

**The Church of God in Belfast:
Needed Truth, the Vernalites,
and the Howard Street Christians, 1890–1924***

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The Apostles' teaching they receive,
And steadfastly in it believe,
 With singleness of heart;
The Fellowship, the Feast divine,
Together with the Prayer combine
 To exercise their heart.¹

When we fell we aye got up again,
And so will we yet.²

* I am grateful to Lindsey Woods for his advice on the history of the Churches of God associated with the *Needed Truth* magazine. I am also grateful to Carlisle McAuley for his permitting access to the 'Rea Memorial' Church of God Minute Book, 1914–1924, which, after the disbanding of the church in 2017, have been deposited in the CBA, and for his advice about the early history of this church when it gathered in Howard Street. Other documents published by the church are available at <<http://www.reamemorial.co.uk>>. I am grateful to Gordon Beck, Neil Dickson, Samuel J. McBride and James Thomson for advice on the early history of the 'Vernalite' Churches of God. In this article, I am sensitive to the difficulty of finding appropriate nomenclature to distinguish between congregations and communities of congregations that refer to themselves as 'Church' or 'Churches of God'. For understandable reasons, members of these communities are opposed to 'such expressions as Needed Truth system, Needed Truth party, and the like': C. M. Luxmoore and Joshua Hawkins, 'Discerning the Body', *Needed Truth* [hereafter *NT*], 19 (1907), 113. I beg the indulgence of readers from these churches and communities of churches in that this article will need to use nomenclature to distinguish things that differ, and that no offence is intended in its so doing.

¹ A. P., 'The Footsteps of the Flock', *NT*, 19 (1907), 28.

² Robert Burns (mistakenly attributed), quoted in *NT*, 18 (1906), 223.

The tensions and disturbances that brought to birth the network of churches associated with the *Needed Truth* magazine at the end of the nineteenth century opened debates that could not easily be contained.³ The earliest issues of the magazine, published from 1888, had focused on questions of church order that seemed to run counter to many of the foundational assumptions of both the Open and Exclusive communities within the Brethren movement. The Open and Exclusive Brethren had divided at the end of the 1840s, in part, over the possibility that the ‘ruin of the church’ could be overcome and New Testament order restored.⁴ The appeal by Exclusive Brethren to the order of the primitive churches was never an appeal to rebuild what God had apparently permitted to be destroyed. Instead, pointing to the distance between the experience of the church in the first and nineteenth centuries, these brothers reminded their readers of the conditions that characterized the end of all dispensations, emphasizing the futility of rebuilding what had failed, and calling for mourning as to what had been lost.⁵ Nevertheless, an increasing number of open brethren nourished a strain of restorationist aspiration. In their view, the ‘ruin of the church’ was an appropriate descriptor of apostate Christendom, but hardly a paradigm to limit the hopes of that faithful remnant which had been re-gathered ‘outside the camp’. Instead, they argued, believers should form themselves into churches after the apostolic pattern, with ‘saints’ recognizing the roles of elders and deacons

³ On *Needed Truth*, and the emergence of a network of churches associated with the journal, see: J. J. Park, *The Churches of God: Their Origin and Development in the 20th century* (Leicester, 1987); Neil Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland, 1838–2000* (Carlisle, 2002), 158–169; Tim Grass, *Gathering to His Name: The Story of Open Brethren in Britain and Ireland* (Milton Keynes, 2006), 187–193; Norman S. Macdonald, *A Review of the Needed Truth Brethren* (privately published, 2013); and Norman S. Macdonald, ‘Developments in the Churches of God, 1892–2000’, *BHR*, 11 (2015), 40–60.

⁴ This argument is developed in James Patrick Callahan, *Primitivist Piety: The Ecclesiology of the Early Plymouth Brethren* (Lanham, MD, 1996).

⁵ See, most famously, William Kelly, *Lectures on the Church of God* (London, n.d.), *passim*; W. T. P. Wolston, *The Church: What is it?* (Edinburgh, 1904), *passim*.

(Philippians 1: 1). These hopes to restore the organization of the apostolic church were, in the nineteenth century, never held by any more than a large minority of Brethren, but they always counterbalanced and eventually overcame the movement's prevailing ecclesiological pessimism, while generating enthusiasms that could not easily be controlled, and, paradoxically, facilitating the emergence of ecclesiological practices that would integrate brethren within evangelicalism and, in the later twentieth century, facilitate the settlement of 'full-time workers' in individual churches.

Forty years after the division between Open and Exclusive Brethren, a new variety of restorationist ecclesiology was announced in *Needed Truth*, a magazine that would exercise enormous influence in the Open assemblies in Scotland and the north of Ireland. A number of Open Brethren in Scotland had begun to express alarm at the variety of practice and, increasingly, doctrine within their assemblies, with particular concern over theological issues such as conditional immortality and ecclesiological issues such as the necessity of believers' baptism.⁶ They advanced their programme for action in a print culture that rose above the populism of a great deal of Scottish Brethren publications, and which can be compared to the strongly cerebral content of the articles in William Reid's contemporaneous defence of Exclusivism, *Bible Witness and Review* (1877–81), appealing to their assemblies to develop a more fully formed associational structure that eventually developed to resemble the Presbyterian ecclesiology with which they were already so familiar.⁷ Their flagship publication, *Needed Truth*, outlined the disputes that would shatter the cooperation of the assemblies in Scotland and the north of Ireland—though the seventy Scottish assemblies that entered the new network were joined by only two

⁶ See, for example: F. A. Banks, *Spiritual Growth* (London, 1898), 49–54, 68–70, 98–99; 'Introductory', *NT*, 1 (1888–1889), 1–9; 'Reminiscences of Former Days', *Green Pastures*, 1 (1907), 143; Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland*, 143–58.

⁷ C. A. Oxley, 'The "Needed Truth" Assemblies', *Christian Brethren Research Fellowship*, 4 (1964), 21–32.

from Ireland.⁸ A ‘time of . . . separation from so-called Open Brethren . . . took place in the years 1892-94’,⁹ one participant later remembered, and, within a few years, assemblies were being re-organised on the basis of the structures proposed in the new journal, and the emerging network of ‘churches of God’ began to adopt new ways of thinking about its identity as the ‘house of God’ and eventually also its character as the ‘kingdom of God’. The ‘house of God’ was, in many respects, a structurally key doctrine. While Exclusive and most Open Brethren had tended to understand the ‘house of God’ as the sphere of Christian profession, marked out by baptism, and therefore larger than the body of Christ, which is composed of all of the regenerate, the *Needed Truth* writers, with influence on some Open Brethren, were arguing that the ‘house of God’ was smaller than the body of Christ, and was composed only of members of properly constituted New Testament churches—that is, those assemblies that were included within the *Needed Truth* network.¹⁰ But the appeal to primitive purity was difficult to control. The restorationist temper of the new movement supported the Berean attitude that facilitated further division, and, in 1904, the Churches of God were themselves subject to a dispute about the character and function of ‘district oversight’ that dealt a near-fatal blow to the *Needed Truth* movement in Scotland, with unexpected consequences in Ireland.¹¹ The themes raised in the *Needed Truth* magazine were

⁸ Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland*, 168; Macdonald, *Needed Truth Brethren*, 21.

⁹ *A Record of Divine Deliverance*, supplement to *NT*, 17/167 (June, 1905), 1.

¹⁰ See, for example: Wolston, *The Church*, 66–7; W. J. Lennox, ‘The House of God’, *NT*, 9 (1897), 101–6. This point became foundational to *Needed Truth* doctrine: see, for example, John Brown, ‘Jottings on the First Epistle to Timothy’, *NT*, 1 (1888–89), 22. For evidence of the influence of *Needed Truth* teaching on Scottish Open Brethren, see: ‘Recovered Truths, and Power to Practice them’, *The Believer’s Magazine*, 1 (1891), 49–50, which lifts *Needed Truth* language on the ‘fellowship, ministry and government of the Assemblies of Saints’; and the elucidation of the ‘house of God’ doctrine in ‘The Fellowship of Saints’, *The Believer’s Magazine*, 1 (1891), 123.

¹¹ Isaac W. Parson, *Why I left the Brethren that are Guided by the so-called Elderhood* (Hanworth, n.d.), 1–2.

brought together in a paradigm that would revolutionize the thinking of many open brethren in Britain and Ireland. But, as in every paradigm shift, its consequences were unforeseen.

The ‘Vernalite’ division (1904)

As the official *Needed Truth* record put it, ‘1902 and 1903 were years of great stress in Scotland.’¹² A series of events had created tensions that came to a head in a division within the church of God in Ayr, in south-west Scotland, in which Frank Vernal had been a leading brother.¹³ Vernal, in earlier years, had been a well-regarded evangelist within the ‘Open’ assemblies. The first edition of *The Believer’s Magazine* (1891), for example, had reported his evangelistic activities in Hamilton.¹⁴ It is not clear how, when or why Vernal became disenchanted with the Open assemblies among which his ministry had been so successful, nor the means by which he found his way into the party associated with *Needed Truth*. Nevertheless, the circumstances of the division within the church of God in Ayr echoed some of the earlier conflicts among Exclusive Brethren, in that it centred upon the relationship between the local assembly and the wider network of which it was a part. His response suggests that he may not have fully appreciated the significance of the district oversight for which the journal had been arguing.

Over one hundred years later, the particular circumstances which led to the division in the church of God in Ayr are not clear. At the centre of the discussion, however, was an argument about principle – whether or not the disciplinary decisions of the elders within a local church of God could be overturned by the district oversight. Vernal and others of the elders in Ayr believed that their decision to exclude one of their fellow overseers in a disciplinary judgement could not be so overturned. But the district oversight disagreed, permitting, as

¹² ‘Record of Divine Deliverance’, 1–33. This supplement contains edited texts of the two *High Ways to Zion* pamphlets, which had set out the principal concerns of the Fellowship: 5–19.

¹³ Macdonald, *Needed Truth Brethren*, 44–6.

¹⁴ *The Believer’s Magazine*, 1 (1891), 83, 119.

one contributor to *Needed Truth* put it, a ‘devastating wave of democracy, independency and self-will to sweep over the assemblies in Scotland, enveloping some erstwhile champions for the Truth in a ruin from which, alas! they may perhaps never recover.’¹⁵ Fundamentally, the issue turned upon the question of whether an issue that was intractable at local level should be referred to a broader consultation, and whether any decision-making process that left local elders divided could co-exist with the ideals of the unity of the body of Christ that were widely shared by brethren.

The consequences of this division were almost catastrophic for the young movement of Churches of God. The national council of overseers feared that many of the Scottish churches would support the stance of the overseers in Ayr, and circulated a message disbanding the Scottish churches, calling those who wished to remain under their oversight to a meeting in Glasgow at which a course for the future might be discussed. They had been right to suspect that Vernal’s position would be supported, for the journal’s long-standing commitment to the binding power of district oversight had not, ultimately, persuaded the majority of its Scottish readership: less than half of the Scottish *Needed Truth* churches were represented at the meeting with the national overseers. Failing to reach agreement as to the way forward, the *Needed Truth* editors and associates of Frank Vernal led simultaneous reorganizations of the churches of God in Scotland. While some assemblies were lost to the less defined community of Open Brethren, others emerged into two distinct movements of churches, with the Vernal party including around thirty local fellowships, approximately half of the *Needed Truth* assemblies in Scotland. The Vernalite movement pushed back against *Needed Truth* organisation, and initially contended for the ‘independency of the local assembly’, though within a few years they would adopt a connectional model similar to that of the churches whose fellowship they had left.¹⁶ One frequent contributor to *Needed*

¹⁵ J. P. A. Taylor, ‘With One Accord’, *NT*, 16 (1904), 248.

¹⁶ James E. Thomson, ‘Memorandum on the Plymouth Brethren group, commonly known as the Vernalites’ (privately circulated, n.d.), n.p.; Luxmoore recognised the

Truth noted the congregational impulse of the network of Vernalite churches:

God has caused a separation from those who have set up a confederacy of their own, in which almost every man does that which is right in his own eyes. And by doing so has caused many who were determined not to be in and of this to separate and seek with His help to go on with that which owns the Fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ, where there is godly rule, and where assemblies are linked together to the praise of His great Name.¹⁷

Others who remained with the *Needed Truth* connection wondered how they should respond to those who had abandoned their fellowship. One anonymous contributor took a stringent approach, arguing that those former leaders who had ‘cut themselves off from the Fellowship [and] depart from the good way ... are dead to us, and to bury them is the kindest thing we can do.’¹⁸ But the disappointments continued. A number of prominent brethren left the fellowship in the aftermath of the Scottish division: the Scottish solicitor L. W. G. Alexander, who had been an editor of and contributor to *Needed Truth*, withdrew to rejoin the Open Brethren,¹⁹ and James Allan, who had signed one of the *On the High Ways to Zion* pamphlets on behalf of the Scottish overseers, a principal statement of the original fellowship’s concerns, left the connection and published a booklet that was critical of *Needed Truth* presuppositions.²⁰ For good reasons, *Needed Truth* writers warned of the continuing danger of internal division.²¹

Vernalite churches as being congregational in their government: ‘High Ways and By Ways’, *NT*, 16 (1904), 277.

¹⁷ Thomas Catlow, ‘Division’, *NT*, 18 (1906), 5.

¹⁸ Wayfarer, ‘Kindness to the Dead’, *NT*, 18 (1906), 56.

¹⁹ C. M. Luxmoore and Joshua Hawkins, ‘Discerning the Body’, *NT*, 19 (1907), 97–127.

²⁰ C. M. Luxmoore, ‘Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth’, *NT*, 19 (1907), 182.

²¹ David Smith, ‘Danger Signals’, *NT*, 19 (1907), 275–6.

But the *Needed Truth* churches were changing. Several years after the Scottish division, the editors of the magazine began to advance a new theory of worship, with consequences for the administration of the Lord's Supper. Previously, the practice of *Needed Truth* churches had been similar to that of the Open Brethren assemblies from which they had emerged: the meeting for the breaking of bread provided an opportunity for Spirit-led contributions which culminated in the sharing of bread and wine. But, from around 1907, Dr Luxmoore began to advocate a new liturgical order, developing a 'doctrine of approach' in which believers would break bread at a very early stage in the meeting and then move into an extended period of praise.²² The new order of service reflected a broader theological argument—the claim that the Christians assembling for worship, and breaking bread, were now entering into the Holy of Holies (Hebrews 10: 19–22). The Vernalites, having split before this new teaching had been widely disseminated, were unaffected by this change, and continued to break bread at the end of the remembrance meeting.²³ But not everyone within the *Needed Truth* churches had been persuaded of the necessity for change. The 'doctrine of approach' would disrupt the churches in Armagh and Belfast, and W. J. Lennox and Samuel Miller, two elders who had represented the Irish oversight during the Vernalite controversy, would find themselves on opposite sides of a second division within the *Needed Truth* churches of God.²⁴

²² *Rea Memorial: Contending for the Faith, 1917–1987* (Belfast, 1987), 3. See, for example, C. M. Luxmoore, 'Paul on Worship', *NT*, 19 (1907), 159, 225–229, which was later published as a pamphlet. Inevitably, the restricting of the breaking of bread meeting led to questions about the conduct of a latecomer who missed the distribution of bread but arrived in time to share in the cup; 'Question and Answer', *NT*, 20 (1908), 210. See also Macdonald, 'Developments in the Churches of God', 44–5.

²³ Thomson, 'Memorandum', n.p.

²⁴ J. Gibson, [no titlepage]: Circular letter signed by J. Gibson and other Scottish brethren in defence of G. Thomson, F. Vernal, and T. M'Laren, jun. against the decision of the 'Highways Brethren' within the 'Needed Truth' party of Open Brethren (Glasgow), [n.publ.] (1904) [Christian Brethren Archive 2102, pp.2, 6].

The formation of the Howard Street fellowship (1914–1917)

The ‘doctrine of approach’ was a serious concern for some of the brethren in the Church of God that met in Shiloh Hall, 79 Victoria Street, Belfast, including Samuel Miller, one of its most significant overseeing brethren.²⁵ The two Irish *Needed Truth* churches, located in Belfast and Armagh, had responded to the crisis in Scotland by continuing to work for the expansion of the Fellowship, supporting tent missions in Portadown and Ballymena,²⁶ but trouble had been brewing for some time. As political convulsions pushed Ireland towards the brink of civil war, Miller and other of the Shiloh Hall believers became concerned by national developments among the *Needed Truth* assemblies, as well as the support that had been given to these developments by local leaders, including W. J. Lennox, an overseer in Armagh, in the article that first set out the new doctrine of the house of God, and in his subsequent pamphlet, *God’s House and Man’s House* (1912).²⁷ It may have been with an eye to both political and ecclesiastical contexts that the Irish overseers asked for prayer in ‘these difficult days’:²⁸ in June and July 1913, advertisements for the annual conference in Armagh asked for prayer for ‘seasonable help, in the midst of ever increasing difficulties.’²⁹ Theirs was a reasonable concern. Although it is uncertain whether their departure was reported in the privately circulated news report, *Intelligence*, a number of members in the Belfast church had begun to leave the fellowship.³⁰

²⁵ ‘Special Notices’, *Wholesome Words* [hereafter *WW*], 3/6 (June 1911), 71.

²⁶ ‘Special Notices’, *WW*, 2/6 (June 1910), 233; ‘Special notices’, *WW*, 3/9 (Sept. 1911), 108.

²⁷ For Lennox’s support of the new teaching, see W. J. Lennox, ‘The House of God’, *NT*, 9 (1897), 101–6, and ‘Foreword’, in C. M. Luxmoore, *Paul on Worship* (Bradford, n.d.), n.p.

²⁸ ‘Special Notices’, *WW*, 4/7 (July 1912), 84.

²⁹ ‘Special Notices’, *WW*, 5/6 (June 1913), 72; 5/7 (July 1913), 83.

³⁰ McAuley collection, letter from Isaac Poots to Dr Duffield, 29 Sept. 1937, 4.

In August 1914, ten of these believers met together for the first time in premises at 12 Howard Street, a terraced house on a location adjacent to the City Hall, Belfast, in order to discuss their situation and their future prospects for fellowship. Although they shared in prayer, singing, and Bible reading,³¹ they understood themselves to have ‘no Church responsibility’, one of their leaders later explained, and ‘met as Members of the body of Christ and ministered to each other as such’ for around two years.³² But they had a clear sense of administrative order, for throughout that period they kept detailed notes of every meeting, recording the names of those in attendance and summarizing the purpose and content of each meeting, as they worked together to establish a common basis of faith. Whatever the informality of their ecclesial status, the fellowship quickly established a routine, meeting on Sunday mornings for praise, prayer, and ministry, on Wednesday evenings for prayer, and on Saturday evenings for Bible readings, initially in Matthew, that, in the first sign of an emerging leadership, were conducted by Isaac Poots, a son of Samuel Poots, a recently widowed elder in Shiloh Hall.³³ While the Howard Street Christians may have been hoping for reconciliation with the *Needed Truth* assembly, they also began to innovate.

Their efforts were being monitored. Articles in *Needed Truth* and *Wholesome Words*, another of the fellowship’s publications, reflected concerns about division within the Churches of God. Lennox, writing from Armagh, had long been concerned that

³¹ A history of this fellowship, later known as the ‘Rea Memorial’ Church of God, was privately published in 1987: *Rea Memorial: Contending for the faith, 1917–1987* (Belfast: privately published, 1987). McAuley collection, Rea Memorial Minute Book, 1914–1924, 1; *Rea Memorial*, 9. The history of the Howard Street brethren must be reconstructed from the Rea Memorial Minute Book, which is our only record of the early years of this church, the accuracy of which cannot often be verified.

³² McAuley collection, [Samuel Poots], ‘The Beginnings of the Church of God in Belfast’, typescript, single sheet.

³³ ‘Gone Home’, *WW*, 4/12 (Dec. 1912), 142–143.

younger men were not being subject to their elders.³⁴ He had for some time been concerned that ‘various ... esteemed fellow-believers ... find themselves in what some of them call ‘little meetings’, others ‘little assemblies’, and others make bold and speak of them as ‘Churches of God’.’³⁵ As the Belfast division continued, another national leader, J. Crosthwaite Radcliffe, expressed concern that some of those in fellowship in churches of God were ‘failing to keep rank’ with their brethren.³⁶ Later that autumn, S. J. Hill surveyed the state of the Established churches, the Nonconformist bodies, the Exclusive and Open Brethren, and the *Needed Truth* churches of God, complaining that ‘many (and their number increases) claim liberty to do what is right in their own eyes without any regard to the one will of God for His people—to such we have nothing to say, except that independence is unthinkable in the things of God.’³⁷ He took a stringent view of the possibility of acceptable worship outside the boundaries of the combined oversight, and argued that ‘sects now answer in a sense to the high places, and are a departure from the will of God as seen in his one place.’³⁸

This attention from external bodies compelled the Howard Street Christians to consider how they should relate to the claims of other brethren communities, for, as well as attracting the attention of leaders among the *Needed Truth* community, their secession had come to the attention of leaders among the Vernalite party in Scotland. Leaders from the *Needed Truth* and Vernalite communities contacted the Howard Street Christians at the same time. In October 1914, the new fellowship received letters from Frank Vernal and ‘Mr Smith’—likely David Smith, a prominent preacher and writer among

³⁴ W. J. Lennox, ‘The Mighty Hand of God’, *WW*, 2/12 (1910), 300.

³⁵ W. J. Lennox, ‘The Place’, *NT*, 21 (1914), 38.

³⁶ J. Crosthwaite Radcliffe, ‘The One Thing for God in a Day of Apostasy’, *NT*, 21 (1914), 305.

³⁷ S. J. Hill, ‘High Places and God’s Place’, *NT*, 21 (1914), 300.

³⁸ Hill, ‘High Places’, 264.

the *Needed Truth* Brethren,³⁹ who had preached at a conference in Armagh only a few years before⁴⁰—requesting a ‘meeting to discuss matters with a view to seeing how much we had in common.’⁴¹ This approach forced the new fellowship to think through the ecclesiological issues that had divided the Fellowship in 1904—and their efforts to do so were led by an individual who had taken a leading role against the Scottish seceders.

In the late autumn of 1914, Samuel Miller, formerly an elder in Shiloh Hall, organizer of the Fellowship’s British Isles Fund,⁴² and a keen British Israelite,⁴³ led a series of meetings on the constitution, privileges, responsibilities, hope and destiny of the body of Christ. Despite his involvement in the earlier controversy, his approach emphasized universal rather than local aspects of church order.⁴⁴ He may have been evading the contentious issues that the Vernalite controversy had raised, for in that division Miller had acted as the representative of the Irish overseers, with his name, like that of Lennox, appearing on statements representing the combined oversight of England, Wales and Ireland against the secession of the

³⁹ For reports of David Smith’s activity, see ‘Special Notices’, *WW*, 3/10 (Oct. 1911), 120; ‘Special notices’, *WW*, 5/5 (May 1913), 59; and for examples of his writing, see: David Smith, ‘The Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and Subsequent Events’, *WW*, 5/4 (Apr. 1913), 37–9; 5/8 (Aug. 1913); 88–91; ‘The Name and the Memorial’, *NT*, 21 (1914), 45–8; ‘The Downfall of Antichrist’, *NT*, 21 (1914), 155–7.

⁴⁰ ‘Conference Notes’, *NT*, 19 (1907), 236–8.

⁴¹ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 8.

⁴² ‘British Isles Fund’, *WW*, 2/11 (November 1910), 294.

⁴³ *Belfast Telegraph*, Apr. 1940, reprinted in *Rea Memorial*, 18. Carlisle McAuley has confirmed that while Miller’s interest in British Israelitism dated from this period, British Israel doctrine was never taught within the church, nor considered to be a part of the ‘faith once delivered to the saints’.

⁴⁴ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 9. Samuel Miller and W. J. Lennox had signed advertisements for the Belfast and Armagh conference: ‘Special Notices’, *WW*, 1/7 (July 1909), 106; ‘Special notices’, *WW*, 2/7 (July 1910), 241; ‘Special Notices’, *WW*, 3/6 (June 1911), 71; 3/7 (July 1911), 85.

Scottish churches.⁴⁵ Miller appeared less certain of his position vis-à-vis district oversight in the autumn of 1914. Emerging from one national network and being approached by another, the Howard Street Christians seemed as yet unsure of their identity.

But local issues could not be avoided. The new fellowship sought to normalize its meetings and formalize key responsibilities, recognising Isaac Poots as its secretary, while Peter Simm acted as treasurer and Robert Curran took care of the hall.⁴⁶ The fellowship's early expenses provided for the practical necessities of public worship, and the minute book records expenditure on twelve seats, gas lights, a table, linen, and hat hooks. Other necessities were more challenging. Early discussions focused on adopting a name for the new meeting place, with an early proposal for 'The Drawing Room'⁴⁷ giving way to a plainer and more typically Brethren descriptor—'The Meeting Room.'⁴⁸

Another practical step that had significant broader implications was the adoption of a hymnbook.⁴⁹ By the turn of the twentieth century, British and Irish Brethren had been provided with a variety of hymnbooks, which were often used to mark out networks of association within the larger movement. Exclusive meetings tended to use the various editions of the *Little Flock* (from 1856) while many Open assemblies in Scotland and the north of Ireland, including the Vernalite churches of God, were using the *Believers Hymnbook* (1884), which the *Needed Truth* assemblies had begun to replace with a new volume of compositions, *Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1909), the contents of which more accurately reflected the distinctive emphases of their developing theology,

⁴⁵ Gibson, Circular letter, 10. Samuel Poots was listed as still living in the Lake District.

⁴⁶ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 2–3.

⁴⁷ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 4–5.

⁴⁸ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 7.

⁴⁹ For discussion of Brethren hymnbooks, see John S. Andrews, 'Brethren Hymnology', *Evangelical Quarterly*, 28/4 (1956), 208–28.

including the ‘doctrine of approach.’⁵⁰ These hymnbooks were designed for devotional use around the Lord’s table, and were often supplemented by an explicitly evangelistic hymnal designed for gospel meetings. One of the most popular evangelistic hymnals among Ulster brethren was *The Gospel Hymn Book* (1897).⁵¹ In what was perhaps a surprising move, which signalled both their affinity to and distance from the broader Brethren movement in the north of Ireland, the Howard Street fellowship decided to adopt *The Gospel Hymn Book*, instead of a more devotional hymnal suitable for the Lord’s table.⁵² The fellowship agreed to purchase four dozen copies of *The Gospel Hymn Book*, in an early indication of their aspiration for growth.⁵³ This was certainly a larger number of copies than was required—though the regular attendance had expanded to include eighteen men and five women⁵⁴—and so twelve copies were purchased instead.⁵⁵ But it is not clear that this was a popular decision. Discussions about a congregational hymnal continued into June 1915, as the fellowship continued to define its relationship to the church of God in Shiloh Hall and the wider Brethren movement out of which the *Needed Truth* movement had emerged.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ ‘Special Notices’, *WW*, 1/6 (June 1909), 89–90; ‘Gone Home’, *WW*, 4/1 (Jan. 1912), 12; ‘British Isles Conference’, *WW*, 5/10 (Oct. 1913), 120; Macdonald, *Needed Truth Brethren*, 52.

⁵¹ For a recent discussion of the content of this hymnbook, see Mark S. Sweetnam, ‘Raptured, Rewarded, and Reigning: The Hope of the Believer in *The Gospel Hymn Book*’, in Neil T. R. Dickson and T. J. Marinello (eds.), *Culture, Spirituality, and the Brethren* (Troon, 2014), 237–8.

⁵² It is possible that the decision was pragmatic, in that *The Gospel Hymn Book* was published in Belfast: Sweetnam, ‘Raptured, Rewarded, and Reigning’, 240. Samuel J. McBride notes that some assemblies in north-east Ireland, including Ballymagarrick, did use this hymnbook for the breaking of bread as well as other meetings: e-mail, 8 Dec. 2016.

⁵³ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 10.

⁵⁴ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 17.

⁵⁵ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 10.

⁵⁶ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 21.

These decisions were part of a broader move to normalize and formalize the meetings of the new assembly. In spring 1915, the Howard Street Christians agreed to begin breaking bread on Sunday evenings, and appointed a music leader, who established singing practice on Tuesday evenings.⁵⁷ The fellowship began, slowly, to grow, receiving a request for baptism from a young sister,⁵⁸ and taking a house on Foundry Street for gospel meetings, which may also have provided the premises for the children's meetings that Isaac Poots convened on Friday nights.⁵⁹ This move towards formalizing the fellowship gained pace in autumn 1916, when one individual requested a meeting of 'all who habitually attend any of the services at Howard St Meeting Room' to 'consider and exchange thoughts about our desire or lack of desire towards taking up the responsibilities which belong to the 'Fellowship of the Son of God Jesus Christ our Lord''.⁶⁰ The meeting was convened, and its minutes reported 'much silence and hesitancy on the part of brethren.'⁶¹ These discussions continued over several Sundays, as the believers grew in confidence, returning to themes made popular by *Needed Truth*, and agreeing upon the difference between the 'Fellowship' and the 'House of God': this distinction would become a key theological feature of the new fellowship, as leaders among the seceders advanced upon *Needed Truth* discussions of the 'house of God' to argue that this term referred to the combined worship of the churches of God on earth—now restricted to a single assembly on Howard Street—and the worship that took place in heaven.⁶² A key part of this process of formalizing the assembly was a series of testimony meetings, in which regular attenders were requested to explain why, despite their debt to *Needed Truth* ideas, they could not recognize the church of God in Shiloh Hall as belonging to the

⁵⁷ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 18–19.

⁵⁸ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 12.

⁵⁹ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 15.

⁶⁰ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 23.

⁶¹ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 23.

⁶² Rea Memorial Minute Book, 26.

‘Fellowship of God’s Son.’⁶³ Nineteen individuals ‘made public confession regarding their apprehension of the Truth’ as the assembly formalized its position in several meetings in October and November.⁶⁴

As these testimonies made clear, a small number of members of the Howard Street fellowship had not been members of Shiloh Hall—a signal, perhaps, that the fellowship was not expanding much beyond its original party of seceders. One individual had moved from the Church of Ireland to the Open Brethren meeting in Victoria Hall but felt it was becoming too much like a Baptist chapel.⁶⁵ Another had moved from an Open Brethren assembly directly into the Howard Street fellowship. One congregant revealed that he had been converted among the Cooneyites.⁶⁶ But most of the believers had been members in Shiloh Hall, and their testimonies followed a common pattern. With the exception of two men who had started life as Presbyterians, most of the prospective members appeared to have moved from the Open Brethren into Shiloh Hall. These *ex-Needed Truth* testimonies returned to familiar themes, recognizing that the assembly in Shiloh Hall had once ‘held and practiced’ the truth, and that they had experienced ‘some happy days’ in its fellowship. This harmony had been shattered by a ‘period of unrest and trouble about the ‘Breaking of the Bread’,’ in which Luxmoore’s argument that the sharing of the elements should be the ‘first spiritual exercise’ of the meeting overturned the universal practice of the open assemblies out of which the *Needed Truth* party had emerged.⁶⁷ Members complained that, by bringing the breaking of bread to the beginning of the meeting, the elders in Shiloh Hall had ‘curtailed’ their ‘liberty of engaging in worship.’⁶⁸ But, as Frank Vernal had earlier discovered, the connectional character of the *Needed Truth*

⁶³ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 26.

⁶⁴ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 23; [Poots], ‘The Beginnings’, single sheet.

⁶⁵ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 35–38.

⁶⁶ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 46.

⁶⁷ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 27–28.

⁶⁸ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 29.

assemblies presented a challenge to anyone seeking to overturn the decisions of district, national or international oversight. The overseers in Armagh—which was, after all, ‘the only other Church in Ireland’—had supported the actions of the Belfast overseers in restructuring the order of service in the breaking of bread.⁶⁹ Lennox, their leading spokesman, was reported as believing that ‘the highest service which could be rendered unto God was thanks for the Cup, which was something like going into the Holiest with the blood.’⁷⁰ Samuel Miller reported that he had not supported the revision of the order of service, but had been ‘expelled from the oversight circle by the overseers in Belfast and Armagh (although one overseer in Belfast refused to sign the order) because he believed and taught that the “Fellowship of God’s Son” and the “House of God” were not synonymous terms.’⁷¹ Other unhappy members of Shiloh Hall had pressed a more radical agenda. Peter Simm had asked the elders in Armagh whether they thought it appropriate for ‘sisters taking part such as giving thanks for or giving out a hymn’, perhaps being prompted by F. A. Banks’s discussion of the subject in *Spiritual Growth* (1898), as well as a short series of articles on the role of women in *Wholesome Words*⁷² and a discussion of the question in a recent issue of *Needed Truth*.⁷³ He could hardly have been surprised to discover that the elders in Armagh were not sympathetic to his enquiry—though his reference to the question within his testimony for membership of the new assembly hints that the Christians in

⁶⁹ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 30.

⁷⁰ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 49.

⁷¹ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 32.

⁷² S. T. L., ‘A Word to the Women’, *WW*, 3/11 (Nov. 1911), 128–131; S. M. H., ‘Another Word to the Women’, *WW*, 4/4 (Apr. 1912), 44–47; J. Dorricott, ‘The Ministry of Women’, *WW*, 5/11 (Nov. 1913), 127–129.

⁷³ Banks, *Spiritual Growth*, 150–152; ‘A Question’, *NT*, 18 (1906), 236. It was perhaps not coincidental that many of the articles on ‘The woman in her sphere’ in *NT*, 18 (1906) and 19 (1907) were anonymous: ‘Are the women in the assemblies doing their part? They have no time sometimes, we think we hear them say. Time is too easily found for braiding the hair and for costly raiment’: ‘The Woman in her Sphere’, *NT*, 19 (1907), 62–63.

Howard Street had a more open mind on the subject.⁷⁴ Whatever their reasons for dissatisfaction, these former members of Shiloh Hall were persuaded that ‘the church ceased to be a church of God when [they] left it.’⁷⁵

Nevertheless, the new fellowship was taking care to build relationships where it could. Even as they expressed these hesitations about district oversight and the status of the church of God in Shiloh Hall, the Howard Street believers agreed to make contact with W. J. Lennox, a leading brother among the *Needed Truth* assemblies in Ulster, in the hope of discussing their concerns with him.⁷⁶ One month later, in early November 1916, they considered whether they should write to the fellowship of churches associated with ‘the late bro Vernal’, but eventually decided against it: ‘it seemed clear to all that the action which they endorsed of the majority of overseers in a local church acting in spite of the minority in a matter of discipline could not be endorsed by us ... therefore it was decided not to write to them.’⁷⁷ But, as this hope and hesitancy suggested, the Howard Street Christians were still uncertain of how they should relate to the wider brethren world.

Nevertheless, by mid-November, six months after beginning to break bread and with no prospect of inclusion in a national fellowship, the Howard Street Christians decided to begin the process of formalizing their status as a church of God.⁷⁸ In the

⁷⁴ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 31. The sisters’ participation in worship became a distinctive feature of the new fellowship. One individual who was later associated with the Vernalite churches of God remembered that women had publicly participated in church meetings in his earlier life; ‘Reminiscences of Former Days’, *Green Pastures*, 1 (1907), 132.

⁷⁵ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 30.

⁷⁶ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 34; W. J. Lennox was one of two overseers to sign an invitation to the Belfast and Armagh conferences, ‘Special Notices’, *WW*, 4/7 (July 1912), 84, and ‘An Appreciation’ on behalf of the Belfast Assembly, *WW*, 4/2 (1913), 24. He was a regular contributor to *Wholesome Words* and a long-time editor of *Needed Truth*.

⁷⁷ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 45.

⁷⁸ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 55.

presence of two women and fifteen men,⁷⁹ Isaac Poots rose to speak, reminding his listeners of the error maintained by both the Roman Catholic Church and the Open Brethren, that the church of God was the same as the Body of Christ. He followed this remark with a survey of Brethren history, moving away from the group's obvious lineage by concluding that the movement out of which most members of the fellowship had emerged had 'no apprehension of [the] Fellowship of God's Son.'⁸⁰ By late November, in an effort to clarify their own position on this and other theological issues, the fellowship decided to draw up a 'Declaration of Doctrine', which occupied Sunday afternoon meetings from December 1916 until March 1917.⁸¹ The discussions, which were all recorded in the minutes, worked from first principles to establish an agreed statement of faith: there does not appear to have been any discussion of the singularity of this activity within Brethren history, nor any sense of the value of the historic creeds and confessions of faith.⁸² In meetings in which they sang psalms and paraphrases, and therefore moved beyond the revivalist content of *The Gospel Hymn Book*, the fellowship agreed upon a sequence of basic doctrinal claims and the methods by which a series of ethical difficulties might be addressed.⁸³ The earliest agreed statements related to the verbal inspiration of Scripture and a description of the Godhead that quoted the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which many of the members would have learned in school, to the effect that 'God Almighty is a Spirit, Infinite, Eternal & Unchangeable in His Being.'⁸⁴ Other statements reflected minority positions within Ulster evangelicalism,

⁷⁹ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 55.

⁸⁰ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 57.

⁸¹ [Poots], 'The Beginnings', single sheet.

⁸² F. A. Banks, for example, had condemned 'human creeds' that cast ideas 'in an iron mould for all time'; *Spiritual Growth*, 103.

⁸³ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 68–69, 74–75.

⁸⁴ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 61.

including an agreement that women could serve as deacons.⁸⁵ While the content of the statement of faith was agreed upon, some members, in classic Brethren fashion, were hesitant about affirming its claims: Curran and Foster had ‘very strong objections & refused to sign any declaration [but] made no objection to the rest making such, and signing it.’⁸⁶ The minutes emphasized the provisional nature of the doctrinal agreement at which the Howard Street Christians had arrived: ‘whatever declaration may be made by us, is a faint attempt to put in writing some of the Truth which we have learned + do believe up to date, taking the attitude of appealing further light from God through His Word + Spirit.’⁸⁷ Nevertheless, the fellowship appointed two men to ‘arrange the items’ in the statement of faith, which was approved, signed by seven representative men, and sent to the printer, with ‘about 30’ copies of the statement being printed in May 1917.⁸⁸

The publication of the statement of faith was timely. In April 1917, the fellowship had been approached by David Smith, who was likely the correspondent of October 1914.⁸⁹ Smith had addressed two letters to Samuel Miller, asking for further details about the position of ‘the brethren in Howard St.’, an action that indicated either his ignorance of the fact that Isaac Poots was secretary, or his preference to work with an individual with whom he likely had established links through the national meetings of *Needed Truth* oversight. But Miller

⁸⁵ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 74. *Needed Truth* Churches of God had been discussing the possibility of women deacons for some time. J. Crosthwaite Radcliffe, ‘Suggestions as to Deacons’, *NT*, 16 (1904), 107, suggested that the example of Phoebe demonstrated that ‘there is plenty of work for sisters to do in connexion with the assemblies of God, but of course not in the higher sense of deacons of Christ Jesus.’ See also: A. F. A., ‘Deacons’, *WW*, 1/7 (July 1909), 104–105; and S. T. L., ‘Word to the Women’, 130, who also recognised deaconesses as having a role in ‘taking care of the meeting-room, keeping floor and windows clean, and suchlike needful things.’

⁸⁶ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 60.

⁸⁷ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 60–61.

⁸⁸ [Poots], ‘The beginnings’, single sheet; Rea Memorial Minute Book, 86.

⁸⁹ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 8.

had not replied to either of Smith's letters. Smith then travelled to Belfast to make enquires in person, taking part with the Howard Street believers in a discussion of the 'separation in Scotland', and, presumably, offering a critique of the Vernalite position.⁹⁰ Given Smith's evident interest in retrieving the Howard Street Christians for the *Needed Truth* network, the fellowship decided that the best way to represent their position to enquirers was to provide them with a copy of the recently prepared statement of faith.⁹¹ Suddenly, the statement was no longer only for their own edification: thirty copies would not be sufficient for their aspiration to reunite the Brethren movement.

The *Declaration of Divine Doctrines* (1917; 1924)

The *Declaration of Divine Doctrines* (1917) that was prepared by the Howard Street Christians set forth forty-one agreed theological statements. The content moved from a statement of the inspiration of Scripture (though, surprisingly, given the period, not its inerrancy), describing the Trinity, without using the term, as 'one God in Three Persons, the Creator of all.' Salvation was stated as being 'by grace through faith', with justification and sanctification being described as both a crisis before God and a process before the world. Subsequent statements outlined the elements of dispensational eschatology. This was followed by statements about ecclesiology. The *Declaration* defined a 'Church of God' as 'the people together of God in any place ... the smallest unit of the Fellowship which has authority to act collectively.' It explained that the churches of God combined to form the Fellowship of God's Son, and that the overseers of this Fellowship constitute 'the Presbytery, or Elderhood', and that their work was to be facilitated by deacons and deaconesses.⁹² The *Declaration* distinguished the Fellowship of God's Son, which was the visible body of believers established

⁹⁰ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 83.

⁹¹ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 84.

⁹² *Declaration of Divine Doctrines* (1924), n.p.

through Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost, from the Body of Christ, which was made up of all true believers irrespective of their membership of a church of God. And, in a significant step away from *Needed Truth* orthodoxy, it represented the 'House of God' as the sphere over which Christ is High Priest—or, as Samuel Miller put it, in *The House of God* (1914), as something that included both earthly and heavenly sanctuaries.

The *Declaration* contained clear statements of the recent discussions, therefore, and the Howard Street believers sought to use it to create a new network of connectional churches. They agreed that their statement should be printed and circulated with a letter:

Forasmuch as we believe that there is exercise of heart before God regarding 'unity' by those commonly known as 'Brethren' owing to the present condition of things amongst such, it seemed good unto us to draw up the attached list of Divine Doctrines, which we herewith submit for your prayerful criticism & judgement.

We the undersigned represent a company of Christians who do not take up any ecclesiastical position whatever, therefore we are open to meet by appointment any persons from whom we may receive help or to whom we could give help unto the producing of Divine Unity.

We are sending this list of Divine Doctrines with copy of circular letter to each company of Brethren known to us.⁹³

The letters were dispatched in May and June 1917 to thirty assemblies within Belfast, including Shiloh Hall, the Iron Hall (an independent mission), and East End Baptist Church.

Almost all of the submissions were unacknowledged—a stunning blow to a small group of lay theologians who had laboured through the winter to establish divine principles upon which a reunited Brethren movement might be based. Ironically, Shiloh Hall was the first assembly to reply, sending a simple acknowledgement that was received on 4 June. On 15 June, a letter from Kingsbridge Road assembly indicated that the statement of faith would be considered at

⁹³ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 91.

a future date. An acknowledgement from the Grove Chapel assembly arrived on 21 June. The assembly on Adam Street replied on 2 August to express a desire for the unity of God's people.⁹⁴ Outside Belfast, the Central Avenue assembly in Bangor replied by suggesting that the Body was the unit of fellowship—a rebuttal of the *Needed Truth* ecclesiology that the *Declaration* had enunciated.⁹⁵ Only one individual, in Dungannon, wished he were closer and could be part of the new group.⁹⁶ The statement of faith was ignored by the other Ulster assemblies.

Not discouraged, the fellowship spent the period until August sending copies of their statement to 'all they could get in touch with', including sixty-eight 'Meeting places' in 'other parts of Ireland', and to around twenty 'well known preachers in England and Scotland and one or two in America.'⁹⁷ Overall, the response was 'very poor', which to the Howard Street Christians indicated 'fairly well the condition of the brethren, if we might make bold to say so.'⁹⁸ There were occasional glimmers of hope: 'Sir Robert Anderson wrote to us expressing his pleasure at our efforts and his regret that he could not be with us in these days of declension and spiritual poverty to discuss these glorious themes.'⁹⁹ The leaders of the Vernalite Churches of God were the most interested of all the correspondents. The Howard Street Christians sent copies of their *Declaration* to Robert Jeans in Inverness, an editor of *Green Pastures*, the monthly magazine that linked the Vernalite churches, who asked for additional copies,¹⁰⁰ while John Montgomerie, a preacher among the Vernalites in Glasgow, wanted to begin a discussion about the connections between local churches,¹⁰¹ and

⁹⁴ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 95–96.

⁹⁵ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 97.

⁹⁶ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 104.

⁹⁷ [Poots], 'The Beginnings', single sheet.

⁹⁸ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 103.

⁹⁹ [Poots], 'The Beginnings', single sheet.

¹⁰⁰ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 100.

¹⁰¹ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 104.

Andrew Kyle, of Galston, Ayrshire, asked for ‘help about the Fellowship & the Elderhood’—request for further discussion that make sense in the context of the movement among the Vernalite party from an emphasis on the independence to inter-dependence of churches of God.¹⁰² For a while, the Vernalite response raised the hopes of the Howard Street Christians. ‘We are now waiting for further word from the brethren in Scotland to whom we replied and forwarded extra copies’, the minutes reported at the end of August 1917.¹⁰³ But the Vernalite response did not materialize, and no notice was taken of the statement in *Green Pastures*,¹⁰⁴ which broke into a series of articles for young people to include a summer special on ‘Some points about the Church and Churches of God.’¹⁰⁵ *Green Pastures* writers insisted that ‘numbers are not everything.’¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, the Howard Street minutes continued, ‘we have not had any reply from any collective company that has given us any joy or hope that there was anything together today which is constructed after the pattern of Acts II.’¹⁰⁷ Or, as Samuel Poots later put it, ‘we could not discern in the few replies we received that any other people were exercised as we are about Spiritual matters.’¹⁰⁸ Having ascertained that there was no collective company that they could join, the Howard Street Christians decided to act alone, to ‘consolidate and be formed into a Fellowship’¹⁰⁹—‘the Church of God in Belfast.’¹¹⁰

The formation of the Howard Street church of God (1917)

¹⁰² Rea Memorial Minute Book, 101; on Andrew Kyle, see ‘Conference notes’, *Green Pastures* 5 (1911), 12.

¹⁰³ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 105.

¹⁰⁴ *Green Pastures* 11 (1917), passim.

¹⁰⁵ *Green Pastures* 11 (1917), 71.

¹⁰⁶ *Green Pastures* 11 (1917), 136.

¹⁰⁷ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 105.

¹⁰⁸ [Poots], ‘The Beginnings’, single sheet.

¹⁰⁹ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 106.

¹¹⁰ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 107.

Resolving to act alone, on 26 August 1917, twenty individuals who ‘desired to be consolidated together as a Church of God’ adopted the statement of faith and signed their names.¹¹¹ They spent Sunday afternoons during the late summer and autumn discussing salvation, separation, baptism, and the breaking of bread and prayers, and formalized their relationship as a church at a meeting on 18 November 1917.¹¹² One week later, the twenty members of the new church met to recognize overseers and deacons and deaconesses.¹¹³ Those who were willing to be recognized as overseers or deacons marked their names on a list, including Maggie McVeigh, who aspired to the work of a deacon.¹¹⁴ Discussions centred upon a series of presumably hypothetical ethical issues, and, fairly consistently, taking positions that were not normative among Open Brethren, *Needed Truth* Brethren, or Vernalites. The Howard Street Christians agreed that it was permissible for a Christian to join a trade union,¹¹⁵ and agreed that a church member who married an unbeliever would not be disciplined, because of possible legal action and heavy damages,¹¹⁶ while *Green Pastures*, like other Open Brethren and *Needed Truth* publications, continued to promote strict separation in terms of marriage and trade associations among its readers in the Vernalite churches.¹¹⁷ The fellowship agreed to meet on Sunday mornings for worship, breaking of bread, ministry, and prayers; on Sunday evening for an address; on Wednesday evening for prayer and Bible study; and on Saturday evening for a ‘literature study.’¹¹⁸ In terms of worship, the new fellowship determined not to establish ‘a sacramental system such as the so called open brethren’,¹¹⁹ to

¹¹¹ [Poots], ‘The Beginnings’, single sheet.

¹¹² [Poots], ‘The Beginnings’, single sheet.

¹¹³ [Poots], ‘The Beginnings’ single sheet.

¹¹⁴ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 107; [Poots], ‘The Beginnings’ single sheet.

¹¹⁵ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 114.

¹¹⁶ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 118.

¹¹⁷ *Green Pastures*, 11 (1917), 98–100.

¹¹⁸ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 137.

¹¹⁹ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 109.

continue the practice of breaking bread at the end of the meeting,¹²⁰ to use unleavened bread,¹²¹ to follow the *Needed Truth* (but not yet the local Open Brethren) practice of addressing prayer only to the Father,¹²² and, perhaps most significantly, given the earlier discussion of the subject, to allow women to ‘take part in leading the worship towards God.’¹²³ When the assembly met to break bread on 2 December 1917, those who were willing to serve as overseers and deacons stood to be ‘formally recognized’ as having these responsibilities.¹²⁴ The church of God in Belfast had been re-formed.

And it began, slowly, to grow. The minutes from 1918 report a baptism, which took place on a Saturday in the Open Brethren hall on Apsley Street,¹²⁵ and, a few weeks later, the purchase of three more seats.¹²⁶ The fellowship continued to develop its theology, which Isaac Poots set out pictorially in a chart, entitled ‘The Purpose of the Ages’, which clearly showed the influence of the famous chart-maker, Clarence Larkin.¹²⁷ But this growth was not without disappointments. In January 1919, the church endured its first major doctrinal conflict, in which one member, whose name quickly disappeared from the minutes, argued with the overseers that ‘Jesus Christ is God with qualifications’, and that the Holy Spirit is ‘the power of God.’¹²⁸ Four months later, the debates continued in a meeting that had been convened to ‘criticize’ Samuel Miller’s book, *The House of God* (1914), which had set out the distinctions between the body of Christ, the Fellowship of God’s Son, and the house of

¹²⁰ Samuel Miller, *The House of God* (Belfast, [1914]), 27.

¹²¹ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 127.

¹²² Rea Memorial Minute Book, 129.

¹²³ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 31, 130.

¹²⁴ [Poots], ‘The Beginnings’, single sheet.

¹²⁵ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 149.

¹²⁶ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 151.

¹²⁷ McAuley collection, Isaac Poots, ‘The Purpose of the Ages’ (1918). A copy of this chart is available at <<http://www.reamemorial.co.uk/filearchive/File/BibleDispensationChart-adobe5.pdf>>, accessed 1 Dec. 2016.

¹²⁸ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 156.

God that had been formalized in the published statement of faith.¹²⁹ The Howard Street Christians felt the difficulty of starting a new assembly in the absence of a presbytery to guide it,¹³⁰ and its disappointments continued. Members discussed the possibility of discontinuing services during ‘the disturbed state of the city’ in May 1922, a reference to the acute violence that marked partition and the formation of the new jurisdiction of Northern Ireland.¹³¹ In the winter of 1922–23, one member and another prospective member reverted to join the church in Shiloh Hall.¹³² In April 1923, one member complained to the overseers that the morning meeting packed ‘four services ... into one hour’, that the ‘functions of the House of God’ were being ‘mixed up with the functions of the Church of God’, and, more practically, that one of the overseers had been married three times and was consequently disqualified for office.¹³³ These disputes were quickly dealt with, and none of them emerged to threaten the new assembly with another breach in a Belfast church of God. And the assembly continued to grow. The publication of a revised version of the statement of faith—with plans in the summer of 1923 for the production of 1000 copies¹³⁴—was accompanied by a series of baptisms in such premises as Bloomfield Baptist Church and Apsley Street Gospel Hall that required investment in a ‘baptizing suit’.¹³⁵ By October 1923, one cup was no longer enough at the breaking of bread.¹³⁶ By 1925, membership was approaching sixty, and the church had found new premises.¹³⁷ The church had begun to grow.

¹²⁹ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 159.

¹³⁰ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 135.

¹³¹ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 174.

¹³² Rea Memorial Minute Book, 181–182.

¹³³ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 187.

¹³⁴ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 193.

¹³⁵ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 184, 195, 200.

¹³⁶ Rea Memorial Minute Book, 198.

¹³⁷ *Rea Memorial*, 17; [Poots], ‘The Beginnings’, single sheet.

It is not clear how the first *Needed Truth* secession responded to the new assembly in Belfast. The Vernalites had lost some significant manpower during the years in which the Howard Street assembly had been established,¹³⁸ and articles in *Green Pastures* did not pay attention to developments in Ireland, except to note, sometime in the 1920s, the formation of a Vernalite assembly in Belfast.¹³⁹ Formal links were never developed between the two communities, though at least one family had members in both churches.¹⁴⁰ Despite their structural similarities, and their drawing upon doctrines that had been first advanced in *Needed Truth*, each community developed its own emphases, with the Howard Street position on the public participation of women in worship likely providing an insurmountable obstacle to fellowship with the wider family of *Needed Truth* and Vernalite fellowships. For the differences mattered. After all, the churches of God, across the *Needed Truth*, Vernalite, and Howard Street spectrum, were comprised of earnest and vigorous Christians, who received ‘the Apostles’ teaching ... And steadfastly in it believe, / With singleness of heart.’¹⁴¹ And these Christians were determined to continue: as *Needed Truth* recognized, in words it mistakenly attributed to Robert

¹³⁸ John Montgomerie, ‘My Odyssey: A Conscientious Objector in the First World War’, *BHR*, 10 (2014), 29–41.

¹³⁹ Thomson, ‘Memorandum’, n.p., citing address books now deposited in the CBA.

¹⁴⁰ I owe this information to Gordon Beck.

¹⁴¹ A. P., ‘The footsteps of the flock’, *NT*, 19 (1907), 28.

Burns, 'When we fell we aye got up again, / And so will we yet.'¹⁴²
That was one thing held in common by the churches of God in
Belfast.

¹⁴² Robert Burns (mistakenly attributed), quoted in *NT*, 18 (1906), 223.

