 the sub-committees conversations became dominated by the idea of the Trades Hall and the inclusion of other local organisations in the planning, so that the original proposal of the merger seemed to get lost.²¹⁰ By November 1904, the failure of the plans to open the Trades Hall is reported²¹¹ and the executive meeting of the Socialist Centre, who had suggested amalgamation in the first place, voted unanimously to continue its work on "present lines".²¹² Over ambition crippled what could have been the formation of a very significant political association for Birmingham.

The Labour Church continued to give active support to the local Labour movement, which included the backing of a proposed Labour Institute, some two years after the Trades Hall plans failed.²¹³ As the previous proposal, the Labour Institute idea faltered, on this occasion because of disagreements with the local trade unions,²¹⁴ which continued to have Liberal

²⁰⁷ Birmingham Socialist Centre, Minute Book 1909 -1911, 9th November 1903.

²⁰⁸ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 12th November 1903, 16.

²⁰⁹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 17th December 1903, 34 / Birmingham Socialist Centre, Minute Book 1909 – 1911, 17th December 1903.

²¹⁰ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 1st March 1904, 60 / Birmingham Socialist Centre, Minute Book 1909 – 1911, 6th June 1904.

²¹¹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 10th November 1904, 133.

²¹² Birmingham Socialist Centre, Minute Book 1909 – 1911, 14th November 1904.

²¹³ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 21st January 1907, 28.

²¹⁴ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 6th March 1907, 52.

sympathies.²¹⁵ A representative of the Labour Church congregation attended a conference convened by the Birmingham branch of the Workers' Education Association, and expressed its members' desire for the W. E. A. to grow and develop in the city.²¹⁶ Links with local Christian Socialists were well maintained, through a partnership with Rev. H. Carnegie and the Birmingham Central Branch of the Christian Social Union, as well as contacts with more fringe groups, such as the Christian Brotherhood of the Wesleyan Central Hall that wished to share speakers with the Labour Church.²¹⁷

The ties between the Labour Church and the I. L. P. in Birmingham became increasingly inter-dependant as the years rolled on, but in 1909 relationships were tense. The Birmingham I. L. P. Federation objected to the news that the Labour Church Union had decided to re-brand itself as the Socialist Church, claiming that this was "evincing a narrow sectarian spirit and [was] likely to create an erroneous impression that Socialism is a new religious sect".²¹⁸ The reason for this attitude is not clear, and may relate to the influence of the S. D. F. in the local Labour Church, or simply the association of the term 'Socialist' with that specific party rather than 'Labour' in terms of the I. L. P.. In its long and detailed response to this criticism, the Birmingham Labour / Socialist Church offered a reminder to its comrades that it was a separate organisation to the I. L. P., being founded before the latter had been formed, and lay down its convictions as a broad movement that upheld the Socialist Religion:

The Socialist Church exists to give expression to the religion of the Labour Movement.

The religion of the Labour Movement is not theological but respects each individual's personal convictions on this question.

²¹⁵ R. A. Wright, 'Liberal Party Organisation and Politics', 343.

²¹⁶ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 30th April 1908, 175.

²¹⁷ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 8th January 1908, 125.

²¹⁸ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 28th April 1909, 253.

The religion of the Labour Movement seeks the realisation of universal well-being by the establishment of Socialism: a commonwealth founded upon Justice and Love That the Church maintains a broad platform open alike to representatives of the I. L. P., S. D. P., Fabian Society, Church Socialist League, Clarion Scouts, Women's Suffrage Movement (all sections) and Social Reformers generally . . .²¹⁹

Here the Birmingham Labour Church is asserting its distinctiveness within the life of local Labour politics by staking its claim on the Religion of Socialism as its rationale, but by doing so also states that it poses no threat to its sister groups because it holds to a broad, inclusive Socialist agenda.

The minute books for the Birmingham Labour / Socialist Church end with the notes from an executive meeting held on 6th January 1910 in the offices of the Socialist Centre.²²⁰ It is known that the church remained active, because in 1912 it hosted the annual conference of the Socialist and Labour Church Union.²²¹ Notices for the church appeared regularly in *Justice* until 1913, and there is evidence that at that time the lecture programme was transferred from the Bristol Street Board Schools to the Birmingham Repertory Theatre.²²²

The general feeling is that the congregation went into a slow decline until the outbreak of the First World War, which led to its final closure. George Barnsby has traced a reference in *Clarion* on 1st October 1915 to a merger of the Labour / Socialist Church with the Birmingham Socialist Society,²²³ and he also suggests that it reopened as a Labour Church in October 1917,²²⁴ though there is no archival reference in support of this. Percy Broadhurst, who deposited the surviving minute books, bears out this belief in the church's demise, "As

²¹⁹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 28th April 1909, 255.

²²⁰ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 6th January 1910, 296.

²²¹ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 339.

²²² George Barnsby, *Birmingham Working People*, 452.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid., 260.

this organisation ceased to function sometime between 1914 – 1918, and is not likely to be revived (the Labour Church movement throughout the country appears to be quite dead) there is no one to whom I can hand these records.”²²⁵

4:4 The Cinderella and Clarion Cycling Clubs

As indicated in the previous chapter, the Birmingham Labour Church gave to the wider national movement the original Clarion Cycling Club and a successful Cinderella Club. The first meeting of a Cinderella Club in the city occurred in the autumn of 1893, which marked the beginning of an organisation that would make an important contribution to the lives of many children and their families living in slum communities during the club’s twenty year history. While there are no longer any surviving local records from this period which describe the founding of the Cinderella Club, A. K. Constantine wrote in the January 1894 *Labour Prophet*:

Our Cinderella Club is now in full working order, and meetings will be held weekly, or oftener if funds will permit. The first meeting was held on November 23rd, when over 40 children from the poorest districts of the town were entertained with games, music, and a fairy tale, and fed on buns, apples, and cocoa. This kind of work is badly needed in Birmingham, and it is hoped that lack of money will not curtail the work.²²⁶

A month later, Constantine recorded an attendance of sixty children at the weekly Cinderella meetings, where they were “fed and entertained.”²²⁷ It would be near to the end of that year that an important moment in the development of the Birmingham Labour Church’s Cinderella Club was noted,

²²⁵ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 2, 1894 – 1895.

²²⁶ *Labour Prophet*, January 1894, 14.

²²⁷ *Labour Prophet*, February 1894, 32.

At the monthly meeting of the Labour Church, Frank Mathews was elected secretary of the Cinderella. He will be very glad to hear from any friends who could help entertain the youngsters by means of comic songs, minstrel troupes, etc., as we found last winter our available games were played so often that the children got tired of them . . .²²⁸

Under the careful guidance of Frank Mathews, by 1897 the Cinderella Club in Birmingham became the largest organisation in Britain to bear that name.²²⁹ During the three years that Mathews was secretary, it can be calculated from the annual reports and minute books that 14,200 meals were served at the weekly meetings, 1,200 children went on day trips to the countryside – often to Sutton Park, and 35 children with physical disabilities stayed at a holiday cottage.²³⁰ What motivated Mathews’ involvement in the Cinderella work was his belief in the broad principles of Socialism, but it was his pragmatism that sustained his dedication to the club. As his biographer and family friend, Tony Rees, has written the Cinderella Club was “a way of applying his beliefs, not of spreading them.”²³¹ A report of the work by Mathews for *Labour Prophet* in 1895 would support this understanding of his attitude to the Cinderella Club,

Recognising the fact that it is impossible to amuse – and the primary object of the Cinderella, let it be distinctly understood, is to amuse, and not to educate – children, if their stomachs are empty, the first proceeding was to feed them (and this has been and is the invariable rule at all the gatherings) . . .²³²

²²⁸ *Labour Prophet*, October 1894, 143.

²²⁹ George Barnsby, *Birmingham Working People*, 261.

²³⁰ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 340.

²³¹ Tony Rees, *An Obscure Philanthropist: Frank Mathews, 1871-1948* (Ludlow: Castle View Books, 2009), 39.

²³² *Labour Prophet*, July 1895, 111.

The minutes of the Birmingham Labour Church from September 1895 records that the Cinderella Committee was preparing to entertain some 4,000 children in its forthcoming winter programme.²³³ As it turned out, two extra weekly meetings had to be convened in order to accommodate the demand for the club's activities.²³⁴ At this time of rapid growth, the Cinderella Club found itself struggling for finance, which meant that the committee made an urgent appeal to the members of its sponsor, the local Labour Church.²³⁵ Funds were gathered in enough amounts for the Cinderella Club to host 2,000 children from some of Birmingham's slum neighbourhoods over the Christmas period of 1896.²³⁶ Up until 1897 the use of a country cottage in Kingswood for respite care was possible because of the connection between Frank Mathews and Edith Holden's family.²³⁷ When the Holdens left Birmingham, the Cinderella Committee rented a cottage in Streetly, near Sutton Coldfield, for six months in 1897 and for seven months the following year.²³⁸ A matron was employed to care for the children staying at the cottage, and the yearly running costs of £150 were met by some 200 supporters from across Birmingham, both members of Socialist organisations and others wishing to be philanthropic.²³⁹ It should be acknowledged that social and charitable work was a popular activity of the city's middle classes as individuals served on the City Council, Board of Guardians, School Board or committees for music festivals, hospital funds or the Botanical Gardens.²⁴⁰ The Cinderella Club was able to tap into this rich vein of resources.

²³³ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 27th September 1897, 3.

²³⁴ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 13th December 1895, 31.

²³⁵ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 31st July 1896, 97.

²³⁶ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 3, 29th January 1897, 148.

²³⁷ Ina Taylor, *The Edwardian Lady: The Story of Edith Holden – Author of The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady* (London: Michael Joseph Limited / Exeter: Webb and Bower Limited, 1980), 81.

²³⁸ Tony Rees, *An Obscure Philanthropist*, 38.

²³⁹ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 341.

²⁴⁰ Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 113.

There was a question as to whether the Cinderella Club's close association with the Labour Church was helpful when it came to fundraising. In the early days the connection had been regarded as beneficial because it gave the club a distinct group of potential benefactors.²⁴¹ But within a few years the management committee began to debate the connection with the Labour Church, as some wondered if that partnership "pulled a good many purse-strings".²⁴² This attempt to broaden the appeal of the Cinderella Club to possible donors came to a head in January 1902 when at a special meeting of Labour Church members to discuss their relationship with the club, it was resolved that the words 'Labour Church' should be removed from its title, and that the new name be 'Birmingham Cinderella Club'.²⁴³ While this was an attempt to express the non-sectarian nature of the work with children, by April of 1903 the committee has agreed to conform with other clubs across the country to become known as 'Clarion Cinderella Club',²⁴⁴ which relates back to the origins of the first club in Manchester founded by Robert Blatchford.

The work of the Cinderella Club in Birmingham continued throughout the first decade of the twentieth century. Winter activities were based in local schools, at Rea Street from 1899²⁴⁵ and at Fox Street in 1903.²⁴⁶ J. A. Fallows reported in the July 1900 *Labour Church Record*, "The "Cinderella" work is the most flourishing institution connected with the Church; besides the winter work it maintains a cottage for convalescent and crippled children 8½ miles from Birmingham."²⁴⁷ By 1902 the summer cottage was located in Wythall, supported by a paid

²⁴¹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute book No. 2, 20th September 1895, 244.

²⁴² D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 341.

²⁴³ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 9th January 1902, 181.

²⁴⁴ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 16th April 1903, 242.

²⁴⁵ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 5th October 1899, 100.

²⁴⁶ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 12th November 1903, 14.

²⁴⁷ *Labour Church Record*, July 1900, 2.

matron.²⁴⁸ But two years later funds had been exhausted which meant that for the first time in its history there was to be no summer cottage for Cinderella children.²⁴⁹ Two things occurred that rescued Birmingham's Cinderella Club, first of all the appointment of the local Labour Church stalwart, Tom Groom, as secretary²⁵⁰ and an anonymous donation for £125 which meant that the work could recommence and a cottage be rented.²⁵¹ In the summer of 1906 relations between the Labour Church and the Cinderella Club were on good terms, and this was celebrated with an outing of church members to the Cinderella cottage, accompanied by other local Socialists, including the Clarionettes.²⁵² By the October of 1906 it was noted that year 800 children had been on day trips to Sutton Park, and that 140 had been guests for a fortnight at the cottage,²⁵³ a number revised to 210 by November.²⁵⁴

Such was the high regard for Tom Groom among the Socialist fraternity of Birmingham, that when it was announced that he was leaving the city for London, picture postcards bearing his photograph were produced to raise funds for the Cinderella Club.²⁵⁵ Groom had helped to revive the work first developed by Frank Mathews, and the activities of the club would continue until the outbreak of the First World War.²⁵⁶ Shortly after Groom left Birmingham, the Cinderella committee would be heard complaining to the Birmingham Labour Church's annual meeting about the lack of recognition from within the city's Socialist community.²⁵⁷ This lack of Socialist support may have been due to the attempted non-sectarian stance the Cinderella Club took in promoting its activities, or simply because of the pressures of other

²⁴⁸ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No.4, 1st May 1902, 189.

²⁴⁹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 1st March 1904, 59.

²⁵⁰ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 21st April 1904, 76.

²⁵¹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 4th July 1905, 203.

²⁵² Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 31st July 1906, 280.

²⁵³ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 5, 2nd October 1906, 291.

²⁵⁴ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 8th November 1906, 2.

²⁵⁵ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 18th June 1908, 161.

²⁵⁶ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 340.

²⁵⁷ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 29th October 1908, 206.

issues on the resources of local activists. But when it came to appeal for a new honorary secretary the Cinderella committee turned to the Socialists of Birmingham,²⁵⁸ a likely recognition of its core constituency and fundamental principles. Though there was no political teaching given to the children who attended the Cinderella Club activities, for that was the purpose of the Labour Church Sunday School, those who undertook the work were driven by the cause of Socialism. Frank Mathews expresses this clearly in his report for the September 1896 *Labour Prophet*:

If only everyone could hear the ‘Cry of the Children’ as we who are engaged in Cinderella work hear it, then the cry of the children would soon cease, our streets would no longer bring bitter pain to sensitive hearts, and socialism would be three generations nearer, for children would grow to be men with love in their hearts and would not need to learn the lessons of co-operation but would refuse to work or live under a system based on anything but love.²⁵⁹

In January 1901 *Labour Church Record* printed the regular account of the life of the Birmingham Labour Church as conveyed by J. A. Fallows. In this he outlines the activities of his branch since the previous June,

In the summer we had the usual rambles into Sutton Park, and a special jaunt to Bidford-on-Avon. Of the various lectures which have been given since our holiday in August, the most notable have been those of Bruce Glasier on Ireland; Miss Goyne on Grant Allen, and Rev. Bliss on America.

The Reading Circle on Economic History continues, but is badly attended, as English people have a perfect horror of the idea of developing their brains. Comrade Cole has

²⁵⁸ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 5th December 1908, 216.

²⁵⁹ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 341.

started a useful little discussion society, and it is hoped that he and Comrade Westbury will be able to start a Clarion Vocal Union and a choir for our Sunday meetings.

The “Fellowship,” “Cycling Club,” and “Cinderella,” are very prosperous institutions, as in other localities, but at present do not seem to be burning with enthusiastic ardour to spread the gospel of socialism.²⁶⁰

As well as being a personal comment on what he perceives to be anti-intellectualism among his fellow Socialists and apathy among his neighbours to the Labour cause, Fallows gives a flavour of the range of interests that occupied the members of the Labour Church in Birmingham at the dawn of the new century. Along with the Cinderella Club, a cycling club is mentioned, the local and national origins of which began with that branch of the Labour Church. Cycling had a major impact on social life in Britain from the late 1890s; David Rubinstein wrote, “In a period marked by sharp changes in social attitude, cycling provided not only a practical means of transport but a symbol of emancipation.”²⁶¹ The West Midlands benefitted from the development of the cycling industry,²⁶² with one Birmingham manufacturer, ‘Dunlop’, at the forefront of pneumatic tyre production.²⁶³

In February 1894, on the initiative of Tom Groom, seven members of the Birmingham Labour Church met to form what became the Clarion Cycling Club.²⁶⁴ A photograph survives from that year of those founding members with their bicycles, and at the centre of the group their leader, Tom Groom. By the April of 1894 the Birmingham Clarion Cycling Club began its first season with an Easter tour. The club members travelled to

²⁶⁰ *Labour Church Record*, January 1901, 7.

²⁶¹ David Rubinstein, ‘Cycling in the 1890s’, *Victorian Studies*, volume 1 number 1, 47.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁶³ Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 124.

²⁶⁴ George Barnsby, *Birmingham Working People*, 250.

Wolverhampton by train and met local cyclists from Socialist groups, and then together they cycled to Bridgnorth, Bewdley, Stourport, Worcester, Pershore, and Evesham, before returning to Birmingham.²⁶⁵ In the style of the journalists who wrote for Blatchford's *Clarion*, Tom Groom adopted the nickname 'O'Groomie O' and he became a popular speaker around the West Midlands as the founder of an organisation that quickly spread across the country.²⁶⁶ What Groom and his fellow members of the Birmingham Labour Church had connected with was a spirit among young Socialists, especially those educated skilled workers, who sought both social and personal freedom.²⁶⁷ Cycling clubs became a means of forging friendships and promoting the Socialist cause. Within a matter of months new *Clarion* Cycling Clubs were being formed, or older groups were renamed, in the Midlands and then across Northern England.²⁶⁸ At the first joint meeting of *Clarion* cyclists which took place over the Easter weekend of 1895 in Ashbourne, Derbyshire, the National *Clarion* Cycling Club was formed.²⁶⁹ At its peak in 1913, national membership of the N. C. C. C. reached 7,000.²⁷⁰ The Birmingham Labour Church gave a gift to the wider, national Labour movement, a gift that encouraged the stimulation of body and mind. This offering contributed to changing something of the nature of Labour politics in Britain, with the place of the Labour Church advocating a distinctive theological interpretation of Socialism being subsequently lost in the pursuit of electoral success and leisurely fellowship.²⁷¹

On the surface, the regular activity programme of the Birmingham Labour Church does not look any different to that of another congregation of a Christian tradition. The weekly

²⁶⁵ George Barnsby, *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country 1850-1939*, 57.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁶⁷ David Rubinstein, 'Cycling in the 1890s' 68.

²⁶⁸ Henry Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party 1880-1900*, second edition (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965), 138.

²⁶⁹ Denis Pye, *Fellowship is Life: The Story of the Clarion Cycling Club* (Bolton: Clarion Publishing, 2004), 17.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁷¹ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 117.

schedule of Sunday school and service, study groups, choir, social outreach projects and social clubs, reflects the preoccupations of other local organisations that met under the name of church. What is noticeable about the activities in the 1890s and early 1900s is the scale of the impact of two of their commitments. The Clarion Cycling Club inspired a national movement of Socialist fellowships based around leisure pursuits and the bonds of friendship, which would in turn lead to the development of Cycling Touring Clubs throughout Britain by the first half of the twentieth century.²⁷² Several thousand lives of young children from the poorest communities of Birmingham were affected by the work of the Cinderella Club. For a Labour Church congregation that averaged little more than one hundred members, that two of its clubs had such an influence in local communities and across the national Labour scene is of no small significance.

4:5 The spread of Labour Churches across Birmingham

As the Birmingham Labour Church prepared to enter its third year of operation, its members discussed resolutions to be taken to the movement's national conference. Their attitude was that the conference should be an event open to "all bodies of "educational character" calling themselves 'Labour Church'" believing that "the "extension" of the Labour Church movement would be best accomplished by spontaneous effort."²⁷³ The spread of the Labour Church movement across Britain during this period may have been less of a spontaneous effort, and more due to the fact that newly formed Independent Labour Party branches were being encouraged to form their own Labour Churches. As a letter from the Labour Church Union of May 1895 acknowledged, "its effect is gradually becoming visible in the increasing number of Branches of the Labour Party which are carrying on their Sunday work under our

²⁷² Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 161.

²⁷³ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 2, 16th November 1894, 63.

name.”²⁷⁴ It took several years before a further expansion of the Labour Church movement took root in Birmingham and challenged the role of the central congregation.

The first reference to another local Labour Church in the minute books refers to a branch in a neighbouring town. Links between the Labour Churches in Birmingham and West Bromwich were strong from the opening of the latter in January 1899, when for several years both congregations shared visiting speakers at their Sunday meetings.²⁷⁵ Although the West Bromwich Labour Church did not exceed more than forty members, the chairman of the congregation was a local businessman called Henry Brockhouse, who became a member of the national executive committee of the Labour Church Union.²⁷⁶ When the West Bromwich Labour Church decided to raise funds to build its own premises it turned to its larger sister congregation, and despite financial difficulties the Birmingham contribution to building funds was generous.²⁷⁷ In 1901 the church opened its building, the People's Hall, a corrugated-iron structure on High Street between Shaftesbury Street and Temple Street decorated to the design of Walter Crane.²⁷⁸ Tom Groom and other Birmingham members assisted with the opening on Sunday, 10th November 1901.²⁷⁹ These premises were to remain in the hands of the local Labour Church until 1935.²⁸⁰ The minute books of the West Bromwich I. L. P., records the activities of the town's congregation and building throughout the 1920s and into the mid-1930s, many years after the original Labour Church in central Birmingham had ceased to meet.

²⁷⁴ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 2, 24th May 1895, 204.

²⁷⁵ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 467.

²⁷⁶ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 5th December 1908, 222.

²⁷⁷ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 3rd January 1901, 149.

²⁷⁸ *West Bromwich and Oldbury Chronicle*, 15th November 1901.

²⁷⁹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 7th November 1901, 175.

²⁸⁰ ILP West Bromwich, Minute Book 1932-35, 20th February 1935, I. L. P. Archives, London School of Economics.

On 4th January 1903 the inauguration service took place of the Bordesley Labour Church on the Coventry Road.²⁸¹ The Birmingham Labour Church agreed to help its neighbour by lending 300 hymn books for Sunday meetings.²⁸² But within a matter of weeks after the opening the central church began to notice a difference in attendance at its own meetings. It is recorded that two members transferred to Bordesley,²⁸³ and that numbers were dropping at Bristol Street due to competition from there and another Labour Church in West Birmingham. It was during this same year that J. H. Belcher, president of the Labour Church Union, wrote to the Birmingham Labour Church in response to an invitation to speak, and he took the opportunity to raise the issue that there were potential openings for new Labour Churches throughout its city.²⁸⁴ By the end of 1903 the central church requested the return of its hymn books,²⁸⁵ an indication that there was a feeling that the Bordesley members should be resourcing themselves. In the 8th December 1905 *Clarion* it is recorded that the North Worcestershire I. L. P. had sponsored a Labour Church in Selly Oak,²⁸⁶ which may be the West Birmingham branch, and in 1908 Labour Church meetings were being held in Erdington.²⁸⁷ As George Barnsby notes, “Nationally, the Labour Church movement peaked before 1900 at about 54 such Churches. But in Birmingham the movement enjoyed a modest prosperity in the twentieth century, and at least three Churches survived until 1914.”²⁸⁸

At the Annual Business Meeting of the central Labour Church held on 22nd November 1906, after the poor state of the congregation’s finances was reported, an account of the previous year’s endeavours included a word of regret from the Percy H. Broadhurst, the church’s

²⁸¹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 18th December 1902, 209.

²⁸² Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 27th November 1902, 206.

²⁸³ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 10th February 1903, 222.

²⁸⁴ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 4, 7th July 1903, 266.

²⁸⁵ George Barnsby, *Birmingham Working People*, 344.

²⁸⁶ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 455.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 392.

²⁸⁸ George Barnsby, *Birmingham Working People*, 344.

honorary secretary, that membership had not increased during the year. Broadhurst explained this numerical stagnation in terms of the expansion of Labour politics within the life of the city: “an indication of the formation and growth of kindred societies in Birmingham and district; several of our members assisting in this work.”²⁸⁹ The following January a publicity card was produced by the church to advertise forthcoming lecturers, and printed on this was a list of the local ‘kindred’ organisations. This list mentions the Birmingham Socialist Centre, the Labour Representatives’ Council, the I. L. P. Federation, the S. D. F., and the Clarion Cycling Club.²⁹⁰ The implication of Broadhurst’s report to the Labour Church is that many of its active members were becoming over-stretched by their commitment to the increasing variety of local Socialist bodies, and that new recruits were not being found to replenish the ranks of the city’s more established organisations.

In October 1906 the Kings Heath branch of the I. L. P. was inaugurated, and with it came the establishment of a new Labour Church. The activities of that congregation can only be found within the minute books of the local I. L. P., which implies that the Kings Heath branches of the political party and the Labour Church were one and the same organisation.²⁹¹ The relationship with the I. L. P. was one of complete dependence so that this Labour Church meeting was the Sunday expression of the local I. L. P. under a quasi-religious banner. Eventually, the concerns of the party and church meant that each became a distinct entity within the political scene of their community.²⁹² In a similar way to Kings Heath, the Hay Mills branch of the I. L. P. held Labour Church meetings on Sunday evenings before the branch met for discussion. Then, due to financial debt and the lack of personnel, Hay Mills

²⁸⁹ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No. 6, 22nd November 1906, 12.

²⁹⁰ Birmingham Labour Church, Minute Book No.6, 21st January 1907, 30.

²⁹¹ George Barnsby, *Birmingham Working People*, 359.

²⁹² I. L. P. Kings Heath, Minute Book 1906-1919, Birmingham Central Archives, Birmingham Central Library, C11994.

merged with Stechford to form a new Yardley I. L. P. / Labour Church branch.²⁹³ The interconnection between the Birmingham Labour Churches and the I. L. P. during the first decade of the twentieth century is an issue raised by the list of Sunday meetings of branches in the city's Federation Year Book of 1909, in which Birmingham Central, Bordesley Green, Hay Mills and Yardley, Selly Oak and Kings Heath are all named. Without archival evidence, the question about whether the other I. L. P. branches labelled their Sunday meetings 'Labour Church' in those places that held such gatherings in Aston, Harborne, Kings Norton and Stirchley, Small Heath and Aston Manor remains unanswered.²⁹⁴

The spread of the Labour movement and its various activities across Birmingham corresponds with the growth of the city at this time. New industries had opened in Birmingham which engaged in tyre manufacturing, bicycle production and a variety of engineering systems. By 1914 local industry had developed in new areas away from the city centre to districts like Ladywood, Stirchley, Small Heath and Erdington. This shift of location for employment opportunities meant the need for housing, shops, schools and transport systems for the employees.²⁹⁵ With the building of new housing estates located near to places of work in outlying areas of the city, there was a move to incorporate such communities under the city council. In 1911 the Greater Birmingham Scheme achieved this by expanding the city boundaries to measure thirteen miles from Rubery in the south to Oscott in the north, which made Birmingham larger than Manchester and Liverpool.²⁹⁶ Well established villages and small towns that had once bordered Birmingham were absorbed into the expansion of 1911, thus forming Handsworth, Aston, Northfield, King's Norton, Yardley

²⁹³ I. L. P. Hay Mills, Minute Book 1908-1911, Birmingham Central Archives, Birmingham Central Library, C28249.

²⁹⁴ Birmingham I. L. P. Year Book 1909, 15-37, Birmingham Central Archives, Birmingham Central Library, Birmingham Institutions D/31.

²⁹⁵ Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 42.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

and Erdington into city districts, a fact confirmed by an Act of Parliament in the same year.²⁹⁷

Not only in terms of size, but also because of its capacity for manufacturing, commerce, administration and cultural activities, Birmingham “could now truly boast of being the Second City in the kingdom”.²⁹⁸

In 1911 the syllabus of lectures for the Stirchley Labour Church was published for the coming year, announcing that its meetings would take place at the Stirchley Council Schools and that its speakers would be drawn from the I. L. P., the S. D. P., and the W. E. A..

Through its introduction to the ideals of the Labour Church, the Strichley Labour Church declared, “Labour Church movement is making its influence felt in the Churches, even as the new Labour movement is making its influence felt in the world of politics.”²⁹⁹ The syllabus produced for 1913-14 expressed a particular Christian Socialist or maybe Socialist Christian flavour, as the following principles indicate:

1. To study the Bible frankly, freely, reverently and without prejudice.
2. To Encourage International Brotherhood.
3. To advance Equality of Opportunity.
4. In short, to help men and women to understand the life of Jesus Christ and encourage them in their personal allegiance to Him.³⁰⁰

The personal comments of one member which conclude the syllabus seems to epitomise the approach of this Labour Church, “Today, the ideal of Christ is the end for which the Socialist movement is fighting.”³⁰¹ It is not clear why there was such a strong Christian influence on the Stirchley congregation, it may have been due to the Quaker culture that had a dominant

²⁹⁷ Asa Briggs, *History of Birmingham*, 157.

²⁹⁸ Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 61.

²⁹⁹ Stirchley Labour Church, *Syllabus of Lectures 1911-12*, 5.

³⁰⁰ George Barnsby, *Birmingham Working People*, 359.

³⁰¹ Stirchley Labour Church, *Syllabus of Lectures 1913-14*, 5.

presence in that part of the city, or simply due to the commitment of certain individual members. A typed-script history of the Northfield Labour Party tells the story of another Labour Church that existed independently from the local I. L. P.. In 1912 the Northfield Socialist Society formed a Labour Church, and it attracted Socialists from across Birmingham as members and speakers.³⁰² By 1914 the Labour Church in Northfield had reached the peak of its activities, and then struggled through the years of the First World War.³⁰³ The sale of its piano in 1920 marked the end of the congregation.³⁰⁴

On a national scale the Labour Church movement had petered out by the outbreak of the First World War, and with a couple of notable exceptions, such as the congregation in Hyde which survived into the late 1950s,³⁰⁵ this meant that the presence of the Labour Church in most local communities had been eradicated. Not so in Birmingham. Before 1914 the growth of the movement in the city had been gradual and steady up to around 1910, followed by a slow decline to the outbreak of war, but then after the war the spread of new congregations across many neighbourhoods seems to be remarkable to Birmingham.³⁰⁶ The Erdington Labour Church, which was ‘owned’ by the local I. L. P. branch, survived throughout the First World War, even though it was criticised for its anti-war stance. The consistent opposition to the armed conflict adopted by the I. L. P. in Birmingham stands in contrast with the position taken by the majority of local trade unionists, who were strongly pro-war until the final year of the hostilities.³⁰⁷ By the time armistice was declared four Labour Churches were meeting

³⁰² Labour Party - Northfield Ward: short history: 1904-1954, 7, Birmingham Central Archives, Birmingham Central Library, LP 76.22.

³⁰³ Ibid., 8.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 9.

³⁰⁵ D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 408.

³⁰⁶ George Barnsby, *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country*, 353.

³⁰⁷ Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 130.

around Birmingham in Erdington, Rotton Park, Stirchley and East Birmingham.³⁰⁸ While no records of these congregations have survived, what does exist is the weekly programme of speakers as printed in a local Socialist newspaper.³⁰⁹ Eric Hopkins has argued that “co-operation rather than class struggle was a distinctive feature of Birmingham society and of labour relations in the period 1850 to 1914”,³¹⁰ referring to the local alliance between trade unions and employers. But he recognised the greater sense of class consciousness among the city’s working people at the end of that period, and that what followed in the war years galvanised working class identity with trade unions representing, not simply their membership, but whole communities in terms of rents, pensions and allowances.³¹¹ The First World War changed the Labour movement in Britain as the more progressive general unions, such as the Workers Union, replaced the established, liberal craft unions in influence.³¹² The collectivism of the war effort was welcomed by the progressive trade unionists as a sort of quasi-socialism,³¹³ and laid the way for a renewed utopian optimism for the post-war period among Socialists across Birmingham.

Town Crier was founded in 1919 as a newspaper for the Birmingham Labour movement, and it fostered a close relationship with the District I. L. P. throughout the 1920s, which is an indication as to why the paper produced a weekly record of the life of the local Labour Churches as most had strong links with the party’s branches.³¹⁴ In October 1919 *Town Crier* records the lectures of the four Labour Churches plus a congregation meeting in Kings

³⁰⁸ George Barnsby, *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country*, 353.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 354.

³¹⁰ Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 127.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

³¹² John Corbett, *The Birmingham Trades Council*, 116.

³¹³ N. R. Jenkins, ‘The Trade Union Movement in Birmingham during the First World War’ B.A. (History) dissertation (University of Birmingham, 1984), 42.

³¹⁴ A. Wright and R. Shackleton, (editors) *Worlds of Labour: Essays in Birmingham Labour History* (Birmingham: Department of Extramural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1983), 104.

Norton.³¹⁵ By the end of 1921 the number of churches had increased to ten, with the inclusion of All Saints, Aston, City Bristol Street, Ladywood and Sparkhill. Within a couple of months three more Labour Churches were opened in Balsall Heath, St. Martin's and Deritend (one branch), and West Birmingham.³¹⁶ As a means of publicising the new meeting in Balsall Heath, an advertisement was taken out in *Birmingham District Commonwealth* which describes the local Labour Church's regular activities:

An attractive programme is invariably arranged, including excellent vocal items, interesting readings, and addresses by prominent members of progressive movements . . . anyone desiring to spend an hour in an educative manner could do well to give this Labour Church a trial.³¹⁷

One committed member of a Birmingham Labour Church wrote a piece for *Town Crier* in which he expresses something of the passion that inspired the ongoing presence and growth of the movement across that city,

The Labour Church has given me something which the orthodox churches have failed to give – a contemplation of the things that matter, and rest for the soul, instead of the fantastical dogmas built up from mere assumption – sure ground for the feet . . . Believe me, after one or two attendances at the Labour Church, one really believes one has been standing on holy ground.³¹⁸

The range of subjects covered by the weekly Sunday lecture programmes of the Birmingham Labour Churches enhanced the learning of the local Labour movement. Moral, religious, cultural and political topics were addressed by local activists and speakers from further-a-field. National figures such as George Lansbury and Fenner Brockway lectured at local Labour Churches during the 1920s, as did speakers from other aspects of the life of the city,

³¹⁵ *Town Crier*, 10th October 1919, 6.

³¹⁶ George Barnsby, *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country*, 354.

³¹⁷ *Birmingham District Commonwealth*, February 1922.

³¹⁸ *Town Crier*, 5th August 1921, 3.

such as Rev. N. Micklem of the Selly Oak Colleges and Councillor Jabez Hall.³¹⁹ The Birmingham Labour Churches continued to be a draw to speakers and listeners, alike.

Birmingham continued to grow as a city throughout the 1920s, with the success of locally based companies working in the motor, aluminium, electrical, rubber and plastic industries,³²⁰ and the building of new housing estates for the increasing numbers of workers. The trade unions in Birmingham continued in their traditional role of co-operation with the employers through collective bargaining, a policy which led to the formation of joint councils between unions and the city council and a joint consultative committee by the end of the 1920s.³²¹ Eric Hopkins has written about industrial relations in Birmingham during these years, “Cloth-capped Chamberlainism still had influence between the wars in promoting conciliatory attitudes among the Birmingham working classes rather than class hostility.”³²² Birmingham built more council houses than any other local authority in Britain during the inter-war period, a prime example of this being the opening of the Kingstanding estate at Perry Barr in 1928, which covered 1,000 acres and provided 9,000 houses. Asa Briggs described this building programme as the most important aspect of the civic history of Birmingham at this time.³²³ Along with the development of council housing estates on the periphery of the city came the need for an extension of the transport system which was achieved by the expansion of the bus and tram fleets, extending their routes from district to district.³²⁴ The city continued to grow in size with the annexation of Perry Barr, Castle Bromwich and Sheldon between 1927 and 1931.³²⁵

³¹⁹ George Barnsby, *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country*, 355.

³²⁰ Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 148.

³²¹ Asa Briggs, *History of Birmingham*, 274.

³²² Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 167.

³²³ Asa Briggs, *History of Birmingham*, 228.

³²⁴ Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 159.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 143.

The Labour Church movement reached its peak in growth by the mid-1920s, with sixteen congregations being listed in Witton, Kings Norton and Stirchley (one branch), Duddeston, Handsworth, Erdington, East Birmingham, St. Martin's and Deritend, West Birmingham, Ward End, Balsall Heath, two churches in Sparkbrook, Sparkhill and Tyseley (one branch), Ladywood, Broad Street and a new Labour Church in November 1926 at Billesley.³²⁶ The church listed under Broad Street became the Guildhouse Church, it opened on Sunday 23rd January 1927 under the leadership of a Christian Socialist, Rev. John Lewis,³²⁷ and continued to be mentioned under the Labour Church programme. When certain names disappear from the listings, such as All Saints, it is not clear whether the Labour Church has ceased to meet there, or that it merged with a neighbouring branch, or is being given another name due to the relocation of premises. With the lack of archival records it is difficult to ascertain the true functions of each congregation, but it has been noted about the appearance of Labour Church meetings taking place in Perry Common and St. Bart's in December 1927³²⁸ and the reappearance of Bristol Street meeting in March 1928.³²⁹

Exactly a year later the closure of the Sparkhill and Tyseley Labour Church was announced,³³⁰ but on Sunday, 6th October 1929 a new Labour Church was opened in Moseley School, the same day that Balsall Heath and West Birmingham Labour Churches reopened for a new season.³³¹ Advertisements for the meetings in Moseley appeared in *Town Crier* throughout out the remainder of 1929 until the end of March 1930, when the congregation

³²⁶ *Town Crier*, 12th November 1926, 3. Apart from the city centre congregations, the other locations listed are in working class districts, either in the inner city (e.g. Sparkbrook) or around industrial hubs (e.g. Erdington).

³²⁷ *Town Crier*, 21st January 1927, 4.

³²⁸ *Town Crier*, 9th December 1927, 6.

³²⁹ *Town Crier*, 23rd March 1928, 4.

³³⁰ *Town Crier*, 22nd March 1929, 3.

³³¹ *Town Crier*, 4th October 1929, 4.

concluded their session for the year.³³² The last reference to the Birmingham Labour Churches in *Town Crier* was the announcement of the grand re-opening of the Moseley congregation on Sunday, 5th October 1930, with the Bordesley & East Birmingham Male Choir as the attraction.³³³ When primary sources fall silent it can be easy to draw the conclusion that something ceased to exist, but this may be far from the truth. All that can be stated with certainty is that by 1930 at least three meetings held under the title of the Labour Church occurred in different communities of Birmingham. On the day that the Moseley Labour Church opened its doors for the first time in October 1929, Frank Smith, then M. P. for Nuneaton, was the guest speaker at the West Birmingham I. L. P. Labour Church's re-opening. Smith was the 'Salvationist Socialist' who had inspired John Trevor in his quest for new vision. His lecture entitled 'A Truly Religious Movement' was summarised in *Town Crier* and it recalls the founding spirit of the movement whose name was continued by the people he was addressing.

"The more we can spiritualise our movement", he said, "the better it will be." They were all out for the material things of life which were so necessary to secure for people who were now deprived of them, but the spiritual side was just as essential. The Labour Church movement had no use for mere theology or creeds, but it was a truly religious movement in that it called upon men and women, irrespective of colour, race or creed, to get together and remove the evils which afflict humanity.³³⁴

An insight into the nature of the Labour Churches in Birmingham during the 1920s and their relationship with the local I. L. P. branches comes from the minutes of the Birmingham City I. L. P. of 1926. This was the year of the General Strike, nationwide industrial action called

³³² *Town Crier*, 28th March 1930, 4.

³³³ *Town Crier*, 3rd October 1930, 4.

³³⁴ *Town Crier*, 11th October 1929, 4.

by the T. U. C. in support of a miners' dispute. The strike was supported among the city's trades unions and the wider Labour movement through a local partnership between the Birmingham Trades Council, the Labour Party and the Birmingham Co-operative Society.³³⁵ Such a left wing political alliance had not been witnessed in the history of Birmingham, and it acted as a direct challenge to the conciliatory approach to industrial relations accepted in the city for several decades.³³⁶ On 12th May the whole of the General Emergency Committee, which co-ordinated the strike action across the city, was arrested,³³⁷ "and charged with spreading alarm in their own publication, the *Strike Bulletin*".³³⁸ The failure of the General Strike was to be a watershed in Birmingham politics, as the traditional coalition between trade unionists and the employers began to break down, local firms seized the opportunity to renegotiate terms and conditions with demoralised trade unions.³³⁹ But this weakened position of the trade unions in the life of the Birmingham Labour movement coincided with a galvanising of local support for the class-conscious politics advocated by the movement.³⁴⁰

One sign of the changing fortunes of the Labour movement as a political force was the eight seats gained by the Birmingham Labour Party in the local elections the following November.³⁴¹ The nature of Labour politics in Birmingham was moving from the influence of trade unions to define the local agenda to a party driven focus on the ballot box. Local Socialist activist and politician, Jim Simmons, who will be discussed further in this chapter, described the impact of the General Strike on Birmingham's Labour politics,

³³⁵ George Barnsby, *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country*, 527.

³³⁶ John Boughton, 'Working-Class Politics in Birmingham and Sheffield, 1918-1931', 200.

³³⁷ John Corbett, *The Birmingham Trades Council*, 128.

³³⁸ Eric Hopkins, *Birmingham, the Making of the Second City*, 149.

³³⁹ Birmingham Public Libraries, *The Nine Days in Birmingham: The General Strike 4-12 May 1926* (Birmingham: Birmingham Libraries Social Sciences Department / The Workers' Educational Association West Midlands District, 1976), 43.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁴¹ John Boughton, 'Working-Class Politics in Birmingham and Sheffield', 204.

since 1926 we had redoubled our efforts, had rallied round our standard men and women who had glimpsed the true Socialist vision and were determined to work to prevent miners being betrayed again, or the unemployed driven to bleak despair – the comrades had rallied – they had chosen us as their representatives – it was a great honour and even greater responsibility. Could Parliament provide the answer?³⁴²

A significant record for the Labour Church begins two months after the defeat of the General Strike with an I. L. P. branch meeting held at 8 – 9 Hedges Building in Bull Street on Wednesday, 21st July 1926 when the minutes record a sub-heading ‘Labour Church’. The minute reads, “Mr. Solway moved and Mr. Longden seconded that we hold a Labour Church this winter. The matter was left to the committee to go into and proceed if they thought advisable.”³⁴³ There is no branch meeting recorded for August of that year. The trail is picked up again on 2nd September 1926, when the note was written, “Mr. Solway reported on his attempt to find a meeting place for a Labour Church. It was decided that the committee should meet early to discuss these proposals. It was decided to look out for a more suitable place of meeting.”³⁴⁴ The next branch meeting on 7th October continue the considerations,

The committee reported on Mr. Solway’s proposals for Sunday Evening Meetings at the Broadway Cinema, Bristol Street and moved “That we have a Labour Church providing that the “Broadway” is available and that we have a unanimous vote of the Branch.” After discussion the vote was taken and as only five members voted for the resolution, it was decided not to proceed with it ourselves, but to send it to the Federation [Birmingham I. L. P.] in the hope that they might do so.³⁴⁵

³⁴² Jim Simmons, *Soap-box Evangelist* (Chichester: Janay Publishing Company, 1972), 77.

³⁴³ Birmingham City ILP, Minute Book 1924 - 1928, 21st July 1926, 116.

³⁴⁴ Birmingham City ILP, Minute Book 1924 – 1928, 2nd September 1926, 119.

³⁴⁵ Birmingham City ILP, Minute Book 1924 -1928, 7th October 1926, 123.

This is the last reference to the Labour Church proposal in the minute book, but it offers some clues to what was meant by ‘Labour Church’ in Birmingham during the mid-1920s. It would seem that “to hold a Labour Church” was about “Sunday Evening Meetings”. While there is no explanation as to the nature of these meetings, it may be deduced from the discussions of the three branch meetings that what was being proposed was different from the usual I. L. P. business and that a public building was required to accommodate these weekly events for the winter of 1926 to 1927. Acknowledging that only a minority of the branch members supported the proposal, for certain people “to hold a Labour Church” still had some significance in Birmingham at this time.

4:6 Aspects of post-1918 Birmingham Labour Politics

The political life of Birmingham was a microcosm of the wider scene across Britain, with the trends, issues and concerns being felt and expressed as keenly in the communities of the city as in other places at the time. The period immediately after the First World War saw an increase in membership for the I. L. P. as a consequence of the anti-war policy taken by the party during the conflict and the shift in public attitudes towards the end of the war, along with the hopes that these generated. From the outbreak of the First World War and consistently throughout, the I. L. P. “was the main anti-war political organisation in Britain.”³⁴⁶ Ralph Miliband noted that after a period of decline in membership, the pacifist stance taken by the party “gave it a new lease of life”³⁴⁷ as people gravitated to the I. L. P. through a variety of sympathetic organisations, such as the Union of Democratic Control and the No Conscription Fellowship. This growth in the life and activities of the I. L. P. is reflected in the branches of the party across Birmingham. At the same time that the I. L. P.

³⁴⁶ Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism: A Study in the Politics of Labour* (Pontypool: The Merlin Press Limited, 1972), 45.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

was increasing in numbers, activists on the left-wing of British Labour politics were looking to the Russian Revolution and its consequences for guidance to a more radical form of political theory and practice.³⁴⁸ The revolutionary element of local Labour activists debated and formed a Communist group for Birmingham and by doing so often abandoned other organisations, but, just like on the national scene, the C. P. G. B. was and remained a small player in the city. That being said, there are aspects to the political landscape of Birmingham that meant that the national trends were not automatically transferred and transplanted there.

Martin Pugh argues that what turned the tide in favour of the Labour movement in Birmingham during the 1920s was the patronage of rich and politically ambitious individuals, notably Oswald Mosley, who were adopted as I. L. P. and Labour Party candidates for city council and parliamentary elections.³⁴⁹ Matthew Worley in his study of the Labour party between the two World Wars explains that the situation was more complex, with the city of Birmingham changing in nature through increase in population, new housing schemes, industrial diversity and electoral boundary changes, all of which slackened the Chamberlainist grip. But he goes on to offer support to the view that wealthy benefactors played an important role in local Labour politics of the time. Worley defines the Birmingham Labour movement of the 1920s as a “tempestuous mix” of moderates, militants and Mosleyites.³⁵⁰ Within this local context the I. L. P. provided a platform for Oswald Mosley to launch his career as a Labour politician, when he joined forces with John Strachey to stand as candidates for Birmingham. Both men produced the so-called ‘Birmingham Proposals’, “the novelty of which was its emphasis on the nationalisation of the banking system and its

³⁴⁸ Francis Beckett, *Enemy Within: The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Merlin Press Limited, 1995), 9..

³⁴⁹ Martin Pugh, *Speak for Britain!: A New History of the Labour Party* (London: Vintage Books, 2011), 197.

³⁵⁰ Matthew Worley, *Labour Inside The Gate: A History of the British Labour Party between the Wars* (London / New York: I. B. Tauris and Company Limited, 2005), 55.

fusion of proto-Keynesian economics with socialist objectives.”³⁵¹ To Worley the “tempestuous mix” of Birmingham’s Labour politics created a potent brew in which the local I. L. P. was a vital ingredient, and it was a potion that was flavouring the tastes of the national Labour Party.

George Barnsby concurred with the position taken by Pugh and Worley about the part of former Tory and Liberal notables within the movement, particularly in the I. L. P., but adds more detail to the argument. Barnsby writes about the party’s national treasurer, Clifford Allen, and his recruitment of middle class supporters of anti-war groups, the creation of *New Leader* newspaper as the official party organ, and the adoption of Guild Socialism which drew closer ties to the trade unions in order to contrast with the ideologies of the Communist and Labour Parties.³⁵² In terms of finance and membership, the I. L. P. benefited from these changes, but Barnsby questions the price that had to be paid at national and local levels,

While solving some problems, the Allen reforms exacerbated others. Members felt that the party was being swamped by middle class recruits without a clear Socialist perspective. This feeling existed in Birmingham where former Liberals, such as members of the Cadbury family, Harrison Barrow, and then Oswald Mosley were providing considerable sums of money and felt to be dominating policy with right-wing attitudes.³⁵³

Even though such feelings were held by I. L. P. members, the increase in membership was evident in the life of the Birmingham Federation which grew from thirteen to twenty branches between 1924 and 1926.³⁵⁴ The under-analysis of Barnsby’s work means that he does not attempt to explain the reason for the rapid growth of the I. L. P. in Birmingham,

³⁵¹ Ibid., 102.

³⁵² George Barnsby, *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country*, 371.

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 374.

though he cites the popularity of local party leaders, notably the Communist Robert Dunstan³⁵⁵ and Christian Socialist Jim Simmons.³⁵⁶ A professional soldier, Simmons was discharged from the army in 1917 after being severely wounded, and he then became an advocate for pacifist and Socialist causes in the city.³⁵⁷

But the popularity of individuals cannot account for what occurred in local Labour politics, rather the implication of Barnsby's findings seems to be that while rich benefactors bank-rolled the party, the Guild Socialism of the I. L. P. had found its time and place in post-First World War Birmingham. Guild Socialism under the guidance of Clifford Allen was an ideology that defined itself against both the Sydney Webb form of Socialism as described within the Labour Party constitution of 1918 which advocated a reformist Socialism, and the revolutionary agenda of the C. P. G. B.. Inspired by the craft guilds of the Middle Ages as championed by William Morris at the end of the nineteenth century, Guild Socialism supported the control of national industry by its workers through trade-related guilds and was sanctioned by public mandate. While it shaped the I. L. P. agenda in the post-war period by Allen, its chief architect was the political theorist G. D. H. Cole.³⁵⁸

According to R. E. Dowse, Clifford Allen's leadership helped the I. L. P. to reach "the pinnacle of its success" from 1922 until 1925.³⁵⁹ This 'rebuilding' programme was expressed in the new constitution of the I. L. P. which was accepted at the Annual Conference of 1922.³⁶⁰ One key appointment brought about by Allen persuading the National

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 371.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 372.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 258.

³⁵⁸ G. D. H. Cole, *Guild Socialism Re-stated* (London: Leonard Parsons, 1920).

³⁵⁹ R. E. Dowse, *Left in the Centre: The Independent Labour Party, 1893-1940* (London: Longmans, Green and Company Limited, 1966), 76.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 68.

Administrative Council to choose Fenner Brockway as the Organising Secretary.³⁶¹ Under Brockway the Organisation Committee of the council was revived and several national propagandists were appointed, including Katherine Bruce Glasier (formerly St John Conway), and Divisional Organiser posts were created which related to the Divisional Councils.³⁶² As a consequence, there was a flourishing of party activities across the country and an increase in membership, including Birmingham, so that by 1925 the I. L. P. had increased its local branches to one thousand³⁶³ and many of these branches were reviving the past times of the previous generation of Socialists, such as drama groups and choirs.³⁶⁴ Dowse refers to *The Socialist Annual* of 1925 in a footnote, which “estimated that the I. L. P. held between 700 and 800 public meetings a week.”³⁶⁵ Though there was a warning from some quarters of the party that a rise in membership did not necessarily equate to a rise in knowledgeable Socialists; in those terms it was “the I. L. P. editor of the *Birmingham Town Crier* who advised that the party should not mistake increased membership for increased strength and argued that education was the solution.”³⁶⁶ Stefan Berger describes how in support of its propaganda programme, the I. L. P. channelled resources into the establishment and promotion of educational activities during the 1920s, with the purpose of training new Socialists and equipping party officials.³⁶⁷

George Barnsby introduces the subject of the Communist Party in Birmingham by referring to elation among certain local Socialists to news of the Russian Revolution.³⁶⁸ He

³⁶¹ Ibid., 84.

³⁶² Ibid., 86.

³⁶³ Ibid., 89.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 83.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 89.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Stefan Berger, *The British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats 1900 – 1931: A Comparative Study*, 147.

³⁶⁸ George Barnsby, *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country*, 360.

acknowledges the earlier research undertaken by Martin Durham,³⁶⁹ and does not depart from his conclusions, but rather adds to the details. Durham offered a tentative contextual study tracing the founding elements and initial activities of the Birmingham branch of the C. P. G. B. from the outbreak of the First World War until 1924. Barnsby emphasised the contribution made to local political life by Robert Dunstan. This charismatic former medical practitioner and barrister had resigned from the Liberal Party in 1917 and began to align himself with the left of the I. L. P., and through the support of Birmingham Socialists, notably Jim Simmons, Dunstan stood at a number of local and national elections as an I. L. P. candidate for different Birmingham seats. Although defeated at each election, he slowly began to increase the Labour vote, so that the I. L. P. became a serious contender by the mid-1920s,³⁷⁰ by which point Dunstan had moved further to the left and sided with the C. P. G. B. especially because of his disappointment that the I. L. P. had not affiliated to the Third International. This move to the Communists should have excluded Dunstan from standing as a Labour candidate because of their expulsion from the Labour Party Conference in 1922, and yet, though he lost his nomination for the Ladywood seat to Oswald Mosley, “so great had been the impact of Dunstan on Birmingham and so considerable was the left-wing influence in the city”,³⁷¹ that he was nominated to West Birmingham as the Labour-Communist candidate for the General Election of 1924. Again defeated, Dunstan still maintained a good reputation on the local and national political scene. When Communists were expelled from the Labour Party in 1928, the Edgbaston Constituency Labour Party,

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 366.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 362.

³⁷¹ Ibid., 363.

which dominated Birmingham West, refused to remove Dunstan from its membership, which led to its disaffiliation from the national Labour Party.³⁷²

The example of Robert Dunstan is used by Barnsby to indicate that the political scene in Birmingham during the post-First World War period was not simply a reflection of the happenings on the national stage. There were I. L. P. branches in the city that openly opposed the ruling of their overseers in the Labour Party by continuing to welcome Communists within their ranks. In that respect, Barnsby does not accept the argument held by Durham that Birmingham was a wholly hostile place for the C. P. G. B.,³⁷³ because he indicates that within certain quarters of the city's Labour movement it was considered to be a comrade party.³⁷⁴

Until 1926 a handful of Communist candidates stood in local elections, but there was often a tension in doing so.³⁷⁵ At a time when the I. L.P. was growing in significant numbers in the city, Barnsby estimated that the membership of the C. P. G. B. was no more than fifty by 1926.³⁷⁶ He acknowledges the considerable influence that a small number of Communist Party members had within the Birmingham Trades Council, as Durham had acknowledged,³⁷⁷ but Barnsby goes on to detail the reactions to this influence. A number of large trade unions, including the National Union of Railwaymen, threatened to withdraw from the Council if the Communist element was not removed, and this came to pass with three of the four C. P. G. B.

³⁷² Graham Stevenson, 'Dr Robert Dunstan' http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=915:dunstan-robert-dr&catid=4:d&Itemid=19 accessed on 27th September 2013.

³⁷³ Anthony Wright and Robert Shackleton (editors), *Worlds of Labour*, 93.

³⁷⁴ George Barnsby, *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country*, 363.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 364.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 365.

³⁷⁷ Anthony Wright and Robert Shackleton (editors), *Worlds of Labour*. 92.

members of the executive not being re-elected in 1923.³⁷⁸ After 1926 references to the party in Birmingham trail off in Barnsby's research, apart from his occasional note of the Communist role in the anti-Fascist campaigns of the 1930s.³⁷⁹ Recognition is given to the fact that in size the C. P. G. B. remained small when compared to the I. L. P. and the Labour Party, but Barnsby wished to express that though it may not have amounted to many members it was by no means insignificant in the life of the Birmingham Labour movement.³⁸⁰

The 'tempestuous mix' that was the Labour politics of Birmingham after the First World War combined a diversity of ideologies which generated a richness to the local Socialist cause. The need for unity had been a motivation for the Socialist Revival pioneers of late nineteenth century Birmingham and that same spirit can be sensed several decades later as local I. L. P. branches resist attempts to exclude Communists, and, in turn, members of the C. P. G. B. seek a united front on issues from local elections to industrial relations. It can be argued that George Barnsby overstates the point about the influence of the left-wing in Birmingham and its Labour movement, as evidence seems to indicate that the Guild Socialism advocated by the I. L. P. by the early 1920s was far more favourable to the local electorate than either the Communist concept or the reformist approach adopted by the Labour Party post-1918. The closer ties with the trade unions fostered by Guild Socialism were well suited to both the traditional position of unions within the city and the more radical general trade unionism that emerged from the experiences during wartime. The fertile ground of Birmingham in which the I. L. P. flourished led to a rediscovery and reclamation of a sister organisation, the Labour Church, as a number of the city's branches opened Sunday evening meetings under the

³⁷⁸ George Barnsby, *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country*, 386.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 561.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 362.

Labour Church banner. The growth of Labour Church meetings across Birmingham from 1918 to 1926 corresponds with the spread of local I. L. P. branches during that period. To use the title 'Labour Church' was to cite the Socialism of the previous generation, but it also enabled a platform for the rich diversity of Birmingham Labour politics to be expressed.

While some Labour Churches may have been Sunday evening branch meetings with a guest speaker, other congregations had their own identity and agenda. Kevin Manton while writing an article about Labour governments' attitudes to capital punishment came across a petition on the issue sent to the Home Secretary in 1923 from a Labour Church.³⁸¹ Further enquiries of Dr. Manton via email correspondence revealed that the petition had come from the Tyseley and Sparkhill Labour Church, and was dated 9th January 1923, an indication that such a Labour Church congregation was able to speak on its own behalf as a separate body within the wider Birmingham Labour movement. By the time that the new wave of Labour Churches across the city began to wane after the year of the General Strike, the I. L. P.'s fortunes had begun to turn for the worse, both on the national scene and in terms of the political life of Birmingham. *Town Crier* indicates a direct correlation between the lives of the Labour Church and the Independent Labour Party, so that as the latter declined in influence its sister organisation followed, because by the 1920s the Labour Church in Birmingham was totally dependent on the political party. George Barnsby emphasises this subservient relationship when he considers the aftermath of the General Election in 1931:

The Labour Party had been all but destroyed, the Independent Labour Party committed hari-kari in 1932 when it disaffiliated from the Labour Party; with it went

³⁸¹ Kevin Manton, 'Labour Governments and Capital Punishment, 1924-1970', *Labour History Review*, April 2011, volume 76 number 1, 2011, 18.

the Labour Churches in Birmingham and the Black Country and much of the cultural activities.³⁸²

At the General Election of 1931 the Unionists regained political control of Birmingham, which they would hold for a further fifteen years. The Labour Party only became a major political force in the city in 1945 with the national Labour landslide reflected in most of the Birmingham constituencies. The list of ingredients that made up the ‘tempestuous mix’ of Labour politics in Birmingham after the First World War includes moderates, militants and Mosleyites, seasoned by what was considered on a national scale to be the indigestible ingredients of the I. L. P., the C. P. G. B. and the Labour Party. But then the local movement added a long lost condiment of the Labour Church, so rarely used elsewhere.

4:7 Analyses of the Birmingham Labour Churches

What remains is for us to reflect upon the history of the Labour Church in Birmingham and to address why this organisation, or independent bodies that claimed its title, bucked the trend of the wider national movement into the third decade of the twentieth century. At the heart of this analysis is the questioning of why the Labour Church was of “some significance” in the life of the city of Birmingham. Two historians have considered the same question, and it will be from their conclusions that a theory will be constructed based on the evidence described throughout the chapter. An attempt has been made to place the Labour Church within the evolving context of Birmingham, with thought given to its transformation from an industrial town into a major city.

The first historian to give attention to the flourishing of Labour Churches in Birmingham during the 1920s was John Boughton in his 1985 Ph. D. thesis, ‘Working-class Politics in

³⁸² George Barnsby, *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country*, 572.

Birmingham and Sheffield, 1918-1931'. Boughton contrasts and compares Birmingham, which he describes as "a bastion of working-class Conservatism", with Sheffield, "a Labour stronghold".³⁸³ It is within that understanding of the nature of Birmingham and its politics that Boughton interprets the growth of the number of Labour Churches from 1920 until 1925.³⁸⁴ In the space of just over four pages, he summarises the role of the Labour Church as being "undoubtedly primarily secular",³⁸⁵ but acknowledges that "the very form of their meetings, reminiscent of those chapels which many of their visitors would have attended, infused an air of spirituality into the proceedings."³⁸⁶ There is recognition that no common creed was shared between the various congregations apart from what Boughton calls "an idealistic, Christian-influenced humanism".³⁸⁷ He concludes with an appreciation of the movement's Theological Socialism,

The main purpose of the Churches was avowedly propagandistic but it was a propaganda which stressed the religious aspect to Labour's cause and the spiritual worth of the individual activist and the movement to which he or she belonged.

Indeed, the Churches made the movement seem real by imparting a sense of unity of like-minded individuals and by reinforcing the message of humanity's ineluctable progress – and they could do this even while discussing the municipality's approach to sewage disposal! The great strength of the Labour Churches was that they blurred the frontiers of the secular-spiritual divide and gave an inspiration and meaning to political work lost in the more prosaic daily struggles.³⁸⁸

³⁸³ John Boughton, 'Working-Class Politics in Birmingham and Sheffield', summary page.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 286.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 287.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 288.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

Boughton's analysis of why the Labour Church was a significant movement in Birmingham during the 1920s was that the Socialists of the city were a tiny percentage of the population who faced a monumental struggle for recognition on the political scene by seeking comfort in the certainties of yesteryear. He writes that the "Churches were part of an earlier tradition of socialism in which the New Life was not merely to be won through the ballot box in the future but practised in the present."³⁸⁹ Unlike Sheffield, where the Labour Party was on the ascent, Birmingham remained under the dominance of the Conservatives. John Corbett wrote, "The spirit of Chamberlainism still deluded many Birmingham workers."³⁹⁰ Boughton explains the rapid decline of the Labour Church in the city from the mid-1920s as being a combination of the availability of other forms of entertainment, such as the wireless and cinemas, and the rise of the Labour Party from a sect to "the second party of the state".³⁹¹ While the situation in Sheffield reflected the national scene, Boughton argues, the life of Labour politics in Birmingham continued to be that of a sect:

The religion of socialism was, by the sense of election and comradeship it instilled and the certain victory it promised, a form of belief necessary to the embattled minority. In Birmingham, socialists remained such a minority even as their counterparts in Sheffield were taking power, and this was one reason for the ethicality of Birmingham's socialism as compared to that of Sheffield.³⁹²

The argument posed by John Boughton that the Labour Church congregations in the Birmingham of the 1920s must be understood within the setting of a struggling local Labour movement is an important reminder of the on-going influence of 'Cloth-capped Chamberlainism' among the city's working class. Boughton claimed that Labour support

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 289.

³⁹⁰ John Corbett, *The Birmingham Trades Council*, 126.

³⁹¹ John Boughton, 'Working-Class Politics in Birmingham and Sheffield', 289.

³⁹² Ibid.

was localised in areas of Birmingham with high levels of trade union membership. But his assessment of the Labour Church relates to the movement in the pre-First World War period, and even earlier to the last decade of the nineteenth century. There is little sense of how the Labour Church Union changed in nature before 1914, and how the branches in those northern towns and cities that had once led the way for the movement then declined and disappeared. Boughton does not explain why Birmingham bucked the trend after 1918, with a sudden flowering of Labour Church meetings in communities across the city. Also, by the end of the 1920s the political tide was turning in Birmingham. In the General Election of 1924 eleven Unionist M. P. s and only one Labour M. P. were elected, five years later the result was six M. P. s from both parties – “Chamberlainism’s grip had been loosened.”³⁹³ This rise in power of the Birmingham Labour Party is not reflected in Boughton’s ‘contrast and compare’ approach to the situation with Sheffield, and, as a consequence, it diminishes his assessment of the Labour Church in Birmingham during this period.

The second historian who engages with the Labour Church of Birmingham in the 1920s is George Barnsby, who recognises the important role it played in the political life of the city, but expresses great frustration at the lack of archival records.³⁹⁴ When it comes to addressing the questions about why the Labour Church was significant in Birmingham and what was it about the city that made it nurture the growth of local congregations when the national movement had all but disappeared, Barnsby sets the organisation into a broad framework. He relates the congregations to the activities and structures that functioned during the 1890s and up until 1914, but then looks beyond that specific group and the narrow realms of organised political bodies to consider the influence of the city’s radical tradition. Barnsby writes, “it is

³⁹³ John Corbett, *The Birmingham Trades Council*, 134.

³⁹⁴ George Barnsby, *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country*, 356.

probably better to look for the emerging factors of the 1920s against the background of Radical Christianity in Birmingham.”³⁹⁵ In his definition of ‘Radical Christianity’, Barnsby recounts the impact of Arthur O’Neill and his Chartist Church, and other radical activists of Birmingham, from the Chartists to the new Socialists. He concludes, “Most of these elements would have co-existed happily in Labour Churches which were partly Christian, but mostly secular.”³⁹⁶ In support of Barnsby’s analysis of the later Labour Church congregations in Birmingham is one of the figures who he cites, Jim Simmons, the Christian Socialist pacifist who became a Labour city councillor and M. P.. In his autobiography, *Soap-box Evangelist*, Simmons recollects his experience of the local movement during the post-First World War period,

At the Labour churches I heard some of the best speakers in the Midlands deliver Socialist sermons that fully satisfied my Christian principles; the local I. L. P. organiser, J. W. Kneeshaw spoke on ‘The Politics of Christ’ and Eldred Hallas, a local trade union leader, built up a powerful case for ‘work or maintenance’ on the parable of the vineyard labourers.³⁹⁷

By taking a broad perspective on the place of the local Labour Church movement, Barnsby is able to tap into a deep vein of influence within the social, cultural and political dimensions of Birmingham life, that being radicalism. But, not wishing to deny the importance of the radical spirit, recognition must be given to the authority asserted by conservative forces on the political scene for many decades, and that this led to a conciliatory rather than confrontational approach to local industrial relations, which is something that Barnsby plays down in his assessment. Also, his final sentence of analysis about the “mostly secular”

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ Jim Simmons, *Soap-box Evangelist*, 16.

nature of the Labour Church congregations does seem to contradict his argument that the main reason for the movement's survival and flourishing after 1918 was due to a radical strain of Christianity. It is highly debatable whether the individuals and movements that Barnsby cites under the title of 'Radical Christianity' would have found a happy home together within the same organisation. Barnsby displays a blind spot in his analysis because he supposes the theological dimension of the Labour Church movement must have been grounded in Christianity, when in fact its founding vision was that of God moving beyond established religion to bring about a Socialist utopia.

Both Boughton and Barnsby offer some explanation as to the significance of the Labour Church in Birmingham, but there is more to be said in the analysis. The name of the Labour Church was respected within the wider Birmingham Labour movement because of a number of reasons. From the formation of the central Labour Church it became a unifying presence among the city's Socialist and Labour organisations. Speakers from the I. L. P., S. D. F. and Trades Council were regular lecturers at the congregation's Sunday evening meetings, and in return the church was invited to participate in each other organisations events, such as the May Day demonstrations. Along with the Socialist Centre, the Birmingham Labour Church included members who were active in many political and social groups, from campaign groups about public transport to election committees and the Clarion Cycling Club. The philanthropic work of the congregation's Cinderella Club was well respected by many within and beyond the Labour movement across Birmingham. Then there was the annual Town Hall event organised by the Labour Church which became a rallying point for the Socialists of the city for many years, and such was its high profile that it continued to attract national figures as the keynote speakers. In addition to the annual event was the well-established tradition of Sunday meetings held by local branches of the I. L. P., and occasionally the S. D. F., which

were branded as 'Labour Church'. The use of the movement's name was not only an attempt to placate certain sensitivities about political activities taking place on the Sabbath, but also enabled the branch to offer a broad programme of moral, educational and theological subjects. This tradition within the Labour movement still had credibility for the Birmingham City I. L. P. in 1926, when the holding of a Labour Church was discussed. These reasons for the high regard in which the Labour Church was held offer background to the rapid growth of meetings during the 1920s.

What Barnsby and Boughton have in common is their wish to assess the Labour Church within a broader context of Birmingham life. 'Cloth-capped Chamberlainism' was a major factor in the first half of the 1920s, which meant that traditional alliances between trade unions and local employers, and consequent political allegiances, were maintained. This state of 'business as usual' which had been in place since the 1890s and had survived the First World War may have encouraged the local Labour movement to follow suit by keeping their own traditions going, which included the Labour Church. But that does not take into account the fact that most of the local congregations had floundered by 1914. What the spreading of Labour Church congregations across Birmingham in this period indicates is that by adopting the title of Labour Church for their Sunday meetings gave local I. L. P. branches credibility to promote a broad educational programme for members as encouraged by the national party, and so defied the dominant consensus of working class politics in Birmingham. The watershed of the General Strike turned the trend away from Chamberlainist loyalties and began to support Labour representation, which meant that the Labour Party grew in strength to the detriment of the smaller Socialist parties. Those who opened their Labour Church meetings in Erdington, Witton, Sparkhill and Billesley during the 1920s were not part of some "embattled minority", as Boughton has claimed, instead,

they bucked the political trend both locally and nationally by re-claiming the name of an organisation which spoke of the Religion of Socialism as the means of understanding the optimism for a new society.

Around five years after the national organisation had evaporated as war broke out in 1914, Sunday gatherings bearing the name of the Labour Church began to meet regularly across the city and their numbers rose to sixteen separate congregations by 1926. Most of these meetings were closely associated with the local branch of the I. L. P., as had been many of the Labour Churches in the previous phase of their movement's history. Apart from Birmingham, there is no evidence that in any other part of the country were Socialists re-claiming the Labour Church to serve the needs of their party branches and local communities. Why this occurred there can be deduced by understanding the consensual nature of industrial relations in Birmingham, which relates to the appeal of the I. L. P. with its Guild Socialism and national educational programme, the revival of Socialist culture, and that the Labour Church continued to have a 'good name' amongst local Socialists in the growing city.

The expansion of the I. L. P. revived the cultural life of Socialism, including the reforming of choirs, cycling clubs and drama groups, and, in the case of Birmingham, the Labour Church.³⁹⁸ Birmingham proves itself to be an interesting case study of Labour politics in the post-1918 period, because it both follows national trends and deviates from them. The Labour movement of the city embraced a wide selection of activists that ranged from Communists to former-Conservatives, all of whom sought alternatives to the dominance of

³⁹⁸ C. Stella Davies expresses the sense of stimulation felt by local Socialists in the Manchester area with the revival of cultural activities in the post-First World War period. In that context it was the Clarion Club which acted as the focus of the political and cultural revival - C. Stella Davies, *North Country Bred: A Working-Class Family Chronicle*, 195.

Chamberlainism. The transformation of Birmingham as a city through population growth, industrial developments and electoral boundary changes created a different political landscape in which Labour politics operated. The rapid growth of the city's population meant that newcomers were able to play an active role in the local Labour movement, bringing with them understandings not influenced by Birmingham's history and traditions. In this changeable context, the revival of the I. L. P., the appeal of its Guild Socialism and educational programme, along with local desire for closer Socialist participation, were all elements that created a fertile setting for the return to the Labour Church in Birmingham. At a national and local level, the outcomes of the General Strike took Labour politics to another level of organisational development. Responding to the potential and conclusions of the strike would cement the Labour Party into the established parliamentary system, leading to the marginalisation of both the I. L. P. and the C. P. G. B.. As a consequence, the exceptional Labour Churches of Birmingham diminished until their final gasp in the early 1930s.

4:8 Conclusion

The question was posed as to why the Labour Church was a movement of some significance in the life of Birmingham. Radical aspirations within the city were encapsulated in the Civic Gospel proclaimed by prominent nonconformists, which found practical and political expression in the 'Gas and Water Socialism' of Joseph Chamberlain. This became an increasingly conservative and reactionary political programme sanctioned in Chamberlain's name, with a profound influence on the workers of Birmingham and the approach to local industrial relations. In that context, the Labour Church established itself as a meeting place for many of the Socialists of Birmingham. Its broad programme of lectures addressing moral, theological, economic and political questions, appealed to a cross section of local Labour activists. From its early days at the beginning of the 1890s, the Labour Church gained a well-

respected reputation within and beyond the city's Labour movement for its activities as an organisation and for the commitments of its individual members. The high profile annual Town Hall events became a rallying point for the wider movement, and the work of the congregation's Cinderella Club was appreciated for the benefit it brought to many of the poorest children of the city. From a handful of local Labour Church members developed a group that was to spread rapidly across the country as it tapped into a passion for outdoor leisure, fellowship and cycling, with the birth of the Clarion Cycling Club. The Labour Church's close relationship with the I. L. P. enabled local branches to hold Sunday meetings that continued the broad programme of lectures as they began to be established across the expanding city into the twentieth century. Between the end of the First World War and the defeat of the General Strike, many Labour activists, including those new to the city, asserted their opposition to the prevalent influence of Chamberlainism on working class politics of a rapidly changing Birmingham as the I. L. P. spread in popularity. The party's championing of Guild Socialism had an appeal to workers from companies used to the consensual approach to industrial relations practiced within the city. An I. L. P. revival meant a resurgence of Labour cultural activities and an educational programme, which in Birmingham included meetings bearing the respected name of the Labour Church.

The supplementary question to why the Labour Church was significant in the city relates to the relevance of Theological Socialism, whether this explained the contradictory nature of the movement in Birmingham compared to the rest of the country. Leading figures of the Labour Church in the city, such as Tom Groom and John Arthur Fallows, were Theological Socialists who had grown from Christian radicalism, following in the path of the movement's founder, John Trevor. They had been attracted to the potential of an organisation founded on a particular theological vision of Socialism. From the minutes of its executive meetings it can

be deduced that the local Labour Church members tended to favour a pragmatic approach to the organisation's purpose and activities, and their two major contributions to the national movement were directly influenced by Robert Blatchford, who took a very non-theological stance to his Socialism. And yet, the note books of Frank Mathews reveals a spiritual quest comparable to that of Trevor's which inspired his politics and philanthropic endeavours. Historians have cited Birmingham as instigating the secularisation of the Labour Church Union in the early twentieth century by its resolutions to re-write the movement's constitutional principles. But research has shown that the motivation behind their argument to broaden the ideological base was to ensure that the Labour Church could be a meeting place for all active in the Labour movement, reflecting its good reputation in Birmingham.

When the central Birmingham congregation was challenged in 1909 about the inclusion of 'Socialist' in its name, the response was one of asserting a distinct presence within the Labour movement which was inclusive in its nature. There remained the need for the organisation that stood for the Religion of Socialism, though for the Birmingham members Theological Socialism was understood in an open sense, embracing those with moral, creedal or literal interpretations of Socialism as a religious mission. Such was the good name of the organisation that in the wake of the General Strike the Birmingham Federation of the I. L. P. considered the proposal to "hold a Labour Church" with many of the party's branch members doing that during the preceding years. In the final days of this movement of some significance in Birmingham, a contemporary of John Trevor would re-emphasise the Theological Socialism of the Labour Church when Frank Smith declared it to be "a truly religious movement".³⁹⁹

³⁹⁹ *Town Crier*, 11th October 1930, 4.

CONCLUSION – SO PECULIAR A MOVEMENT

The great movements of to-day have not broken out in the churches, though they may come to be patronized by the churches. They have been immediate ebullitions of Life. It is these movements that the Real Religion of to-day is to be found, though it may still be unconscious of itself.

The Labour Church was an attempt to awaken the Labour Movement to a consciousness of its real significance – a special application of a universal principle to the immediate exigencies of life.¹

Written from hindsight several years after his active involvement with the movement he founded had ceased, John Trevor places the Labour Church at the centre of seismic, ideological shifts in contemporary thought and praxis. Trevor writes of the Labour Church as an endeavour to realise the consequences of those shifts, by working inside the political sphere, enabling the Labour movement to discover its true purpose as God's chosen vehicle, succeeding Christianity to herald a new utopian age, which Trevor described as the Kingdom of God on earth. This thesis examined the significance of Trevor's Theological Socialism for the life of the Labour Church and the wider Labour movement, and argues that Labour Church members are to be understood as a specific grouping within Ethical Socialism because of their alignment with the Religion of Socialism through a particular and quite peculiar organisation. The premise of the study was that the Labour Church brought to the British Labour movement a distinctive theological interpretation of Socialism.

The thesis set out to challenge the accepted historiographical views of the Labour Church movement by pursuing an alternative way of analysing its history, significance and meaning

¹ John Trevor, *The One Life*, 13.

as proposed by a contemporary commentator of the British Socialism, Moritz Kaufmann, who viewed the Labour Church through the lens of utopianism. In the introductory chapter the tasks for the thesis were defined as being a reassessment of the Labour Church by scrutinising the movement's theological interpretation of Socialism, then a detailed contextual case study, and a rejection of the generally held belief about the lifespan of the Labour Church as an organisation. These tasks meant that the central thesis question about the movement's message and its significance were examined from different vantage points as the social and ideological setting of the Labour Church were considered, the concepts and experiences that influenced John Trevor's outlook, and the issues and concerns affecting the active members, including those committed to the movement in Birmingham.

Some sixty years after the founding of the Labour Church, and at a time when the last of its congregations continued to meet in the Hyde district of Manchester, historians of the British Labour movement began to turn their attention to this neglected institutional expression of late-Victorian Socialism. But their conclusions have been questioned by the outcomes of the research for this thesis. Unlike Eric Hobsbawm, who saw the prime purpose of the Labour Church to be a vehicle for secularisation as Primitive Rebels became Rational Socialists, this thesis has argued that throughout its history the movement enabled people to express their religious convictions through Labour politics. While Stanley Pierson recognised the religious significance of the Labour Church, he also interpreted the organisation in terms of a passing moment in Labour history, with the fantasy of utopian visions being transformed into the reality of political electioneering. The position of the thesis is that the prioritising of activists' time and commitments did not necessarily mean a rejection of earlier beliefs. This thesis has concurred with Stephen Yeo's conclusion that the Religion of Socialism expressed in institutional form through the Labour Church, with Trevor's vision of a post-Christian Free

Religion, faded by the mid-1890s. The sea change occurring between the defeat of the 1895 General Election and the uproar caused by the publication of the 'Unspoken Address' was pinpointed; yet, the interpretation of the Religion of Socialism that God was in the Labour movement as held by Theological Socialists continued well into the twentieth century. Our objection to the approach taken by more recent historians, notably Mark Bevir, is that this has been too reductionist in an attempt to fit the movement into their prescribed arguments. The diversity of influences upon the Labour Church and its membership has been emphasised by our study, recognising the desire amongst Theological Socialists to maintain a broad and inclusive agenda. With acknowledgement given to the historiography of the Labour Church, the contribution of this thesis to the re-appraisal of the movement is to refute that it was a Socialist substitute for nonconformist Christianity, or a vehicle to further the secularisation of Labour politics, or the base for British Transcendentalism. Instead, the distinctiveness of the movement, message and membership of the Labour Church was highlighted, stating that it is Theological Socialism and the Theological Socialists which change our perception of the organisation, because both offered an opportunity for a renewal of religious understanding in British society.

From the writings of Moritz Kaufmann there was a challenge to view the Labour Church through the lens of utopianism. Kaufmann interpreted Socialism as an applied utopianism, by which he meant the visions of a better social future were solidified into systematic and pragmatic political agendas. Therefore, for Kaufmann the Labour Church could only be understood by grasping its place within the applied utopianism of Socialism, because he argued that the organisation put into religious language and perception the visions and agendas of the Labour movement, with a belief in the divine calling to proclaim the dawning of a new age as God's Kingdom. While this thesis has acknowledged that the Labour Church

was an unusual organisation for its time, it cannot be claimed that it was unique. The utopian spirit was active as the nineteenth century came to a close and a new century offered an opportunity for an alternative society, leading to numerous groups being formed to proclaim their own concept of the future. Visions of an imagined, alternative society based upon the belief that humanity was able to reach a state of perfectibility inspired ideologies that led to a variety of Socialist theories which emerged during the final decades of the century.

Underpinned by rational ideology, the pursuit of equality and democracy in a free and just society became the utopianism of the age.² Utopian experiments such as the anarchist colonies, Tolstoyan communities and the Brotherhood Church all flourished. Along with the political commentator Moritz Kaufmann, by the 1880s many British Socialists were looking back across many centuries of the nation's history to trace the roots of their radicalism. The interest of Socialists in the history of British utopianism was more than an academic exercise, for they were looking to previous generations for inspiration and to give credibility to their own political movement. Credibility in terms of being able to claim that the Socialism they promoted was the most recent manifestation of a long and rich tradition, including the theologies of John Ball during the Peasants' Revolt and Gerrard Winstanley in the English Revolution, that sought a better society as a contemporary utopia. Thus, it was determined that for this thesis to make a contribution to the study of Labour history the focus had to be sharpened by identifying the definite contribution of the Labour Church to the political and religious life of late-Victorian British society.

With a prompt from Yeo, this research aimed to rescue John Trevor by producing a biographical sketch that pursued his life story and influences, by asking what shaped his Theological Socialism and vision for the Labour Church. Trevor described himself as 'the

² Merlin Coverley, *Utopia*, (Harpenden, Hertfordshire: Pocket Essentials, 2010), 83.

victim of the unfolding God' in his autobiography published in 1897. This statement expresses both his self-perception and an understanding of divine revelation. Trevor saw all the trials and tribulations he had suffered to have been preparation for his calling as God's true nature and purpose were slowly revealed to him. Trevor took strands from the wide variety of religious experiences he encountered: from the strict Calvinism of the Johnsonian Baptists to Evangelical Christianity, through his own 'crisis of faith' before finding meaning in Transcendentalism and Free Religion, then weaving together his own political theology. So when Trevor was struggling with the relevance of the Christian Church to the issues surrounding the Labour Question, it was on the basis of his theological quest that he was led to the conclusion that the answer was the Religion of Socialism, but not as a moral code or in its pseudo-Christian form, but in the literal sense, that Socialism was the new religion which would save the world. Trevor's answer to the Labour Question with a literal Religion of Socialism was the basis of Theological Socialism and the making of the Labour Church. By unpacking what he meant by the Socialist religion, Trevor would draw on the ideas and agendas that had inspired him along the way, then fashioned these ideological components into a distinctive theology.

Trevor considered himself to be a prophet of the Labour movement, and he called for all Socialists to see themselves as such.³ His prophecy, which he wanted others to share, was summarised in the phrase 'God in the Labour movement', the rallying cry of the Labour Church. Trevor claimed for the Labour Church a unique calling as an organisation, that of being the vanguard of the successor to Christianity as the vehicle for God's grace as it proclaimed the divine nature of the Labour movement. Drawing on evolutionary theory and Transcendentalist theology, Trevor stated that Socialism was the means for a new utopian age

³ John Trevor, *The Labour Church in England*, 64.

to begin, when social and personal freedom would be available to all people, including those of the working class. He explained this in language from Christian doctrine about the Kingdom of God on earth, which was understood by Trevor to be the fulfilment of both the Socialist agenda and the insights of Free Religion. Trevor's Theological Socialism was collective individualism, whereby every person would have the opportunity to achieve their full potential within the true democracy of God's Kingdom. An essential aspect of this personal growth would be spiritual by adopting Free Religion which released people from the restraints of traditional creeds, notably Christianity, in order to discover the eternal Laws of God. Thus, Theological Socialism was the belief that God had left Christianity for the Labour movement to progress humanity into a new world. But this utopian vision was not simply theoretical, because for Trevor collective freedom in the future meant collective action in the present, as he stated in an article for *Clarion*:

The Labour Church shifts the religious question from the historic value of the Fourth Gospel to the rights and wrongs of the Miners' Lock-out, from the question whether the people can be "brought to Jesus" to the question whether they can be brought to Socialism, and to understand all that Socialism means to them and demands of them.⁴

Those people who were drawn to the message that God was in the Labour movement and committed themselves to the Labour Church as active members were Theological Socialists, a particular group within Ethical Socialism, a term used of a broad ideology which considered Labour politics to be as much about moral values as economic goals. But Labour Church activists were not only Ethical Socialists, they were also Socialists who took their conviction further by aligning themselves with an organisation which was based on a theological interpretation of Socialism. That been stated, this research has shown a diversity

⁴ *Clarion*, 18th August 1894 quoted in Philip P. Poirier, *The Advent of the Labour Party*, 55.

of beliefs amongst the Theological Socialists of the Labour Church. As the debate about John Trevor's 'Unspoken Address' to the London Congress of the Second International revealed, Theological Socialists may have been singing from the same Labour Church Hymn Book but their understanding of the ideology expressed in the hymns, tracts and articles sanctioned by the Labour Church Union varied considerably.

While the diversity of explanations to the Religion of Socialism may have been as broad within the Labour Church as across the wider British Labour movement, the unifying factor among the Theological Socialists was the belief that the religious nature of their political convictions needed an organisation to preserve and promote the faith. In response to their founder's rallying cry, they were practical prophets of the Labour movement who proclaimed the dawn of a new utopian society by starting philanthropic endeavours, such as the Cinderella Clubs, as well as through promoting shared leisure pursuits, like the Clarion Cycling Clubs, and by being a meeting place for local Socialists to unite for inspiration and campaigning. Not all Theological Socialists accepted Trevor's literal interpretation of the Religion of Socialism, as many preferred a more liberal understanding, but each one of them found meaning in the organisation which announced the presence of God in the Labour movement. To associate with the Labour Church meant that you wished to keep religion and politics in constant dialogue whatever the changing nature of the broader context. What distinguished the Theological Socialists from their contemporary Marxist, Fabian and Christian Socialists, and defines them apart within Ethical Socialism, was the conviction that God required a Labour Church to act as the aide-mémoire of the divine nature and purpose of the Labour movement.

A detailed case study considered the significance of the Labour Church movement in Birmingham from the establishment of its first congregation in the city centre on New Year's Day 1893, through the development of other branches in different communities across the city, until the records fall silent in 1930. By concentrating on one geographical area, the study was able to trace the role played by the Labour Church in the growing local Labour movement and the contribution made by key members to the promotion of the Socialist cause, as well as being able to ask about the relevance of Theological Socialism to that context. Figures such as Tom Groom, J. A. Fallows and Frank Mathews are worthy of the name Theological Socialist as they each came to the Labour Church through their own spiritual quests and found it to be the place where faith and politics combined. Although it remained a relatively small organisation, the impact of the Labour Church in Birmingham was significant as from it came the first Clarion Cycling Club and the largest Cinderella Club in Britain, and to it was attracted a cross section of the local Socialist community, particularly with its annual Town Hall meetings. In order to maintain the role as a gathering point, the local Theological Socialists kept to a broad agenda, which meant that the name of the Labour Church remained relevant throughout the 1920s in the rapidly expanding city, at a time when Labour cultural events were reviving across the country and I. L. P. branches convened Sunday meetings with wide ranging educational programmes, including the promotion of Guild Socialism. The Labour Church in Birmingham brought both joy and challenge to its national organisation, with the Birmingham Labour Church being a contradiction to the national movement as it bucked the wider trends of growth and decline. Throughout the history of the Labour Church in Birmingham, those who aligned themselves with the movement did so in the spirit of Theological Socialism, which proclaimed God in the Labour movement. As a consequence, the Theological Socialists of Birmingham upheld a broad, inclusive agenda which allowed a liberal understanding among its membership and associates

of the Religion of Socialism which embraced moral, creedal and literal translations of their organisation's core concept.

In the introductory chapter the history of the Labour Church as an international movement was outlined, but it was noted that a more detailed study was beyond the remit of the thesis which means that this is an area for further research. While articles have been written about Labour Church activity beyond Britain, specifically in Canada and New Zealand, there is a need for an overarching piece of research about the spread of the movement within certain English-speaking nations from the 1890s to the 1920s. By taking a transnational perspective leads to a more nuanced analysis of the Labour Church, the importance of John Trevor's founding vision, and a wider understanding of how Theological Socialism was interpreted in different social and political settings. From a macro-assessment to the micro, the contextual case study of Birmingham suggests another avenue for greater exploration. To dig deeper into local archival sources for the life of the Labour Church in certain times and places is an opportunity to understand the movement from its grassroots. More work needs to be done on the Black Country and other Midlands congregations, and references revealed during this research suggest that there are openings for further studies in Watford and Norwich.

Although this thesis includes a comprehensive study of his life, the founder of the Labour Church, John Trevor, who brought a theological insight to the organisation and the wider political and religious debate, warrants greater investigation. Trevor's biographer, G. W. Brassington, was not able to finish the task he began,⁵ and so it remains an outstanding piece historical work to be completed.

⁵ John Trevor Working Papers, MSS.143, background to the papers available at [http://dscalm.warwick.ac.uk/Dserve/dserve.exe?&dsqIni=Dserve3.ini&dsqApp=Archive&dsqDb=Catalog&dsqCmd=show.tcl&dsqKey=RefNo&dsqSearch=\(RefNO='TRV'\)AND\(Level='Collection'\)](http://dscalm.warwick.ac.uk/Dserve/dserve.exe?&dsqIni=Dserve3.ini&dsqApp=Archive&dsqDb=Catalog&dsqCmd=show.tcl&dsqKey=RefNo&dsqSearch=(RefNO='TRV')AND(Level='Collection')) accessed on 14th December 2013.

The Labour Church has here a magnificent sphere of work in the promotion of a Socialist life to correspond with Socialist doctrine – a doctrine which, with many teachers, alas, goes with much fatal error in dealing with questions of personal responsibility and the moral and religious life. It is the Labour Church to be at once more faithful in its conduct and more comprehensive in its conclusions in this sphere, which is so peculiarly its own.⁶

In a tract written in 1895 that distinguishes the Labour Church from contemporary Socialist groups, John Trevor argues that what has been defined by historians as the Ethical Socialism promoted by the Clarion movement and the I. L. P., and championed by his former General Secretary, Fred Brocklehurst, was but a pale shadow of the full potential meant for the Labour movement. Trevor writes of the transition from Ethical to Theological Socialism, “when friendship grows into love, respect deepens into worship, and the true life of adoration and communion begins.”⁷ It was his conviction that the Labour Church’s particular calling was to epitomise the full potential of the wider movement, a claim that defines the Labour Church within exceptional parameters in relationship to British Socialism. For the Labour movement the significance of the Labour Church was that it helped to galvanise independent Labour politics in a society with traditional religious loyalties during a period of growing expectations for a new democratic age. To John Trevor the theological interpretation of Socialism given to the Labour Church was a prophetic post-Christian message announcing Socialism as a divine cause at the dawn of a new world. It was Trevor’s earnest conviction that the Labour Church was a peculiar utopian movement with a very definite and characteristic divine calling to answer the Labour Question with the Religion of Socialism, thus heralding the Kingdom of God on earth. For the Theological Socialists the appeal of

⁶ John Trevor, *From Ethics to Religion*, 22.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

their organisation and the motivation for their commitment was the potency of the Labour Church motto, 'God in the Labour movement'.

What are the implications of this thesis' research? Theological Socialism shows how religious belief was critical to the development of the British Labour movement. Beliefs ranging from traditional Christian convictions to those held by people seeking post-Christian religion, all shaped the British interpretation of Socialism. Theological Socialism was one rationale, an imperative of the Labour Church movement, indicating that the Labour Church acts as a signpost to the influence of religious faith upon political understanding. With a national culture of religiosity and a social history of nonconformist radical politics, to grasp what Socialism meant for many activists in the British Labour movement of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries requires acceptance that their politics was their religion, not as "the moralising dress worn by socialists"⁸, but the defining purpose of their lives, their divine calling: a vocation.

The religious influence, particularly from nonconformist Christianity, upon the revival of Socialism in Britain was unusual within the worldwide Labour movement, encountered only in certain English-speaking countries, most notably in Canada, and as a consequence it was considered both with suspicion and with a sense of bewilderment among contemporary Socialists from other nations. Some significant figures of international Socialism encountered the culture of British politics and judged it to be unusual in their experience of the growing, global working class movement. Although she was British born, Eleanor Marx's politics was fashioned by living among European Socialists in exile; she often expressed being mystified by aspects of the British scene, commenting, "one must be English

⁸ Stephen Yeo, 'A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883-1896', 7.

to understand the ludicrous mixture of Christianity and Socialism.”⁹ Another example comes from Nadezhda Krupskaya, who recounted visits she made with her husband, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, to a Socialist church during their exile in London between 1902 and 1903. Krupskaya declares a wondrous curiosity at such a very British phenomenon, recalling how a certain Socialist preacher related the Exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt to the liberation of workers from the Kingdom of Capitalism to the Promised Land of Socialism (an extract from her account is printed as Appendix 5).¹⁰

The product of a British mixture of religion and politics, Theological Socialism was prophecy to the Labour Church, a message which the Theological Socialists believed had global implications about the relationships between humanity and God. Described in language received from Christianity, the prediction was that a Socialist utopia was imminent, the inevitable fulfilment of human evolution, which required careful preparation in personal, social and spiritual relations. Thus, in recognition of the message and the political context which enabled its composition, theological analysis is a key means of assessing the Labour Church, but also of re-examining the wider Labour movement in which it served. Although most Labour historians have acknowledged the influence of religious belief on the origins of the British Labour movement, this has been in terms of ideological background and not analysis of the theological motivations which continued to inspire and shape the political discourse within the movement.

John Trevor made great efforts to explain what the Labour Church was not, as well as attempting to express its true nature and purpose, consequently he set out to distance his

⁹ Quoted in Clive Bloom, *Victoria's Madmen: Revolution and Alienation* (Basingstoke / New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 93.

¹⁰ Nadezhda K. Krupskaya, *Memories of Lenin (1893-1917)*, Workers Library Edition (London: Lawrence and Wishart Limited, 1942), 51-52.

organisation from earlier movements associated with Evangelical Christianity, including Methodism.¹¹ Instead, Trevor linked the Labour Church with expectations of a religious revival, which he believed was being witnessed on the rapidly changing, contemporary political landscape. And yet, viewed from the perspective of the Labour Church through the lens of Theological Socialism, the emergence and development of the British Labour movement over fifty years from the 1880s, is comparable to the birth and growth of a revival movement, such as the Methodism of John Wesley and his successors over a similar period beginning from the late-eighteenth century. The religious and cultural implications of the Labour movement should be regarded alongside its social and political impact. The significance of the Labour Church is not simply to do with the trials and fortunes of the organisation, it is also about how the message of Theological Socialism redefines our understanding and refines our approach to Labour history as religious history.

Labour history has evolved from the study of the organised Labour movement and the industrial working class into a broader field of research which encompasses issues of race, gender and identity in terms of social and cultural development. What has remained consistent in the approach taken by Labour historians is the commitment to understand the conditions, perspectives and aspirations of people with limited access to power in their own societies. E. C. Fry, at a symposium on the meaning of Labour history, argued that the peculiarity of the approach to research was that it added “a new dimension by looking at the history of those who largely comprise modern societies.”¹² The study of religious history has also broadened its focus beyond tracing changes in Christian ecclesiastical structures and doctrinal beliefs into concern for other faith traditions and the relationship of religion to other

¹¹ *Labour Prophet*, October 1895, 154.

¹² E. C. Fry, ‘What is Labour History?’, *Labour History*, number 12, May 1967, 64.

academic disciplines, especially sociology and anthropology.¹³ A seminal work which drew together both fields of historical study was E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. Thompson reassessed the creation of a growing body of industrial artisans through the social and cultural changes generated by the Industrial Revolution, and examined the role of Evangelical revivalism in the shaping of the working people into a defined social class.¹⁴ To understand the continuing religious history of the working class is crucial to the study of the Socialist revival and the re-birth of the British Labour movement at the end of the nineteenth century, as this informs us of the ideological grounding of the politics and the consequential attraction of the cause. Labour history is religious history because theology helped to distinguish British Socialism.

The Theological Socialism given to the Labour Church movement by John Trevor was an expression of late-Victorian Religion of Socialism, and a product of contemporary ideological streams combining, which made the concept particularly potent during the early 1890s. But a consequence of such an immediate relevance meant that Trevor's vision had a limited shelf-life, ending with the debate over the 'Unspoken Address' of 1896 when the whole idea of post-Christian Free Religion was called into question. But Theological Socialism as an ideology can be traced throughout British history when religious belief has inspired radical social movements, including the recent broader coalitions of activists with a shared agenda addressing ecological and anti-globalisation issues.¹⁵ Gerd-Rainer Horn has researched the religious basis of social action groups active across Europe in the late 1950s

¹³ In answer to the question 'what is religious history?', David Hempton wrote, "Ultimately, the best religious history is written by those who combine a deep insight into the nature of religious forms and experiences with a proper understanding of their social setting." Duncan Shaw, 'What is Religious History?', *History Today*, volume 35 issue 8, August 1985, available at <http://www.historytoday.com/duncan-shaw/what-religious-history> accessed on 16 June 2014.

¹⁴ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963).

¹⁵ D. F. Summers wrote in the late 1950s that the same spirit, described throughout this thesis as Theological Socialism, inspired the founding of the Iona Community and the Worker Priest movement. D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', iv.

and throughout the 1960s, arguing that this was 'Left Catholicism' which attempted to root Christianity in the political empowerment of marginalised peoples. Horn considered such European-centred political theology to be a prototype for the liberation theology that emerged from South America in the following decades.¹⁶ For historians of the British Labour Party, the role played by the Labour Church and the influence of religious belief on the wider movement is often diminished or neglected all together, raising the question of their secular interpretation of Labour politics.¹⁷

If Theological Socialists were those who believed that God was in the Labour movement as determined by the existence of an organisation which held to that creed, then such a category of Socialists ceased to exist with the general demise of the Labour Church in Birmingham around 1930. But if the motto of God in the Labour movement is the basis of the belief, then Theological Socialism can be traced beyond the Labour Church to be the inspiration of faithful people within Labour politics up until today. This is identifying a continuing theological imperative for the British Labour movement. By posing such a proposition means that there is the need to reassess the religious influences and impact of those committed to Socialism in Britain. In his doctoral thesis on the relationship between the Free Churches and the Labour Party between the World Wars, Peter Catterall emphasises the role played by individual nonconformists and argues that historians have been distracted by what he regarded as minor organisations such as the Socialist Sunday Schools and Labour Church.¹⁸ This thesis has shown that in the case of the Labour movement in Birmingham

¹⁶ Gerd-Rainer Horn, *Western European liberation theology: The first wave* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 291.

¹⁷ An exception to this is Graham Dale, *God's Politicians: the Christian contribution to 100 years of Labour* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000) which appealed to ongoing engagement between Christians and the Labour Party. What is lacking in the book is the distinction between the Christian Socialists who associate with Christian denominations, and the Socialist Christians who apply their faith beyond the Church.

¹⁸ Peter Paul Catterall, 'The Free Churches and the Labour Party in England and Wales 1918-1939', Ph. D. thesis, Queen Mary College, University of London, 1989, 514.

during the 1920s individual Socialists, including nonconformists such as Jim Simmons, met under the name of the Labour Church. Although this challenges Catterall's view about the significance of certain organisations, it does not reject his argument regarding the part played by people with theological convictions in British Labour politics, which he felt "coloured the party's ideology, self-image and rhetoric."¹⁹ Religious denominations have not thrown their support behind the Labour movement, but many of their members and adherents continue to commit themselves to its political cause.

It should be recognised that religious influences varied considerably, as they did at the founding of the Labour Church, and that the routes which brought people to the British Labour movement have become more pluralistic since the Second World War with the growth of a multi-cultural, multi-faith society. Figures such as George Lansbury, Ellen Wilkinson, Margaret Bondfield, Eric Heffer, and John Smith were Socialists with a theological imperative who committed themselves to the Labour Party.²⁰ Dennis Skinner in his memoirs published recently writes of the importance of Methodism to the shaping of his political context and perspective, describing the Parable of the Good Samaritan as "a Socialist story"²¹ echoing John Trevor's approach to the teachings of Jesus. A contemporary Theological Socialist within broader British Socialism is Salma Yaqoob, who has explained the influence of the Qur'an on her political beliefs.²² The former Shadow Secretary of State for Justice and Shadow Lord Chancellor, Sadiq Khan, has written about how his Muslim faith brought him into Labour politics and argues for the recognition of faith identity in the

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Eric Heffer acknowledged the role played by the Labour Church in the forming and fashioning of the Labour Party in his autobiography and commented that he would have attended its meetings. Eric Heffer, *Why I am a Christian* (London: Spire / Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1991), 37.

²¹ Dennis Skinner, *Sailing Close to the Wind: Reminiscences* (London: Quercus Editions Limited, 2014), 108.

²² Salma Yaqoob, 'Booktopia' (March 2010), available at www.redpepper.org.uk/Booktopia-Salma-Yaqoob/ accessed on 25 September 2014.

formation of Labour Party vision and policies.²³ A “Christian agnostic”²⁴, Tony Benn epitomised Theological Socialism in recent times by his sense of British Labour history being the story of religion, and Labour politics as the application of belief to social context.²⁵ In an article about the moral basis of democratic Socialism, Benn wrote, “outside the established churches, and in parallel with them, the practical commandment to practise true neighbourly love based upon an acceptance of our common humanity acquired an impetus of its own.”²⁶

The theological imperative of British Labour politics offers a broad set of reference points from which people have sought religious inspiration and an ethical framework as they formulated policies and wrote manifestoes. Understanding drawn from scriptures, traditions, theological works, and the continuous reflections of faith communities have been applied through Socialism out of the concern that religious belief should have a practical and political impact. Theological concepts of God, and the relationship between God and the world, have defined people’s sense of self and the value of human life. While it cannot be claimed that people of religious belief have a monopoly on justice, it is certainly the case that the teachings of many faiths direct believers towards social action, whether through obligation or the outpouring of conviction; the spread of Food Banks and Credit Unions across Britain in recent years supported by local faith communities is an example of such religiously motivated acts. What underpins this social action is often theology of a New World, where life is lived as God desires in a state of justice, peace and equality for all people. For some, this New World is described as the Kingdom of God, a term favoured by John Trevor and the Labour Church’s Theological Socialists, with its appeal of always being before us as a

²³ Sadiq Khan, *Fairness not Favours: How to reconnect with British Muslims* (London: Fabian Society, 2008), 70.

²⁴ Tony Benn, *More Time for Politics: Diaries 2001 – 2007* (London: Hutchinson, 2007), 223.

²⁵ Tony Benn and Chris Mullin (editor), *Arguments for Socialism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Limited, 1980 / first published 1979), 44.

²⁶ Tony Benn and Chris Mullin (editor), *Arguments for Democracy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Limited, 1982 / first published 1981), 124.

challenge and goal. Throughout and beyond the history of the Labour Church, Socialists with a theological imperative have agreed to a common agenda with their secular-minded comrades by reaching political conclusions based on shared values, but the particular contribution of all Theological Socialists to the partnership is that they continue to bring a divine mandate to the British Labour movement. Labour history is religious history.

According to John Trevor and the Theological Socialists, the calling which was so peculiarly its own as a distinct organisation meant that the Labour Church revealed the true nature of the Labour movement, a claim which brings to light a belief in the redemption of both politics and religion.

THE FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTION of the Labour Church, and the First Principle in its Constitution, is, THAT THE LABOUR MOVEMENT IS A RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT. Thus at the outset we wipe out all distinctions between Secular and Sacred; we place Religion in the broad current of human progress; we take from it its ghostly character, its voice from the tomb, its cold dead hand laid on the mouths and hearts of living men.²⁷

²⁷ John Trevor, *The Labour Church in England*, 52.

APPENDIX 1 – A WRITTEN RECONSTRUCTION OF THE FIRST LABOUR CHURCH SERVICE

The purpose of this appendix is to describe the first Labour Church service by drawing on contemporary records, historical research and the texts of songs and literary verses.

Background information to the venue, contributors and writers of poems and songs is given as means of bringing greater illumination to the event and the aspirations of its host, Rev.

John Trevor, who was staking his professional reputation on an idea of a church for the working class. The service in early October 1891 was the first opportunity for Trevor to share his vision with a wide audience. That event would be the beginning or the end of the Labour Church, this depended on the response from the public on that autumn afternoon. By working through the records of the first Labour Church service, uncertainties arise about particular subjects and items because of lack of information from the archival sources, in such cases speculative comment is given in brackets within the text.

The Labour Church was born on the afternoon of Sunday, 4th October 1891, when over four hundred people met in Chorlton Town Hall for the first Labour Church service.¹ Chorlton Town Hall was located on Cavendish Street, at the corner with Oxford Street, in the All Saints district of Chorlton-on-Medlock. The building was designed by local architect, Richard Lane, and built between 1830 and 1831. The hall was noted for its Doric portico.² A string band opened the proceedings playing what is described in newspaper reports as an

¹ *Manchester City News*, October 1891, quoted in *Ibid.*, 12.

² Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: South Lancashire*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Limited, 1969) quoted in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chorlton-on-Medlock#cite_note-2 accessed on 10 June 2012.

overture³ (this may have been a medley of the song tunes about to be performed during the event). John Trevor then led the gathering in a time of prayer⁴ (no record of the wording, but it is probable that Trevor was offering the event to God and relating God to the Labour movement as a means of setting the tone of the service). A solo followed sung by either Mr George Freeman⁵ or Mr Joseph Freeman.⁶ The song was written by an American composer called Julian Jordan in 1887, and is entitled 'The Song that Reached My Heart':

I sat midst a mighty throng
Within a palace grand,
In a city far beyond the sea,
In a distant foreign land;
I listened the grandest strain
My ear had ever heard,
Enraptured, charmed, amazed I was,
My inmost soul was stirred.
I looked on the singer fair,
My heart was at her feet,
She sang of love, the old, old theme,
In accents low and sweet;
And then she sang a song
That made the teardrops start.
She sang a song, a song of home,
A song that reached my heart.

³ *Manchester Times*, 9 October 1891 / *Manchester City News*, October 1891, quoted in D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 12.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *Manchester Times*, 9 October 1891.

⁶ *Manchester City News*, October 1891, quoted in D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 12.

(Chorus).

Home, home, sweet, sweet home,
She sang the song of "Home, Sweet Home,"
The song that reached my heart.

That night I shall never forget,
That night with its pleasure and pain,
I think of the singer, I think of the song,
And wish I could live it again;
In fancy again I recall
The scene with its splendor bright,
The mighty throng, the palace grand,
Oh. the mem'ry of that night.
My fancy it may have been
But never had I heard
A song that thrilled me o'er like this,
Like this so strangely stirred;
The memo'ries of that night of bliss
Will never from me part,
She sang a song of "Home, Sweet Home,"
The song that reached my heart.

(Chorus).

Home, home, sweet, sweet home,
She sang the song of "Home, Sweet Home,"

The song that reached my heart.⁷

“Mr Trevor, rising again, said he thought that the race of prophets was not yet extinct, and he would accordingly read a portion of the writings of a lately deceased American Prophet, James Russell Lowell”,⁸ ‘On The Capture Of Fugitive Slaves Near Washington’:

Look on who will in apathy, and stifle they who can,
The sympathies, the hopes, the words, that make man truly man;
Let those whose hearts are dungeoned up with interest or with ease
Consent to hear with quiet pulse of loathsome deeds like these!
I first drew in New England's air, and from her hardy breast
Sucked in the tyrant-hating milk that will not let me rest;
And if my words seem treason to the dullard and the tame,
'Tis but my Bay-State dialect,--our fathers spake the same!
Shame on the costly mockery of piling stone on stone
To those who won our liberty, the heroes dead and gone,
While we look coldly on and see law-shielded ruffians slay
The men who fain would win their own, the heroes of to-day!
Are we pledged to craven silence? Oh, fling it to the wind,
The parchment wall that bars us from the least of human kind,
That makes us cringe and temporize, and dumbly stand at rest,
While Pity's burning flood of words is red-hot in the breast!
Though we break our fathers' promise, we have nobler duties first;
The traitor to Humanity is the traitor most accursed;
Man is more than Constitutions; better rot beneath the sod,
Than be true to Church and State while we are doubly false to God!

⁷ Julian Jordan, ‘The Song that Reached My Heart’, USA: Willis Woodward and Company, copyright, 1887.

⁸ *Manchester Times*, 9 October 1891.

We owe allegiance to the State; but deeper, truer, more,
To the sympathies that God hath set within our spirit's core;
Our country claims our fealty; we grant it so, but then
Before Man made us citizens, great Nature made us men.
He's true to God who's true to man; wherever wrong is done,
To the humblest and the weakest, 'neath the all-beholding sun,
That wrong is also done to us; and they are slaves most base,
Whose love of right is for themselves, and not for all their race.
God works for all. Ye cannot hem the hope of being free
With parallels of latitude, with mountain-range or sea.
Put golden padlocks on Truth's lips, be callous as ye will,
From soul to soul, o'er all the world, leaps one electric thrill.
Chain down your slaves with ignorance, ye cannot keep apart,
With all your craft of tyranny, the human heart from heart:
When first the Pilgrims landed on the Bay State's iron shore,
The word went forth that slavery should one day be no more.
Out from the land of bondage 'tis decreed our slaves shall go,
And signs to us are offered, as erst to Pharaoh;
If we are blind, their exodus, like Israel's of yore,
Through a Red Sea is doomed to be, whose surges are of gore.
'Tis ours to save our brethren, with peace and love to win
Their darkened hearts from error, ere they harden it to sin;
But if before his duty man with listless spirit stands,
Erelong the Great Avenger takes the work from out his hands.⁹

⁹ *Labour Prophet*, November 1893, 113.

The reading of the poem was “well received”,¹⁰ and was followed by a reading from the Old Testament given by the Unitarian minister of the Flowery Field Church in Hyde, Rev. Harold Rylett. He had served the congregation since 1889, which had been founded in 1878 on the principles, "To the Worship of God by a Congregation bound by no Creeds or Confessions of Faith who, under the guidance of Ministers equally free to follow Truth, humbly strive to love God and serve their Fellowmen.”¹¹ Rylett read from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 5:

1: Now will I sing to my wellbeloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard.

My wellbeloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill:

2: And he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein: and he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes.

3: And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard.

4: What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?

5: And now go to; I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down:

6: And I will lay it waste: it shall not be pruned, nor digged; but there shall come up briers and thorns: I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

¹⁰ *Manchester Times*, 9 October 1891.

¹¹ Flowery Field Church, Hyde, founding principles, 1878 <http://www.floweryfieldchurchhyde.co.uk/8.html>, accessed on 19 June 2012.

7: For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant: and he looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry.

8: Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth!

9: In mine ears said the LORD of hosts, Of a truth many houses shall be desolate, even great and fair, without inhabitant.

10: Yea, ten acres of vineyard shall yield one bath, and the seed of an homer shall yield an ephah.

11: Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflame them!

12: And the harp, and the viol, the tabret, and pipe, and wine, are in their feasts: but they regard not the work of the LORD, neither consider the operation of his hands.

13: Therefore my people are gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge: and their honourable men are famished, and their multitude dried up with thirst.

14: Therefore hell hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure: and their glory, and their multitude, and their pomp, and he that rejoiceth, shall descend into it.

15: And the mean man shall be brought down, and the mighty man shall be humbled, and the eyes of the lofty shall be humbled:

16: But the LORD of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness.

17: Then shall the lambs feed after their manner, and the waste places of the fat ones shall strangers eat.

18: Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope:

19: That say, Let him make speed, and hasten his work, that we may see it: and let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw nigh and come, that we may know it!

20: Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!

21: Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight!

22: Woe unto them that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink:

23: Which justify the wicked for reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him!

24: Therefore as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: because they have cast away the law of the LORD of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.

25: Therefore is the anger of the LORD kindled against his people, and he hath stretched forth his hand against them, and hath smitten them: and the hills did tremble, and their carcasses were torn in the midst of the streets. For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still.

26: And he will lift up an ensign to the nations from far, and will hiss unto them from the end of the earth: and, behold, they shall come with speed swiftly:

27: None shall be weary nor stumble among them; none shall slumber nor sleep; neither shall the girdle of their loins be loosed, nor the latchet of their shoes be broken:

28: Whose arrows are sharp, and all their bows bent, their horses' hoofs shall be counted like flint, and their wheels like a whirlwind:

29: Their roaring shall be like a lion, they shall roar like young lions: yea, they shall roar, and lay hold of the prey, and shall carry it away safe, and none shall deliver it.

30: And in that day they shall roar against them like the roaring of the sea: and if one look unto the land, behold darkness and sorrow, and the light is darkened in the heavens thereof.¹²

A choir, which had been put together especially for the event, led the next part of the service with a rendition of a popular Socialist anthem, 'England, arise' composed by Edward Carpenter.

England, arise! The long long night is over,

Faint in the east behold the dawn appear;

Out of your evil dream of toil and sorrow

Arise, O England, for the day is here.

From your fields and hills

Hark! the answer swells:

Arise, O England, for the day is here.

Long, long have been the anguish and the labour,

Dark, dark the clouds of unbelief unrolled,

Dreadful the night when no man trusted neighbour,

Shameful the nightmare-greed of gain and gold;

Yet from fields and hills

¹²*King James / Authorised Version of The Holy Bible*, 1611.

Hark! the song now swells:

Arise, O England, for the day is here.

By your young children's eyes so red with weeping,

By their white faces aged with want and fear,

By the dark cities where your babes are creeping

Naked of joy and all that makes life dear;

From your wretched slums

A voice of pity comes:

Arise, O England, for the day is here.

By all your workshops where men sweat and sicken,

Foredone to death, in toil and hope deferred,

Where cheeks are flushed and pulses start and quicken,

Not with glad life but by dark hatred stirred;

From each bench and forge

A sound comes like a surge:

Arise, O England, for the day is here.

By your high homes of wealth and wasteful living,

By your rich tables piled, without good cheer,

By the ennui, ill-health, and sickly striving --

Not great to be, but only to appear;

O'er the weary throng

Strangely floats the song:

Arise, O England, for the day is here.

By your rich orchards, lands of corn and pasture,
Where all day long the voice of joy should ring,
Now mute and desert, by land-grabbers wasted,
Robbed of the love the peasant longs to bring;
From the stricken land
Hark! the words ascend:
Arise, O England, for the day is here.

People of England, all your valleys call you,
High in the rising sun the lark sings clear;
Will you dream on, let shameful slumber thrall you?
Will you disown your native land so dear?
Shall it die unheard --
That sweet pleading word?
Arise, O England, for the day is here.

Over your face a web of lies is woven,
Law that are falsehoods pin you to the ground;
Labour is mocked, its just reward is stolen,
On its bent back sits Idleness encrowned;
How long, while you sleep,
Your harvest shall it reap?
Arise, O England, for the day is here.

Out of your ruin rich men thrive and fatten,
Your merchants rub their hands when food is dear,

Capital says your claims are not forgotten
If wages keep you just starvation-clear;
People of England, when
Will ye rise like men?
Rise and be freemen, for the day is here!

Hear, England, hear! Deliverance is within you;
Though like a man whom death is very near,
Though sick the head, the whole heart faint within you,
Dare to be true! -- and even from the bier
Where your body lies
A new life shall arise,
England shall rise again to life sincere.

Yet thus I warn you: long shall be the struggle,
Not one but many men in it shall die;
This cancerous disease and devil's juggle
Shall not pass in the twinkling of an eye;
To undo their wrong
The people shall strive long:
O that they fail not! for the day is here.

Forth then, ye heroes, patriots and lovers!
Comrades of danger, poverty and scorn!
Mighty in faith of Freedom, your great Mother,
Giants refreshed in joy's new-rising morn!

Come and swell the song
Silent now so long --
England is risen and the Day is here!¹³

(This is the song in its entirety, yet it is unlikely that all of the verses would have been sung at the service).

At this moment in the service Rev. John Trevor came forward to give the address, and in doing so defined his vision of a Labour Church (the local newspaper reports offer variable accounts of the address, what follows is a combination of the reports to produce a credible homily for the inaugural service). The title of the lecture was ‘Programme of the Labour Church’¹⁴, “Mr Trevor then said he wished to clear away any misunderstanding as to the principles inspiring the movement.”¹⁵ “In this statement of purpose, Trevor emphasized the non-exclusive nature of the project, pledging his co-operation with the cause of Labour”¹⁶, “and of social regeneration, labour confederations, trade unions, labour electoral associations, and other institutions, like the Ancoats Brotherhood and the Healthy Homes Society.”¹⁷

At the same time they felt that something else needed to be added to the labour movement in order to ensure its success. We have reached a social crisis. Labour had arisen and determined to submit no longer to [have] conditions-imposed upon it. The struggle had lasted years, and went on still in the form of trade strikes, of which all were sick. A change in the movement took place after the Trafalgar Square riots. The

¹³ Edward Carpenter (editor) *Chants of Labour: A Song Book of the People*, (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1888).

¹⁴ *Manchester City News*, October 1891, quoted in D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 12.

¹⁵ *Manchester Times*, 9 October 1891.

¹⁶ *Manchester City News*, October 1891, quoted in D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 12.

¹⁷ *Manchester Times*, 9 October 1891.

people learned that it was useless to battle with the forces of the Government. If they trusted to physical force they would never get what they wanted. They turned to Parliament as a means of whereby to secure their ends. From that time the Parliament movement had grown, and labour now was determined to get the freedom it desired through legal reform. By this action the labour party showed distinctly that it would resort to constitutional means, and also, he was convinced, the labour party was saying, “On this condition that, until that progress shall be secured to us, we shall be left free to work out our own freedom, and that we shall have no tyrannical impositions on us, or else we shall have to resort to the old and desperate methods.”¹⁸

“The Labour Church wishes to contribute to the progress that will render resort to violence completely unnecessary (applause)”.¹⁹

The Labour Church meant to help the workers to secure this progress, so that there should be no need to go back to old and desperate measures. (Hear, hear.) To do this they would bring religion into the struggle. Some would say in the past religion had not helped them – (hear, hear) that the churches of the country were against them, and that the power of Christianity to this day was not in any appreciable degree on the side of the emancipation of labour. (Applause) He knew it all and he would tell them how to get religion and the churches to take a more just view. It was to start a religious movement of their own outside the churches which should allow them to live a righteous and godly life and yet secure the freedom for which they lived.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *Manchester City News*, October 1891, quoted in D. F. Summers, ‘The Labour Church and Allied Movements’, 12.

²⁰ *Manchester Times*, 9 October 1891.

Ours is not a 'wolf age', but it might be called a 'pig age'. We struggle to put our feet in the trough and to keep others out. Wealth makes us all gilded pigs in a golden trough. This can be changed only by God's laws. The place of the Labour Church would be to bring a simple religion without creeds by which men could learn God's laws.²¹

Mr. Thomas Russell takes the platform to sing a solo of the song, 'Friends of my boyhood's years'.²² (I have been unable to discover any information on this song. There is the traditional Irish folk song called 'Carrickfergus', which became a standard ballad from the mid-nineteenth century, and contains the verse:

My childhood days bring back sad reflections of happy times I spent so long ago
My boyhood friends and my own relations have all passed on now like melting snow
But I'll spend my days in endless roaming, soft is the grass, my bed is free
Ah to be back in Carrickfergus on that long road down to the sea.)²³

"... and the service closed with the Benediction."²⁴ (The usual wording of a final benediction prayer within nonconformist churches was taken from Numbers 6:24-26:

May the Lord bless you and keep thee;
may He cause his spirit to shine on thee
and be gracious to thee;
May He lift up His countenance on thee and give thee peace.²⁵

²¹ *Manchester City News*, October 1891, quoted in D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements', 15.

²² *Manchester Times*, 9 October 1891.

²³ 'Carrickfergus', 1850s referred to in 'Carrickfergus (song)' [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carrickfergus_\(song\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carrickfergus_(song)) accessed on 11 June 2012.

²⁴ *Manchester Times*, 9 October 1891.

²⁵ *King James / Authorised Version of The Holy Bible*, 1611.

It is possible that the Benediction which closed the first Labour Church service was that prayer often used by John Trevor to conclude worship: “May the strength and joy of God’s presence be with all who love their brethren in sincerity. Amen.”²⁶⁾

“The meetings are to be continued each Sunday.”²⁷⁾

²⁶⁾ *Labour Prophet*, June 1895, 89.

²⁷⁾ *Manchester Times*, 9 October 1891.

APPENDIX 2 – PHILIP WICKSTEED’S RECONSTRUCTION OF A
LABOUR CHURCH SERVICE

THE LABOUR CHURCH IN MANCHESTER

(From an Article in the Manchester Guardian)

By PHILIP H. WICKSTEED, M.A.

The Labour Church is frankly, even passionately, democratic. It contemplates the organisation of society in the highest interests of labour as the work of the age. Anyone who should look with favour on Mr. Trevor’s movement as a means of

CLIPPING THE LION’S CLAWS,

Would be woefully [sic.] out of his reckoning. But in its very being it is devout and not mutinous. My own doubts on this point, if I had any, were removed last Sunday, when I had the rare privilege of conducting a service for the Labour Church. I was struck at once with the purposeful air with which the six or seven hundred members of my congregation gathered. They were of all classes, but the great bulk I took to be workmen. We had, I think, the most genuine and spontaneous religious service in which I ever engaged. As a matter of fact, the hymns, prayer, solo songs, pieces of music, lesson and address had been arranged beforehand, but one felt at the time as if each one of them came just where and when it did in response to the present want of the eager souls that were drinking in every word and sound. There were none of the traditions, customs, or habits of worship in the dingy, drafty, and not over-reputable hall in boxes, galleries, and pit of which my congregation gathered; but

THE REALITY OF WORSHIP WAS THERE.

The hymns were sung with the utmost heartiness, the solo singers and musicians were felt as a part of the congregation, not as performers. At the close of the prayer a chorus of dis-

imprisoned coughs testified to the earnest participation of the congregation in the devotions of the place, and the lesson and address were greeted with frank and spontaneous applause that did the heart good. My lesson was the first canto of Dante's "Divine Comedy", recited, or rather paraphrased, with interpretative comments interspersed so as to make my rendering of it clear. I showed them Dante struggling to gain the sunlit hill of good government and

WELL-REGULATED LIFE ON EARTH,

Thwarted by lust, pride, and greed, and urged by his guide and master, while never relinquishing his hopes of reform, also to seek another way to peace. In the address I led them, with Dante, to seek the permanent conditions of all fruitful reform in a knowledge of the roots of moral good and evil, and when we brought our pilgrim from the very presence of God, where the life of "knowing" and "loving" is focussed, back into the miseries of exile and poverty and the never-ceasing struggle against wrong, and saw that "as a wheel without strain or jar moves equally in all its parts, so was his will henceforth moved by that love which guides the sun and all the other stars", the strained attention of my hearers released itself in prolonged and repeated applause that showed how every word had gone home. The impression was produced by the congregation, not by the preacher, and

I SHALL NOT SOON FORGET IT.

It will be strange indeed if Manchester is blind to the significance of such a movement. Hitherto, it has been shaped by a single man, and he a man of little physical strength, with no pretence to eloquence, with no means, and with no influence, save such as spring from absolute devotion and singleness of purpose and the passion inspired by a great idea.¹

¹ *Labour Prophet*, February 1892, 10 - 11.

APPENDIX 3 – D. F. SUMMERS’ RECONSTRUCTION OF A LABOUR CHURCH SERVICE

Based on contemporary descriptions from archival sources and having corresponded and spoken to former members of the Labour Church during his research, D. F. Summers produces a fascinating reconstruction of a Labour Church Sunday service in his thesis. It should be noted that Summers has drawn on a number of services which took place in various places over several years, making his description a composite piece. The attempt to recreate the atmosphere of an event is taken from an account of a service by Philip Wicksteed, which was published in *Manchester Guardian* and reproduced in *Labour Prophet* in February 1892 (see Appendix 2).



[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

¹ D. F. Summers, 'The Labour Church and Allied Movements of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries', 97-109.

APPENDIX 4 – ARNOLD BENNETT AND THE LABOUR CHURCH

Arnold Bennett is known for his writings about the Potteries region of the English Midlands in his “Five Towns” novels. In a collection of his short stories there is a notable reference to the Labour Church, which indicates the significance of the movement in that part of the country at the beginning of the twentieth century. The story, entitled ‘Mary with the High Hand’, tells the tale of two brothers, the conservative older brother, Edward Beechinor, and his much younger radical sibling, Mark. Edward is facing the end of his life at the age of forty eight, but his imminent demise does not soften his desire to assert his disapproval at the views of his brother:

‘ . . . I’ve heard as thou’rt going to be th’ secretary o’ the Hanbridge Labour Church, as they call it.’

Hanbridge is the metropolis of the Five Towns, and its Labour Church is the most audacious and influential of all the activities, half secret, but relentlessly determined, whose aim is to establish the new democratic heaven and the new democratic earth by means of a gradual and bloodless revolution. Edward Beechinor uttered its abhorred name with a bitter and scornful hatred characteristic of the Toryism of a man who, having climbed high up out of the crowd, fiercely resents any widening or smoothing of the difficult path which he himself has conquered.

‘They’ve asked me to take the post,’ Mark answered.

‘What’s the wages?’ the older man asked, with exasperated sarcasm.

‘Nothing.’

‘Mark, lad,’ the other said, softening, ‘I’m worth seven hundred pounds and this freehold house. What dost think o’ that?’

Even in that moment, with the world and its riches slipping away from his dying grasp, the contemplation of this great achievement of thrift filled Edward Beechinor with a sublime satisfaction. The sum of seven hundred pounds, which many would dissipate in a single night, and forget the next morning that they had done so, seemed vast and almost incredible to him.

‘I know you’ve been very careful,’ said Mark politely.

‘Give up this old Labour Church’ – again old Beechinor had a withering emphasis on the phrase – ‘give up this Labour Church, and it’s all thine – house and all.’

Mark shook his head.

‘Think twice,’ the sick man ordered angrily. ‘I tell thee thou’rt standing to lose every shilling.’

‘I must manage without it, then.’

A silence fell.¹

¹ Arnold Bennett, *Tales of the Five Towns*, 44.

APPENDIX 5 – LENIN AND KRUPSKAYA IN LONDON, 1902-1903

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

¹ Nadezhda K. Krupskaya, *Memories of Lenin (1893-1917)*, 51-52.

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