

PLYMOUTH CHURCH, INDIANAPOLIS.

BY JUNIUS B. ROBERTS.

[The following historical sketch of Plymouth Congregational Church was prepared several years ago by Mr. Roberts for a meeting of the congregation. It is an example of historical work which ought to be done much more generally than it is. It is the purpose of the editor to secure other similar church histories from time to time. A sketch of Plymouth Church, Indianapolis, is especially in order on account of the widespread influence which this church had, and its leadership, especially in Mr. McCulloch's pastorate, in introducing new methods and ideas in church work, as well as developing philanthropic work in the city generally. In our next number an account of Mr. McCulloch and his pioneer work in this direction will be presented. In this article Mr. Roberts confines himself to a description of the church itself. No one is better equipped for this work than Mr. Roberts. A trained historian, for years a teacher of history in Shortridge High School, he had long connection with Plymouth Church and an intimate knowledge of its workings.—EDITOR.]

A SUMMARY of the outward facts relating to the history of Plymouth Church could be made very brief. It would be the short and simple annals of the poor. It would be something like this: Born about August 9, 1857. In its struggle for existence it successfully weathered the various ills, ailments, weaknesses, discouragements and backsets that such organizations are subject to. It has been a power for good in this community.

Not one of the original founders of the church now survives, I believe, but some of its early members and active workers are still among its active supporters.

It has had nine ministers, whose terms of service lasted for various periods, the shortest being that of Rev. W. C. Bartlett, the first settled pastor, which lasted less than one year, and the longest being that of Rev. Oscar C. McCulloch, which lasted fourteen years, and was terminated by his death in 1892. Mr. McCulloch was the only pastor who died while connected with the church. The names of these ministers in chronological order are as follow:

Rev. W. C. Bartlett.....	May to August, 1858
Rev. N. A. Hyde.....	1858-1867
Rev. E. P. Ingersoll.....	1868-1871
Rev. J. L. Bennett.....	1871-1873
Rev. O. S. Dean.....	1873-1877
Rev. O. C. McCulloch.....	1877-1891
Rev. F. E. Dewhurst.....	1892-1899
Rev. H. C. Meserve.....	1900-1904
Rev. H. Blunt.....	1904-

This church has owned and occupied three houses of worship: The original Plymouth Church, northwest corner of Meridian street and Monument Place, now a part of the English Hotel; the second Plymouth Church, on the southeast corner of Meridian and New York streets, on ground now occupied by the Federal Building, and the third, on Central avenue, at Fourteenth street, which was acquired by purchase and remodeled.

The church, after its organization, until it built its first edifice, met in the Senate chamber of the old State House. During the erection of the second building the church services were held in the Grand Opera House. For several months after the sale of the second church building we were privileged to use the Jewish Temple on Delaware street.

On the business and financial side, Plymouth Church pursued a very steady and uniform course. It was always in debt. The various schemes and devices which have had to be resorted to to meet financial obligations, form a very considerable part of the records of its trustees.

The following passage in the records reveals the strain which was almost constant for many years. I am sorry to say that the clerk of that meeting seemed to lose his patience and his temper when he penned the following words (1864): "Brother X. Y. Z. prayed that God would give the trustees of the church 'courage,' " and then in parentheses, "It is the impression of some, especially the clerk, that money would be preferable."

At the time of the resignation of Rev. O. S. Dean, the financial condition of the church was quite desperate, and it resulted in the

sale of the church, or rather surrender of the church property, to W. H. English, who held a mortgage upon it. At that time the church had the extreme good fortune to secure Rev. Oscar C. McCulloch as pastor. His vigor, enterprise and hopefulness, aided by his splendid financial ability, resulted in the erection of the edifice universally known as Plymouth Church (par excellence), which for so many years was the center of much of the spiritual and intellectual life of this city.

From the organization of Plymouth Church to the present time, beginning with thirty-one members, there have been enrolled upon the records 755 names.

This church was born in the critical and troublous times just before the war, and its early years were in the midst of the awful struggles and the dread anticipations of the time that tried men's souls. Plymouth Church, along with most of the other churches of this city, was patriotic to the core. It contributed its due share of effort and sacrifice to the patriotic cause.

How doctrines, beliefs and policies vital at any given time may become obsolete, if not unthinkable, within the life of a single generation even is well illustrated by the following passage in the history of this church. To be appended to the Covenant and Confession of Faith, which was adopted August 3, 1857, W. T. Hatch offered the following:

"Resolved, As we who are about entering upon the organization of a Congregational Church, believe slave-holding to be a sin that should exclude a person from church membership, we will vote against the admission of any one who believes it to be right."

The resolution was adopted, whereupon a reconsideration was moved and the further consideration of the question was set for the following Thursday evening. Upon reconsideration the resolution was adopted without amendment by a vote of ayes and nays. It required some courage for any church, and especially for one in feeble infancy, to take such a stand at that time. It requires the exercise of a very vivid historic imagination to picture to one's self the meaning and effect of such a proceeding.

Again, to a revision of the Rules of the Church, adopted in

May, 1862, the two following resolutions are of interest as illustrating some of the sociological conditions of the times:

"Resolved, That persons who make use of, or sell intoxicating liquors as a beverage are guilty of an immorality which should exclude them from membership in the Church.

"Resolved, That we believe the holding of human beings as property is a sin, the renunciation of which should be a condition of membership in the Church."

Article XIII. in the Rules of the Church, adopted originally in 1857 and revised in 1862, reads as follows:

"The censures inflicted on offenders shall be—private reproof, public admonition, suspension, excommunication, according to the aggravation of the case.

"Notice of excommunication shall be given from the pulpit on the Sabbath.

"In case of private wrongs, the sufferer shall seek by private means to reclaim the offenders, nor shall the matter be brought before the church until all such means shall have been tried in vain. (See Matt. 18:15-16.) In cases of public and notorious offenses the matter shall be brought before the church without unnecessary delay. When a member is accused, he shall be seasonably furnished with a copy of the complaints and shall have a full hearing."

These rules of discipline have to our ears a kind of thin and far-away sound, but, whatever may be their present validity, they have not always been a dead letter, in testimony of which listen to an extract from the minutes of the annual meeting of December 28, 1874, names being omitted:

"The clerk was then called upon to present to the church the cases of three (3) of the church members which were referred by the committee to the church for their final action (naming the three members.) The case of each member was taken up separately, the church committee stating to the clerk the facts in the case of each one, and showing that each one had been labored with faithfully and long, and due effort was made to induce him to forsake the evil of his ways and turn to the Lord, but all without avail.

"After some discussion of the matter, Deacon —— made the following motion in regard to the case of John L.: 'Moved that we, the members of Plymouth Congregational Church of Indianapolis, in annual meeting assembled, suspend the said John L. from the communion and fellowship of Plymouth Congregational Church, together with the rights and privileges belonging to its members until at such time he shall return to the Lord with repentance of heart, renouncing all his sins and seeking forgiveness of God for his past transgressions.' Said motion was seconded by —— and carried by a unanimous vote of the church."

The same action was taken in regard to the other two offenders. As far as I know this incident is quite unique in the history of this church. Whether this is to be explained by the superior morale in the later church membership and the absence of offenders or to a letting down of the sense of responsibility for the conduct of its members, I leave for others to determine.

To those who have watched the course of Plymouth Church since the first twenty years of its existence, it may be a curious question as to whether it had any history on the ecclesiastical side. Did it ever stand for any type or form of theological belief? Indeed, it passed through a great transition. Its history ecclesiastically may be divided into two great periods. The first period is that of "strict construction," and the second that of the "open door." These terms are not exactly antithetical, but they connote very different situations and perhaps they differ more widely in the letter than they do in the spirit.

The idea of a church without a creed was hardly thinkable by the founders and early members of this church. And so among the first acts was to formulate a confession of faith, to which every one entering the church was expected to subscribe. Now, the first confession of faith was not of the deepest blue, nor did it contain all the fine points of Calvinism, but it was nevertheless of a decidedly cerulean complexion. And yet in the second year, or in 1859, it was thought desirable to strengthen somewhat the bulwarks of the orthodox faith by inserting a new article in the creed, as follows: "We believe that our first parents were origi-

nally holy; that they sinned against God and that all their descendants are unholy and disposed to sin, and, therefore, without redemption through Christ and regeneration by the Holy Spirit, are exposed to eternal death."

This article was probably penned by the Rev. N. A. Hyde, since he was chairman of the committee which recommended its adoption, and was pastor at the time. At any rate it very well expresses the doctrine generally preached in the so-called orthodox pulpits of that time, and possibly it expresses the general orthodox belief at the present time, though I fancy that few well-instructed preachers of the present would express it in precisely those terms.

The period of the "open door" commences with the accession of Oscar C. McCulloch to the Plymouth pulpit. It was the favorite watchword with Mr. McCulloch, and its adoption as the motto of the church marks the utter obliteration of all dogmatic statements in regard to theologic matters. Membership in the church after that time was based upon conduct and aspiration alone, the article upon membership in the constitution reading as follows: "All persons are eligible for membership who will unite with us on the basis of these principles and pledge themselves to carry out the objects of this church, it being distinctly understood and agreed that the applicant is not committed to any philosophy of faith, and that Christian spirit and Christian character shall be the only requisites of membership."

Upon this platform thereafter Plymouth Church stood. There was no disposition manifested in any quarter to revert to the old creed, or Confession of Faith, as it was called, and, although this attitude on the part of the church has brought upon it more or less criticism from other denominations, it is a ground for satisfaction that Plymouth pulpit was never turned into a polemic platform. Never was there heard from it a word or tone of a controversial character. The preachers who ministered to the church devoted themselves wholly to constructive work and teaching. In this matter it may fairly be claimed, I think, that Plymouth has been a potent leader, at least in this city and State.

The old militant spirit has died out to a large extent, and now you will almost never hear an attack made in one church upon the doctrines or practices of one of a different name. The spirit of harmony and brotherhood prevails among all Christian bodies which are working for the common uplift of mankind.

It is not my object to go into a detailed account of the various activities in which this church has engaged since its birth, though much might be said. The story of Plymouth Institute and the beginning of furnishing means for intellectual culture to busy people would make a whole chapter. The organizing of special classes for night work has now been taken up by other churches and other organizations, but the pace was set by Plymouth under the masterly leadership of Mr. McCulloch. The reorganization and the betterment of the charitable work of the city had the same initiative.

There are only a few incidents of an anecdotal character in the experiences of the church. One which is not without its humorous features I will mention. The various seasons when the pulpit has been vacant have been critical and anxious periods, as such must always be to any congregation. On one of these occasions, March, 1870, a call was extended to the Rev. Minot J. Savage, who was then the pastor of a Congregational church in Framingham, Mass. There was some correspondence, but finally Mr. Savage declined, and it was then ascertained that while corresponding with this church he had already virtually accepted a call to Hannibal, Mo.

But three years later there was another vacancy in Plymouth pulpit. Another call, an urgent one, was extended to Mr. Savage. He replied practically agreeing to accept upon a number of conditions which he named. The church met, and, after due consideration, agreed to comply with the conditions named. It must be remembered that this was during the "strict construction" period of the church's history.

In a few days the leading members of the church were appalled and came near having an attack of nervous prostration upon receiving another letter from Mr. Savage, saying that his conditions having been approved and thus made a part of the con-

tract, he was ready to accept the call, but that he thought it right to inform the church that he was no longer orthodox in his beliefs.

This letter produced a sensation, and was even characterized by some of the brethren as positively insulting. A meeting was hastily called and Mr. Savage was informed that the deal was all off. The Rev. Minot J. Savage has become since that time one of the most aggressive and notable preachers in the Unitarian church.

The first knowledge that I ever had of Plymouth Church, or any other church in Indianapolis, was in the summer of 1864, when I met its pastor, Rev. N. A. Hyde, laboring in the camps and hospitals about Louisville. He was in the service of the Christian Commission. In this connection the following entry in the church records, from the clerk's annual report, dated April, 1863, interested me greatly:

"Our pastor (N. A. Hyde), takes no heed who may be offended by the truth, but preaches Christ and him crucified. The apologists for slavery, the liquor traffic and licentiousness generally do not ask for membership or sittings with us. Those in authority have the earnest prayers of the church for God's guidance in crushing the unholy rebellion of the South, and the effect of the pulpit teaching has been to induce quite a number of the congregation to enlist in the Union army, some of whom have sacrificed their lives for the cause. The Ladies' Sewing Society has not contributed as much as usual to the church finances on account of the great demand for sanitary goods for the army to which they have given largely, as well as to the new and pressing calls of the suddenly disenthralled black men of the Southern States."

This sketch is already too long, but I shall nevertheless insert the names of some notable men who have preached from Plymouth pulpit or spoken from its platform: Dean Farrar, Matthew Arnold, Joel Parker, Wendell Phillips, Henry Ward Beecher, Mary A. Livermore, David Swing, Lyman Abbott and Bronson Alcott.

The distinctive work of Plymouth Church was somewhat al-

tered by the growth of other organizations and by the loss of its downtown location. On May 25, 1906, it and the North Congregational Church united under the title Plymouth Church, and continued to worship in the edifice in Central avenue at Fourteenth street. On July 10, 1908, a union of Plymouth and Mayflower Congregational churches was effected under the title of "The First Congregational Church of Indianapolis." This church now occupies the former Mayflower Church building at Delaware and Sixteenth streets, and the Rev. Harry Blunt, formerly of Plymouth, continues as minister of the united churches. With this disappearance of the name, our sketch of Plymouth Church may well end.