

# Baptist Students and ‘Spiritual Dynamics’: The Robert Hall Society in Cambridge, 1950s–1980s

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## Abstract:

This is a study of the Robert Hall Society (RHS), the Baptist Students’ Society in the University of Cambridge, from the 1950s to the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> There is a particular focus on spiritual dynamics. There were transitions through the period examined, related to the members’ spiritual commitment and the sense of denominational belonging. In the early 1950s the RHS tried to find a place in university life in relation to pan-denominational student groups. In the 1960s, a decade marked by confident RHS student spiritual leadership, the Society had as a principal aim preparing Baptist students for future service. The emphasis on witness in the university was also stressed, as was wider mission. A considerable number of RHS students of this period went on to take up significant roles in Baptist life and elsewhere. In the 1970s decline in denominational loyalty began to have an impact, and as a consequence the Society struggled. New spiritual dynamics were evident in the 1980s, but the Society came to an end. The article indicates that the RHS contributed in significant ways to the Baptist denomination.

## Keywords:

Cambridge; spiritual; service; witness; denominational

## Introduction

The prime mover behind the setting up of the Robert Hall Society (RHS), which dated back to 1902, was T. R. Glover, described by Brian Stanley as a ‘classical historian, Fellow of St John’s College, Cambridge, and one of the most highly educated British Baptist laymen of his generation’.<sup>2</sup> It was the first Baptist society to be formed in an English

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Keith Jones, President of the Baptist Historical Society (BHS), for the opportunity to present this paper at a BHS conference in 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Stanley, “‘The Old Religion and the New’: India and the Making of T. R. Glover’s *The Jesus of History*”, in *The Gospel in the World*, ed. by David Bebbington (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), p. 296.

university. At the inaugural meeting about twenty were present and Glover commented in his diary on the ‘unanimity about going on vigorously’.<sup>3</sup> Connections were made with the internationally-linked Student Christian Movement (SCM): Glover was a popular SCM speaker and writer, and RHS members were encouraged to attend SCM conferences.<sup>4</sup> The 1920s–1940s saw periods of RHS advance as well as of set-backs.<sup>5</sup> From 1947 the Society was part of a wider fellowship in British universities, with the formation of the Baptist Students’ Federation (BSF).<sup>6</sup> One Cambridge student and RHS member in the 1960s, Michael Quicke, who returned to Cambridge in 1980 to become minister of St Andrew’s Street Baptist Church, discovered only a few students in the Society, but as numbers grew he found the same ‘spiritual dynamics’, as he put it, that he had experienced as a student.<sup>7</sup> Spirituality can be seen as concerned with the conjunction of theology, communion with God, and practical living.<sup>8</sup> This study has as its focus the ‘spiritual dynamics’ in the RHS from the 1950s to the 1980s. The BSF came to an end in 1977, but the RHS continued on to the early 1990s, when it also closed.

## Fostering Understanding in the 1950s

It was agreed at an RHS meeting in October 1952, at which fifty-two members were present, that the Society could and should have a role in ‘fostering understanding’ between the SCM, which had a broader theological position, and the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian

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<sup>3</sup> Glover diary, 18 May 1902. T. R. Glover’s diaries are held in St John’s College, Cambridge.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Minutes of RHS General Meeting, 11 May 1913. S2/2. RHS minutes are held in St Andrew’s Street Baptist Church, Cambridge. I am grateful to Eileen Hori, the church administrator, for her help.

<sup>5</sup> I have looked at this earlier period in my, ‘Baptist Students in Cambridge: Denominational and ecumenical identities, from the 1920s to the 1940s’, in *Ecumenism and Independency in World Christianity: Historical Studies in Honour of Brian Stanley*, ed. by Alexander Chow and Emma Wild-Woods (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 144–161.

<sup>6</sup> I. M. Randall, ‘Seedbed for Baptist Leadership: The Baptist Students’ Federation, 1947-1970s’, *Baptist Quarterly*, 44, no. 6 (April 2012): 324–43.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Quicke, ‘A Cambridge God Adventure (35): Not a ‘Student Church’ . . . yet!’, blog, 20 February 2018, <MichaelQuicke.org> [accessed 22 February 2021]. I am indebted to Michael Quicke for his very valuable help with this paper.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History* (London: SPCK, 1991), p. 52.

Union (CICCU), which was a conservative evangelical body.<sup>9</sup> The Society was in tune with wider BSF thinking: in the Federation's newsletter produced at the same time, John Nicholson, who was studying for Baptist ministry at Regent's Park College, Oxford, and had previously been a Cambridge student, hoped that Baptist societies in universities could assist members of interdenominational groups — SCM and the growing Inter-Varsity Fellowship (IVF), with which CICCU was affiliated — to find common ground spiritually.<sup>10</sup> In Cambridge, the influences of SCM and CICCU were both present in the RHS. A possible way of distinguishing between the spirituality of these bodies was offered to the RHS in 1950 by Maurice Wiles, who was from a Baptist background and became an Anglican. He was chaplain at the evangelical Ridley Hall, Cambridge, and was later a widely read theologian. Wiles suggested that for CICCU 'the Gospel could best be spread by a closely drawn group', while the SCM approach was 'not to direct the Gospel at people but to live it among them'.<sup>11</sup>

An emphasis on the spread of the gospel was certainly a marked feature of RHS life in the 1950s. Norman Walters, who became Senior Tutor at Fitzwilliam Hall (later College — one of the colleges of the University), suggested in a paper on the history of the RHS (1947) that in the early 1940s a change, which he described as an 'evangelical revival', took place in the spiritual dynamics of the Society.<sup>12</sup> The effects continued. In 1950, George Beasley-Murray, minister of Zion Baptist Church in Cambridge (and later Principal of Spurgeon's College, London), spoke to the Society on 'The Strategy of Evangelism'.<sup>13</sup> In 1955 the magazine of St Andrew's Street Baptist Church, *The Messenger*, reported on RHS missions in various places; on youth work supported by Society members at Barnwell Baptist Church, in a needy part of

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<sup>9</sup> Minutes of Robert Hall Society Meeting, 13 October 1952. S 2/7.

<sup>10</sup> BSF Newsletter, October 1952. D/BSF, Box 1, Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford. My thanks to Emily Burgoyne, the Angus Librarian, for her help. The attempts at SCM–IVF rapprochement are described in Robin Boyd, *The Witness of the Student Christian Movement* (London: SPCK, 2007), pp. 83–89.

<sup>11</sup> Minutes of RHS Meeting, 5 February 1950. S2/6. Wiles later became Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Oxford.

<sup>12</sup> Norman Walters, 'A History of the Robert Hall Society' (unpublished, 1947), pp. 12, 13. This is held at St. Andrew's Street Baptist Church.

<sup>13</sup> Minutes of RHS Meeting, 24 April 1950. S 2/6.

Cambridge; and on a helpful RHS retreat at Histon Baptist Church, near Cambridge.<sup>14</sup> Also in 1955, Society Committee members hoped that the forthcoming Billy Graham Mission to the University, organised by CICCUC, might bring CICCUC and the SCM closer together. This wish was expressed in response to a statement in the previous month from Mervyn Stockwood, the vicar of Great St Mary's in Cambridge (the University Church), who attracted large congregations, that the situation in Cambridge 'leans far too much towards fundamentalism'. The RHS considered this kind of partisan approach unhelpful.<sup>15</sup>

The potential problems were exacerbated when there was a complaint in *The Times* newspaper that fundamentalism should not be given a hearing in Cambridge.<sup>16</sup> John Stott, rector of All Souls Church, Langham Place, London, who had close links with CICCUC, wrote to *The Times*, insisting that Graham had denied the description 'fundamentalist'.<sup>17</sup> Eventually CICCUC obtained permission from Mervyn Stockwood to use Great St Mary's for the mission.<sup>18</sup> Great St Mary's and two other churches were packed with students and Graham, after attempting initially to use what he termed an 'intellectual framework', preached 'a simple Gospel message on the meaning of the Cross', and 400 students stayed behind to talk further.<sup>19</sup> Stockwood began Sunday evening services aimed especially at students, and asked the RHS and other Free Church student societies for their support in this move. The RHS, in an effort to continue its policy of fostering understanding, agreed that it would not arrange meetings on Sunday evenings. It was emphasised that the RHS, while committed to Baptist spirituality, was not seeking to persuade Baptists who were 'keen adherents' of CICCUC or SCM to abandon them for the RHS.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *The Messenger*, No. 325, July–August 1955.

<sup>15</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meetings, 26 April 1955; 16 May 1955. S2/18.

<sup>16</sup> 'Letters to the Editor', *The Times*, 15 August 1955, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> 'Letters to the Editor', *The Times*, 25 August 1955, p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> David Goodhew, 'The Rise of the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union, 1910-1971', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 54, no. 1 (January 2003): 78–9.

<sup>19</sup> Billy Graham, *Just As I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 259.

<sup>20</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 10 March 1957. S2/17.

The later 1950s saw growth in the RHS and in CICCUC. RHS members were involved in missions in English towns and cities.<sup>21</sup> In Cambridge, the main missionary at the 1958 triennial CICCUC mission was John Stott, and RHS members were involved.<sup>22</sup> John Stott was invited to speak at the RHS: he was not available, but suggested Donald English, an IVF Travelling Secretary who had commenced Methodist ordination training at Wesley House, Cambridge. English duly addressed the RHS in November 1958.<sup>23</sup> In the aftermath of the CICCUC mission, which saw many conversions,<sup>24</sup> several speakers were invited to the RHS to help in consolidating the impact made. Raymond Brown, who followed Beasley-Murray as minister of Zion Baptist Church (and also later as Principal of Spurgeon's College), became a regular speaker, especially on themes connected with spiritual experience. After an address he gave on 'Christ in our Lives', instead of the usual question time his challenge to deeper spirituality meant that discussion 'would have been inappropriate'.<sup>25</sup> In 1959, RHS speakers continued to promote mission: one of these was Leslie Lyall, of the China Inland Mission, who had been a Cambridge student and a CICCUC leader.<sup>26</sup>

Questions were regularly raised in this period about Baptist distinctives and ecumenical commitment. Morris West, a tutor at Regent's Park College, Oxford, who was involved in the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC), spoke to the RHS in 1954 on 'Baptists and the Ecumenical Movement'.<sup>27</sup> There was also an interest in this period in Free Church identity. In 1955, B. R. (Barrie) White, a member of the RHS studying theology at Queens' College, Cambridge, was president of the Free Church Societies in the University and their representative on the Executive Committee of

<sup>21</sup> See reports in the *The Messenger*, for example nos., 367, 373, April and November 1959.

<sup>22</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 10 October 1958. S 2/20.

<sup>23</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 6 November 1958. S2/20. See Brian Hoare and Ian Randall, *More than a Methodist: The Life and Ministry of Donald English* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), pp. 30–36.

<sup>24</sup> 'Basil Atkinson's Memoirs', p. 85. MS Add. 8722 A2/6. Held in the Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts and Archives. CICCUC had about 400 members in this period.

<sup>25</sup> Minutes of RHS Meeting, 19 May 1957. S 2/8.

<sup>26</sup> Minutes of RHS Meeting, 7 June 1959. S 2/9.

<sup>27</sup> Minutes of RHS Meeting, 17 October 1954. S 2/8.

SCM.<sup>28</sup> He was to become Principal of Regent's Park College and a leading Free Church historian.<sup>29</sup> Wider debates about distinctive Baptist experience featured in the RHS in 1959, when two Society members, Roger Hayden of Fitzwilliam and David Swinfen of St Catharine's College, argued that most people in Baptist churches 'are Baptists without really knowing why', with little clarity evident on theological matters apart from baptism, and that Baptists needed to know what they believed before progress with reunion could be made.<sup>30</sup> Fostering understanding was a challenge for the RHS.

### Preparing for Service: Early to mid-1960s

A notable feature of the early to mid-1960s was the way in which the RHS addressed the challenge of preparing members for future Christian service, including service in Baptist churches.<sup>31</sup> Among the speakers invited in this period were well-known Baptist figures, notably Ernest Payne, General Secretary of the Baptist Union and a leading figure in the WCC, and J. B. Middlebrook, Home Secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS), as well as leading Cambridge theologians. Local Baptist ministers were also involved, including Arthur Justice, who was minister of St Andrew's Street and the RHS chaplain, and Walter Quicke, minister of Arbury Road Baptist Church, Cambridge, who spoke on one occasion on 'The Case for a Baptist Monastery'. Spiritual life in the Society was emphasised and was nurtured through Sunday worship, prayer meetings, and Bible study groups. By the mid-1960s there were RHS representatives in almost all (over twenty) of the Cambridge Colleges.<sup>32</sup> Members took part in missions in Baptist churches, either entirely through the RHS or linked with the Baptist Students' Federation and those had an impact on RHS members as well as the churches. Martin Tarr, for example, spoke of how a mission in Dorking, held after his graduation and just before he began work,

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<sup>28</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 16 May 1955. S2/18.

<sup>29</sup> See B. R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition: from the Marian Martyrs to the Pilgrim Fathers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

<sup>30</sup> 'Free Church Union', *Baptist Times*, 19 February 1959, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 20 February 1962. S 2/21.

<sup>32</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 6 May 1964. S2/22.

helped ‘set me up for the new life that I was to start’.<sup>33</sup> Support was also given to churches in the Cambridge area: in 1960–61, for example, students conducted services in twenty-two churches, with forty-five students participating.<sup>34</sup>

Student leadership was integral to the spiritual dynamics of RHS life. John Briggs, who began as a student at Christ’s College in 1958, became a member of the RHS committee in 1959 and a year later, as president, he asked Haddon Willmer, of Emmanuel College, to be the Society’s study secretary. They launched a study series on ‘The Church’, based on notes prepared by Arthur Justice, notes they felt needed revising quite drastically for RHS purposes.<sup>35</sup> With his desire for unity, John Briggs was pleased that Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, from the Church of South India and the WCC, was taking up the subject of ‘Christian Unity’ at a joint meeting of the University’s Free Church societies, and Briggs invited a range of people to this meeting in ‘an attempt to resolve conflicts which ranged between societies, college chapels and town churches’.<sup>36</sup> John Briggs was to pursue an ecumenical vision in wider circles, as a member of the executive of the WCC and convener of the Free Churches Group in association with Churches Together in England. Within the Baptist world, his roles included editing the *Baptist Quarterly* and serving the International Baptist Theological Seminary and the Baptist World Alliance.<sup>37</sup> Experience in the RHS helped to set directions for the future.

World-wide opportunities for service were being explored, with the call to overseas mission high on the RHS agenda.<sup>38</sup> Missionary speakers were featured each term. Of those Society members in this period who went overseas, several went to Uganda and Kenya, in line with historic ties Cambridge missionaries had with East Africa. Among

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<sup>33</sup> Martin Tarr, ‘Memories of Dorking ’66’ (Unpublished, May 2019), p. 4. This is held at St. Andrew’s Street Baptist Church.

<sup>34</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 24 May 1961. See the recollections in Paul Beasley-Murray, *This is my Story* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), pp. 51–52.

<sup>35</sup> Faith Bowers, ‘John H.Y. Briggs MA, FSA, FRHistS: An Appreciation’, in *Ecumenism and History*, ed. by Anthony R. Cross (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meetings, 31 October 1960. S2/20; 25 January 1961. S 2/20.

<sup>37</sup> Bowers, ‘Briggs’, pp. 10–15.

<sup>38</sup> Beasley-Murray, *This is my Story*, p. 51.

these were Michael and Anne Bowker (née Bennett), a doctor and teacher respectively; Christopher Bradnock, a teacher; and Jill Parfitt and Ruth Bywaters (later Tetlow), also in teaching. Michael Bowker and Christopher Bradnock had been Presidents of the RHS. Paul and Caroline Beasley-Murray, who served with the BMS in the Congo, had also both been RHS presidents. Colin Carr and Ed Burrows served in India, the latter at the historic Serampore College. Robert Bradnock taught in the University of London and made frequent visits to India, on which he was a specialist. Frank and Liz Guinness, although RHS members, went to Uganda with the (Anglican) Church Missionary Society (CMS), and Hilary Bryant married Peter Bewes and together they went with CMS to Uganda and then Tanzania. Another couple, Paul and Jennifer Jenkins, joined the staff of the Basel Mission, Switzerland.<sup>39</sup>

Still other RHS members entered ordained ministry in Britain. Paul Beasley-Murray, Keith Clements, Philip Clements-Jewery, Michael Herbert, Maurice Markham and Michael Quicke all became Baptist ministers. Derek Moore-Crispin became a Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches’ (FIEC) minister. The RHS was important as a spiritual training ground for local church leadership.<sup>40</sup> Some moved into other areas of ministry, with Paul Beasley-Murray and Michael Quicke being appointed (successively) Principals of Spurgeon’s College, and Keith Clements becoming General Secretary of the Conference of European Churches.<sup>41</sup> In 1967, at one of the services in St Andrew’s Street taken by Society members, three who were later ministers — Markham, Quicke and Moore-Crispin — gave ‘student testimonies’ and the congregation responded appreciatively.<sup>42</sup> Michael Quicke (Jesus College) later wrote of the RHS as an ‘amazingly varied group of students who had a major influence on my life’. Within the Society he ‘learned many disciplines including prayer, preaching, leadership and serving in summer missions’. His period in the Society was unparalleled

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<sup>39</sup> Keith Clements, email to the author, 8 March 2018; Ruth Tetlow, email to the author, 12 March 2018; Christopher Bradnock, email to the author, 14 March 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Beasley-Murray, *This is my Story*, p. 52.

<sup>41</sup> For his life, see Keith Clements, *Look Back in Hope: An Ecumenical Life* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017).

<sup>42</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 14 February 1967. S2/23.



in the ‘spiritually and intellectually stimulating experience’ it offered.<sup>43</sup> For Keith Clements (King’s College) the Society was ‘earnest and sociable’, with football matches, theatre visits, parties, punting and an annual dinner, but with its importance lying ‘in something deeper than mere sociability’. In the RHS he experienced ‘liberation’ through meeting ‘the whole spectrum of varieties of Christian belief and commitment, from the most conservatively evangelical to the out and out liberal’.<sup>44</sup>

While missionary service and pastoral ministry were valued within the RHS as specific callings, ‘preparing for service’ was seen in broader terms. The vision was for the Society to nurture authentic spirituality that would be relevant in any sphere of life and work. John Briggs took this vision with him, talking in 1962, as BSF president, about spiritual priorities.<sup>45</sup> Guidance to RHS students was offered by two senior friends, Norman Walters, a member of the Churches of Christ, and Noel Schofield, a Baptist and an Old Testament scholar.<sup>46</sup> A number of RHS members went on to work in university settings. Briggs became senior lecturer in history at Keele University, and subsequently Principal of Westhill College and Pro-Vice-Chancellor of Birmingham University; David Thompson, also a member of the Churches of Christ, became professor of modern church history in Cambridge and an influential writer; Haddon Willmer became a professor of theology in the University of Leeds; and Adrian Gill, an Australian, made a major contribution to oceanography.<sup>47</sup> Many RHS members offered committed involvement as lay people in varied church settings. When Paul Beasley-Murray (Jesus College), became Society president in 1965, he reiterated that a central RHS aim was ‘to prepare men and women,

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Quicke, ‘A Cambridge God Adventure (35)’, blog, 20 February 2018; also notes produced by Michael Quicke.

<sup>44</sup> Clements, *Look Back in Hope*, pp. 26–7. He adds that although for the most part RHS members ‘were prepared to accept each other cheerfully while arguing their case’, during his second, year tensions became ‘almost disruptive’ over a matter in which he found himself at the centre.

<sup>45</sup> Minutes of BSF Presidents’ Conference, 1–3 January 1962. D/BSF, Box 2.

<sup>46</sup> The Churches of Christ joined the United Reformed Church in 1981. For the history see David M. Thompson, *Let Sects and Parties Fall* (Birmingham: Berean Press, 1980). J. N. Schofield wrote *The Historical Background of the Bible* (London: Nelson, 1938).

<sup>47</sup> Clements, *Look Back in Hope*, pp. 26–27.

dedicated to Christ, who will be able to take their places as future leaders of our churches'.<sup>48</sup>

### Possibilities for Witness: Mid-1960s to 1970

The mid-later 1960s constituted a period of advance for the RHS. Membership grew to over sixty, with other students attending. Local involvements were flourishing, with Peter Wales (Trinity College), who would later serve with the missionary movement, Operation Mobilisation, a 'very keen' local activities secretary.<sup>49</sup> Paul Beasley-Murray took up the theme of local witness in his RHS presidential address:

Nowhere is our responsibility greater than here in Cambridge, which – despite the fact that if all the men in Cambridge who possessed a dog-collar lined themselves up in a row they would stretch more than the length of King's Parade – is desperately in need. People need friends, and above all are in need of the greatest Friend. This is well illustrated by the fact that thirty-five percent of undergraduates contemplate suicide while they are up in Cambridge.

He concluded with a passionate appeal: 'If we believe that the Christian gospel is able to meet the needs of the whole man, then what are we going to do about it?'<sup>50</sup> This was a stirring spiritual challenge to RHS members to be fully involved in reaching out.

The Baptist Students' Federation offered a wider Baptist forum. Numbers at the annual BSF conference held at High Leigh, Hertfordshire, peaked at about 130 in the 1960s.<sup>51</sup> The RHS committee decided in 1966 to 'give as much support as possible to this year's [BSF] conference at High Leigh, and to advertise it as much as possible'. Michael Quicke, supporting this intention, commented on what he termed 'the present bias of B.S.F'.<sup>52</sup> It seemed that in several universities the BSF-linked groups were not offering a sufficiently clear spiritual

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<sup>48</sup> Beasley-Murray, *This is my Story*, p. 50.

<sup>49</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 10 June 1964. S2/22.

<sup>50</sup> Beasley-Murray, *This is my Story*, p. 51.

<sup>51</sup> For one report, see Paul Ballard, 'Baptist Students' Federation Conference', *Baptist Times*, 25 April 1963, p. 8.

<sup>52</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 30 November 1966. S 2/23.

witness to attract Baptist students. Two RHS members who held the BHS presidency in the mid-later 1960s, Keith Clements and then Paul Beasley-Murray, attempted to offer positive ways forward.<sup>53</sup> Caroline Griffiths (later Beasley-Murray), at Girton College, RHS president in 1966–67, noted that denominational endeavours (Baptist among them) were being questioned, but she argued that Baptist witness — in universities but also more widely — was important and that it was ‘committed denominationalists who have something to offer in the age of ecumenism’.<sup>54</sup>

Although Caroline Griffiths was encouraged by RHS involvement in mission, she was concerned about some evidences of a lack of spiritual commitment within the Society. Attendance at several of the Sunday afternoon tea meetings had been poor, which was partly due to the standard of speakers having ‘not been very high’; but a deeper issue for her was the absence of ‘the staunch loyalty’ that had characterised earlier Society members. In terms of the prayer meetings, she described the numbers as ‘shocking’.<sup>55</sup> However, members were meeting in study groups.<sup>56</sup> This presidential analysis appears to have acted as a wake-up call, and Derek Moore-Crispin, building on this as the next president, re-affirmed RHS commitment to Christian witness.<sup>57</sup> When Moore-Crispin reviewed the year 1967–68, he was able to report on growth in numbers, stimulating speakers, and support for the 1968 CICCUC mission at which the Anglican evangelical leader, David Watson, was the main missionary.<sup>58</sup> Paul Beasley-Murray had proposed appointing a full-time secretary for national Baptist student work, and Michael Quicke was commissioned to this role. He served from 1967 to 1969, visiting BSF groups at weekends and administering the ‘commendation’

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<sup>53</sup> Minutes of BSF Presidents’ Conference, 31 December 1965–3 January 1966. D/BSF, Box 2.

<sup>54</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 15 March 1967. S 2/23. For an RHS reunion report by Caroline Beasley-Murray, see ‘A Day of Reminiscence, Reflection and Resolve: A Reunion of the Robert Hall Society’, <[http://rhs.mtarr.co.uk/pdf/cbm\\_101001.pdf](http://rhs.mtarr.co.uk/pdf/cbm_101001.pdf)>; ‘Robert Hall Reunion’, *Baptist Times*, 1 October 2010 [accessed 22 February 2021], p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 15 March 1967. S 2/23.

<sup>56</sup> The committee included Michael Quicke (Vice-President), Isobel Bacon (Secretary), Derek Moore-Crispin (Missionary Secretary) and Maurice Markham (Group Secretary). Robert Hall Society Michaelmas Term Card, 1966.

<sup>57</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 6 December 1967. S 2/23.

<sup>58</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 14 March 1968. S 2/23.

scheme, through which churches with students going to university sent the names to the BSF so that they could be linked with Baptist chaplains.<sup>59</sup>

Robert Gardiner became RHS president in 1968 and sought to continue the focus on mission. Eileen Lacey (Girton College), as the missionary secretary, wanted more RHS members to know about the work done by Dr Michael Flowers, who was at Chandraghona with BMS and was linked with and supported by the RHS.<sup>60</sup> The RHS was encouraged by the emphasis that Michael Quicke, as secretary for nation-wide Baptist work in universities, was giving to student missions.<sup>61</sup> But the RHS demands and also BSF connections took their toll on Bob Gardiner, and he wrote to the Society secretary, Christine Clements, to say he was 'physically, mentally and spiritually exhausted' and was resigning as RHS president. Andrew Johns, vice-president, took over, and in February 1968 Eileen Lacey, who was to become president, expressed the committee's appreciation for Bob Gardiner's work. He responded with thanks, but regretted the lack of interest from the Society as a whole.<sup>62</sup>

Change was necessary. Eileen Lacey, as president, was joined by several new committee members, including David Bebbington (whom she would later marry), and efforts were made to re-build a sense of common purpose. Attendance at all meetings, including prayer meetings, increased. Missionary offerings doubled in a year. David Bebbington, who had been inspired by a call in February 1969 from George Beasley-Murray, then Baptist Union president, to distribute copies of John's Gospel, proposed that ten thousand of the contemporary *Good News for Modern Man*, be purchased — for £100 under a Bible Society/Fontana Books scheme — and distributed to each undergraduate. RHS support was forthcoming.<sup>63</sup> Bebbington raised the

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<sup>59</sup> See Michael Quicke, 'The Christian Student', *Baptist Times*, 14 September 1967, p. 8; Michael Quicke, 'Oh No! Not students', *The Fraternal*, October 1968, p. 42. Some churches with large youth groups were sending a considerable number of names.

<sup>60</sup> Minutes of Committee Meeting, 14 May 1968. S 2/23.

<sup>61</sup> Minutes of Committee Meeting, 15 January 1969. S 2/23.

<sup>62</sup> Minutes of Committee Meeting, 12 February 1969 S 2/23.

<sup>63</sup> Minutes of Committee Meeting, 13 March 1969. S 2/23. For the call by Beasley-Murray see 'Big New Boost for Easter Outreach', *Baptist Times*, 20 February 1969, p. 1.

finance and recruited distributors.<sup>64</sup> As Society president, Eileen Lacey's call was to 'bring others into RHS and to a living faith in the Lord', and she warned of 'introversion'. As part of this outward-directed spirituality, RHS members took part in a 'Procession for Peace' (the context was the Vietnam War) around Great St Mary's Church. Eileen Lacey's presentation of a vision for the Society's witness was described as 'highly edifying'.<sup>65</sup> Significant spiritual dynamics seemed evident.

### Declining Denominational Loyalty in the 1970s

By 1970 the student population in the UK was much larger than it had been a decade before, and the number of Baptist ministers involved in student chaplaincies increased. But several BSF groups were losing impetus. To a greater extent than previously, Baptist students in Cambridge were looking to CICCUC meetings as places of witness and fellowship. In 1971 David Bebbington, as RHS vice-president, encouraged involvement in the CICCUC mission led by Michael Green.<sup>66</sup> Against the background of the continued advance of the Inter-Varsity Fellowship (which became the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship),<sup>67</sup> coupled with a loss of a sense of denominational belonging, the BSF was to come to an end in 1977.<sup>68</sup> The phenomenon of waning denominational identity was not confined to Baptist life. Although the Methodist Society had traditionally been strong in Cambridge, its groups were faltering by the 1970s and Methodist students were joining Ecumenical Fellowship Groups (EFG). A suggestion came from the EFGs that the RHS should close its groups, which drew the response from the RHS that this was 'ridiculous'.<sup>69</sup> In

<sup>64</sup> Eileen Bebbington, *A Patterned Life: Faith, History, and David Bebbington* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), p. 42.

<sup>65</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 2 December 1969. S 2/23.

<sup>66</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 12 January 1971. S 2/24.

<sup>67</sup> For the advance of the IVF/UCCF see D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 259–60.

<sup>68</sup> Ian Randall, *The English Baptists of the Twentieth Century* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 2005), p. 406. The demise of the BSF was deeply regretted by Ernest Payne (Morris West, *To be a Pilgrim: A Memoir of Ernest A. Payne* (Guildford: Lutterworth Press, 1983), p. 89). John Briggs notes that students who were home-based often did not see themselves as representing a category different from other young people in their churches (email to author, 13 May 2019).

<sup>69</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 8 February 1972. S 2/24.

1975, however, the RHS discussed the ‘purpose of the Society’, asking fundamental questions ‘especially in relation to its role alongside [CICCU] College Christian Unions’.<sup>70</sup> In the University, Colleges were building additional student accommodation, a development which offered College Christian Unions extra opportunities.<sup>71</sup>

Although pan-denominational evangelical influences were evident, there were attempts within the RHS to maintain wider Baptist links. Eileen Lacey became BSF president for 1970–71, the first woman to hold this post. Broader Baptist identity was encouraged through an emphasis on Baptist history. David Bebbington, who would become a professor of history, reported that 1971 was the 250th anniversary of St Andrew’s Street Baptist Church. One special meeting which, it was anticipated, would be of particular interest to members of RHS was a historical talk by B. R. White on ‘Robert Hall’.<sup>72</sup> But numbers within RHS were declining and it was more and more difficult to sustain the Society. In 1976 Andrew Cozens, then the RHS president, spoke of the experience of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost and how the early Christians were described as those who wanted to ‘turn the world upside down’.<sup>73</sup> Radical change was in the air: within Baptist circles and elsewhere emphasis was being placed on the transformative experience of the Holy Spirit.<sup>74</sup> RHS members were invited to agree to suspend Society committee meetings, a move supported by Professor J. B. Skemp, a senior friend of the RHS who had retired from Durham University to Cambridge.<sup>75</sup>

The RHS still had a membership, and meetings were held. Also, Professor Skemp and his wife Ruby contributed through a weekly ‘Open House’.<sup>76</sup> However, the Society could easily have come to an end. Unexpectedly, a new sense of purpose was apparent in 1978 with the

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<sup>70</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 14 April 1975. S 2/24.

<sup>71</sup> I am grateful to Richard Black, who joined the RHS in the late 1980s, for this observation.

<sup>72</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 4 November 1970. S 2/24.

<sup>73</sup> Andrew Cozens, ‘The Robert Hall Society’, paper presented to the Society, November 1976. S 2/24.

<sup>74</sup> For the story of Baptists and charismatic renewal see Douglas McBain, *Fire over the Waters* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997).

<sup>75</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 28 November 1976. S 2/24.

<sup>76</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 7 June 1974. S 2/25.

production of a *Newsletter*. Andrew Nainby, a student at Fitzwilliam, was behind this. He reported in the first issue that there had been an RHS autumn retreat at Histon Baptist Church, with David Martin, the Young People's Secretary of the Baptist Union, as the speaker. Three RHS discussion groups were now functioning each week.<sup>77</sup> Another *Newsletter* was produced in early 1979. This discussed ecumenical issues as they affected the RHS. In an echo of an event two decades previously, Lesslie Newbigin spoke at a special meeting held at St Columba's Church with the aim of promoting an ecumenical vision.<sup>78</sup> May 1979 saw the RHS *Newsletter* become the *Baptist Telegraph*, produced monthly. In early issues it was acknowledged that considerable spiritual re-building in the RHS was required.<sup>79</sup>

As it transpired, new possibilities were on the horizon. The October 1979 issue of the *Baptist Telegraph* expressed pleasure that Michael Quicke had been called to be the new minister of St Andrew's Street and would be RHS chaplain.<sup>80</sup> There were hopes for the future, but also realism. Chris Blainey, at Trinity College, who took over as editor of the *Baptist Telegraph* at the beginning of 1980, spoke of the situation within the RHS. He was forthright: 'Let's face it. RHS is in trouble!' Blainey accepted that the RHS was 'deliberately inclusive and diverse' in its approach to fellowship. He also outlined how the Society had historically encouraged members to share their 'experience of life before God' and help Baptist churches. But he was concerned that there had been a loss of spiritual distinctiveness: he identified a 'secularization of activity' and also 'a breakdown of relationships'.<sup>81</sup> At a time when Cambridge students from Baptist churches were increasingly drawn to the witness taking place through the pan-denominational evangelical world, it was clear that if the RHS was to survive, let alone flourish, then renewal was needed.

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<sup>77</sup> *Robert Hall Society Newsletter*, Christmas 1978, p. 3.

<sup>78</sup> *Robert Hall Society Newsletter*, 4 February 1979, p. 2.

<sup>79</sup> *Baptist Telegraph*, May 1979, p. 2; June 1979, p. 2.

<sup>80</sup> *Baptist Telegraph*, October 1979, p. 1.

<sup>81</sup> *Baptist Telegraph*, February 1980, p. 1; May 1980, p. 1.

## Renewal in the 1980s

The new vision which Michael Quicke brought to St Andrew's Street produced fresh energy in the RHS.<sup>82</sup> The Society re-constituted a committee and looked again at its purpose. A statement was produced, affirming that the RHS existed 'to bring together in fellowship Baptist students in Cambridge; to promote their understanding of Christian life and faith, and their common growth in grace; to fraternise with other Christian groups within the University; and to engage in Christian work outside the University'.<sup>83</sup> It was noted in November 1980 that a weekend retreat at Histon Baptist Church had taken place, with Michael Quicke, who was to become the regular speaker at future Histon weekends, speaking on spiritual connection and spiritual gifts.<sup>84</sup> The sense of spiritual dynamic was seen in a renewed commitment to Bible study — something, it was emphasised, that was not only 'a CICCUC activity' — and in a desire 'to live out the gospel'.<sup>85</sup> New initiatives were taken. Some members began visiting young people in Douglas House, an Adolescent Rehabilitation Unit connected to Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge. Several members were reading *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, by a Mennonite, Ron Sider, and decided to give to a scheme developed by the evangelical relief agency Tear Fund to support children in Rwanda.<sup>86</sup>

It was clear in *Baptist Telegraph* reports in May–June 1981, when Julie Brown at Selwyn College took over as editor, that growth in the St Andrew's Street congregation was being accompanied by RHS advance. As well as featuring theological articles, book reviews, missionary items and interviews, the *Telegraph* included reports on RHS speakers, Bible studies in Colleges, prayer teas and sporting events. Hospitality extended to RHS members by the minister of St Andrew's Street (a feature of the RHS in its earlier days) was evident, with Michael and Carol Quicke hosting events for up to one hundred students, who appreciated the good food and opportunities for conversation.<sup>87</sup> June 1981 saw eight

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<sup>82</sup> *Baptist Telegraph*, October 1980, pp. 1, 3.

<sup>83</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 12 October 1980. S 2/24.

<sup>84</sup> *Baptist Telegraph*, November 1980, p. 3.

<sup>85</sup> *Baptist Telegraph*, February 1981, p. 1.

<sup>86</sup> *Baptist Telegraph*, March 1981, p. 3. This book remained important for the RHS and was commended again in the *Baptist Telegraph* in February 1985, pp. 3–4.

<sup>87</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee Meeting, 21 May 1981. S2/24.



students baptised at St Andrew's Street. In the *Telegraph* one of those being baptised spoke of the impact on her life of the 'R.H.S.'s spiritual activities'. Another described how she 'came to know Jesus' in her first year at Cambridge and how it was 'out of my love for Jesus, and my desire to obey Him, that I decided to be baptised'. About five hundred were at this baptismal service. For most students present it was the first time they had seen baptism of believers by immersion. Michael Quicke saw it as a 'spiritual breakthrough event'. People came forward to the baptismal pool in response to the invitation. Students who were baptised became church members/associate members.<sup>88</sup> Julie Brown, *Telegraph* editor, was among those baptised in 1982.<sup>89</sup>

RHS membership grew to over fifty in the early 1980s, with a number of nurses from Addenbrooke's Hospital also attending Society events. In 1982, in celebration of 80 years of the RHS, Paul and Caroline Beasley-Murray, introduced as 'very well-known figures of our denomination', were invited as guests. For them it was an opportunity to challenge RHS members to take up responsibilities in Baptist churches.<sup>90</sup> At a meeting in 1984, with forty RHS members present, it was decided to aim for three 'vacation projects' each year.<sup>91</sup> The RHS *Annual Report* (1983–84) included an article by Michael Quicke in which he spoke again of 'spiritual breakthroughs'; for him 'highlights' of his RHS chaplaincy. Karen Blunt, who had recently been baptised and had 'felt so filled with God's Spirit', described the Histon weekend on the theme of witnessing.<sup>92</sup> A similar sense of vitality was evident in the *Annual Report* two years later (1985–86) when Andrew Henton-Pusey, who would later enter Baptist ministry, was RHS president. The report noted that some RHS talks had focused on witness in Europe, especially behind the Iron Curtain.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> *Baptist Telegraph*, June 1981, pp. 1, 4. Michael Quicke, 'A Cambridge God Adventure (32) A Mini-Pentecost', blog, February 16, 2018, <MichaelQuicke.org> [accessed 22 February 2021], drawing from his diary.

<sup>89</sup> *Baptist Telegraph*, March 1982, p. 1.

<sup>90</sup> *Baptist Telegraph*, December 1982, p. 2.

<sup>91</sup> Minutes of RHS Open Meeting, 28 October 1984. S 2/26.

<sup>92</sup> *Robert Hall Society Annual Report, 1983–84*, pp. 2, 5, 10, 13–16.

<sup>93</sup> *Robert Hall Society Annual Report, 1985–86*, pp. 2, 4, 6.

There were indications in the mid-1980s, however, that the RHS was not as secure as it seemed. At an open meeting in November 1986, apart from the committee, only seven members were present.<sup>94</sup> Michael Quicke, while delighted about the witness of Society members, had expressed concern about 'that growing number of students who worship at St A's [St Andrew's Street] on Sundays but who do not belong to the RHS'.<sup>95</sup> It was clear that RHS members were connecting with interdenominational mission groups such as Operation Mobilisation (OM), and Baptist connections were being somewhat overshadowed.<sup>96</sup> The difficulty was highlighted in the 1986–87 *Annual Report*. Sue Goodman, as RHS president and secretary (simultaneously), had at times been 'ripping her hair out', realising that new students coming to Cambridge from Baptist churches did not seem to want to be committed to the RHS.<sup>97</sup> It was not that Baptist life in England was faltering. Indeed, some growth was evident.<sup>98</sup> At St Andrew's Street the congregation more than quadrupled, to over four hundred, and students who had been members of the church and of the RHS were going out to serve in many parts of the world.<sup>99</sup> But the wider context, reflected in Cambridge, was that more and more people who attended Baptist churches did so because they found spiritual life in these congregations, with Baptist identity being of considerably less importance.

By the end of the 1980s it was becoming evident that the renewal the RHS had experienced was not able to ensure its longer-term existence. For most students who attended St Andrew's Street, the focus was moving away from the Society.<sup>100</sup> There was still a committed core, and in the 1988–89 *Annual Report* Katherine Parker, who would later serve with OM in Russia and would become one of OM's international leadership team, spoke of the effect of initiatives in prayer within the Society.<sup>101</sup> At a committee meeting in November 1990, however, Steve Holmes, who became a Baptist minister and a leading theologian, as

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<sup>94</sup> Minutes of RHS Open Meeting, 30 November 1986. S 2/28.

<sup>95</sup> *Robert Hall Society Annual Report, 1983–84*, p. 2.

<sup>96</sup> *Baptist Telegraph*, April 1986, pp. 7–8; June 1986, pp. 2–5.

<sup>97</sup> *Robert Hall Society Annual Report, 1986–87*, pp. 10, 15.

<sup>98</sup> Randall, *English Baptists*, p. 417.

<sup>99</sup> *Baptist Telegraph*, January 1988, pp. 6–10.

<sup>100</sup> *Baptist Telegraph*, February 1989, p. 3.

<sup>101</sup> *Robert Hall Society Annual Report, 1988–89*, p. 13.

RHS president suggested that the RHS ‘had begun to lose its direction, its sense of expectancy that God would work in meetings’.<sup>102</sup> Nonetheless, the Society continued. The presidency passed to Heather Taylor, later a clinical biochemist, who would marry Steve Holmes. St Andrew’s Street appointed one-year pastoral assistants from among RHS members.<sup>103</sup> But in a *Telegraph* article in 1992 Heather Taylor said that the Society was now attracting only eight to ten regular members.<sup>104</sup> It was subsequently agreed that there was no demand for a Baptist Society; the RHS came to an end.<sup>105</sup>

## Conclusion

This study of the Robert Hall Society has had a particular focus on the spiritual dynamics of the Society. There were transitions through the period examined here, related to the members’ spiritual commitment and the sense of denominational belonging. In the early 1950s the RHS, as part of the recently formed Baptist Students’ Federation, mirrored the endeavour of the BSF to find a place in university life in relation to the traditional role of SCM and the growing influence of the Inter-Varsity Fellowship, represented in Cambridge by CICCU. In the 1960s, a decade marked by confident RHS student leadership, the Society did not feel the same need to define itself in relation to other bodies. Instead, there was an aim of preparing Baptist students for future service. The emphasis on witness in the university, alongside the witness of other groups, was also stressed, as was wider mission. A considerable number of RHS students of this period went on to take up significant roles in Baptist life and elsewhere. In this way the Society was an important incubator of future Baptist leaders. In the 1970s the decline in denominational loyalty began to have an impact on the RHS, and as a consequence the Society struggled. With the appointment of Michael Quicke as minister at St Andrew’s Street Baptist Church, and with his

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<sup>102</sup> Minutes of RHS Committee, 18 November 1990. S 2/28.

<sup>103</sup> The RHS group in the late 1980s and early 1990s included these students and Ken Hori and Eileen Gayton, who later married, Richard Shaw and Richard Black, all of whom subsequently stayed in Cambridge and in St Andrew’s Street.

<sup>104</sup> ‘Easter 1991–Easter 1992 Report’, *Baptist Telegraph*, 1992, p. 2.

<sup>105</sup> Minutes of RHS Open Meeting, 17 February 1994. S 2/28.

role as RHS chaplain, new spiritual dynamics were evident in the Society in the 1980s. In the early 1990s the RHS came to an end, but the Society, as with sister societies elsewhere in British universities, contributed in significant ways to the Baptist denomination from the 1950s to the 1980s.