

# ROCHESTER HISTORY

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## A Brief Pilgrimage; Plymouth Church of Rochester

By Charles D. Broadbent

Where traffic now flows along the Inner Loop, at what was the junction of Troup Street and Plymouth Avenue, once stood the stately building of the Plymouth Congregational Church. Known after 1912 as the Spiritualist Church, this structure, considered the most impressive house of worship in western New York when it was built, vanished in 1954 to make way for the new highway. The building lasted for 101 years, the organized congregation for 49. It was a short life span, yet the church and its ministers exercised a significant influence on the religious life of Rochester. Originating within a Calvinist theological heritage its structure of belief moved through the liberalism of the New Theology of the late nineteenth century to an affinity with Universalism, and finally embraced Christian Socialism. Often a center of controversial issues the church died, not with a whimper but with a bang!

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## The Founding Fathers

On September 28, 1852, a group of "Subscribers" met at the home of Henry A. Brewster to consider the progress of a fund-raising campaign, underway for some weeks. They intended to erect a building for worship at the corner of Sophia Street (later renamed Plymouth Avenue) and Troup Steet. By this time they had pledged \$32,950 toward the project.

It may seem odd to us that a church building should be constructed before a congregation was organized. However, the subscribers were all men of substance and standing in the community, who harbored no doubts that a church would be organized to occupy the building they were planning. Among them were Freeman Clarke, a banker, railroader and later member of Congress; Aristarchus Champion, one of the richest men in Rochester; Dr. William Ely, well-known physician and naturalist; Daniel W. Powers, whose name still survives in the Powers Building; Charles J. Hill, an early settler and flour miller; and Dr. Chester Dewey, clergyman and educator, remembered through the name of the Dewey School on University Avenue.

On February 17, 1853, a Congregational Society was formed, to hold the property of the church and handle its local expenses. In September of that year the cornerstone was laid, with participation by clergy of several denominations.

It was not until August 21, 1855, that the church was formally organized by an ecclesiastical council of pastors and delegates from Congregational churches in New York City and other churches in western New York. Sixty-seven persons had transferred from other churches in Rochester, mostly Presbyterian. First Presbyterian contributed twenty-six; Brick, thirteen; Third, eight; and Washington Street (later Central), ten. This movement from Presbyterian to Congregational church membership stemmed from an earlier ecumenical venture.

In 1801 the General Association of Connecticut, a Congregational body, proposed to the Presbyterian General Assembly, that the two groups unite in a plan of union, in order to work cooperatively in the development of new churches in the frontier area, particularly western New York. The proposal was the product of many years of close relationship, a common heritage of Calvinist theology, and similar government. The operation proceeded smoothly for some years. However, the centrally

organized Presbyterian system began absorbing the more loosely organized Congregational ministers and churches. By 1825, Presbyteries had replaced most of the New York Congregational Associations and most churches of the union were in Presbyteries. A few years later the Presbyterians were rent by a controversy between Old and New Light adherents, the former being conservatives who were fearful of discussing slavery and upset by what they considered doctrinal laxity among the Congregational element in the union churches, as well as being suspicious of growing revivalism. A reaction also arose among Congregationalists of New England background, who yearned for the freer polity and the doctrine of their youth. Associations were re-established and Congregational churches organized, particularly after the Old Light group gained control of the 1837 General Synod meeting, expelling the New Light churches and abrogating the Plan of Union. Congregationalists renounced the plan in 1852.

In Rochester, the First Presbyterian Church, led by the Rev-Doctor Joshua H. McIlvaine, a sturdy conservative, joined a presbytery with other Old Light congregations. This, according to a local historian, was a major factor in the establishment of Plymouth Church. It explains the number of transferees from First Presbyterian Church at the beginning of Plymouth's operation. Undoubtedly anti-slavery sentiment was a factor, as well as the probability that the well-to-do gentry of the Third Ward, where Plymouth Church was located, desired to be influential in a parish of their own making.

Plymouth Church was seen by other Congregational Churches and leaders as a star of Congregationalist hopes shining over the Presbyterian desert of western New York. It was located in the elite section of the city, possessing a congregation of business, professional and political leaders. Everything pointed to its eminence and influence.

Doctrinally it was a product of the evangelical revivalism of the eighteen-fifties. This movement, led in western New York by Charles G. Finney, involved a relaxation of the Calvinist doctrine. It believed that salvation was not reserved only for the elect, who had been chosen by the Lord at the beginning of creation, but was available to all, upon expression of faith in Jesus Christ. Such confession was often accompanied by emotional outbursts to the dismay of those, who, like most orthodox

Presbyterians, felt that doctrine was preferable to feeling.

Plymouth Church, in order to be recognized as part of the Congregational fellowship, adopted the statement of faith of the General Association of New York. This document was more conservative than the evangelical position. Among its assertions was one of belief in the everlasting punishment of sinners. The article would later cause much turmoil in the Association and lead the church away from its roots. The church was officially instituted on August 21, 1855.

Congregational churches in New England, and often elsewhere, generally had a dual form of organization and operation. The church was an unincorporated body of believers. Members were those who had accepted a statement of faith. They had covenanted with the other members to live together as a congregation and follow the way of Christ. Offerings received at the worship services were devoted to missionary and benevolent purposes.

The ecclesiastical society was a legally incorporated body, holding the physical property, raising funds for its maintenance and the support of the pastor. Some members of the society were also members of the church, but this was not usually a requirement. In many cases society members were well-to-do citizens of the community, with little religious activity, but exercising considerable control over the church through the finances. Conflict between church and society was not uncommon. In Plymouth's case, however, the relations were generally harmonious. The Plymouth Congregational Society was incorporated by the state legislature on April 14, 1854, but it was not until August 8, 1855 that the trustees of the society formally accepted the action.

### **Growth**

The new congregation, in the autumn of 1855, turned its attention to the securing of a pastor. A committee was appointed for this task, but their labors were not too intense. While three candidates were reported, the minister who had preached the dedicatory sermon at the official recognition of the congregation, in August, was called and accepted the invitation. The Reverend Jonathan Edwards, minister of the Congregational

Church in Woburn, Massachusetts, began his pastorate in Rochester on February 17, 1856. He was related to the famous New England theologian of the previous century, a fact which must have influenced a church concerned about a Congregational heritage.

The method of calling the minister required the assent of both the Church and the Society, based on an agreement which read:

Basis of Union Between the Church and the Society: In calling a Pastor, the Society and the Church will act as concurrent bodies, a majority of each being necessary to constitute a call; the church nominating, and the Society confirming or rejecting the nomination.

The Society paid the minister's salary, in Edward's case \$2,000, payable quarterly. It was a good sum for those days, when the annual wage for factory workers averaged about \$230 and principals of local schools received up to \$1,000. The only other benefit was a vacation period of five Sundays free of responsibility for the pulpit.

Edwards began at an opportune time. Charles G. Finney, the leading evangelist of the time, had recently held a revival in Rochester at the Brick and Plymouth Churches. Converts from the campaign were added to the church roll, and other additions followed.

The new pastor was soon known as a true shepherd of the flock. He did a considerable amount of home calling and endeared himself to the people. This warm feeling, however, did not extend to the trustees of the Society. Only a year after his coming they resolved that his salary would be paid semi-annually, with other payments if there were any funds available. Edwards replied that his contract required quarterly payment. The board grudgingly agreed, stipulating that he must come to the office of the treasurer to receive it.

At this time, in July, 1857, Aristarchus Champion, who had contributed substantially to the cost of building and equipping the church, decided that he would not continue annual payments to which the contributors had committed themselves. He was a person of intense, but variable, religious enthusiasms, and this action was a threat to the church's solvency, especially as it was obligated to repay certain cash advances made by him. The matter was to drag on for fifteen years, being resolved only after

Champion's death. The circumstance complicated the financial problems of the Society which were to plague it throughout the church's life. The system of pew rents, in use at the time, did not provide enough revenue and often resulted in large sums being in arrears because no arrangement for regular payment was devised. Irregular meetings, lack of planning and frantic emergency measures characterized the trustees' methods all through the lifespan of Plymouth Church.

Edwards had his problems. He was criticized, while on vacation, concerning his preaching. Some said it was not pointed enough. Yet, after he reacted to the complaint, the same persons said he was too pointed. He tendered his resignation, which was not accepted. Yet, a short time later, the Society trustees proposed to reduce his salary to \$1500. He resigned on November 2, 1862, having accepted a call to Dedham, Massachusetts, but he remained in the affectionate regard of the church, returning several times for services. He died in 1894.

Not until 1865 did the church find a successor, the Reverend Dwight K. Bartlett. He was a strong personality and a vigorous leader. At his accession he declared that it was his philosophy to have freedom of the pulpit and freedom to denounce any institution. This did not mean meddling in politics or dictating to his hearers. He could point out the sinfulness of slavery, but the question of how to abolish it was a political matter with which he had nothing to do.

The church prospered under Bartlett. It reached the zenith of its membership, some 388 members, during his pastorate. In 1866 Plymouth installed the first large organ in the city, which it shared with the community through weekly organ recitals. To bolster congregational singing it employed a Mr. Williams to lead the choir and improve the response from the pews. He soon was criticized and then told by the Music Committee that his contract would be considered void. But Mr. Williams was made of sterner stuff than they had imagined. He replied that he would remain until the end of the year, as per his contract, and THEN the committee could do as it pleased. The church clerk recorded: ". . . he had continued to occupy that position in opposition to the expressed wishes of the committee." He must have had some powerful friends in the congregation.

During Jonathan Edwards' pastorate the church had begun

a mission Sunday School in the Eighth Ward for "the more ignorant portion of the population." The old building, an abandoned schoolhouse, became unavailable in 1867, so the church borrowed \$1,000 (without interest) from the Rector of Saint Luke's Church, to build a chapel, which St. Luke's could use at such time as Plymouth did not have need of it. The remainder of money for construction was gathered by subscription, including enough to paint the church and pay some current expenses.

In 1868 two significant changes occurred. The original pew leases had been made for a term of one thousand years. Experience, however, demonstrated that human memory and will were not that long lasting. Accordingly, all leaseholders were permitted to surrender their millennial leases in exchange for annual terms. Also, at the annual meeting in the fall a resolution was offered to provide for the right of women to vote upon all matters of church business. The measure was finally confirmed in 1870.

By this time a Miss Hopkins had been engaged to work in the Eighth Ward Mission. She visited the homes of the poor, comforted the sick, made recommendations for financial help to needy individuals and recruited children for the Mission School.

In the early part of 1873 the Rev. Mr. Bartlett resigned, first in January and then again, finally, in February. The only clue to his reasons is found in his comment: ". . . it is the duty of minorities to yield to and in every proper way to cooperate with the majority in united and harmonious effort." The minister accepted a call to the Second Reformed Church in Albany. His farewell sermon bade the congregation to become the Body of Christ, to forswear bickering and unite in a common cause. Unhappily he died only a few years later, after a throat operation, in New York City. In his leaving, Plymouth Church lost the most able administrator among all its pastors.

### **Years of Change and Decay**

Two years were to pass before Plymouth Church found a new minister. A long procession of candidates passed through

the considerations of several successive committees and of the congregation. Some were not acceptable, others would not accept. Finally in March, 1876, a call was extended to the Reverend Myron Adams, then serving the Presbyterian Church in Dunkirk, New York. He responded with a one-sentence letter of acceptance, which inaugurated the longest pastorate in the church's history.

Adams was a person of unusual qualities and exercised considerable leadership in both religious and community interests. Born in East Bloomfield, in 1841, he served with distinction in the Civil War. Captured at Harper's Ferry early in the war, he was paroled and later saw service as signal officer on the *U.S.S. Lackawanna* during the battle of Mobile Bay. The experience of this awful conflict deeply affected him and had fateful consequences for him and for Plymouth Church.

After the war he studied at Hamilton College and Auburn Seminary, marrying the daughter of one of his professors. Hester Hopkins, like her husband, was a person of exceptional ability. One child was born to them, the author Samuel Hopkins Adams.

Myron Adams was a man of independence. He had been under suspicion by Presbyterian authorities for doubting the personality of the devil. No official inquiry resulted, but Adams increasingly felt the need for a free forum for his message. While he remained on good terms with his former parishioners, it was with real satisfaction that he came to Rochester. His gifts, given freedom to flower, revealed him as a truly great religious leader.

The new minister was in the vanguard of those liberals who were beginning to embrace what was called in the 1870's the New Theology. Its philosophy was expressed by David Swing, a Chicago Presbyterian, accused of heresy, who left that denomination and established an independent local congregation. Swing was a well-known preacher, in 1874, when he stated that: ". . . all religious expressions are dependent upon the culture within which they are formulated, . . . they cannot be understood apart from that culture." Adams' thought reflected a similar philosophy.

A parishioner later reflecting on Adams' preaching remarked that three themes predominated:

1. The true authority of the Bible, not in divinely given revelation, but



in its harmony with the spiritual nature of man and the demands of human consciousness.

2. The universal Fatherhood of God.
3. The ethical and humanitarian nature of Christianity, as opposed to a strictly theological one.

Myron Adams was a quiet person and unassuming in public. Although awarded a Doctor of Divinity degree he never used the title. He was active in other fields, serving as president of the Rochester Academy of Science, and was a member of the Spencer Club, which sought to further the evolutionary theories of Herbert Spencer. Spencer claimed that the survival of the fittest was a principle which should operate in the economic world, a theory which delighted the entrepreneurs of the Gilded Age.

From the beginning of his pastorate Adams demonstrated an interest in moving from the more conservative doctrinal standard of the past toward the newer theological positions. In February, 1877, he proposed a new text for the confession of faith used at the admission of members. The original statement of faith, adopted in 1855, included affirmation of the infallibility of Scripture, the action of God to will in advance everything that would happen and the concept of original sin which stained all of Adam's descendants. It was inconsistent in declaring that mankind was nevertheless responsible for its actions. Another contradiction was that repentance and faith in Christ would avail, but that God had appointed His elect from the beginning of time, so that only they could avail themselves of forgiveness. Furthermore, sinners would be "doomed to endless punishment."

The new statement was quite brief. It affirmed trinitarian belief and asserted that the Scriptures were the Word of God. It stressed the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and declared that salvation came through repentance and faith. As to the final disposition of sinners, the statement said only that there would be a final separation of the wicked and the righteous.

Adams expounded the New Theology, the beginning of what would later be known as American liberal theology. This movement stressed the person of Christ, a loving Saviour, in contrast

to the Calvinist view of God as a dreadful judge. It accepted the critical study of the Bible and asserted that religion is influenced by the culture of society and by history. Furthermore (and this enraged conservatives) the logical consequence of these ideas was that traditional creeds would need to be re-written. Conservatives in the Rochester area soon vented their displeasure upon Adams.

On December 27, 1880, the Ontario Association of Congregational Ministers charged Adams with heresy. This action had been preceded by some correspondence with the minister of the church in Gaines. Since Adams' response was not satisfactory the Association appointed a committee to reclaim him to evangelical views and to meet with the Association for fraternal conference. This "conference" turned out to be a trial.

Seven charges were made against him:

1. He could not formulate a system of Christian truth.
2. He regarded sin as a disease and that the sinner is to be pitied.
3. His view of the Atonement was mystical.
4. He denied the truth of endless punishment.
5. He used his pulpit to defame truth and other ministers.
6. He does not represent the faith of Plymouth Church.
7. He has no basis in scripture but relies on his own inspiration.

The central matter of contention was the denial of endless punishment for sinners. This seems to have been a cherished doctrine for Victorian Protestants. Because Adams would not accept this he was "disfellowshipped" by the ministers, denied admittance to their meetings. It must have been a painful wound to a sensitive man, but no word of retaliation ever publicly escaped his lips.

Adams replied to the Association action in a sermon given on the following Sunday evening, January 2, 1881. It was a masterly reply and deserves to be read in its entirety. Concerning the matter of endless punishment, he remarked:

. . . during the war for the preservation of the Union, I was brought face to face with an awful fact. Unconverted men were being slain by the hundreds and thousands; brave men who were urged on by the tears and blessings of Christian people to sacrifice their lives in behalf of their country. But if these men were going out into endless and inconceivable suffering, these men, some of whom I loved as though they were my brothers, what possible justification could there be in subjecting them to the risk? To save the country? But what is America worth that one man should suffer endlessly for it. Christian America should have enlisted or drafted only converted men . . . I revolted from it as perhaps many others did, but I thought the Bible taught it . . . Afterward with the impression strong upon my mind, I sought for relief from the terrible idea. And in the process of time I found it . . .

From this time Plymouth Church began to move away from its ancestral relations and into fellowship with churches of other denominations. Both Adams and church delegates, however, continued to attend meetings of the Ontario and New York State Associations for some years, indicating the gracious, forgiving spirit which characterized his actions. However, Thanksgiving services were celebrated with the Universalist, Unitarian and Jewish congregations, rather than with Presbyterians as had been the practice.

The Society continued to have its internal problems. While the trustees were deciding upon some repairs to the church building it was discovered that the ladies of the congregation had embarked upon their own program of improvements without consulting the trustees. With some displeasure the matter was investigated. The trustees learned something about the power of determined women. The ladies succeeded in convincing the board of either their wisdom or their invincibility, for a short time later the trustees sent a letter commending them for the embellishments they had made.

At about this time Adams' health began to show signs of deterioration. There is little question that the strain of being excluded from gatherings of his fellow ministers, of both his own and other denominations, was an emotional drain. He was given several leaves of absence in succeeding years.

In September, 1886, Plymouth joined with other Congregational churches to approve the formation of South Congregational Church, located first at Mount Vernon and Caroline Streets and later at Alexander and Pearl Streets. Plymouth maintained a warm relationship with this congregation.

MINISTERS OF PLYMOUTH CHURCH



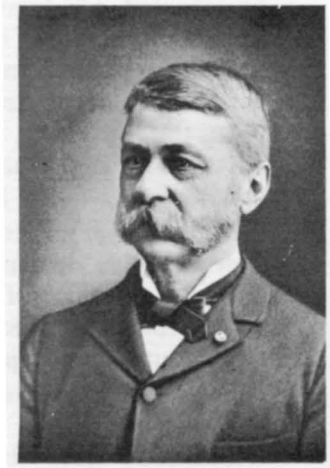
**Jonathan Edwards**  
1856-1862



**Dewight K. Bantlett**  
1865-1874



**William Thurston Brown**  
1898-1902



**Myron Adams**  
1876-1895

*For every hundred dollars subscribed  
Redeem Sept. 25<sup>th</sup> 1852*

<i>To a Congregational</i>	<i>Agnes Clark</i>	<i>10.00</i>
<i>To a Congregational</i>	<i>And Champion</i>	<i>10.00</i>
	<i>Edward Lyon</i>	<i>5.00</i>
	<i>H. H. G. Wells</i>	<i>5.00</i>
	<i>E. H. H. H. H.</i>	<i>5.00</i>
	<i>J. F. C. C. C.</i>	<i>5.00</i>
<i>offered to a</i>	<i>C. W. B. B.</i>	<i>5.00</i>
<i>to a</i>	<i>C. W. B. B.</i>	<i>5.00</i>
	<i>W. W. W. W.</i>	<i>1.00</i>
	<i>A. H. H. H.</i>	<i>1.00</i>
<i>offered to a</i>	<i>Ch. F. H. H.</i>	<i>2.50</i>
	<i>Sam. W. W.</i>	<i>2.00</i>
<i>offered to a</i>	<i>W. H. H. H.</i>	<i>2.00</i>
<i>offered to a</i>	<i>W. H. H. H.</i>	<i>5.00</i>
<i>offered to the</i>	<i>W. H. H. H.</i>	<i>2.50</i>
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<i>for a</i>	<i>W. H. H. H.</i>	<i>2.00</i>
<i>for a</i>	<i>W. H. H. H.</i>	<i>2.00</i>
<i>Congregational</i>	<i>W. H. H. H.</i>	<i>100.00</i>
<i>Congregational</i>	<i>W. H. H. H.</i>	<i>100.00</i>
	<i>W. H. H. H.</i>	<i>2.00</i>
<i>offered to a</i>	<i>W. H. H. H.</i>	<i>200.00</i>
<i>for a</i>	<i>W. H. H. H.</i>	<i>200.00</i>
<i>in a</i>	<i>W. H. H. H.</i>	<i>2.00</i>
	<i>W. H. H. H.</i>	<i>6.00</i>

Signatures of The Subscribers



Communion Cup



Plymouth Church



The Brewster House

In 1887, the minister proposed a radical plan for the solicitation of funds. He persuaded the Church to pass on a resolution to the Society providing that all pews be free and that the expenses of the Church and Society should be provided by yearly pledges. The trustees responded, with a characteristic lack of optimism, that they were unprepared to take any action. They wanted positive proof that financial improvement would follow implementation of such a plan. Myron Adams obtained the support of the church membership for the idea and then obtained most of the necessary funds for the next year through personal calling in the homes of the parish. Before this feat the opposition of the trustees melted away, and they voted to follow the free seat plan for one year. It was renewed at the end of that period, but before long the inattention of the trustees was again evidenced by financial problems.

The church at this time began to develop a more active social fellowship program. Annual picnics and excursions by boat or train to various recreational areas along the lakeshore were scheduled for several years. The church building was also made available for use by groups presenting concerts, entertainments and lectures.

In 1889 Adams published his first book, *The Continuous Creation*, a discussion of the spiritual implications of the theory of evolution, which had been attracting much attention among the liberal theologians. He saw evolution in spiritual as well as physical terms, and claims in the work: “. . . the philosophy of evolution renders necessary a restatement of Christian truth.”

Adams followed this assertion with efforts to obtain a new statement of faith, since there was increasing disinclination by prospective members to accept the one upon which the church had been founded. In 1894 this objective was achieved by the adoption of a Basis of Union, the original suggestion for it, having come from Dr. R. W. Dale, of Birmingham, England, an influential Congregational preacher. This Basis of Union read:

The objects of this church are: to promote that reasonable religion which Jesus taught and lived; to secure increasing recognition of the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God; to discover truth and dispel ignorance and superstition, and to bring about improved social conditions.

To the furtherance of these objects, in a spirit of mutual friendship, we

pledge our earnest efforts, and promise to devote to them, according to our ability, our time, money and talents.

The congregation next petitioned the state legislature to amend the charter, granted in 1855, in this manner:

... by striking out the obnoxious clauses in section four reading as follows: "holding doctrines in harmony with the present articles of faith of the General Association of the State of New York and for no other purpose."

This petition was approved and the church was relieved of a restriction which it felt unendurable. In the course of the next year ninety-three persons joined the church by affirming the Bond of Union.

Another step away from orthodoxy was taken in that same year. At the annual meeting in October it was stated that since

... the Lord's Supper is not obligatory on the members, and inasmuch as the observance of the ordinance at the morning service is not interesting to some of the congregation and is a cause for some absenting themselves at that time...

a special service of Communion in the afternoon would be instituted for those who wished to join together at the Lord's Table.

By November, 1895, it was evident that Myron Adams was seriously ill. Consequently, an associate pastor, the Reverend William F. Kettle, then serving in Elbern, Illinois, was called. Since Adams was unable to function in any ministerial capacity he was granted a salary of \$1000 during his pastorate, which was, in effect, a pension. On December 29, 1895, a Sunday morning, he died, aged fifty-four years.

The reaction within the city testifies to the impact of his life and thought. His brother-in-law reported:

Since his death, one of the city pastors remarked: "The denomination to which Dr. Adams belonged 'disfellowshipped' him, but I have always felt that he was walking near to Christ, and that we were following a long way off in the rear."

His funeral was an occasion for tribute from the liberal clergy to whom he had been drawn after the controversy with

the clergy of his own denomination. The service, held in Plymouth Church, was attended by a capacity audience. The Reverend Amos Sheel, Rector of the Church of the Epiphany, read the Episcopal service. Rabbi Max Landsberg, of Temple B'rith Kodesh, gave the principal address, in which he stated:

... Those who had been his bitter opponents learned that Myron Adams' scientific theories had not removed him from religion, but had made him more deeply religious, that what they accepted on faith alone, was to him substantiated by the most incontrovertible evidence. . .

This eulogy was followed with a brief comment by Reverend W. C. Gannett, of the First Unitarian Church. The newspaper account of the service does not mention any Congregational clergy.

Adams' death was a profound shock to Plymouth Church, even though it had advance warning. William Kettle, only three days after, was chosen as minister to succeed Adams. Kettle was a firmly orthodox person. He moved immediately to reinstate the Communion to the morning service. The membership decided that it should be a separate observance, at the end of the regular morning worship. Furthermore, the decision stipulated that the time for the combined service should not exceed that usually required on Sunday mornings.

Kettle also moved to re-establish closer relationships with other Congregational churches in the state, although the church resolved that they would not change their statement of faith in the process. Local Presbyterians asked Plymouth to again join with them in the annual Thanksgiving service. The church was willing, provided that an invitation be extended to their "old friends," namely Unitarians, Universalists and Jews. A newspaper account of the service, however, lists only Presbyterian churches participating, including Plymouth under that designation. This could not have pleased Kettle's parishioners.

Internal difficulties, caused by a combination of grief for Myron Adams and opposition to the conservative position of Mr. Kettle, caused this pastorate to fail after a short time. The Society trustees reported that pledges for the year ahead were less than half of what had been raised the year before. In their records they used the phrase: "if the present minister be retained."



Early in November William Kettle resigned. His action was at first refused by the church. The trustees responded to the church vote by informing the pastor: "It is the sense of this Board that he adhere to his resignation." That he did, terminating his work on June 1, 1898. He had accepted the position of minister to the Congregational Church in Homer, New York.

Plymouth Church moved with unaccustomed rapidity to call a new pastor, William Thurston Brown, then at the Congregational Church in Madison, Connecticut. The son of a minister, he was born in Medusa, New York in 1861. He graduated from Yale Divinity School in 1895, the commencement speaker for his class, at the same time he was serving as minister in Madison. In 1896, charges of heresy were preferred against him by some of his parishioners, but he was unanimously exonerated. By the time he arrived in Rochester William Thurston Brown was committed to the cause of Christian Socialism.

This movement had its formal beginnings in 1889, in Boston, in the formation of the Society of Christian Socialists, who declared their aims to be: 1. To show that the aim of Socialism is embraced in the aim of Christianity. 2. To awaken members of Christian churches to the fact that the teachings of Jesus Christ lead directly to some form or forms of Socialism; that therefore the church has a definite duty upon this matter, and must, in simple obedience to Christ, apply itself to the realization of the social principles of Christianity. The movement spread across the country, involving numbers of Protestant clergy and educators.

Brown had been influenced by George D. Herron, a Congregational minister who was a primary spokesman for Christian Socialism. Herron had been deposed from the ministry, after a divorce involving an associate at Iowa College, whom he later married. In the ceremony they chose each other "to be my companion," thus scandalizing Herron's colleagues. The officiating clergyman was William Thurston Brown.

Brown declared, as Herron did, that the only instrument which could serve people in the search for individual and social righteousness was the state. The state would also be the instrument to purify the church. He saw the socialistic state as the best of all means for the betterment of human life. Brown vigorously opposed the war in the Philippines as a repudiation of American principles and as the product of economic greed.

In Rochester he considered the labor movement the area of his greatest concern.

Meanwhile, the church was moving toward a final separation from its ancestral affiliations. The Western Association, to which it now nominally belonged, demanded that as a condition of continued membership the church adopt the Burial Hill Creed. This was a statement of faith, adopted in 1865, by a national meeting of Congregational churches in Plymouth, Massachusetts. It contained an obliquely worded assertion of belief in original sin and eternal punishment. The Church refused to accept it and the relationship was dissolved in 1899.

Pastor Brown now began to advance his own concepts of faith. He claimed that under Myron Adams' leadership Plymouth Church had moved from a concern for salvation in another world to an interest solely with matters of this one. His interest in labor was strong, and he became a member of the advisory committee of the Labor Lyceum, in association with the Rev. W.C. Gannett and Professor Walter Rauschenbusch.

One of the minister's early moves was to establish a men's club, as a result of which the church building became a people's club house. Even billiard tables were installed in former Sunday School rooms, a move which certainly shocked some of the older members. The club, called the Pilgrims, sponsored weekly entertainments which included dancing. There were also lectures on social problems.

Some members complained to the Trustees that the club was using church rooms without payment. The board decided that it would not be expedient to require such. A little later the trustees were again asked to prohibit the use of rooms unless the discussion of papers be discontinued. When they refused to take such a drastic step the chairman of the board resigned. The Prudential Committee of the church was concerned about having less socialism and more of other religious subjects in the sermons. Brown, however, expressed himself as feeling justified in his course.

When names of prospective members were presented to the Prudential Committee for its recommendation there was reluctance to accept them because of their identification with a "particular political movement," undoubtedly the Socialist Party. After some deliberation all were accepted.

Financial problems, never long absent, now became critical.

The minister proposed several ways of meeting the deficit, including his resignation, a salary rebate, and fund raising ideas. All these were rejected, and within a few months the trustees were discussing a motorized blower for the organ and extension of the pastor's contract for another year.

Typical of William Thurston Brown's appetite for controversial stands was a statement made in concert with the Rev. Algernon Crapsey, a similarly controversial Episcopal priest. A reform movement was under way, aimed at saloons and gambling. Both ministers declared that a true Christian could not join the Anti-Saloon league or support the campaign against the gamblers.

In 1901 Brown founded a monthly magazine, *Here and Now*. It was a vehicle for his personal views and for publicizing Plymouth Church. His articles were fervent appeals for change, but with few particulars for implementation. He urges changes in the United States Constitution to provide for quick amendment. He said that what was needed was not talk but action.

His attitude toward the organized church became increasingly negative and bitter. Not one present member could be found who bore any resemblance to the heroic souls of the early church, he claimed. Furthermore, he asserted, the church was dead. In an article in his magazine Brown stated that Plymouth Church was now becoming a church in name only, without ritual and creed. It would be a place to discuss ways for the betterment of life. The chairman of the Board of Trustees, agreeing with Brown, declared that Plymouth would become a grand educational society. Formal prayers in the worship service had been abandoned, to be replaced by a feeling of joy in service.

A surprising and disturbing blow hit the church in October, 1901. George W. Clark, then president of the Chamber of Commerce, had purchased a mortgage on the church, for \$9,000, held by the Albany Savings Bank. He refused to grant any extension of time and began foreclosure proceedings. Evidently he was determined to get rid of a preacher irritating to him. At this point, William R. Seward, a local man of wealth committed to liberal causes, loaned the Society funds to avert foreclosure.

The annual meeting that year considered two proposals. The texts of both are covered by paper pasted over them in the record book, but they can be read. The first stated that there

should be only one Communion service each year, to take place in January. It would be in the form of a dinner, which would not be obligatory nor would anyone be excluded. The second proposed that the duties of the Deacons were to arrange for the annual Communion dinner, to administer the church's charities and to provide for pulpit supplies. Neither of these were adopted, being held over for action at the next annual meeting, which never took place. The church, however, instructed the Deacons to prepare for the dinner in accordance with the spirit of the resolutions.

In January, 1902, the Pilgrim Club applied for permission to remodel the church basement for its use as a club house. A committee was appointed to explore the request. Nothing came of this. Two months later the pastor requested a leave of absence. No action was taken. On Sunday, May 11, he read his resignation.

The Rochester *Herald* of May 12, 1902, devoted a lengthy article to this event. The newspaper praised Brown's intellectual and hortatory gifts, as well as his sincerity, mentioning the public nature of his ministry, which had been subjected to both praise and criticism. Brown had declared that he could no longer work in the church, because the church no longer believed its own statements. He looked to the coming of industrial democracy to bring in the promise of the Kingdom of God. Socialism had now become his religion. A later newspaper comment on Brown said:

One defect of his pastoral work in Rochester was his lack of affiliation with leading men and women of the church, and his habitual disregard of their opinions in the practical management of its affairs. He seemed to have come to the conclusion that two or several heads were not so good as one if the one was his own.

### **The Last Things**

After Brown's resignation the church was in complete disarray. Its membership had either departed or was disheartened. Those who had come only to hear Brown preach melted away. In October, 1902, Plymouth voted to sell the property. Shortly afterwards, Rev. Charles W. Shelton, Secretary of the New York Home Missionary Society, a Congregational organization,

began correspondence with the church. This led to an offer of help with certain conditions, among which was the demand that the church put itself into fellowship with the Western Association, with a creed and confession of faith acceptable to them. Reverend Edward R. Evans, of Redding, Connecticut, did his best to lead the church through this terminal period, but the odds were too great.

As one of the conditions for continuing its aid, the Missionary Society demanded that the congregation renounce its statement of faith, as expressed in the Basis of Union, which it had adopted in 1894. Feeling that they could not so abruptly put aside convictions forged over a period of years, the members of Plymouth declined. Aid was thereupon withdrawn and the congregation dissolved in 1904. The building was sold, in 1912, to the Spiritualist Society.

Plymouth Church began with every prospect of success. It had a fine building, a congregation of community leaders and well-qualified pastors. Yet through its history it suffered from poor administration and stewardship. Beginning in the time of Myron Adams it lost contact with its own ancestral religious roots. The alternation between conservatism and liberalism in its pastors was a severe strain. The Ontario Association and the New York Missionary Society likewise contributed, by their intransigence, to its decline. There seems also to have been an apathy on the part of lay leaders who permitted the ministers to follow whatever course suited them, without any apparent attempt to counsel together for the good of all. No single factor can be pointed out as the cause, but the accumulation of many strains finally accomplished the demise of a most interesting religious fellowship.

#### **Note on Sources**

Additional information about Plymouth Church may be found in my doctoral dissertation: "A Time To Be Born . . . And To Die" (MS D. Min. Dissertation, Colgate Rochester Divinity School/Bexley Hall Crozer Theological Seminary, 1977). Primary sources include Clerk's records of Plymouth Church and the Plymouth Congregational Society, which, together with other documents, are in the Local History Division of the

**Rochester Public Library. Histories of Rochester, by Blake McKelvey, articles in *Rochester History*, and microfilms of Rochester newspapers will provide both background and specific material.**

**Dr. Charles D. Broadbent is Senior Pastor of Salem United Church of Christ, in Rochester, New York.**

This Indenture, made the *twentieth* part day of *February* 1847, between the **PLETHURTH**  
**SYNAGOGICAL SOCIETY OF THE CITY OF RADIATOR**, of the first part, and *Chester* *Survey*  
*of the above place*

Witnesseth, That the parties of the first part, in consideration of the sum of *£1000* of the second part, have bargained, sold, granted and conveyed, and by these presents do bargain, sell, grant and convey unto the parties of the second part, and *his* assigns, **£1000** number *one thousand* (1847) in the Church Edifice belonging to the parties of the first part, situate at the corner of *Rupbia and Tramp streets*, in the said City of *Radiator*. To Have and to Hold the same unto the parties of the second part and their assigns, for and during the Term of **ONE THOUSAND YEARS**, from the *Twenty five* day of *February* 1847, one thousand eight hundred and *forty seven*—subject nevertheless, to a Yearly Annuity of *Twenty five* £100 Dollars, payable in quarterly installments, on the twenty first days of *May, August, November, and February*, in each year during the said Term, to the parties of the first part, for the purpose of defraying and providing the means of defraying the charges and expenses incurred and to be incurred by the parties of the first part in the support of Divine Worship at the said Church Edifice, and in the congregation lawfully occupying the same as a place of public worship.

And the parties of the first part, for themselves and their assigns, hereby covenant and agree with the parties of the second part and assigns, that neither *he* nor *his* assigns, paying the Yearly Annuity as herein prescribed, shall be disturbed in the enjoyment of the said Slip, so long as the said Church Edifice shall be lawfully occupied as a place of public worship.

And the parties of the second part hereby covenant and agree with the parties of the first part and their assigns, that the said Annuity shall be punctually paid as it becomes due, so long as *he* or *his* assigns shall occupy the same. And it is hereby mutually declared and agreed by and between the parties in these presents, that in case the parties of the second part, or *his* assigns, shall at any time make default in the payment of the said Annuity, or any portion thereof, and the same shall remain unpaid for the space of six months after it became due, or payable, it shall be lawful for the parties of the first part, or their assigns, to take possession of said Slip, and LEASE the same from year to year, or for any shorter period; subject always to the right of the parties of the second part, or *his* assigns, to resume the possession of the said Slip at the termination of any such lease, upon the payment of all arrearages then due from *him* or *his* assigns account of such Annuity, with interest.

And further;—that if such Annuity, or any portion thereof, shall remain due and unpaid for the space of three years after the same shall become payable, it shall be lawful for the parties of the first part and their assigns, to SELL the said Slip, at public auction, on giving reasonable public notice of the time and place of sale; and on such sale to grant and demise the same to the purchaser for the remainder of the said term; and from the proceeds of the sale, to retain the balance then due for the principal and interest on such Annuity, with the costs, charges, and expenses attending the sale; and that the surplus, if any, shall be paid to the parties of the second part, or *his* assigns, whenever the same shall be lawfully demanded.

In Witness whereof, the parties of the first part have caused these presents to be signed by the Chairman of their Board of Trustees, and sealed with their corporate seal; and the parties of the second part *has* signed and sealed the same, on the day and year first above written.

*Ant Champion Ch<sup>y</sup> Trust*  
*R. Deane*