

## The Pastor goes to war!

Reverend Arthur Cecil Dixon became the popular and dynamic evangelical pastor of Helensburgh Baptist Church in 1906 and would remain in that position until 1919 when he resigned because his war service commitment was extended.

Dixon informed the church meeting that 'he had attested under the "Lord Derby Scheme" and would, possibly. Be called upon to join the army, within a short time', although he had applied for military exemption. His exemption from normal army service had been granted, he informed the church on condition that he undertook work in connection with the Y.M.C.A. Who had, by 1919, 28 Huts throughout France and many others in other theatres of war. He was expecting to be called up quite soon and he therefore asked for a leave of absence, so he had time to get his own house in order. He requested that the Deacons 'take steps regarding the conduct of the services'. The church was clearly behind the war effort and agreed unanimously to grant him leave of absence to engage in Y.M.C.A. work among the troops'. It was also agreed to consider the matter further at the next business meeting on 29 March 1916. When they met again, the church membership 'almost' unanimously decided to to generously pay half-salary during his absence with the Y.M.C.A., Dixon was thankful that they had been so financially supportive when he was away with the troops. He wrote 'I earnestly hope that they will not find their generous decision unduly burdensome upon them. With earnest prayer and best wishes to you all, I am your loving Pastor'.

Initially, Dixon, was sent as a chaplain with the Y.M.C.A. To Salonika in the Balkans and then on to Egypt. It is obvious that Dixon sought to keep his pastoral connections with the church by preaching whenever he was on leave and writing letters regarding his work. At the business meeting of the 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1916 the Secretary read a letter from the pastor with an account of his experience up to date after reaching Salonika, and in 1917 the Secretary reported in the Scottish Baptist Magazine that 'The pastor's letters from time to time tell of the uniqueness and urgency of the opportunities thus afforded of helping the men towards nobility of character and communion with God'. Dixon's letters do not give much detail about the work itself, but Robert F Wearmouth, a Primitive Methodist chaplain, serving with the United Board, described the army chaplains' diverse responsibilities by contrasting the extremes the chaplain of any denomination often faced.

For the most part the Padre's job was diverse, difficult and dangerous. On occasion he had to run the Officers Mess, superintend the men's canteen, sell the cakes, the tea, the Woodbines (at 5 for a penny), accompany the troops on their long marches, footslog it on the cobbled roads, be exposed to the sweltering sun, or the pouring rain, grope his way through the intense darkness, live with the lads in the narrow trenches, the flimsy shelters, the battered houses, the destroyed villages, the shelter of the ridges. Although unarmed he went, sometimes, with them over the top into the fury of the battle, not to fight but to rescue the fallen, attend the the wounded, minister to the dying, reverently bury the dead, write to their loved ones, break the sad news about wounds or death, and to comfort all who suffered or were in distress'

Being aware of Dixon's background it is safe to say that his work was primarily helping his fellows to enter a relationship with God through Christ and the personal application of Christian morality. Coming from Helensburgh Baptist Church with its emphasis on alcoholic abstinence, a church like most of the Scottish Baptist Churches at the time, he would have worked hard to encourage his troops to keep away from the addictive influence of 'booze' which many believed was the key reason for soldiers being with prostitutes and contracting venereal disease. Guy Thornton, a fellow Baptist chaplain serving with the ANZAC and British soldiers based at Cairo, Egypt presented this commonly held view succinctly and explained that: 'Hundreds upon hundreds of soldiers fall only because liquor has first benumbed their judgement, lessened their self-control, deadened their consciences, and quickened their passions'.

The church took a keen interest in the Y.M.C.A. work and the treasurer mentioned 'the special appeal for workers with the Y.M.C.A. among the soldiers' and made the suggestion that the church let Dixon know 'that he was free to remain longer if he so desired'. The next week on the 13<sup>th</sup> December 1916 it was explained to the church that they should not recall their Pastor as he 'was already on the spot if we allowed him just to come home, the probability was that he would have to return to join the army. It was also mentioned that from an economic point of view it might be to his advantage', in 1917 this issue was still being discussed and the Church Secretary then cabled the church's decision to the Pastor, through the Y.M.C.A. Cairo as follows: 'Church authorises remaining if desired'. Dixon simply replied 'Gratefully accepted church's offer. Seasons Greetings'

In 1918, Dixon was commissioned into the Army Chaplains department (A.Ch.D.) as a United Board Chaplain and after his introductory training found himself in France. In a letter Dixon wrote to Mr Millar on the 20<sup>th</sup> April 1918 and asked:

Will you kindly inform the church on some day early suitable occasion that since I have been appointed by the War Office to a chaplaincy in His Majesty's Forces ( which necessitates my signing on for two years or the duration of the war) and shall be in receipt of army pay sufficient for my needs. It is my desire, while this appointment lasts, to surrender the whole of my pastoral stipend for the ampler remuneration of those who minister to you in my absence.

The Reverend WL Stevenson, a retired pastor and a member of Helensburgh Baptist Church, had covered Dixon's absence and would no doubt benefit from this generous decision. Dixon was obviously concerned for the pastoral welfare of his folk and wrote 'I trust that you will be Divinely guided, in these most difficult days'. He also reminded the church that he needed their continued support and prayers.

I shall, constantly, depend upon the faithful earnest prayers of the congregation for God's enabling in the very responsible, difficult and probably dangerous work I am now called to do amongst the troops – that I may be a good soldier of Jesus Christ and that utterance may be given unto me, that I may make known the

mystery of the Gospel and that I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak!

In the same year, Dixon found it necessary to resign his position as the pastor because his commitments would continue to keep him, physically, away from the church and therefore unable to do any effective work for the church. He wrote at length to his deacons and members on the 19<sup>th</sup> September 1918 and it is worth recording this letter in full. Dixon, writing from the Officers mess Mobilisation Centre at Salisbury Plain, explains:

‘ With the signing of the Armistice and the prospect of peace, and the gradual return of men from the war, you are doubtless wondering about my return as well, This has also been a matter of anxious thought to me, and it s requisite that I should now tell you how the matter presents itself to my mind.

The demobilisation of the troops, even when it is speeded up, will in the necessities of the case, occupy a conferrable time; which it imperative that the padres should remain with them, doing our utmost to relieve their monotony by brotherly cheer, and to give them the uplift of Christian teaching. I have also received information from the Chaplain’s Department which indicates that those of us whose commissions are of a comparatively recent date will not be released for some time to come, possibly for another year.

In view of this, I feel that it would not be for your welfare that you should wait a further long and indefinite period for me to resume my ministry amongst you; but it is my duty now to ask you to

accept my resignation of the pastorate that I have counted as an honour to hold for so many years.

We all feel deeply grateful to our dear friend the Reverend WL Stevenson for his goodness in, in so, earnestly and graciously ministering to you all while I have been away on military service, but the time may have come when you should have a younger man, as Pastor, in your midst, in order that the various agencies of church life may receive a new impetus.

I need scarcely say that I have not made this decision light heartedly, for during my ministry in Helensburgh I gave you the unremitting service of some of the best years of my life, in which I was privileged as Pastor and friend to share with you, your sorrows and your joys, and to preach amongst you the unsearchable riches of Christ and if you were led, through my ministry, into a clearer understanding and firmer grasp of the grace of God in Christ Jesus, that it is my consolation and joy, thus you became very dear to me and your welfare will ever be near my heart.

I desire to remain a member of the church and hope to have the pleasure of preaching to you again from my old pulpit sometime in days to come. From my heart, I thank you all for your fellowship and help in the Gospel and commending you to the holy care and guidance of the Lord, the great Head of the church, the Chief Shepherd and Bishop of our souls; and asking of your love a continuance of earnest prayer on behalf of my present ministry to the troops and for God's gracious guiding of all my future way; I remain,

Your sincere and loving friend

A Cecil Dixon

The church accepted Dixons resignation and he was informed of their decision. Dixon wrote back to the church on the 15<sup>th</sup> February 1919:

their decision [to accept his resignation] was a right one, for in addition to the church's welfare, which must be the primary consideration, it sets my mind free of dual obligation, to respond to any demand, perhaps for overseas service, that the Chaplaincy may make upon me. Most earnestly do I pray that God may give you all the spirit of cohesion – with full purpose of heart cleaving unto the Lord and to each other; and at the same time the spirit of Catholicity, to understand the wonderful way in which He is leading the various sections of the church closer together in order that through a united church He may work more mightily amongst the nations.

May He graciously guide you in every step that you take with reference to filling the pastorate.

Dixon would serve, as an army chaplain until June 1920, being called to the pastorate of North Kelvinside Baptist Church. However, this would not be the end of Dixon's relationship with the folk of Helensburgh and he often took special services. He seemed to be at all the significant events in Helensburgh Baptist Church but the most important, to him, was probably the dedication of the war memorial.