

## “THE DISCIPLES OF MEAFORD, 1848-1914” CONSIDERED

The Meaford Church of Christ is one of the oldest congregations of its fellowship in Ontario, having its beginnings in 1848.

(Other early congregations include Beamsville whose roots are in the Clinton Township, or “Lakeshore,” congregation, beginning in 1832, but coming to town only in 1885; Jordan, having the same roots, beginning ca. 1840; Omagh, 1845; and Selkirk, 1848.)

However, Meaford stands head and shoulders above its sister congregations in its careful records maintained consistently over its 165 years. It is without peer in its publication of *The Meaford Journals, 1848-1998*, a superb summary of these records for its first 150 years. And what’s more, these records tell a story of one of the most colourful and fruitful of churches.

Some day, with the riches of material available, a careful history of this congregation deserves to be written. For this special occasion, however, as the archival collection of the Canadian Churches of Christ Historical Society is formally deposited in this community, I am presenting the paper, “The Disciples of Meaford, 1848-1914, Reports from the Periodicals.” With little commentary and with no attempt to draw out historical conclusions, this paper attempts to draw together the reports of the actual participants in the congregation’s life that appear in the some fourteen periodicals that were published during the period. It is not suggested that the almost 60 pages of these reports are exhaustive or comprehensive, but collectively they do provide a vital insight into the rich life of this congregation. It is hoped that the results will prove a welcome supplement to *The Meaford Journals*.

As to my credentials for taking on this task, my direct ties with Meaford are largely family. My ancestor, George Ellis and his family, emigrating from Kent, England, in 1851, settled in Meaford. He and his wife are listed in the first journal recorded in *The Meaford Journals*, as #77 and #78, with the only information given, as “dead” (p. 11). The second record book also lists them and supplies some information: both “baptized in 1858,” and for George, “withdrew,” and for Mrs. Ellis, “deceased February 17, 1877” (p. 23). A goodly number of Ellises are subsequently scattered throughout the records and are presumed to be, in the main, descendents of “George Ellis Sr. and his wife.” Included among these is my grandfather, William F. Ellis, who appears in the records as “Willie Ellis, August 24 D. Stirling baptized has moved to Owen Sound, married to Sister Charrie Tolman (sic Tallman) of Smithville and moved to Soo Ontario” (p. 41). [The move to the Sault Ste. Marie occurred shortly after their marriage at the turn of the century; returning to Meaford some time later—the *Bible Student* records William and Charrie Ellis living in Meaford in 1904—the couple with its growing family moved to Owen Sound in 1909 where they conducted meetings in their home for the next ten years, moving to Smithville in 1919.] It remains to be said that the paper, “The Disciples of Meaford,” was possible because of the progress made by the CCCHS in collecting and making accessible the periodicals from which the reports are drawn.

A word is deserved regarding the periodicals themselves. It needs to be asserted that people were as socially engaged then as now. Yes, we have Facebook with opportunities for multiple “friends.” Yesteryear, our communications kept Canada Post in the black. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, myriads of postcards were mailed. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century church periodicals provided an important social connection. The reports sent in were

personal, informative, and engaged. It is also to be noted that the use of the English language blossomed during this period—it has been observed that the Victorian era (Queen Victoria reigned from 1837 to 1901) was the period of the finest usage of the English language, with a reversion to pictographic communication from then till now! Thus, the periodicals are treasures to be explored for multiple reasons.

The first report available in the periodicals in 1848, from W. A. Stephens of Owen Sound, indicates that the first meeting in “St. Vincent Township” were “two or three months” previous to his August 13, 1848 report in *The Witness of Truth*. This would suggest May or June of 1848 for the beginning. He notes that the meetings were in the homes of George Jackson and William Trout (p. 1). John Williams of St. Vincent, also reporting in the *Witness* a year later, in May 1849, states that the church began “one year ago” (p. 1). The obituary for Ellen Stephens, wife of D. J. Layton, deceased May 12, 1877, written by William Trout, May 18, 1877, is published in the June 1877 issue of the *Bible Index*. It states that the congregation was formed “twenty-nine years ago this month,” i.e. May 1848 (p. 12). However, in the 1895 “Reminiscences,” of W. H. Trout regarding the life of D. L. Layton, Trout reports that D. L. Layton married Ellen Stephens, March 6, 1848. Trout states, “In the Spring of 1848, Wm. Frost and wife, my father and mother [William and Catherine Trout], D. L. [Layton], Mrs. Layton and George Jackson and wife, met as a church of Christ, in the Mallony (sic Mallory) house, on his father’s place in the township of St. Vincent. Next Lord’s day [March 6], they were married by Bro. John Williams. Meetings have been uninterrupted to the present time [1895]. Bro. and sister Layton were young members of that time...” (pp. 34, 35). Thus it appears that gatherings occurred in the Township as early as February 1848. The May beginning reported perhaps refers to the time of their formal commitment to meet as a congregation in the community of Meaford, i.e. the George Jackson house was in Meaford. [George and Sarah Jackson moved to Durham in 1849 according to *The Meaford Journals* (p.21).] H. M. Evans, editor of the *Bible Student*, writing in 1907, “A Brief History of the Church of Christ Worshipping in Meaford Ontario,” states, “The Church of Christ at Meaford, had its origin in a small body of brethren who formerly met with the Baptists but finally severed their connection with them and met for the first time as the Church of Christ in the home of Bro. William Trout...” (p. 44). [It is also noted that St. Vincent is listed as a “preaching point” in 1845 in the Appendix A listing of Ontario congregations beginnings: Geoffrey H. Ellis, “An Inquiry into the Growth of the Disciples of Christ in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Ontario,” an unpublished thesis, 1993, p.189.] Thus some area preaching and some tentative meetings preceded the May 1848 formation of the Meaford church.

This is the manner of “reports” from various sources and at different times—tidbits supplied, information not always jibbing! Nevertheless, the larger picture is filled in. Of course, a cautionary note is given: “Reminiscences” can fall victim to memory’s revisioning. W. H. Trout was 61 when he wrote these memoirs in 1895. He would have been 14 when these first meetings took place in 1848, quite likely as a participant. But were his recollections accurate? And H. M. Evans’ 1907 “History” was drawn from scattered records and perhaps hearsay.

We can also learn from Trout’s “Reminiscences” (p. 34) that D. L. Layton came from New Brunswick in 1843 as a Disciple and going to Owen Sound where he worked in a store belonging to T. C. Stephens. In the winter of 1846-47 he moved to Meaford,

“which at the time...had only three families residing in it,” where he worked in the new store of George Jackson, also one of the charter members of the Meaford church. This suggests that the story of the Meaford church is as old as Meaford itself (even as the Owen Sound congregation had its beginnings with the community, 1840-1842.) [Cf. “A Brief History of Meaford”: “In the summer of 1835, surveyor Charles Rankin reserved 200 acres on the southern shore of Georgian Bay at the mouth of the Big Head River for the town plot of Meaford. The first settler arrived from Ireland and built a log cabin on the south bank. In 1845 the town reserve was subdivided, and development stalled until 1850, but following that date, growth increased steadily.” Grey Roots, Museum and Archives: [www.greyroots.com/exhibitions/virtual-exhibits/mary-williams-trout-diaries-of-a-small-town-lady/a-brief-history-of-meaford/](http://www.greyroots.com/exhibitions/virtual-exhibits/mary-williams-trout-diaries-of-a-small-town-lady/a-brief-history-of-meaford/).]

Preaching and baptizing of converts is the leading subject throughout the records. The first report in 1848 lists a baptism on Aug. 13. The third report, May 10, 1849, indicates that “on the last Lord’s day of last month [April]... six persons...made the good confession and were baptized by brother Trout.” And so it goes throughout the following decades.

To introduce this collection to you, I would like to trace this one aspect of the life of the Meaford church: the preaching of the gospel and the winning of souls.

Three periods emerge in the preaching that produce the harvest for this congregation. The first period involves the work of local leaders and the visits of preachers serving “cooperations.” The second period adds the “gospel meeting” work of visiting evangelists, including a remarkable list of visiting American preachers. The third period adds the efforts of preachers that locate with the congregation with the primary purpose being to harvest souls.

Illustrating the first period, William Trout writes to David Oliphant, editor of *The Witness of Truth*, Aug. 26, 1849: “...we find we are too weak to make much progress here, and we would be glad to see brother Oliphant, or any other of the brethren, and proclaim for a time among us; but we are too poor to compensate them for their time.” Nevertheless, Trout reports two baptisms bringing their number to 22. Trout also writes, “I should be glad to meet with you at Bowmanville next month...though the prospect at present is rather dull” (p. 1). That year the young congregation at Bowmanville had invited Disciples congregations throughout Ontario to gather in order to form an Ontario “cooperation” for the purpose of evangelization. [In 1843 an effort had been made at Norval to organize a “cooperation.” William Trout was a member of the Norval congregation at that time.]

A co-operation was established and briefly maintained. Alexander Anderson and James Kilgour were engaged at \$300 each per annum “to labour in the gospel field.” Their stated intentions for 1850 were given: “Having learned that the Evangelists should visit the back country such as Owen Sound, St. Vincent, &c, we would suggest that it would be better to do so in the winter season, when there is sleighing” (p. 2). David Oliphant, acting as the secretary for the cooperation, published in the *Witness of Truth* instructions for the evangelists: “Concerning a visit to St. Vincent and other places in the north-west, these regions, it is hoped, will not be neglected; but for the present, a visit to these parts may be laid over or postponed. By this postponement, more assistance probably can be rendered in the future” (p. 2).

In the meantime, baptisms in St. Vincent continue to be reported. Then in 1853 there is word that James Black, of the Wellington County co-operation is headed for St. Vincent. Then in 1855 under the same auspices John Doyle, working about a week in St. Vincent, baptized 14 (p. 3). David Oliphant Jr. spent about a week at St. Vincent in 1856, with no mention of additions (pp. 3-4), returning again in 1860, but again no additions (p. 5). Other “co-operation” preachers visiting Meaford are identified in the records: C. J. Lister during 1869-1870 (pp. 5-6), James Black, 1870 (p. 6), and Alexander Anderson, 1870 (p. 6).

The St. Vincent brethren decide in 1863 to form a co-operation. Oliphant writes in the *Banner of the Faith*: “Between Collingwood, St. Vincent, Owen Sound, and Derby, some progress is making, and a laborer is to be maintained in the general service of the Lord” (p. 5). W. H. Trout reports, “With regard to evangelizing, the brethren here have concluded that with the assistance of neighboring congregations, they will engage the services of some evangelist to labor in this section of the country” (p. 5).

Charles J. Lister, editor of the *Bible Indicator* (1869-1870), and serving as “evangelist” for the “general co-operation” (Wellington), formerly from Bowmanville but now living near Meaford, reports on meetings being continued in Meaford and some school houses in St. Vincent with numbers being added (p. 6). He then reports the dissolving of the “general co-operation” in favour of several smaller co-operations. “The churches in Grey and one in Simcoe County have formed themselves into a Co-operation. The object... is to keep labourers in the field...Not the hiring of ‘pastors’ in the popular sense; but simply to employ preachers...Let the overseers of the various churches do the ruling and the preachers the *preaching*.” Details of the formal meeting are given in the July 1870 issue of the *Bible Indicator* (pp. 7-8).

Neither of these efforts at cooperation lasted very long. In 1881, nicely arrived from Indiana, H. B. Sherman immediately pushed for a “Georgian Bay Co-operation,” of which he would be the evangelist (pp. 13-14). [The co-operation lasting only one year, Sherman than pushed for the highly disruptive province-wide co-operation, membership open only to individuals, i.e. a society.]

The first train arrived in Meaford on November 14, 1872. With transportation facilitated, visiting preachers began to arrive in Meaford from afar and a number carrying impressive credentials. This begins the second period of evangelization by the Meaford congregation, with visiting evangelists.

The “June Meeting,” a time for fellowship, co-operation business, and evangelization returned to favour in 1873, with multiple meetings planned throughout the month at various locations. Meaford was the site of one of these meetings in that year, some 600 gathering in the “drill shed.” The featured speaker was John F. Rowe, associate editor of the *American Christian Review*, Cincinnati, OH (p. 10).

Benjamin Franklin, editor of the *American Christian Review*, Cincinnati, OH, came to Ontario in June 1874 and spoke at a number of locations including Meaford for two evenings. Two were immersed (pp. 11-12).

A “general assembly” was held at Meaford June 1875, beginning on the 20<sup>th</sup>. J. Harrison Jones, Mount Union, Stark County, OH addressed some 1,200 people in the drill shed. He continued preaching during the week following, with a total of eight immersions (p. 12).

The next summer, 1876, Benjamin Franklin returned in the company of a brother Berry, with results numbering 42 (p. 12).

In July 1877, Joseph Franklin, son of B. Franklin, conducted a meeting of two weeks and eleven were baptized (pp. 12-13).

A. [Alfred] Ellmore, Frankfort, Indiana, conducted a six-week meeting for the Meaford congregation in the summer of 1879, “turning *eighty-two* persons into the way of the Lord... This we believe to be the most successful meeting, not only in point of numbers added, but in every other respect, ever held among the Disciples in Canada” (p. 13). Ellmore returned for his second meeting in Meaford in July 1880. No results are given (p. 13). [*The Meaford Journals* report that eight were baptized, p. 32.] He returned in 1886 for his third meeting, preaching from June 13 for three weeks with possibly three added (pp. 26, 28).

J. T. Hawkins, Ghent, Kentucky, held the June meeting at Meaford in 1882, with four additions (p. 15).

H. W. Elliott, Kentucky, “the boy preacher” [23], was the speaker for the 1883 June meeting, conducting services from June 17 through July 8 with seven being immersed. Standing room only in the Meaford church building was reported (p. 16).

James A. Harding of Kentucky was the 1884 June meeting speaker, preaching from June 15 through July 18. Seven made the good confession (pp. 17-18). Harding returned in the summer of 1885 and preached from July 22 through August 14, with eleven responding (p. 24).

Daniel Sommer, editor of the *Octographic Review*, held a meeting in the new Meaford meeting house that lasted four Lord’s days during August 1888, with 30 responses (p. 29-30). Sommer returned the next year and preached, beginning June 16 (pp. 30-31). [*The Meaford Journals* report three responses, p. 42.]

Word of a pending meeting by James A. Harding is recorded in the May, 1896, *Gospel Messenger* (p.35). *The Meaford Journals* reports that the meeting did take place, from June 7 through July 14, with 14 responses (names listed) (p. 45).

In Evans’ “History” (p. 45) J. T. Hinds is recorded as beginning a three-week meeting on June, 1895, adding 20. In 1897, A. Foster held two meetings, one in January and one in May, adding nine and four respectively. In January, 1899 and June, 1900, E. A. Elam held meetings baptizing one and three respectively. “In 1901, Don Carlos Janes labored in and around Meaford for six months during which time about 10 were added to the one body.”

John T. Lewis of the Nashville Bible School spent the summer of 1904 in the Meaford area doing tent evangelism (pp. 34, 37, 39).

Joe S. Warlick, Dallas, Texas, “the champion of 151 debates,” conducted a three-week meeting at Meaford, concluding January 27, 1907, with 18 baptisms (pp. 43-44).

H. H. Adamson, Bloomington, Indiana began a meeting October 24 concluding November 21, 1909, adding seven (p. 52).

Thus over a period of some thirty-five years sixteen named American evangelists, a number recognized as leaders in their native country, are listed in the periodicals as effective workers in Meaford. Twenty-two meetings by these men are recorded with a harvest of 296 won to the gospel.

The third period of efforts by preachers whose primary purpose is to harvest souls

concerns those who located with the congregation at Meaford. Over much of the time of our survey, evangelists were itinerants and deserving of support. Local preaching was to be done by elders and other capable men, but these were not to be remunerated. A considerable conflict arose over this issue of supported local preaching. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century drew to a close, however, supported evangelists whose base was in one congregation came to be accepted. This developing practice is seen in Meaford. The periodicals give interesting details to this method. Samuel Keffer and W. F Neal are the prominent servants at Meaford.

Samuel Keffer came from the Stouffville area and was married to a member of the Yake family. He worked with the Rodney congregation during 1884-1887. His first recorded work with Meaford was a gospel meeting, December 6-27, 1889, during which eleven were won (p. 31). From 1894 Meaford is identified in the periodicals as the center from which he writes as a corresponding editor for the *Gospel Messenger* (p. 32). Meaford is his base of operation from which he goes forth to evangelize, e.g. Stouffville, Stromness, etc. (p. 33). He speaks on behalf of the congregation, for example on the issue of the appropriateness of the general meeting (p. 33). The final note on S. Keffer is included in H. M. Evans' "History," "In Nov. 15, 1892 Bro. Keffer arrived in Meaford and continued his labors for about two years during which time 4 were added to the Meaford church. Much other substantial work was done by Bro. Keffer especially in the mission points in the surrounding country" (p. 45).

W. F. Neal served in the Meaford area from 1901 through 1907, and is a frequent correspondent in the periodicals from 1904 through 1907 (pp. 37-47) [no conservative periodical being published at the time until the arrival of *The Bible Student* in 1904]. Neal was the brother-in-law of James A. Harding, and his home was originally in Winchester, Kentucky. Evans, writing, March, 1907: "October 5, 1901 Bro. W. F. Neal arrived in Meaford to labor indefinitely with Meaford and other congregations in this community, his family arriving some months later. Bro. Neal has been the evangelist of the Meaford church ever since...the following from his own pen... 'On Oct. 5, 1901 I arrived at Meaford where I have since made my home. My work being directed by the church at Meaford...During that time...baptized 40 persons. From other meetings directed by this church, fifty-one baptisms, making a total of ninety-one. Churches set in order, three with a total membership of forty-five... While Meaford has contributed largely to my support for the past three years and additional Evangelist has been supported for at least three months each year...'" (p. 45).

And thus the periodicals advance, with nuggets of information here and there, important descriptions, vital records, all of which would be lost were it not for the enthusiasm and faithful efforts of those who wrote and the editors and publishers that brought them to light in print. We have traced only one topic, evangelism and results. There are many other themes covered: tensions with religious neighbors, debates, obituaries, congregational developments, biographical information, brotherhood issues, Meaford outreach and church planting, etc., etc.

To those who have gone before, thank you for the treasure you have bequeathed to us!

- Geoffrey Ellis, July 26, 2012