

ROUND THE CHURCHES

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115: Seymour Hill Church

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Seymour Hill Methodist Church was one of the many developments supported by the Methodist Church Extension Fund (MCEF) in the post-WW2 years. The work of the MCEF paralleled the creation of large housing estates round Belfast. Seymour Hill was the first enterprise undertaken by the newly-formed Northern Ireland Housing Trust (now the NI Housing Executive) which acquired Seymour Hill House in 1953.

By 1959 some 494 new homes had been occupied and 12 years later a total of 1,109 houses had been built for 4,097 people.

The Seymour Hill (and Conway) estates lie between Belfast and Lisburn and the work there was initially developed by the Lisburn circuit. A start was made by opening a Sunday School in Derriagh Orange Hall in order to make contact with Methodist families and to build up a potential congregation for the new cause.

By 1958 a dual-purpose church/hall, designed by S V W McCready, a Methodist architect, had been completed at a cost of £14,000. The MCEF contributed £5,000 and Fred H Menary of Lisburn personally donated another £5,000.

By 1960 under the leadership of the Rev R H Gallagher 120 families had been gathered into the congregation and a morning attendance of up to 80 and with 'no dearth of Sunday School teachers and church leaders'.

From the beginning the three churches in the estate, Presbyterian, Methodist and C of I, have co-operated, holding united Holy Week services and running united youth meetings on Sunday evenings. In addition the local Council of Churches sponsored the Seymour Hill Community Care scheme and other practical forms of social outreach.

It was initially a mixed housing estate with a minority of Catholic families. One of those who attended the Sunday evening 'Open House' club in the Methodist premises was Paul Clark of UTV who regards that club as a formative part of his Christian journey.

Winston Good who was minister there at the time recalls that the Club was picketed by the Free Presbyterians because they played games on a Sunday evening.

In 1966 Seymour Hill was transferred to the newly-created Finaghy circuit on the Belfast District.

Faced with the need for increasing accommodation it was decided in 1969 to reconstruct the front area of the dual-purpose Church/Hall rather than build a separate church so as to provide a permanent choir area and sanctuary.

In addition new halls were provided, a minor 'R H Gallagher Hall' in memory of the founder minister of the congregation and an additional room (which could be partitioned in two) in memory of Fred Menary.

The church has, over the first 50 years of its existence, held special missions and served the spiritual and social needs of the local community. The current church programme includes activities for young and old and as it enters its second half-century the congregation prays that the church will continue to flourish, not simply in numerical terms, but in its Christian witness and fellowship.