

Notes On The Early History O' Brethren Assemblies In British Guyana

'... One is your Master even Christ and all ye are brethren' Matt. 23:8

In some respects Guyana may be regarded as the cradle of the so-called 'Brethren Movement.' It arose here through the remarkable circumstances of Rev. Leonard Strong^{1 2} (1797-1874). This fearless young man served as a midshipman in the French and American wars. Many times his ship saw battle. We make a mistake if we think that men like Leonard Strong, who have seen death up close, have become too calloused, too hard. But while on duty in the West Indies, he almost drowned when his shore-going boat upset in a squall. During the rescue, this hard-bitten sailor saw that maybe he wasn't so tough after all. His sins rose before him, and he cried to God for mercy. He was like a man pulled out of a coma. Once awakened, he resolved to serve God. He left the Navy and enrolled at Oxford in 1823. Evidently he thought that to be ordained as a minister would be a safe start on the voyage for heaven. In his time at Oxford, he saw the truth of the Gospel and was definitely converted. Now his ambition was to be a missionary. It may be at this time that Strong first met Anthony Norris Groves, who would also become a pioneer missionary. Strong left Oxford without taking a degree. Although he was ordained in the Church of England as curate of Ross-on-Wye, he did not stay there long. He went out to the area where God first awakened him during his naval service in the West Indies, to British Guiana in 1826, as rector of St. Matthew's, Parish, Parsonage House, Demerary (sic), being forbidden to preach to 'persons of colour', which meant the slaves who endured hard labour and deplorable stories are told of the fate of those hapless Africans. But he persisted, quit the Anglican system and soon hired a coffee-drying shed for meetings.

Slavery was not outlawed until 1834, so Leonard Strong witnessed the atrocities of the trade. Rendle Short tells of the slaves' lot on the sugar and cotton plantations in British Guiana: 'They lived in filthy huts like kennels. They had no furniture except an iron pot and one blanket per person. Their food was salt fish and vegetables. At six every morning the slave-drivers turned them out with the whip to work till six in the evening, or sometimes longer. They had no rights and no redress. For every infraction of a command they were brutally beaten. If they died of the punishment, no one cared. Their moral life was low and degraded, but in this respect their white masters were little better. Their religion was much like that of the heathen African of today. Obeahism (African

¹ According to Lieutenant-Governor Sir B. D'Urban to Viscount Goderich, wrote 26, November 1831 that he was 'an exemplary and invaluable parochial clergyman.'

² see Letter from Rev L Strong. [Georgetown?] 1838, Guyana. Replied to by 'Answer to Letter ...'



sorcery and ritual magic) played a large part in it . . . Such a welter of misery and degradation it would have been hard to find elsewhere in the world.'

Strong devoted himself to work among the slaves, braving the wrath of the planters, who were so enraged they threatened to shoot him. Because of his work among the slaves, he was forced by the planters to leave his position and to move to Peter's Hall and Georgetown, where he began his work again. Disillusioned by the pride and apartheid which confronted him, Strong began to question the scriptural authority for an established church. While examining the Scriptures, he saw that none were superior to another man, he read' ... One is your Master even Christ and all ye are brethren' (Matt. 23:8). He learned practical truths about worship and service that he could not reconcile with his position in the Church of England. In 1827³, he made a costly decision to give up his lucrative living, (about £800 per annum), and to meet for simple worship with the several hundred new converts. Venturing out in dependence, God's hand was with Strong from the beginning. At first the large shed used for drying coffee held as many as 2,000! An assembly commenced at Peter's Hall in 1827 and another at Georgetown in 1840. Strong's life and labours provided a pattern for the missionary effort which spread through the West Indies, where a vigorous work continues to the present day.

When news eventually reached believers in Britain and Europe, Strong's story confirmed what had previously seemed for many to be only a theory. No one could imagine how a lone missionary like Strong could have been materially maintained with no set salary and no organizational backing for so many years. It was in 1842 that George Muller heard of him and was able to provide some help. Here was a missionary working on scriptural principles whom Muller was delighted to support with gifts from the funds of the Scriptural Knowledge Institution.

Strong's furlough in England made interest in British Guiana deepen. Muller recorded in his Narrative that on August, 31, 1843, Mr. and Mrs. Barrington of Bristol sailed with Strong for Demerara. Eleven months later, one of the pillars of the congregation at Bethesda followed; fifty-two-year-old Mr. Mordal, a father of a large family. Mordal died of fever on January 9, 1845, only three months after arriving.

Mr. Strong left Demerara for good in 1848 or 1849. He settled at Torquay, on the south coast of England where his ministry was valued. He wrote several

³ The brethren (Bellett, Huchinson and Cronin and later Darby) in Dublin, Ireland were in their early days of gathering between 1826 and 1827.



beautiful tracts and books, including one on Daniel. He was a welcome speaker at the meetings held in London on prophecy. The cries of perishing souls in the regions beyond seemed to ring in his ears and burn in his heart. A gifted and gracious man, he was greatly beloved. He died in London in 1874, aged 77, but was buried in Torquay, where he had lived and laboured faithfully since leaving the West Indies.

Not long after slavery was abolished a young English brother called Joseph Collier came in 1839 to live in British Guyana in order to serve the Lord. He was soon followed by a Swiss brother, Jean Meyer,^{4 5} who settled near Friendship and did a good work among the indigenous people. Brothers J N Darby and G V Wigram made visits in the 1850s and Dr Thomas Mackern (known as 'the sweetest preacher that ever left the shores of Ireland' [so Charles Stanley]) came early in 1866. Of the meeting in Victoria Mackern records there were then 'some 200 persons gathering to the Lord'. There was a leper colony of some 250 lepers. He visited these and preached the gospel finding 'a most eager ear to hear'. It is most interesting to me to reflect on the tremendous effort brethren of yesteryear made in order to minister the Word of God to saints in such distant places, especially when travel was not so easy as it is today.

The Lord also had sent labourers from abroad to help their Guianese brethren in the 1900s to this tropical land. Their labours are not recounted here, but name a few of them. There were the Glovers then Mr William Sewell who did sterling work their memories are still fragrant in the hearts of many a Guyanese. Miss Charlotte Hain came from Germany, then the Conods from German speaking Switzerland and Luc and Trudy Favarger from French Switzerland. These gave many years of service. Luc continues to keep in touch and has visited since leaving.

Unedited Notes prepared by Edwin Cross 2008

⁴ Leonard Strong, *Gospel Reminiscences in the West Indies. A Brief and Simple Record of the Lord's Gracious Work among the Indians of British Guiana by His Servant John Meyer ...* London: J.B. Bateman 106 pages 24mo, [ca 1848] 1st ed; (London) 16mo, [ca 1850] 2nd ed; (London: Nisbet & Co) 160 pages 18mo, [ca 1851]; (ibidem) 116 pages 18mo, 1852; (Bath: Binns & Goodwin) I vol, [np], [ca 1870]. Guyana. 1st edition. SEE also 233. H. Pickering (ed.), 'Chief Men among the Brethren' 2nd edn. London 1931 pp. 22-3. Strong's personal history was very similar to that of many Brethren founders: born in 1797 the son of a Herefordshire Rector, he first served in the Navy, but after being converted went to Magdalene Hall Oxford in 1823, was ordained, served a curacy at Ross-on-Wye and then went to St. Matthew's Demerara in 1826. Most of his converts were Negroes, and not surprisingly the opposition to his evangelical preaching came from white planters. He organised communities for worship after his secession along Brethren lines; it is not clear how he came into contact with the movement in Britain, but there were links with Bristol by 1840, for Muller's 'Narrative' mentions donations to the Orphan Homes in that year from 'negro brethren at Demerara'. cf J. S. Reynolds, op. cit. note 19, p. 96.

⁵ his biography has lately been published in Dutch by 'Uit Het Woord Der Waarheid' depot.

