

Helensburgh Baptist Church during the war.

On the 4th August 1914, war was declared by the British Empire on the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Germany., but, if the pastor or church leaders made a statement on their position concerning the war, it is not recorded in the Office Bearers and Members' meeting manuscripts. The church's first documented response was to take up a 'War Fund' collection on the 6th September 1914. Three week later, on the 27th September, a 'United Prayer Meeting was developed which would meet weekly on Tuesdays, but this was 'not' to be purely intercessory for the war effort: a strong point made in the 'Office Bearers Minutes' by the Church Secretary, Mr Charles H. Miller. Indeed the life and ministry of the church continued much as it always had with continued success especially their 'Band of Hope' activities. The Band of Hope was a Christian temperance organisation that aimed to develop the Christian faith and moral character of boys and girls to withstand the addictive power and destructive habits of drinking alcohol. It is recorded that 85 children were on the Band of Hope role and in '1914, practically all of the 80 [church] members had signed the pledge' Scottish Baptists saw the destruction of health and family life by strong drink as the 'war within the war' and the temperance movement as a whole was supported, not only by Christian, but by the Suffragists which saw it as a key cause of violent behaviour towards women in the home.

Helensburgh Baptist Church had always had a strong missionary interest, beginning in 1886 with the laying of the church foundation stone by James Young, a relative of the Reverend and Mrs Sale of the Zennana mission, in India, who are commemorated in the church windows. The church community continued to be enthusiastic about missionary work and they prayed and gave practical support for individual missionaries serving with the Baptist Missionary Society (B.M.S.). During the war the B.M.S. work in the Congo and the missionary activity of Mrs Cameron were of particular interest to the Helensburgh folk.

The church saw consolidated growth through the war years, as can be seen by the membership and Sunday school statistics at the back of this booklet. The primary reason for this church growth was the transferring in, from other Baptist churches, of married women whose husbands were serving in the forces. They seemed to be moving to Helensburgh, considered a safe area from the more industrial towns that were at significant risk from Zeppelin bombing runs. It was, obviously, important for those at the 'Front' to know that their families were safe. One such transferee was Mrs Simpson, who came from Dumbarton Baptist Church after her husband, also a committed member of Dumbarton, joined the army. Mr Simpson was not considered for membership at this time because of his absence. Mrs Simpson received the 'Left Hand of Fellowship' at the communion service on the 20th September 1914. She must have been well known to the Helensburgh folk as she swiftly took over a leadership role within the church, known vaguely, as a 'Church Officer' but holding no officially sanctioned position like that of a

deacon. However, the role she took on in the church was effectively that of a Deacon covering the work of Alexander Milne who left the Diaconate to join the army. Pastor Dixon acknowledged her work and thanked her for it but she had to take a break from this service on 17th January 1916 with no explanation being given in the minutes.

Although the church continued its normal 'Sabbath' services and mid-week meetings, there were some aspects of church activity that did seek to actively support the war effort. This was in two key areas; the Scottish Baptist Ambulance initiative and the making and sending of comforts to those serving in the forces, some in the harshest conditions of the trenches and the storms at sea.

As early as 1914, an appeal was launched by Jessie Yuille, wife of the Secretary of the Baptist Union of Scotland, for £500 to be raised by women of the denomination. The aim of this appeal was 'to purchase a motor ambulance, to be given to the war office' to help the wounded. The response was so swift that in only one month after the appeal enough money was raised for two fully equipped Motor Ambulances. These two ambulances would help those at the front, who were giving themselves to 'Preserve the liberty and the very existence of our country'. Helensburgh Baptist Church decided, along, with the churches of the North East of Scotland to collect the money needed to maintain these two ambulances at the front.

The United Navy and Army Board was founded by the Baptist John Howard Shakespeare and the Congregationalist, Richard Joshua Wells to look after the interests of Free Churchmen serving in the forces, to put nonconformist views forward about policy development and to select, promote and post their own military chaplains. This Board, which the Baptist Union of Scotland supported, encouraged the women of the free churches to make and collect 'comforts' for the troops on the front line. In particular, the Women's Auxiliary was mandated to provide 'a liberal and continuous supply of comforts for our soldiers and sailors'. The Baptist Women of Scotland responded enthusiastically to this and this included the Baptist women of Helensburgh, who gave their time to making up parcels to send to the troops at Christmas and pastor Dixon confirmed that these gifts had been sent off on the 8th December 1915. D Merrick Walker, who would become the first Baptist commissioned Royal Navy Chaplain, while working as an Officiating Chaplain, described how he used such small comforts. He spoke of collecting and distributing 'little comforts' at military centres and on warships, which were 'the keys with which hearts and ears were opened to the gospel. These comforts were primarily distributed through the chaplains and other Christian workers.

Travel became more difficult during the war and the Baptist Assembly was 'being much curtailed owing to the National crisis'. In the light of this 'it was agreed that the Pastor [alone] represent the church' in 1914 and it was further decided that it was inadvisable to have the annual church anniversary and Easter 'Excursion' on account of the war in 1915 and 1916. The most significant change ,

however, was the loss of their beloved pastor directly to the national war effort, who became a chaplain to the Young men's Christian Association (Y.M.C.A.) in 1916 along with other Scottish Baptist pastors, among them John McBeath of Cambuslang; A.T. Richardson, Whytes Causeway, Kirkaldy; T. Houston, Oban; T.A. McQuiston, Rutherglen; and A.T. Walker of Dundee. In all they would be numbered amongst 90 Baptists that would serve with the Y.M.C.A. abroad and 47 Baptists at a home posting. Reverend W.H. Spinks would be killed in action while sheltering a Chinese youth with his own body from a heavy bombardment so this Y.M.C.A. work was not without it's dangers. Dixon would serve in this capacity for two years, followed by service as a commissioned United Board army chaplain.