

COHESION AND CONFLICT IN 1880s CAMBRIDGE

Through the 1880s Baptists maintained a tenuous presence in Cambridge and surrounding districts in the Waikato. The fellowship eventually petered out, not to be reactivated until 1910. The principal reasons for the failure of this Church have been skillfully summarised elsewhere.¹ There remains, nevertheless, a story to be told. Accounts of Christian history in New Zealand have rarely advanced beyond noting the rise and fall of institutions, congregations and societies. Little has been done to add flesh to the bones by examining the corporate lives and aspirations of the people involved or by placing congregational history on the broader canvas of colonial society. A key impediment has been a lack of sources. Denominational records often give little sense of the dynamics of local faith communities. In the case of the first Cambridge Baptist Church significant records do survive, in the form of minute books, account ledgers and a surprising number of letters. Though not exhaustive (there are, for instance, no documents reflecting the specific interests of women or children) these sources add nuance and colour to our understanding of early Baptist life in New Zealand.

1 J.A. Clifford, *A Handful of Grain, The Centenary History of the Baptist Union of N.Z., Vol. 2, 1883-1914* (Wellington: N.Z. Baptist Historical Society, 1982) pp. 55-6.

Connection

The first Cambridge Baptist Church was formed conventionally enough. An historical note in the members' minutes book records that

a few of the Baptist friends consulted together and deeming it desirable that they should occasionally meet to hold fellowship with one another decided to have a monthly Sunday Service and a week-night Bible Reading.²

Yet an outstanding feature of the new fellowship was the importance of its connections beyond the local congregation. There appears to have been no attempt to assert the autonomy traditionally associated with Baptist Churches. A year after its own foundation Cambridge joined with 21 others to form the Baptist Union of New Zealand. However it was with the Auckland Baptist Church (first at Wellesley St, then at the Queen St Tabernacle) that the most important links were maintained. There were practical reasons. The Auckland Church was remarkably proactive in taking up land for future causes. A section had been secured in the fledgling town of Cambridge and held for a number of years. It was natural, therefore, for the new Church to consult with Auckland. However the link was cemented before there was any application to use the property.³ In July 1881 the group resolved to contact Rev. A.W. Webb of the Auckland Church to ascertain "when he or any of the Wellesley St Deacons should be visiting the Waikato district, so that we might embrace the opportunity of being formed into a Baptist Church." The visit took place on 29 September, when Webb and his successor, Thomas Spurgeon, arrived "for the purpose of forming a Baptist Church."

Thus the Cambridge Church, though it emerged from a traditional "gathering" of believers, depended at its formal

2 *Members' Minute Book, Cambridge Baptist Church, 1881-1889 (MM)*, N.Z.B.H.S. Archive file 73/3

3 *MM*, 7 December 1881.

commencement on senior figures from outside the congregation. This would be a consistent pattern, reinforced in numerous ways. The new body immediately adopted the Auckland Church's written constitution⁴ and at a meeting on 4 May 1882 it was resolved that the Church formally affiliate with what was now clearly its parent body.⁵ Thomas Spurgeon's presence was thereafter sought at each of the annual anniversary services, with the scheduled dates of these events being changed whenever necessary in order to accommodate his timetable.⁶

By far the most important symbol of this close connection was the senior Church's virtual control of the Cambridge pastorate. No choice of pastor was made without the advice, blessing and support of Auckland. The influence began at the foundation meeting. After the formal business Webb proposed that the Church consider "a gentleman who had been labouring as a City Missionary in Perth". This candidate, later revealed to be David Whytock, had already been approached. If the Church were minded to call him for up to three months, Wellesley St would provide financial assistance.⁷ Perhaps not surprisingly the new Church accepted the offer. In January 1882, at the conclusion of the initial period, Thomas Spurgeon chaired a special meeting at which he "strongly urged" Whytock's permanent appointment. This duly occurred, again with the promise of assistance.⁸

4 See the compact recorded in the front of the members' minute book.

5 *MM*, 4 May 1882. The resolution was carried "unanimously" although this was possible only because one member, George Smerdon, "undertook to sacrifice all personal feeling in the matter". See also the minutes of the previous meeting on March 30 1882.

6 See for instance *MM*, 7 September 1882, and 2, 12 & 19 April 1885.

7 *MM*, 29 September 1881.

8 *MM*, 15 January 1882.

Exactly a year later a special meeting was receiving Whytock's resignation. His stated reason was that "his heart was in evangelistic work". However, the members appear to have had a different perspective, resolving, "but not unanimously"

that as there does not appear to be mutual confidence between the Church and Pastor his continuance cannot be for his comfort or the spiritual prosperity of the Church and that therefore his resignation be accepted.⁹

The next action of the meeting was to appoint a deputation "to confer with Messrs Spurgeon and Knight in reference to the future pastorate of the Church." The Auckland Church promised continued support of fifty pounds (one third of the Pastor's salary) for the coming year but urged that Cambridge accept Whytock's offer to supply the pulpit in the mean-time. This advice was followed without dissent.

Thus, at every stage of Whytock's term the key decisions were made in deference to the views of the Wellesley St Church. The next two attempts to secure a minister were fruitless. In July 1883, in the only instance of an apparently independent decision, the Church resolved to call the senior figure Charles Carter.¹⁰ This came to nothing. In November the by now normal pattern was reestablished. A call was issued to Thomas Bray of Greendale on the suggestion of Spurgeon who, it seems, had already discussed the matter in some detail with Bray.¹¹ Bray's case is interesting as he appears to have written accepting the call only to withdraw by telegram soon after. Faced with this embarrassment and after "lengthy correspondence" with Bray the Church was constrained to consult once more with Spurgeon. Another deputation traveled North. This time the outcome was a recommendation that Bray be released from his engagement and a replacement minister be sought from

9 *MM*, 15 January 1883.

10 *MM*, 29 July 1883.

11 *MM*, 29 November and 9 December 1883.

England. Spurgeon, through his famous father, was to be the Church's agent in this search.¹²

The agency gave a virtually free hand. No vetting of candidates by the congregation was expected. On 13 May 1884 the Deacons received a photograph of "the Rev J.G. Wilson our future Pastor who has been selected by Rev. C.H. Spurgeon as pastor of our Church at Cambridge." Wilson arrived from England in mid-June 1884.¹³

Wilson's appointment was for two years, after which he chose not to renew the relationship. This decision was communicated to the Deacons at a meeting on 24 February 1886. Characteristically, the immediate response was to seek the counsel of Auckland.¹⁴ By this point Cambridge's sense of connection appears to have broadened, as advice was also sought from the Baptist Union.¹⁵ Nevertheless the link with Auckland remained decisive. The next incumbent would be G.O. Griffiths, a member of the Auckland Church. The invitation to the pastorate was subject to the continuance of support from Auckland.¹⁶ Spurgeon was invited to give the charge to the new pastor at a service of "induction and recognition", held on 26 September, 1886.

12 *Deacons' Minute Book, Cambridge Baptist Church, 1883-1889 (DM)*, N.Z.B.H.S. file 73/4, 22 January 1884; *MM*, 31 January 1884 and 3 February 1884; Bray would later be appointed to the pastorate at Mt Eden, another congregation affiliated with the Auckland Church.

13 *DM*, 13 May 1884. See also the letters of the Church Secretary Houghton to Seering Matthews, 9 and 15 August 1882 and to C.H. Spurgeon 13 September 1882 - Cambridge Letter Book, N.Z.B.H.S. Archive file 074/6, ff. 13-17.

14 *DM*, 24 February 1886.

15 *DM*, 21 April 1886.

16 *MM*, 29 July 1886. Some consternation was caused to the Deacons when Auckland indicated it would continue support for one year only, in the reduced sum of 25 pounds p.a. - *DM*, 27 August 1886.

Cambridge's dependence on Auckland continued unbroken through Griffith's ministry. Financial support from the "mother Church" (supplemented from the Baptist Union funds from 1884) was essential throughout its existence. When, in 1887, a new monthly preaching station was planned at Whao/Litchfield, it was undertaken only with the approval of Auckland and the provision from the larger Church of pulpit supply to fill the consequent monthly gap at Cambridge.¹⁷ The congregation was in effect a home mission project of its Auckland sponsor. This status would become formalised in the last months of the Church's existence.

Covenant and Community

The determination of the Cambridge congregation to maintain its connectional links was matched by an equally determined, though ultimately less successful, effort to build covenantal links within the Church community itself. In the founding charter members promised "to watch, in love, over one another, seeking each other's good, bearing with each other's weaknesses." This commitment was taken seriously, at least on occasion, though the results were mixed. Applicants for baptism and/or "fellowship" were visited by Deacons and reports on their faith status brought to subsequent meetings of the Church. Of those applying in the first days of the new congregation Eliza Took aged twelve and Louisa Harris aged nine were advised to "wait a little."¹⁸ On a later occasion, unusually detailed reports were presented to a meeting at which ten candidates were considered. Alice Riley was recommended as

she was simply trusting according to the light she has received, but evidently had not studied the Word of God very much. Her parents spoke highly of her and had noticed a marked change in her character for some considerable time.

17 *DM*, 31 January and 21 February 1887.

18 *MM*, 13 October 1881.

At the same meeting Manford Scott was particularly endorsed because "in his daily occupation he was surrounded with more than ordinary temptations and had been enabled by God's help to overcome them."¹⁹

Matters were not always so straightforward. On 27 March 1884 a "Miss Johnson" was nominated for baptism and membership. The necessary reports were favourable but Miss Johnson herself wrote to the Church withdrawing her application for membership "owing to certain remarks having been passed about her conduct in church." This caused some consternation, with the Church resolving that two deacons visit the aggrieved Miss Johnson to "explain matters" but that, on the condition that her letter be withdrawn, she be admitted as a member. This was apparently what transpired, as Miss Johnson subsequently entered the membership roll.²⁰

During this period (mid-1884) the pastorate was vacant pending the arrival of J.G. Wilson. The Deacons attempted to implement the oversight provisions of the founding compact. Visitors were appointed to approach six men who "were not as regular attendants as formerly". The visits were not necessarily welcome. Two of the men, John and James Harris, initially declined to receive the deputation at all. There was one apparent success, however. Alex. McKinnon, a founding member, had been suspended in 1882 because "he had fallen away from grace and had several times been guilty of behaviour inconsistent to a member of a Christian Church." Two years later he resolved to return to active membership.²¹ In respect to the others, little was done to follow through on the visits. On 29 October 1884 the deacons decided that the consideration of these cases "should stand over until a later date." The matter was quietly dropped.²² Wilson may have influenced this less aggressive stance, as he

19 *MM*, 25 October 1883.

20 *MM*, 27 March and 13 April 1884.

21 *MM*, 27 July 1882 and 28 August 1884.

22 *DM*, 16 July, 24 September and 29 October 1884.

seems to have preferred a different tactic. Soon after his arrival it was resolved "that in order to bring the Pastor and Church members more intimately together; a tea meeting be held every quarter for members only."²³ Wilson's successor, G.O. Griffiths, took a sterner approach. In early 1887 he instituted a membership revision which eventually saw 21 names (a third of the total) struck off the roll. In most cases this was for "absenting themselves from the Lord's table for a period of six months".²⁴ In November 1887 a register of attendance at communion was introduced.²⁵

In 1888 Mr T. Trehwellan, a member of long standing, filed for bankruptcy. This presented a special case to the Church community. The deacons resolved that Trehwellan be requested to meet with the Secretary, J. Houghton, to "explain the cause of his failure."²⁶ Trehwellan lived in Hamilton and no meeting seems to have taken place. However he supplied "a kind and interesting letter". Trehwellan, the deacons or both were concerned at the impact the financial failure might have on his future Christian fellowship. The deacons accordingly resolved "that a vote of sympathy be tendered to Mr Trehwellan in his present difficulties and a letter commending him to any Christian Church that he may meet with."²⁷

Underlying these specific efforts to promote and maintain discipline was the normal run of ordinary services, prayer meetings, Bible studies, business meetings and social gatherings. If it was to be achieved at all, Wilson's envisaged greater intimacy would grow in these settings. The record of the members' and deacons' business meetings from this period provides an important insight into the changing life of the

23 *MM*, 28 August 1884.

24 *DM*, 21 February and 23 May 1887. Among those removed was the apparently erratic Alex. McKinnon.

25 *DM*, 21 November 1887.

26 *DM*, 23 April 1888.

27 *DM*, 14 May and 18 June 1888.

Church. The members met approximately monthly during the entire life of the Church and in the early years were clearly the main decision making body. Purchases, preaching arrangements, membership questions and the all-too-regular need to fill the pastorate came before these gatherings, which nevertheless rarely attracted more than 10-12 (approx. 25% on average) of the members.

From July 1883 minutes of deacons' meetings were kept. These recorded details of correspondence received and sent but addressed little in the way of business, other than issues to be brought to the members. At least once in this early period the deacons met merely to confirm the minutes, there being "no actual business gone into or done".²⁸ With the arrival of the more authoritarian Griffiths in 1886, however, the pattern changed. Deacons minutes become fuller, dealing with questions earlier left to the members. Outstanding in this respect is the handling of the roll revision of 1887. The 21 names were struck off by the deacons with no reference to the members. Under Griffiths, members' minutes become shorter, with a small agenda largely limited to reports, applications for membership and planning social events. Meetings began to fail to reach a quorum (one because there were not enough males present).²⁹

The change in the nature of business meetings reflected the growing tensions and difficulties faced by the Cambridge Church under Griffith's ministry. Even in this period, however, the earlier pattern of soirees, tea meetings, anniversary services and picnics was continued. These were ways the congregation sought to build its covenantal life, evidence of a wish to fulfill

28 *DM*, 18 June 1885.

29 *MM*, 1 March and 16 August 1888. There appears to be a confusion of dates around the August meeting. Notes in the minutes suggest the recorded meeting was actually held on 19 July.

the founding promise to “watch, in love, over one another.”³⁰ Regular business meetings and twice weekly services, together with specific attempts to provide a framework of discipline were other important means of building community. When these are laid alongside external links, it is clear that Cambridge Baptists actively constructed both external and internal forces for cohesiveness. Yet neither connectional links nor covenantal commitment prevented the ultimate failure of the cause. We now turn to the reasons for that failure.

Collapse

In his short yet pithy analysis of the first Baptist cause in Cambridge, Ayson Clifford identified chronic problems of “membership, ministry and money”. These three interrelated factors surfaced increasingly in the minutes and correspondence of the Church. In the limited space available to him Ayson Clifford could not explore far the subtleties of these problems. When these are understood the significance of this combination of constraints emerges.

Finances were a struggle at Cambridge from the outset. At no time in its history was the Church able to contemplate continuing without significant aid from Auckland and, eventually, from the Baptist Union. Not surprisingly, the key liabilities were the minister’s salary and the building. In November 1882 a tender for the building of the Church was accepted and a finance committee set up to “for providing the funds necessary for the erection of the proposed Tabernacle.” The total expected cost was 600 pounds. Subscriptions were raised and events planned, but a bank overdraft of just over 200

30 This endeavour continued to the end. The last recorded decision of the members was to hold a Sunday School picnic. *MM*, 2 January 1890.

pounds was nevertheless necessary.³¹ By the January 1883 meeting at which David Whytock tendered his resignation, the treasurer had to report a “deficit of 14 pounds in the General Fund and wished to know what was to be done in order to provide for it.”³² There was a temporary improvement but in May the treasurer was reporting that the Church was four months in arrears on rent for the Oddfellows Hall “due to want of funds”. It was agreed to ask the members for a special subscription towards the general funds.³³ An envelope system was introduced, supplemented by the positioning of offering plates at the exits.³⁴

By March 1885 there was still a 12 pound deficit; in July it had ballooned to 25 pounds. Secretary Houghton saw an increase in members as the only solution. It was agreed that the envelope system had failed and that the practice of passing the plate around should be reintroduced. Another special subscription was sought.³⁵ The shortfalls continued, indeed the situation gradually worsened. On 30 June 1887 the deacons were forced to respond to a solicitor’s letter pointing out that interest payments on the bank loan were two quarters behind.³⁶ In December the treasurer noted that average Sunday offerings had fallen below two pounds.³⁷ The situation was by now virtually irrecoverable. A year later secretary Houghton applied for an increase of the grant from Auckland, regretting that it was

31 Letter, E.H. Shoard to Messrs Carter & Hogan, 23 November 1882, Cambridge Letter Book f. 2; *MM*, 30 November 1882, Cambridge Accounts Book, N.Z.B.H.S. Archive file 074/6.

32 *MM*, 15 January 1883.

33 *MM*, 24 May 1883.

34 *MM*, 27 November 1884. By this time a need was felt “to remind the congregation of the plates standing at the doors”.

35 *MM*, 26 March and 30 July 1885.

36 *DM*, 30 June 1887.

37 *DM*, 28 December 1887.

“almost impossible to pay our way even with the help you have given.”³⁸

The Cambridge Church was not alone in feeling the pinch. The Auckland Church too was suffering. In reply to Houghton’s application for funding, Seering Matthews disclosed that “we are not meeting our own expenditure...despite the most rigid economy and retrenchment.”³⁹ None of this is too surprising – the whole country was in the grip of a recession, which had been particularly difficult in Northern regions since 1885. This was the context of Trehwellan’s bankruptcy. The poor economy also set the scene for the migration of workers in search of employment. The leadership of Cambridge were acutely sensitive to the shedding of members, not only from their congregation (with the Salvation Army apparently being the principal beneficiary) but, more fundamentally, from the locality. Houghton noted “the exceedingly depressed state of everything in this district”.⁴⁰

In a series of revealing letters Pastor Griffiths reported his view of the situation. In December 1888 he was losing hope.

The congregations are keeping up as well as can be expected, considering that so many have been compelled to leave the district, and so few coming into the district. I think there is a more united and peaceful spirit reigning in the Church that it has ever experienced in the past, but O how ineffectual the preaching is proving for breaking down the strongholds of Satan.⁴¹

Three months later he had accepted the inevitable

38 Copy Letter, Houghton to Matthews, 8 September 1888, Cambridge Letter Book f. 717 (loose).

39 Letter, Matthews to Houghton, 2 October 1888, N.Z.B.H.S. Archive file 73/2.

40 Copy Letter, Houghton to W.R. Woolley, 8 September 1888, Cambridge Letter Book, f. 719 (loose).

41 Letter, Griffiths to The Deacons of the Tabernacle Auckland, 26 December 1888, N.Z.B.H.S. Archive file 73/2.

I have come to the conclusion that the best thing that I can do for Cambridge is to retire from the Pastorate of the Church. Everything is on the downgrade. The Spiritual life of the Church is rapidly deteriorating....Several of the active members are leaving us, - Bro. & Sis. Rockliffe have returned to Tasmania, & Deacon Fitzgerald has resigned with the intention of joining the Salvation Army.⁴²

Fred Battley from the Auckland Church visited Cambridge in May, later reporting "the Church is much weakened by removals and impoverishment of the members and only a mere handful remain. There are only 22 resident members in the Church now."⁴³

Cambridge had clearly become trapped in a downward spiral of declining funds and shrinking congregations. It was this that Ayson Clifford had in mind when he identified "money and membership" as fatal weaknesses. Yet this cycle of causation was not closed. The economic recession was clearly one factor which accelerated the process. Another was Clifford's third element: the ministry. In citing this he had in mind the inability of the Church to retain its Pastors. Cambridge had four ministers in its nine years. Yet rapid turnover of Baptist ministers was common in 1880s New Zealand, particularly in small Churches. Other rural causes too suffered recession-driven migration and survived into the 1890s. Something more was happening at Cambridge. In Griffiths, it seems, it had a minister with a particular ability to alienate his members.

Griffith's stern approach to discipline has already been noted. He appears to have allowed little room for compromise. Houghton's health collapsed in September 1888, with the unusual result that Griffiths himself delivered the annual report for that year. This report opened in typical form.

42 Letter, Griffiths to T. Spurgeon, 1 March 1889, N.Z.B.H.S. Archive file 72/2.

43 F. Battley, "Report to Pastor and Deacons: Jottings of Interview Friday 3 May 89 with Cambridge Church", pp. 1-2. N.Z.B.H.S. Archive file 72/2.

Another year has passed away in the history of our Church and has left us with a record in wh[ic]h there is much unfaithfulness, the blame of which must rest at our own door.

This hectoring approach produced inevitable tensions. Despite his later report to the Auckland deacons of a “peaceful spirit reigning in the Church” all was not well between pastor and people. As noted above, Griffiths himself reported the movement of one of his deacons to the Salvation Army. Battley identified another, T.J. Gerrish, as one “who has been out of accord with the Pastor”.⁴⁴ Gerrish tendered his resignation from all offices in December 1888 but was challenged to provide a satisfactory reason for doing so.⁴⁵ The resignation was withdrawn in January, only to be renewed in April when it became evident that Griffith was to stay on for a time.⁴⁶

The most startling admission of conflict within the Church comes from the mercurial successor to Houghton as Church secretary, the aged Samuel Crickett. In March 1889, in the wake of Griffiths’ resignation, he gave his own account of affairs to Seering Matthews in Auckland. At this point he was apparently a supporter of his Pastor.

I preface my note by saying that I do feel ashamed of my subject, namely: that Mr Griffiths should have reason for leaving the Tabernacle in Cambridge....There is a party in the tabernacle who(sic) has of late taken offence at his preaching the gospel in Spirit and in truth. They have felt themselves sadly and badly knocked about with these words of truth spoken on Judas the traitor. The Subject was very well spoken and created great sensation and noise....

Now this party is growing in the Tabernacle and has resolved that Mr Griffiths shall not rule over them and has cried out away with him and I suppose it is as well that he should go, but it is a sad alternative....

And it is vexing to hear members of other churches rejoicing in hope of the Tabernacle being closed and very willing that the

44 Battley, “Report”, p. 1.

45 *DM*, 17 December 1888; *MM*, 20 December 1888.

46 *MM*, 18 April 1889.

Salvation Army should have it as a Barrax(sic). Indeed one of our Bastard Deacons is very willing and indeed anxious that this should be the case. May the Lord help us and keep us from ourselves.⁴⁷

Crickett's unusually informal style is found also in his minutes. On 31 March a meeting fell apart after Griffiths left the room. Crickett described the aftermath.

There were a number of the members who went outside, to hold a meeting on their own account I suppose, but I do not know what conclusion they came to. But [among] those [who] waited inside, after a conversation in general, it was agreed that a deputation be appointed to wait upon the pastor and request him to wait with them for another Sabbath, when we would by that time know the will and mind of the Auckland church concerning us.⁴⁸

Crickett's confidence in Griffiths seems to have deserted him by the time Battley arrived for consultation in May. He was not present at Battley's meetings with the remaining Deacons and then with the Church, although he appears to have written up the minutes. Crickett coolly records Battley's impression that Griffiths enjoyed the "esteem of all"⁴⁹ but he suggests his own views in the minutes of the next meeting. After noting the view of some that the key cause of "so many members and adherents being absent from the Church" was the attraction of the Salvation Army he confessed "and your secretary was disposed to blame the pastor, but he would not sustain the charge."⁵⁰

Whatever Crickett's personal position it is clear that there was real conflict within the Church and that much of this tension centred on Griffiths. Battley's solution for the Church's future

47 Letter S. Crickett to Seering Matthews, 26 March 1889. N.Z.B.H.S. Archive file 73/2. (See also Griffiths' letter to Matthews, 12 March 1889, N.Z.B.H.S. Archive file 73/2.)

48 *MM*, 31 March 1889.

49 *MM*, 3 May 1889.

50 *MM*, 30 May 1889. Griffiths later described this meeting as being "not a very pleasant one" – see Letter, Griffiths to Battley 18 June 1889, N.Z.B.H.S. Archive file 73/2.

had been to relieve it of the need to support a minister. A "Home Mission", with a missionary engaged directly by Auckland would be set up for the area. Griffiths was appointed to continue in the new role for six months, under the impression that his continued presence was welcomed by the remaining congregation. But Battley had badly misread the situation. Griffiths felt betrayed by the lack of support from those who had enthusiastically adopted Battley's proposal.⁵¹ He was succeeded briefly by Rev. E. Barnett whose observation on arrival was that "between Mr Griffiths and the members that remain things are anything but pleasant, and things have been going from bad to worse for the last six months."⁵² By February 1890 Barnett too was gone. The Baptist cause in Cambridge had finally collapsed.

Conclusions

Cambridge had never escaped the discouraging combination of low membership and inadequate funds matched with significant liabilities. Yet other small Baptist causes had similar problems and managed to limp along. The outcome at Cambridge suggests additional, exacerbating factors. The break-down in the relationship between Griffiths and key members was one of these. The abortive Waikato Home Mission revealed the limits of Baptist connectionality. Neither Auckland nor the Baptist Union could dictate terms. Despite their genuine openness to connectional links, Baptists in colonial Waikato were nevertheless Baptist enough to guard their independence! The general economic downturn was a second aggravating factor. The recession coincided with a renewal of gold extraction in near-by Thames and the migration of the Waikato population there and elsewhere in the search for security. Religious communities were not immune from such

51 Griffiths to Battley 18 June 1889.

52 Letter, Barnett to Woolley, 13 November 1889, N.Z.B.H.S. Archive file 73/2..

outside influences. The demise of the first Cambridge Baptist Church cannot be understood without a grasp of broader trends.

Insights, however, can flow in more than one direction. Does a detailed study of this Baptist community add to our understanding of wider colonial society?

One of the liveliest debates in New Zealand historiography in recent years has centred on Miles Fairburn's thesis about colonial pakeha society. Fairburn suggests that colonial social organisation was "gravely deficient" in that

community structures were few and weak and the forces of social isolation were many and powerful. Bondlessness was central to colonial life. The typical colonist was a socially independent individual.⁵³

Fairburn's provocative interpretation has received considerable attention, much of it critical. Most of the contrary views have been based on local or regional studies which have stressed the function of school committees, local boards and councils, women's groups, lodges and churches in establishing and maintaining forces of cohesiveness.⁵⁴ Fairburn has responded vigorously, pointing out that he does not pretend to provide a universal explanation and that therefore apparent exceptions prove little.

Counter examples are entirely inconclusive unless (and this is the vital caveat) they are combined with procedures that assure us that the examples represent typicalities or, at least, do not represent aberrations.⁵⁵

53 M. Fairburn, *The Ideal Society and its Enemies: The Foundations of Modern New Zealand Society 1850-1900* (Auckland: A.U.P., 1989) pp. 11-12.

54 See for instance the articles in the *New Zealand Journal of History*, Vol. 25, No. 2, October 1991. A more recent and general discussion is found in J. Belich, *Making Peoples: A History of the New Zealanders from Polynesian Settlement to the End of the Nineteenth Century*, (Auckland: Penguin, 1996) pp. 411-446.

55 M. Fairburn, "A Discourse on Critical Method" *N.Z.J.H.* Vol. 25, No. 2, October 1991, pp. 158-177, p. 160.

This is a trenchant point, the more so as local or regional examples are very difficult to relate to the sort of national statistical information that Fairburn cites. The interface is inherently problematical. The concerns, and therefore the questions, of those holding enough power to gather statistics cannot be assumed to match the day to day preoccupations of people living out their lives. In any case, even if some connection could be made, a flood of highly detailed local studies which threw up examples of strong social fabric would have only limited value as evidence. Local records, by nature, will be produced by agents of cohesion, potentially magnifying their importance. Atomisation, by contrast, is likely to generate only silence, leaving few local traces.

The Baptists at Cambridge, then, despite their apparent commitment to connectionality and their attempts to build a strong covenantal community are of little comfort to those disquieted by Fairburn's thesis. On the contrary, the case study tends to support his view. Fairburn does not deny the presence of forces for cohesion, it's just that he concludes they were largely unsuccessful.⁵⁶ Sadly, the first Cambridge Baptist Church embodied this argument in a near perfect example of failure to achieve "critical mass". Despite surprisingly strong centripetal energy from both without and within, the cause failed. Outside support could not nullify economic migration, internal discipline foundered, relationships broke down, and the membership scattered. Atomisation? Not quite. Many of the departing members transferred to other Churches or denominations. Nevertheless, this local case fits Fairburn's pattern remarkably neatly.

There are other questions. This study raises issues about early New Zealand Baptist life which warrant further investigation. The importance of the Auckland Church has long been recognised but the full extent of its influence is yet to be established. Further, if it can be shown that Cambridge was not

56 See Fairburn, *Ideal Society*, pp. 158-187.

an aberration, we may uncover a picture of colonial Baptists as people who held classical distinctives such as autonomy more lightly than might have been imagined. Widening the focus still further, we would ask "was this pragmatism forced by colonial exigencies, or did it reflect already existing developments in Britain?" The relationship between Baptist life at "home" and its New Zealand counterpart is complex; the experience of Cambridge suggests some of its subtleties.

Finally, most importantly, there are the people themselves. Cambridge Baptist Church was not merely an example of colonial trends or home mission ambitions. It was a site on which a group of believers sought to construct a corporate life and witness. That it failed was for many a tragedy. Among these was Samuel Crickett. It is fitting to close with his lament at the Church's imminent collapse, as it encapsulates the simplicity of the fellowship's ambitions and the pain felt at its demise.

Mr Griffiths way-going has deprived me of sleep and of stomach and, while I write, I am weak and stupid for I am now three score and 14 years and the idea of having no place to worship in presses heavy upon me, no place to shew forth the Lord's Death and Love,...without place for communion.⁵⁷

One Baptist, at least, found the prospect of an atomised existence alarming.

Martin Sutherland

57 Letter, Crickett to Matthews, 26 March 1889.