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History of the Congregational Church of



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HISTORY OF THE CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH OF LITCHFIELD, MAINE

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History of the
Congregational Church
OF
Litchfield, Maine

== BY ==
ASA P. SMITH



Written for its
Centennial Celebration
June 15, 1911

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Founders of the Church

The celebrations of birthdays are interesting, whether of individuals or institutions. The more important the individual or institution, the more interesting the celebration of the anniversary of its birth.

The Congregational Church of Litchfield, having rounded out a period of one hundred years of its existence, it seems fitting that the one hundredth anniversary of its birthday should be noticed with some appropriate exercises. Meeting here to celebrate the century of life and work of this church, I shall attempt a brief statement of the dry facts of history of the church and its founders, leaving the one who follows me to speak of the general work, and the lessons to be drawn from the history.

The early history of this church is so closely connected with three families, that I hope to be pardoned for giving a sketch of the personal history of these people; the founders of this church. Our early ancestors in New England had large families, from ten to fifteen children being the usual number; and when this natural increase was augmented by continual immigration, available land in the vicinity of the settlements became scarce. And even if land could be bought, few had money to buy, for the English government, with their near-sighted policy, laid so many restrictions on the few articles the Colonists had to dispose of, but little could be realized from the sale of these articles.

So when King George offered to give land in Nova Scotia, to actual settlers, many from Plymouth and many other settlements went there to make themselves homes.

In 1764, among others who went, were two brothers, Thomas and Benjamin Smith, from Chatham, and Barnabas Baker, whose wife was a sister of the Smiths, from Yarmouth. All their ancestors were among the first settlers in New England.

The Smiths were the descendants of Ralph Smith, who came from England in 1633: also of Stephen Hopkins, through both Giles and Constance Hopkins, who came with their father in the Mayflower. Hannah Shurtleff, wife of Thomas, had for ancestor Richard Warren through his daughter Mary, who married Wm. Shurtleff of Eastham.

The wife of Benj., Elizabeth Sparrow, was descended from Elder Wm. Brewster through his daughter Patience, who married Gov. Thos. Prince in 1621. Of their life in Nova Scotia we know but little. They took up land and made homes for themselves. Mr. Baker had a wife and children, who went with him and other children were born there. The Smiths married while there, and children were born to them there. Thos. Smith's early manhood was spent on the water. He sailed under Capt. Bunker as sailor and mate until he had command of a vessel. In 1769 he married Mrs. Hannah (Shurtliff) Bunker, and left the sea life.

But trouble arose. The American Colonists, no longer able to bear the intolerance of the mother country, were preparing to throw off their yoke, and these people were in sympathy with their friends and relatives in New England. So when they were called upon, either to take the oath of allegiance to King George or to leave the country, they chose the latter. What pecuniary sacrifices they made we cannot know. They had lived there ten years; had made themselves homes, and had expected to live and die there; and their children after them. Leaving that country in the way they did, they probably could not get much, if anything, for land or improvements; but they left all in 1774, nearly one year before the war of the Revolution. The same reasons that induced them to leave Plymouth Colony, forbade them to return, and like Abraham, who went by faith not knowing whither he went, they sailed along the coast and up the Kennebec River and landed in Pownalborough (now Dresden), then a part of Massachusetts Colony, and decided to settle in this part of the country. After examining different localities, they were attracted to this place, by the heavy hardwood forests, indicating strength of soil, and decided to settle here.

In 1775 they commenced making clearings and built log cabins. In 1779 Barnabas Baker and Thomas Smith moved their families here. Benjamin came the next year. Two other families were in the vicinity. There is no time here to dwell on the hardships and privations they must have endured. They were in the midst of a howling wilderness with no roads, twelve to fifteen miles from mills where grain was carried on their backs. They must often have gone hungry, but that they subsisted somehow is attested by the fact that, of the forty children born in the three families, thirty-six grew to manhood and womanhood, thirty-five married and had children, one was lost at sea and two children had died before they moved into the wilderness.

But in this strenuous life they found time to worship God, and wished to bring up their children in His fear. They were Congregationalists in their religious faith and maintained worship in their families.

When the Sabbath came, the inquiry arose, "How shall its sacred hours be spent?" The two brothers, their sister and some other members of their families, were hopefully pious. They felt deeply the privation of not being able to meet with the people of God for public worship. They were without roads, far from any accessible place of public worship. They believed the Sabbath had been made by God for man, and that the proper observance of it was conducive to the welfare of man, temporal, spiritual and eternal, and where public worship is not attended the Sabbath is almost invariably desecrated. They wished therefore to establish public worship among themselves. Thus they hoped to promote their own spiritual welfare, and that their children might early form the habit of attending divine worship and be restrained from profaning the holy day. Therefore they decided they ought to meet in their homes for religious worship, there being no other place for them to assemble. When such men as Thomas and Benjamin Smith decided what duty was, they were ready to act.

The first public religious meeting in town was held in the house of Barnabas Baker in 1780. Meetings were held in private houses until a meeting house was built. The first sermon was preached by Rev. James Potter, a Baptist minister, in 1783. They were visited occasionally by missionaries sent into the district of Maine by the Massachusetts Missionary Society, circuit riders and others, but whether they had a minister or not, they and their families were as sure to meet for the worship of God as was the Sabbath to return. As they found means, they obtained preaching occasionally for a few Sabbaths.

Two other families were in the vicinity when they began these meetings, and within a year three or four others settled near them. From these the two brothers received encouragement and some assistance in devotional exercises. After more than five years of faithful perseverance in the maintenance of public worship, they were visited by an ordained minister, who preached two sermons and baptized some of their children. They continued to meet and "wait on the Lord" with unyielding perseverance, "not weary in well doing," and in due season they began to reap.

Many years after, their venerable leader, Thos. Smith, said,

"Our form of order was; reading from the Word of God, prayer, singing, a sermon read forenoon and afternoon, closing with prayer and singing."

Father Carruthers, a traveling evangelist, often spent a week or two with them. He was a Scotchman, father of Rev. Dr. Carruthers of Portland; not an educated, but a very useful man, sent by the Massachusetts and Maine Missionary Society to supply destitute places. The people were poor, but these evangelists were always cordially welcomed and freely entertained with the best accommodations they were able to provide, feeling that "there is nothing too good for the minister."

After a time some came professing to preach by direct inspiration, aggressively sectarian, and avowed their determination to break up this little company of staid worshipers, and drew some away; but the three families and some others remained steadfast in their worship and trust in God. They persevered through trials and discouragements which tested the firmness of their religious principles.

Rev. Jotham Sewall, familiarly known as "Father Sewall," or Uncle Jotham, employed by Mass. and Me. Missionary Societies, was always welcomed. I find in his memories that he visited Litchfield twenty-six times. He was a very strong, devoted man of ability, and perhaps did more to organize and help weak churches than any other minister in Maine. (I have been told he never spent more than four weeks at one time in Litchfield.)

"On June 6, 1811, in compliance with a request of several persons in Litchfield, an Ecclesiastical Council convened in the Congregational meeting house, to consider the expediency of constituting a church. Present, Rev. Eliphalet Gillet, pastor of church in Hallowell; Rev. David Thurston, pastor of the church in Winthrop; and for delegates, Ebenezer Davenport, Charles Harris and James Sewell of Winthrop. Council organized with Rev. E. Gillet, Mod., Rev. D. Thurston, Scribe, and proceeded to examine the following persons, as to their experimental acquaintance with religion, and their other qualifications for church privileges; viz.: Thomas Smith, Benjamin Smith, Elkanah Baker, Sam'l Smith, Mehitabel Baker, Hannah Smith, Elizabeth Smith, Desire Springer, Elizabeth Smith, Jr., Rebecca Hutchinson and Mary Smith. The council voted unanimously that they were satisfied with the qualifications of each of the above and willing to admit them to church privileges, and expressed it as their unanimous opinion that they were called of God to a church state, and that they proceed to

organize them accordingly. After the candidates declared their fellowship for each other, and consented to the Articles of Faith and the Covenant as read by the Scribe, the Moderator publicly declared the covenanters 'The Congregational Church of Christ in Litchfield.'"

The first business meeting of the church was held at the meeting house June 29, 1811. Rev. Mr. Sewall (Missionary) officiated as Moderator. Thos. Smith was chosen moderator, Benj. Smith clerk. Also Thomas and Benj. Smith were chosen deacons. This band of eleven persons from three families were as a "city set on a hill." Six other persons were received into the church that year, making the total number seventeen.

In 1820, thirty-one persons had been received: The first to be received by letter were E. Plimpton and wife in 1821. In 1830 fifty-nine had been received, and in 1831, from the fruits of the most extensive revival the church ever experienced, twenty-four were added, and the next year ten others. Of these thirty-four, thirty-three were by confession and one by letter. In 1840, one hundred twenty-six had been received, and in 1850 one hundred thirty-eight.

June 11, 1861, at the end of the first fifty years, one hundred eighty-seven—eighty males and one hundred seven females—had been received. Of these, one hundred fifty were by profession and thirty-seven by letter. Seventy-nine had died, fifty had been dismissed to other churches and seven had been excommunicated, leaving the membership at that date fifty-one. Thirteen of these had been received the second time.

At the present date, June 6, 1911, two hundred seventy-five members have been received, two hundred eight of these on profession and sixty-seven by letter; one hundred nine males and one hundred sixty-six females. Of the total number, one hundred thirty-seven were from the three families from which the church was formed and their descendants and those connected with them by marriage. The present membership is forty-two—fourteen males and twenty-eight females.

From the descendants of the original members the following, not all Congregationalists—have gone into the ministry:

Rev. Thomas Smith, Rev. Chas. B. Smith, Rev. Benj. Smith, Rev. Smith Baker, Rev. Geo. W. Baker (F. W. B.), Rev. Oscar E. Baker (F. W. B.), Rev. Edwin A. Harlow, Rev. Lincoln Harlow, Rev. F. H. Baker, Rev. Chas. E. Springer (M.), Rev. Edwin Dennett (B.), Rev. W. L. Nickerson (F. W. B.), Rev. Chas. L. Goodrich, Rev. W. Haskell

(U.), Rev. T. E. Baker, Rev. M. B. Bowen, Rev. Lincoln Goodrich, Rev. J. Smith.

Of the same descent have been nine of the twelve deacons of this church and seven deacons in other churches; also five wives of ministers. Members dismissed from this church have added strength and efficiency to other churches, and many who obtained hope here, have made their public profession in other churches. From what other church of equal numbers and means have so many of their descendants gone forth to preach Christ? Where has a little band of Christians done so much in proportion to their ability, to sustain the constant worship of God?

We extract from a letter in the Home Missionary Journal about 1830, supposedly written by Rev. A. Mead of Brunswick, the first minister to visit this people, the following statements in relation to the three families at that time: "Reckoning all the parents and their descendants the number was about six hundred. According to the best information, the number of deaths had been eighty-nine. From various causes, they were widely scattered through the country, and are in a variety of situations. But it is not known that a single individual of this multitude, descended from these pious, faithful parents, has even been of a degraded moral character. Not one is known to have been punished by the criminal laws of the land; and it is believed that there is not a drunkard or confirmed tippler among them all. Nearly all of them are noted for steady habits, good principles, in comfortable circumstances. A large portion of them have strong attachments to gospel order!"

The church was organized as a mission church and has continued as such with the exception of a brief time. Owing to deaths and removals the church has always been few in numbers and feeble in means. Members who have gone out have been instrumental in forming churches in two or three other places. "They have, at times, paid more for the ministration of the gospel than their money tax to town, county and state." Considering its ability, its contributions for benevolent purposes, have been as liberal as any in the county.

The articles of Faith and Covenant now used by this church were adopted June 30, 1866.

Rev. Daniel Lovejoy in his report to the Me. Missionary Society in 1814 said: "This church of a little more than twenty members, in the course of two years, has been reduced by the removal of more than one-third of its members to a plantation in Somerset County

(now Bingham and Moscow), and the death of one of its first deacons, Benj. Smith, who was a pillar in the church." The other first deacon, Thomas Smith, was a spiritual leader in the community more than thirty years before the church was organized and continued to be a leader in the church over twenty years, until his death in 1833, two months less than ninety years. He was a man of commanding physique and dignity, unwavering and humble, yet persevering and decided in his piety. His venerable appearance entitled him to be called the Patriarch, honored and loved by all the community. Mr. Lovejoy in his report in 1828, when they were trying to have constant preaching, says again: "They have struggled amid many difficulties to enjoy a regular administration of the word and ordinances of God. It appears to me that the church and society there are as deserving of sympathy and assistance from their brethren as any people in the state."

In 1854 five members were received on condition that they be constituted a branch of this church in Winthrop; with such powers and privileges, as is usual for such branches. 1855 three more were received through this church into the branch, two were dismissed and the last member of the branch died 1878.

In 1870 a parish was formed in connection with the church. About 1872 the organization was given up; as nearly all of its members were, or had become, members of the church, and it was not thought expedient to sustain two organizations. It was the custom of the church from its organization to have two sermons each Sunday, until November, 1874, when it voted to have but one sermon and continue the Sabbath school through the winter. Previous to this time the Sabbath school was adjourned from the first of December until May.

The church was legally incorporated in 1893, under an act of the State Legislature "To enable independent and local churches to become incorporated."

Ministers

To pay for Congregational preaching a subscription paper ("supposed to be the first for support of preaching in this place"), dated Nov. 8, 1809, was circulated to pay Rev. Sam'l Sewall, who had taken a mission from the Me. Miss. Society (to preach in Pittston and some other destitute places for eight months to labor here part of his time). There were thirty-five subscribers and the amount pledged was \$21.90,

to be paid in money, corn, rye, or oats, the produce to be at market price and to be paid to Capt. Smith Baker as treasurer by the first of December. Rev. Samuel Sewall was sent to Litchfield, February, 1809, 1810 and 1811, by the Me. Miss. Society. The people paid the missionary for as long time generally as the society employed him. Rev. Daniel Lovejoy was their pastor from 1812 to 1819, preaching one-fourth of the time. Rev. Daniel Kindrick supplied one year, 1819 to 1820. Rev. James Weston supplied 1821 to 1822. Rev. Daniel Lovejoy returned in 1823 to 1828, preaching one-half of time. His family moved to this place. He was in an insane asylum in Boston some time, improved and called on people here in 1833, went to his home and hung himself one month later in his barn. He was by nature a reformer, a good pastor and highly respected by his people. He was the father of three noted sons, Rev. J. C. Lovejoy, who, while a student in Bowdoin College, organized the first Temperance Society in town in this church in 1825, and was afterwards editor of "The Liberty Standard, published in Hallowell; also of Elijah P. Lovejoy, the anti-slavery martyr, who was murdered by a mob at Alton, Ill., and Hon. Owen Lovejoy, a distinguished anti-slavery leader in Congress.

The first installed pastor was Rev. David Starrett, installed Oct. 1, 1828, and dismissed Oct. 20, 1835, a pastorate of 7 years, but he was unable to do much pastoral work the last two years on account of ill health. He was an earnest, discriminating preacher. During his ministry a remarkable revival took place, following a lecture from the text, "We have toiled all night and taken nothing." Fifty were added to the church during his ministry.

Rev. Thomas Lord came July 1, 1836, and supplied nearly one year.

Rev. Timothy Davis came to the church June, 1837, and was installed Nov. 1, 1837, at a salary of \$250; \$150 paid by the church and \$100 by the Me. Miss. Society; the use of the parsonage and firewood. He was dismissed May 5, 1852, after a pastorate of fifteen years. During his ministry twenty-two were admitted to the church. After his dismission Benjamin Smith, a native of the place, supplied the pulpit in 1852, was ordained and installed pastor in 1853, and was a devoted and universally beloved pastor over six years, until his death Sept. 1, 1858, which was deeply lamented. During his ministry thirty-four were received into the church.

Rev. David Thurston, D. D., commenced his work as acting pastor Jan. 16, 1859, then at the advanced age of eighty years, and continued

to work faithfully with energy and devotion over six years. He preached his last sermon April 20, 1865, and died May 7th, following.

Rev. Josiah T. Hawes came in June, 1865, as acting pastor and labored faithfully more than twenty-six years. A reformer by instinct and conviction, a leader in the great reform movements of his day. He preached his first sermon here after graduating from the Seminary in 1826, and his last in Nov., 1891, after a ministry of more than sixty-five years. He was a man of ability, amiable, earnest, impressive and sometimes eloquent. Kind and genial in his intercourse and held in high estimation by all the people of Litchfield. He died Oct. 22, 1892, aged ninety-four years.

Rev. James Richmond, a very conscientious faithful pastor, commenced work August, 1892, was installed Nov. 3, following, and resigned and was dismissed 1898; pastorate of six years.

Rev. Sarkis A. Apraham came February, 1899, and left February, 1901, acting as pastor two years.

Rev. Edwin A. Harlow was acting pastor six years from March, 1901, to March, 1907. He was a diligent faithful worker, genial and sympathetic in his intercourse with people. He resigned on account of ill health, very much to the regret of the church and community.

Rev. Jehiel S. Richards, the present acting pastor, commenced work October, 1907.

Deacons

It has been the custom of this church to elect its deacons for life. The following have served in that office.

Thomas Smith, elected June 29, 1811; Benjamin Smith, elected ^{June} December, 1814; *Elkanah Baker, Thomas Smith, elected 1812; Isaac Smith, elected 1823; Smith Baker, elected Jan. 5, 1839; John Hancock, elected June 30, 1866; Jesse Lambard, elected May 3, 1878; Cowper S. Ayer, elected May 3, 1878; Sam'l Grovenor Nutting, elected July 1, 1888; David Thurston Smith, elected July 1, 1888; Asa P. Smith, elected Jan. 1, 1910.

Clerks

The following acted as clerks of this church:

Benjamin Smith, elected June 29, 1811; *Thomas Smith, Jr.; Rev. David Starrett, elected 1823; Rev. Thomas Ayer, elected 1834;

*No record of their election.

Smith Baker, elected Aug. 20, 1835; Rev. Timothy Davis, elected Aug. 15, 1837; Rev. Benj. Smith, elected Aug. 5, 1853; Isaac Smith, elected Sept. 5, 1858; Rev. David Thurston, elected Sept. 6, 1859; John Hancock, elected May 6, 1865; A. P. Smith, elected Sept. 31, 1880.

Buildings

The church has had four meeting houses. I have not learned when the first was built, but it must have been before 1801, for I found in Dea. Thomas Smith's Acct. Book, Wm. Tapley credited with four and one-half days work on meeting house, at six shillings per day amounting to one pound and seven shillings, dated July 6, 1801. It stood a short distance north of where the present house now stands. It was a small flat-roofed building, with no means of heating, for it was not thought necessary to have a house of worship warmed in those days. It was also used for a public school several years. There being no school house in this part of the town Jas. Shurtliff taught in it in 1788. When it became too small for the congregation it was sold to town of Bowdoin, 1823, and moved to the Woods district in 1824, for a public school house.

The second house was built and dedicated in 1824, located about where the Academy now stands. It was a house 35x40 feet, two stories high, with two front doors in east end, two rows of small windows and gallery around three sides. The singers occupied the gallery at west end. The pulpit was a box, closed with a door and about eight steps high, located at east end between the outside doors. The pews had high walls and were closed with doors. The house had one small stove in front of the pulpit. In 1845 it was moved across the road to where the present meeting house stands. It was raised four or five feet, twelve feet added to length, the lower part finished for the use of the church, and the second story fitted for and owned by the Academy. It was finished with two large double windows on each side, and small windows in upper story at each end, and belfry for bell. After the school had been moved into the new Academy, the Trustees voted to relinquish their claim upon the building to the church for \$25.

In 1861 the question was agitated, "Is it possible for us to have a new meeting house?" the old one then being much out of repair.

Kennebec County Conference met at this Church on June 6th of that year. Rev. Charles Smith pledged \$100 toward a new meetinghouse, and other members of the conference and friends gave the

church encouragement that they would do what they might be able and would encourage others to aid.

In August of that year a subscription for building a new house was commenced, and after obtaining what they could in the church and vicinity, Rev. David Thurston, the acting pastor, went to other places, and secured such substantial aid that a plan for the new house was drawn the following winter, and a contract was made with Deacon Isaac Smith to take the old house and build a new one, which was completed the following winter. With the aisles carpeted, pews cushioned, all bills paid, amounting to about \$1,850, the church was solemnly dedicated to Jehovah, God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Feb. 12, 1863.

The dedicatory sermon was by Rev. David Thurston, D. D., and the dedicatory prayer was offered by Rev. Benj. Tappan, D. D., of Augusta. Twenty pews were sold when the house was finished. Some of the other pews have been rented as opportunity offered and rental used toward the salary of minister.

A furnace was installed in the church in 1903. In 1906 Rev. S. Baker, D. D., bought the store and office formerly owned by Dr. Kindrick, and presented it to the church, to be fitted for a chapel. Over \$100 has been expended, moving it to the church lot and fitting it for use.

In 1837 a place, on the hill now known as the Joseph Earl place, was bought by the church for a parsonage and occupied by ministers until 1852. It was bought of Rev. M. Starrett for \$500 containing about twenty-three acres. In 1863 it was sold. In 1867 the home of the late Rev. Benj. Smith was secured by purchase and gift. In 1868 this place was sold and in 1869 the present parsonage was bought of L. M. Ross for \$900.

The first bell was presented to the church by Dea. Thomas Smith, Jr., in 1846, the academy to share in its use as long as it remained under the same roof. In 1892 it was cracked and was replaced with a new one of the same weight, the old bell paying about one-half cost and citizens the balance. (First bell, 600 lbs. weight, cost \$150.) In 1865 Mrs. Sarah T. Buck of Orland (sister of Rev. D. Thurston, D. D.), presented an inside clock to the church.

The church in North Beverly, Mass., presented a communion service in 1870. In 1902 Dea. C. S. Ayer presented the individual cup service now in use.

Through the liberality of three of its deceased members the church

has the income of six hundred dollars (\$600): \$100 from the estate of Dea. Smith Baker, \$200 from the estate of David Smith in 1882, \$300 from the estate of Washington Wilcox, Esq., of Monmouth, in 1887. The conditions of the gifts are that the income only is to be used for the support of the ministry so long as the church shall exist and when the church shall cease to exist the principal fund shall be paid to the Me. Miss. Society.

Sabbath Schools

During the early years of the settlement Hannah, wife of Dea. Thos. Smith, Sr., a devoted woman of some ability and education gathered the children into her kitchen and taught them from the Bible and catechism. When she was not able to continue the work, Hepsibah, her granddaughter, (who afterward married Rev. Thomas Ayer) took up the work and after the class became too large for the kitchen she was the first superintendent, about 1820, of the Sabbath school in the little meeting house. A vigorous School has been maintained ever since. Among its superintendents have been Dea. I. Smith, Benj. Smith, Sewall Baker, Alden Baker, Isaac Smith, Jr., G. C. Waterman, C. S. Ayer, G. W. Springer, Mrs. Harriet B. Alexander, Mrs. Anna P. Smith, R. J. D. Larrabee, D. T. Smith, F. W. Libby, Henry Taylor, Mrs. Susan P. Kindrick.

Women's Societies

The church has ever been very fortunate in its female membership of noble women, capable and ready to aid in all of the good work of the church.

I cannot tell when the first woman's society was organized. In 1837 there was a society called "The Female Benevolent Society" with Mrs. Lucy Davis, wife of the pastor, president, that met one afternoon each week for mutual improvement, and to aid the needy and destitute, by their work, and raise funds for benevolent purposes. Meetings were opened with readings from the scripture and prayer. Then some one read while others were sewing, knitting, etc. In 1845 when the third meeting house was finished, they furnished the platform with carpet, sofa and chairs and upholstered the desk.

In 1863 they furnished the new meeting house with sofa, new upholstered chairs, desk, carpet for platform and aisles and cushioned pews.

The first organ, in church, was presented by this society in 1868.

In 1879 the society was reorganized with a new constitution and by-laws and called "The Ladies' Home Circle"; objects, social improvement, to obtain funds to repair the church and for the benefit of the church in any way they may vote. It had the inside of the church painted and decorated and recarpeted two times; bought new cushions and curtains, and, with the aid of Rev. Smith Baker and Mrs. H. A. C. Flint, furnished the platform with a new set of furniture. For several years it has rendered material aid, toward ministers salaries, by paying \$25 annually. The organ now in use was bought by them in 1884.

The ladies of the church have sustained an active missionary society for over thirty years and in addition to maintaining interest in the subject of missions by regular meetings each month, have contributed liberally each year to the various Congregational Missionary Societies.