# Sunday Schooling in Birmingham and Beyond: Qualitative findings from the historical study

In this chapter, the records of the Birmingham Sunday School Union serve as a case study. There is also reference to the national Union and other local Sunday School Unions where they support a particular theme. Publications, minute books, Annual Reports, and letters have been consulted. The Birmingham Union’s publications for Sunday School teachers, in particular, offered a window into how teachers, and their work, were viewed throughout the historical time periods (In the early 1900s, the main publication of this type was the *Monthly Record.* By the 1950s, it was called *News* and was published quarterly). The chapter focuses primarily on the 1955-1972 period, the key point of long-term decline for Sunday Schools, with some comparison with the 1900-1910 period when Sunday School attendance was at its peak. There is also reference to the years between these time periods where context is needed or the material illuminates a particular theme. The chapter also draws on a small number of oral history interviews for the 1955-1972 period. The dominant qualitative themes for Birmingham Sunday Schooling in the twentieth century are presented. It is a narrative of institutionalism and of negativity towards its teachers.

The chapter begins with some general context on Birmingham in the twentieth century before exploring Sunday Schools more specifically. Birmingham was a significant city in twentieth-century Sunday Schooling. It was the base for two of the century’s most influential pioneers of Sunday School method. It was in Birmingham where the training college for Sunday School teachers was created in the early twentieth century. The literature explored focuses on these pioneers and developments that made Sunday Schooling in Birmingham unique and influential. The chapter then outlines the themes that have emerged from the qualitative research in the Sunday School archives, examining each of these themes in detail. The institutionalisation theme over-arches all the sub-themes identified, and the impact of this on teachers is explored. The chapter concludes that the Sunday School Unions, with a particular focus on Birmingham, had become disconnected from their teachers by the twentieth century; a significant finding given that the first Union was set up by teachers themselves to support their work (Laqueur, 1976). In addition to this, the Unions remained distant from the young people they served throughout the twentieth-century time periods of this research.

## Twentieth-century Birmingham

Society was subject to significant change between the early 1900s and the 1960s. Alongside technological advancements, there were two world wars and arguably some of the fastest-paced social upheavals ever experienced in the Western world. British life changed immensely in just a few decades. In Birmingham, the population grew from 630,000 in 1900 (LACT Limited, 2008-11), to 1,100,000 in 1961 (University of Portsmouth, 2009). The city expanded its boundaries between these time periods and built large developments of council housing (Lambert, undated). Immigration into Birmingham from Pakistan, India, Uganda, the Caribbean and Poland (as well as smaller numbers from other countries and continents) grew vastly in the twentieth century, particularly after the Second World War (Dargue, 2008-12). Immigration prior to the 1900s had been primarily from the surrounding counties and Ireland (Dargue, 2008-12). For Birmingham generally, the twentieth century was a time of great societal shifts; social, cultural and technological. For Sunday Schooling, it was more a time of continuity than change. The archival themes identified in this chapter span both the 1900-1910 and 1955-1972 time periods, reflecting similar concerns but becoming greater as the century progressed. As argued in the previous chapter, this rigidity of Sunday School method and thinking was detrimental to its future and the changes that did occur were disconnected from the social currencies of the young.

## The Birmingham Sunday School Union

The Birmingham Sunday School Union (BSSU) was founded in 1814 (University of Birmingham, 2008: 16). It closed between 1831 and 1842 due to conflict over Jubilee celebrations but remained active for the rest of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (ibid.: 16). It became the Birmingham Youth and Sunday School Union (BYSSU) in 1942, presumably to reflect the rise of youth work in both Christian and statutory sectors working with young people. It changed name again in 1966, this time to the Birmingham Council of Christian Education (BCCE) (ibid.: 16), reflecting a diminishing regard for the term Sunday School throughout the national Christian community. The Birmingham Union was funded both through its subscriptions from affiliated Sunday Schools as well as by a Union-owned bookshop, promoted regularly in Union publications. It was also closely aligned with Westhill College, the training college for Sunday School teachers based in Selly Oak, Birmingham, which it helped to set up. It appears from the records to have had some responsibility for sustaining the college through recruiting teachers to training courses. It also added a conference centre to its buildings portfolio in 1947 (ibid.); its finances thus seemingly unaffected by the war. The Union expanded its boundaries between the 1900-1910 and 1955-1972 time periods, reaching further than the increasing city boundaries to towns and villages almost twenty miles from the city, as evidenced by the diagram below.

[Insert Figure 11]

Figure 11 – Image published by BYSSU in *News*, February 1955.

The numbers of scholars, teachers and schools also grew between the time periods, seemingly bucking the national trend. This will largely have been due to the expanding Union boundaries. The Birmingham Union ran throughout the twentieth century until 2001 when it was subsumed into Birmingham Churches Together, outliving other local Unions and surviving as long as the national Union (University of Birmingham, 2008: 16).

## Cadbury and Archibald: Sunday School Champions?

In 1901, the Quaker philanthropist, George Cadbury was elected as president of the National Sunday School Union (Priestley, 2007: 128). Based in Birmingham, he was already running a Sunday School-type provision on weekday mornings for the adults working in his factory. Whilst other Sunday Schools had long moved from the educational focus of Sunday Schooling, his weekday school still taught basic literacy skills. Though, as in the time of Raikes, the Bible was his textbook. He also provided worship services to follow the teaching which attracted at their turn of the century peak, ‘some 2,200 women workers… the men numbering about 1000’ (ibid.: 127-8). Cadbury also ran a Sunday School for men and boys on Sunday itself on what had been the original factory site before it moved from the inner-city. He valued the time for informal conversation, always having breakfast with the men before the Sunday School started. In addition to this, he opened his home to around 20,000 children each year for Sunday School events, having built a barn big enough for 700 people for times when the weather was unfavourable (ibid.: 129).

It appears that Cadbury was successfully running a less institutionalised form of Sunday School than was characteristic of his day. He prized conversation over didacticism in his year as NSSU president, illustrated by his use of the first front-page of the *Sunday School Chronicle* of his presidency to present ‘A Chat with Mr George Cadbury’ rather than the traditional statement from the new president (Priestley, 2007: 128). However, his informal conversational approach may have been less influential on national Sunday Schooling than his commitment to a perceived need for better training for Sunday School teachers. He published on this matter in the *Sunday School Chronicle* three months into his presidency initiating a plethora of articles on the subject (ibid.: 129). These can be observed in the NSSU’s *Chronicle* as well as the publications of local Sunday School Unions from that point forward with an obsessive frequency, carrying through into the 1960s. The Cadbury family were involved in Birmingham Sunday Schooling beyond George Cadbury’s time, with several people named Cadbury recorded as making personal donations to the local Union each year in the Annual Reports throughout the 1950s and 60s (BYSSU/BCCE, Annual Reports, 1955-1971).

In 1902, George Hamilton Archibald, a pioneer of innovative Sunday School methods from Canada took a sabbatical in England (Cliff, 1986: 206). While staying in England, Archibald conducted some lectures on Sunday Schooling, and this led to him being invited to remain longer as an Extension Lecturer for the NSSU (ibid.: 206). In 1905, he was invited to speak at a Quaker Sunday School conference that took place over the Easter weekend at the home of George Cadbury (Priestley, 2007: 124). Cadbury was impressed by Archibald’s commitment to bringing child-centred learning into Sunday School work, which would have fitted nicely with his own informal, conversational approach. From this first meeting in Birmingham, Cadbury immediately gave Archibald the nearby Ruskin Hall as a demonstration school to try out his methods, until the Sunday School in Bournville itself was built (ibid.: 130). Archibald instigated the creation of the British Lessons Council in 1916. This perhaps marks a diversion from Cadbury’s wider educational focus towards solely religious instruction, as was typical elsewhere. The Council was still producing lesson materials for Sunday Schools throughout the 1960s.

Archibald continued to lecture on Sunday Schooling around the country, as well as being commissioned to lead the development of a teacher training college for Sunday Schools in 1907. The college building was funded by Cadbury money but Archibald was not paid for his work there (Holmes, 2009: 136). The opening of Westhill College in Birmingham, however, could be seen to have cemented the obsession with training for Sunday School teachers, particularly in Birmingham where sustaining the college was evidently a concern.

Priestley claims that Archibald inspired ‘A total revolution in the whole world of British Sunday Schools’ through changes such as ‘the acquisition of small chairs and tables, together with sandtrays, blackboards, plasticine, pencils, paper and building blocks’ (2007: 130). It is questionable, however, whether the ‘whole world of British Sunday Schools’ was revolutionised to the extent, or even in the direction that Cadbury and Archibald truly intended. Cliff recognises that whilst a ‘shift had been made from teaching a subject to teaching a child... [m]ost people found it harder to understand, and to do, than Archibald had imagined’ (1986: 217). Though Archibald argued that ‘The Sunday school of the future must be decentralised’ (1913, cited in Sutcliffe, 2001: 13), the development of the British Lessons Council and Westhill College only contributed to closer centralisation and Union control of Sunday Schooling. The influence of Archibald’s ideas can be seen in the ‘family church’ model proposed by H.A. Hamilton, who was also from Birmingham, in the 1940s and 1960s, and discussed in the previous chapter. However, as acknowledged there, the child-centred approach integral to the model was never fully embraced. The impact of Cadbury’s and Archibald’s work lay more in the obsession with the training of teachers, and the grading of Sunday School groups by age, than the deep principles of their method. Their legacy was the adoption of some of the practical elements of their approach rather than its ideological underpinnings.

## The Archival Themes

The main themes identified by the archival case study are all internal concerns. There is little reference to things external to the Sunday Schools in the Union records, except for the odd mention of visitation campaigns and some concern over emerging social evils. The themes explored here are as follows:

* Institutionalisation;
* Recruitment and Decline;
* Scripture Exams;
* Changing Methods;
* Criticism of teachers, and teacher training;
* Importance and Role of the Union;
* Church-Union Conflict;
* Gender.

The institutionalised nature of Sunday Schools was a key factor in Sunday School decline. This is a significant argument to make, given that internal factors have not been largely considered (as discussed in the previous chapter). In particular, I challenge the view that Sunday Schools were passive victims of inevitable decline due to societal changes. Voluntary organisations serving young people can and should be adaptable to changing social needs if they are to ensure their continued existence.

### Institutionalisation

Sunday School Unions were rigidly institutionalised by the twentieth century. Change was slow and unresponsive to the immediate needs of young people. Discussions about changing the name of the Birmingham Youth and Sunday School Union can be traced in their records from August 1962 (BYSSU, ‘*News*’, August 1962). However, a change of name to the Birmingham Council of Christian Education was not agreed until the Union’s AGM in early 1966 (BCCE, *News*, February 1966). If a change of name took four years to accomplish, any change of methods would have been far too long a process to be responsive to the immediate concerns of the communities being served. Indeed, BCCE minutes record a need to amend the constitution before being able to change even the teaching materials (BCCE, Executive Committee Minutes, July 12th, 1967).

There was a hierarchical nature to the Unions, demonstrated by the accountability of the local Unions to the NSSU, and in how the local Unions communicated with their affiliated Sunday Schools. The Unions appeared to assume authority over the Sunday Schools. The communication between the local Unions and their Sunday Schools was largely critical and, in Birmingham, often expressed to teachers via the use of images and verse, as in the example below.

[Insert Figure 12]

Figure 12 – Image published by BYSSU in *News*, May 1958.

These communications were contradictory, sometimes telling teachers to turn their focus away from bureaucratic concerns yet often criticising them for not prioritising meetings and administrative tasks set by the Union.

### Recruitment and Decline

In Birmingham in 1899, there were 136 schools affiliated to the local Sunday School Union, 3,383 teachers and 38,240 scholars (BSSU, Annual Report, 1899). By 1954, when attendance reached a peak, there were 342 schools, 8,805 teachers and 48,630 scholars (BYSSU, Annual Report, 1954). The figures demonstrate growth between the 1900s and the 1950s, and show that the early 1950s in particular were a time of relative stability for the Birmingham Union. This growth was largely due to the expanding boundaries of the Union to encompass towns and villages outside the city. It demonstrates, however, that in Birmingham there was, as yet, no real reason for concern. The 1955 figures show there were 349 affiliated schools, 6,465 teachers and 47,104 scholars (BYSSU, Annual Report, 1955). After 1955, numbers of teachers and scholars were no longer included in Birmingham’s Annual Reports; the 1955 report suggested they were struggling to get schools to submit returns. The number of affiliated schools was still available and this was recorded as 395 in both 1958 and 1960, rising to 450 in 1961 (BCCE/BYSSU, Annual Reports, 1955-71). Within the record books of the NSSU, there is a breakdown of local Unions and their numbers of schools, teachers and scholars. Birmingham did not feature most years in these records; presumably they did not submit their statistics to the NSSU. However, their figures do feature for the year 1972 where it is recorded that there were 300 schools, 4500 teachers and 27,000 scholars (NSSU, Official Statistics, 1966-1974). This shows a decline in scholars between 1955 and 1972 of 43% and a decline in teachers of 30%. Thus it is clear that the Birmingham Union experienced a period of dramatic decline in this period, falling in line with the national pattern.

Despite periods of growth and stability in the first half of the twentieth century, concern about declining numbers of members was a regular theme in the publications for Sunday School teachers from the Birmingham Union from the 1900-1910 period onwards (e.g. BSSU, *Monthly Record*, 1905-08; BYSSU/BCCE, *News*, 1954-63).

The quality of Sunday School teaching, and rising numbers of ‘social evils’ and distractions drawing individuals and families away from Christianity, were perceived as the causes of decline. There was also concern over the low numbers of Sunday School members and their families attending church. The example below, from the later period, demonstrates the way in which blame for decline was laid on the teachers, as well as the sporting image subtly implying that other external attractions may have been luring young people away.

[Insert Figure 13]

Figure 13 – Image published by BYSSU in *News*, May 1958.

At local and national level, both teachers and scholars were encouraged to recruit more members for Sunday Schools. The NSSU published a recruitment card in the 1960s that scholars could use to record their efforts. The Birmingham Union’s *News* produced much material mourning decline and encouraging recruitment in the 1950s and 60s, as illustrated by the example below.

**Increased Efficiency and Productivity.**

You have read or heard much these days about the need to increase industrial and commercial efficiency, for the economic stability of the country. To strengthen the pound and close the gap between imports and exports.

Can we take a page out of this book for our work?

Suppose we sought a 4% increase in the attendance of our teachers, Leaders and scholars each Sunday?

a 4% increase in the enrolment of new scholars?

a 4% increase to the total of the subscriptions you make during the year, for the many worthwhile agencies?

A 4% increase for most churches, schools or Clubs, is very small indeed if the members really meant business.

But this could mean 1600 more scholars in our schools, with 360 new teachers to befriend them.

You only have to let your imagination have its fling, and realise what this could mean for the whole country.

(BYSSU, *News*, February 1965)

The *News* was often inconsistent, sometimes promoting growth in numbers and at other times, rejecting the idea of numbers as important and promoting quality of the work with those that did attend as more important. It also suggested at times that recruitment should not be undertaken if the quality of premises and teaching were in need of improvement, as seen in some of the examples later in the chapter. Sometimes the Union expressed concern over the low numbers of Sunday School graduates becoming church members, yet at other times questioned the importance of this transition. For example, in 1958, it asked ‘Is church membership the only criterion for Christian Education, or can it be something much bigger?’ (BYSSU, *News*, August 1958). As discussed in the previous chapter, the proportion of Sunday School graduates who continued to attend church only increased as the numbers of Sunday School members from non-church families declined.

### Scripture exams

As stated in the previous chapter, scripture exams for scholars emerged in response to the 1870 Education Act, which made religious education the responsibility of the churches (Green, 1996: 226). They had existed previously as a method for assessing the competence of teachers but were extended to scholars in an attempt to measure young people’s learning and the quality of teaching (Green, 1996: 228).

Scripture exams were valued at local and national Union level throughout the early 1900s and between 1955 and 1972. They were greatly prioritised and featured in minutes and publications regularly. Awards and prizes were important to the Unions, and were a prevalent method of encouraging attendance and engagement within Sunday Schools, and the exams provided a good focus for these. There is evidence that teachers still undertook the scripture exams in the early twentieth century but by the 1955-72 period, it appears that they were reserved for scholars. As discussed in the previous chapter, scripture exams were used as a measure of a school’s success. This still appears to have been the case in May 1966, when the *News* criticised the number of schools in Birmingham requesting special concessions for certain children, alternative dates for the exam or to open the papers early. It stated that:

Even with a Christian community, this would lead to all kinds of abuses and would bedevil the very purpose of the examination. You do not need me to state what abuses would take place, where marks for shields and trophies rank very important. (BCCE, *News*, May 1966).

The cost of entry for the scripture exams appears to have sapped the finances of some local Unions such as that in East Herts (EHSSU, Minutes, 31st January, 1964). When the Union closed in 1965, after finding its paying subscribers were not enough to keep the Union afloat, the scripture exam was by far the biggest drain on finances (EHSSU, Minutes, 15th January, 1965). Sunday Schools may have continued subscription to their local Union in order to have access to these exams. In the communications to the failing East Herts Union from its schools, this appeared to be the case for some. Cliff (1986) records growth in the numbers of young people taking the scripture exam even as attendance declined. It may be that those attending were now more often from a church family and were encouraged in this pursuit, but it emphasises the value of these exams to the Sunday Schools. In Birmingham, in April 1965, a bar on entry into the exams was threatened to schools who failed to submit their annual returns, suggesting they held a certain weight (BYSSU, *News*, April 1965).

The Scripture Exam Committee of the national Union appears to have been reluctant to respond to suggestions from local representatives, particularly as regards changing material. The exams were based on British Lessons Council material and a loyalty was expressed by the committee to this body as well as a financial obligation to sustain it. Use of its material for the exams may have been an attempt to foster a dependence on its Sunday School material among the schools. Most feedback from schools that was discussed at committee meetings was dismissed. The examples below are from a committee meeting on 13th January 1961 where no single request was acted upon.

Mr. W. R. Campbell – North Shields – suggesting new name “Bible Study Awards”. A Graded examination based on the lesson courses to be studied at the same period as the present examination and a Uniform examination in the early autumn not on the lesson courses, also an annual Essay Competition for older scholars, teachers and even church members, based on a given subject, perhaps a choice of four subjects.

It was agreed to leave this for the time being as we cannot at present contemplate an autumnal examination and there has been no demand for an essay competition.

Mr. E. J. Caswell – Brighton – criticising the way the questions were worded for Lower and Upper Junior Divisions.

These will be borne in mind.

Mr. R. D. Keith – Barnet – the word “examination” acts as a deterrent to some, suggest “competition”. Standard expected from Upper Junior should be higher.

It was agreed the word “Competition” not appropriate.

Mr. J. W. G. Pampling – Harlow – suggesting the qualifying date for determining age of applicants should be 2nd September prior to examination.

Agreed 2nd September too far from the examination.

(NSSU, Joint scripture Exam Committee Minutes, January 13th, 1961)

The number of entrants for the exam in Birmingham for a sample of the 1950s and 60s is presented below.

[Insert Table 3]

Table 3 – Numbers of entries into the scripture exam by BYSSU/BCCE between 1954 and 1967 (BYSSU/BCCE, Annual Reports, 1954-1967).

The Annual Report for 1958 stated that the 1957 figure was exaggerated as a great number entered but did not sit the exam. Although fluctuating between just short of 1500 and over 2000 throughout this time period (ignoring the anomalous 1957 figure), there had been considerable growth since the turn of the twentieth century with 805 entrants in 1899. There were no concerns evident in Union material about the popularity of the scripture exam. This, again, demonstrates the strength of the Birmingham Union in the mid-century.

There is no evidence of any consideration of how useful the scholars found the exam. Given that Sunday Schools were voluntary associations, attendance was not compulsory and scripture exams were costly, some consideration of their value to the young people or indeed their parents might have been useful. As acknowledged in the previous chapter, Sir Joshua Fitch argued at the close of the nineteenth century that Sunday Schools needed to adopt an alternative purpose and style to that of formal schooling rather than remaining a supplement to it (Robson, 2007: 146). The priority placed on scripture exams between 1900 and the 1960s suggests this warning had not been heeded.

### Changing methods

A need to change methods was acknowledged in Union publications, and the newly fashionable theory of child-centred learning was mentioned throughout the period from 1900 until the 1970s. It featured regularly in the BSSU *Monthly Record* from the early 1900s. However, the Unions did not relinquish top-down control, with Birmingham’s *Monthly Record* publishing weekly lessons and even blackboard outlines, at the same time as discussing such learner-defined methods (BSSU, *Monthly Record* 1909-12).

The key change that did take place within Sunday Schooling was the move to the ‘family church’ model in the mid-twentieth century (Hamilton, 1963). With this, the timing of Sunday Schools moved from the dominant afternoon slot to fit with morning service times although the original idea was that churches would negotiate the most appropriate time to run services and Sunday Schools concurrently. As discussed in the previous chapter, ‘family church was an attempt to address the issue of young people not becoming church members when they outgrew Sunday School. Hamilton (1963: 14) argued that churches could only address the problem by becoming more united with their Sunday Schools and taking more interest in the young people. He proposed a mentorship programme for young people facilitated by church members (outlined in the previous chapter) (Hamilton, 1963: 26-8). However, his proposals were not fully implemented with most churches simply changing the timings of Sunday School to fit with established service times and having the young people attend the start of the service. In many cases, it appears this was nothing more than a superficial attempt to portray the young people as ‘in church’ and it arguably accelerated decline.

There is evidence in the Birmingham records that ‘family church’ was under discussion from the late 1950s. In the early 1960s, the records mention that Sunday Schools were changing their timings to fit with morning services (BYSSU/BCCE, *News*, 1954-63; 1964-69). By 1965, the change was clearly embraced by the Birmingham Union as the way forward.

There are many good reasons why we should re-consider whether Sunday School afternoon is the best time to meet. It is not only a question of meeting changing social conditions outside the church. We have to consider whether the movement towards family church where the adult members acknowledge and express an active responsibility for the children of the church who regularly worship with them, and where the family is accepted as a unit for evangelism is a good one.

(BYSSU, *News*, November 1965)

The Lea Valley Union questioned the changes suggesting that ‘Family Church practice makes it difficult to help people see something larger than the Church itself and it is easy to become insular’ (Lea Valley Christian Fellowship, Minutes, 8th November, 1968). As discussed in the previous chapter, the shift to ‘family church’ may have been an attempt to do just that for many churches, for Sunday School to become church-focused and controlled. The oral histories showed that the practice of attending the start of the service before leaving for Sunday School was established by the 1960s and 70s for those interviewed. Rita recounts that:

It was morning by the time I went but a few years before it had been an afternoon Sunday school and then it had been changed. So actually it was at the same time as the adult congregational service. We went into church, for the first 2 hymns, prayers and then we all trickled out. (Rita)

Similarly, Mary commented that before the age of 10, her Sunday School met in the afternoon whereas by the time she was in the youth group, the younger children attended the start of the morning service before their Sunday School session. Jim explains that he ‘enjoyed participating a bit more in the start of the service’ after the change ‘in a way that [he] hadn't previously’. Whilst he found the service ‘modern’ and accessible and important to feeling part of the church, others reported instances where church services were not particularly interesting or accessible to the young people. Sarah stated that ‘It was just aimed at the adults and the children were expected to either take part as best they could or you know, to be quiet and behave’. The interviewees also recounted that as they outgrew Sunday School, the provision of youth groups for them in the evening was emerging and that these were more informal and popular. Mary explained that the youth group was better attended by young people than services were.

People like me went to the service and then went to evening youth group. Some of my contemporaries had Sunday morning off, you know, came in the evening. It wasn't like it was anything for us specifically during the service. (Mary)

This suggests that some young people still chose not to attend adult church as they grew older even after ‘family church’ enforced a connection.

### Criticism of teachers, and teacher training

An emphasis on the teachers’ need for further training ran throughout the twentieth century, a message communicated quite aggressively and condescendingly at times. The blame for declining attendance at Sunday School was often attributed to a declining quality of teaching, as seen in the examples below.

The Birmingham records as well as those of other local unions in the early twentieth century reflect a particular concern for Sunday School teachers to undertake qualifications specific to their role (EHSSU, Minutes, April 1892-April 1906; BSSU, *Monthly Record*, 1905-1908). There are some regional variations in the level of criticism of the teachers in the early 1900s. For example, the East Herts Sunday School Union minutes from a meeting on 19th July, 1900 stated that there was ‘no lack of devoted teachers’ (EHSSU, Minutes, April 1892-April 1906). In Birmingham, however, Union records were frequently punctuated with criticism of the teachers. In 1905, it was stated in the *Monthly Record* that there was less enthusiasm among teachers than ten years previously and, in February 1909, they printed an article on the subject of teacher enthusiasm (BSSU, *Monthly Record* 1905-1908, 1909-1912). Also in 1905, the *Record* contained a transcript of the Reverend James Wylie’s ‘New Year Address to Sunday School Teachers’, stating that:

If it is true that the greatest discovery of the nineteenth century was the discovery of the child, it is equally true that one of the chief problems of the twentieth is the evolution of the teacher (BSSU, *Monthly Record*, January 1905)

This highlights the conflict between the emergence of child-centred learning and the lack of trust in the teachers.

This criticism of teachers in Birmingham persisted through the twentieth century. The image below comes from the *News* in November 1958, and emphasises the ongoing message communicated to the teachers of their incompetence in their role.

[Insert Figure 14]

Figure 14 – Image and text published by BYSSU in *News*, November 1958.

Douglas Hubery (1960), a writer and proponent of child-centred learning, defended Sunday School teachers, saying they were ‘aware that the problems of Sunday School cannot be solved entirely by themselves, and rightly resent being regarded as scapegoats for the existence of these problems’ (cf. Sutcliffe 2001: 47). This highlights the existence of tensions between Sunday School teachers and their institutional authorities.

With Birmingham being the home of Westhill College, there appeared to be an emphasis on attendance at training courses there and a suggestion that teacher support was needed to keep the college afloat, as illustrated by the extract below.

I have, from time to time, met leaders and teachers who have responded to a suggestion that they should attempt a Course of either one term, a year, or longer, at Westhill with various observations, which all meant that they feared the stifling of individual qualities beneath a mass of formal and authoritarian instruction about how they should do things. Nothing could be further from the truth, and I return once again, without any apology, to the suggestion that individual teachers, who are able to do so, should make the real effort of taking at least one term at Westhill... The National Union offers bursaries for the purpose, as does Westhill itself; the Church from which the teacher comes is often far-sighted enough to contribute generously for the purpose; some denominations have facilities, both local and national, for underwriting study courses at Westhill; and quite a number of local Unions are holding funds for the express purpose of providing training facilities for teachers in membership with them... [Q]uite clearly the advantages of a sustained residence in the atmosphere of the College cannot be duplicated in local Courses... There is little justification for bemoaning the difficulties of Sunday School and Youth Work and the disappointment of seeing so much effort yield a less result than might be hoped and, at the same time, doing nothing to prepare ourselves and our colleagues to get a grip on the situation as far as we possibly can... Even though the calls for training are straining our resources at the moment, we would still welcome a greater effort of determination on the part of teachers to equip themselves for their very high office.

(BYSSU, *News*, August 1963)

Calls such as these are a regular feature in *News* throughout the 1955-1972 period*,* as well as calls to attend other short courses, lectures and conferences arranged by the Birmingham Union. Thus there appears to have been both a concern with maintaining the Union’s role and facilities but also, increasingly, with the quality of the teachers themselves. A particular concern with maintaining the college may reflect an extension of the capitalist epoch that Yeo (1976) identifies at the turn of the twentieth century, where investment in buildings for Sunday School work led to a focus on their financial maintenance before response to local need. Holmes identifies the dilemma for Westhill College from 1939 onwards, as state involvement in youth work grew and youth work courses were increasingly available in ‘secular’ universities (2009: 138). The push to engage in a ‘sustained residence’ at the college, however, may not have been a realistic option for volunteer teachers with family and/or work commitments.

The criticism of Sunday School teachers in the 1950s and 60s was not just centred on training, but often focused on how clean they kept their premises. The example below demonstrates the aggression with which this was communicated by the Birmingham Union.

**How blind are you?**

So often when visiting churches one is struck by the care or lack of care, for the furniture, equipment and the fabrics itself. Yet, if the Queen of England was scheduled to visit your church during one of her engagements, what trouble would you take to brush and dust and generally tidy the church.

YET -------you expect your scholars to meet the King of Kings every Sunday when they come to your school --- or perhaps you do not.

There is no reason for equating junk, rubbish, dust and dirt with Christianity. Yet, in some churches this is true.

When did you last clear out your cupboards or wash the windows and all the other jobs? Nothing but the best is good enough for the House of God and that does not mean depositing the ‘throw out’ from your homes.

(BYSSU, *News*, August 1963)

This, again, reflects the idea that the quality of premises or buildings was key to young people’s engagement rather than the relationships established with teachers.

Other reasons for criticism centred on the personal and faith lives of the teachers. Several different ‘vices’ are criticised in the Union’s publication to teachers. The *Monthly Record* in February 1907 suggested that teachers who attended the theatre should not be recruited. Similar concerns are echoed in the 1950s and 60s around cinema-going, smoking and gambling, as well as the level of commitment to Christianity held by teachers (BYSSU/BCCE, *News*, 1954-63; 1964-69). The verse below features in *News* in May 1967.

WHICH ARE YOU ?

A LOT of Christians are like wheelbarrows … they need to be pushed!

SOME are like canoes … they need to be paddled!

SOME are like kites … unless a string is kept on them they fly away!

SOME are like kittens … they are only contented when petted!

SOME are like balloons … full of air and ready to blow up!

SOME are like rugby footballs … you can’t tell which way they will bounce next!

SOME are like trailers … they have to be pulled!

SOME are like neon lights … they keep going on and off!

SOME are like a valuable watch … open face, pure gold, quietly busy and full of good works!

Well it does take all sorts to make a world and all sorts to make a Church, but ……….

WHICH ARE YOU ?

(BCCE, *News*, May 1967)

These are not isolated examples. The Birmingham records for both 1900-1910 and 1955-1972 regularly suggest that the disposition of the teachers may well be the reason for declining attendance. The persistent negativity the teachers faced from their institutional authorities probably only served to destroy any vision and enthusiasm they may have held when first taking on the role.

### Importance/Role of Union

The Birmingham Union appeared increasingly to assert the importance of its role throughout the twentieth century. This is evident in the authoritarian nature of communication in the early 1900s, and by the 1950s the message had become more explicit and somewhat desperate. The excerpt below illustrates the Union’s feeling of distance from its teachers and its desire to bridge the gap.

The introduction of ‘News’ into our work was an attempt to circulate news and items of interest beyond the secretary’s waste paper basket... [W]e ought to be overwhelmed by people seeking our advice and help. When I speak to the staff of our churches, they are often amazed to know of the facilities that are available, merely for the sake of asking... We exist to help our churches in all branches of Christian Education. If churches are keen enough to give time and thought, then we will do our utmost to help. Those of our readers who are concerned about this and are willing to help us, will you kindly recruit more readers for ‘News’ or constantly ask your secretary for news he has received from us about our Conferences etc... [I]f you have not seen any of us for a while, why not invite us – with or without a cup of tea! Such occasions are often the beginning of a team spirit within a School or Club.

(BYSSU, *News*, May 1962)

The following year, far from its material proving useful to teachers, the Union was receiving complaints about the amount it sent out. Again, the suggestion is that the teachers are not receiving the relevant information.

We have received some complaints about the amount of material sent from this office. Does this mean we are choking the lines of communication, or does it mean the receiving end needs to be reorganised so that the information given, reaches the people concerned? Does your Secretary come to the School every Sunday? Some do not. How often do you have a Teacher’s Meeting? Just one a quarter?

(BYSSU, *News*, November 1963)

Throughout the 1960s, the Union appeared increasingly desperate in its attempts to retain control of Sunday Schooling in the area:

DO YOU KNOW of any churches in your area that are not affiliated to us and do not take advantage of the facilities offered to them? If so, would you send a postcard with the name of the Church to the office please.

(BYSSU, *News,* August 1962)

A need for money to support the Union permeated the 1955-72 period through Union to church communication.

[Insert Figure 15]

Figure 15 – Text published by BYSSU in *News*, February 1963.

The following extract, from *News* in April 1964, is indicative of how little interest the teachers and churches had in the role of the Union.

DOES THIS INDICATE APATHY?

When a recent letter went out to all churches, advising that Mr. Phillimore and myself were willing to wait in the Office from 5 to 8.00 p.m. for three nights in four weeks, so that Workers might have an opportunity of sharing their worries, ideas etc., we hoped this might prove one way of helping you and also give us some indication of the value of Central Training Groups. Your response was disappointing, we received one visitor only on the Senior, Junior and Primary evenings, all from the same church. We were most happy to meet them and have now made some arrangement to help in the near future, but it would seem that this experiment was not really successful.

The Churches must really awake to the vital need of adequate training of those members they dedicate into the Teaching Ministry. As some said to me very recently, “we should be better than the day schools.”

(BYSSU, *News*, April 1964)

This is evidence that the Union was losing its position. It was clearly struggling to promote its services in terms of advice, training, and statistical gathering as shown throughout this chapter. Its only draw was perhaps the scripture exams, which remained popular. The oral history interviews with those who attended Sunday School in the 1960s, and a group interview with those who attended in the 1940s, found that the Sunday School members were never aware of the existence of the local or national Union, despite some of them having gone on to teach. This suggests that these young teachers did not access the advice or training offered by the Unions.

### Church-Union conflict

There is archival evidence of conflict between churches and Unions. For example, when a local vicar complained to the Birmingham press in the 1960s about a school holding opera rehearsals on Sundays, the local Union’s General Secretary responded with disagreement saying the rehearsals did not overlap with Sunday School timings anyway and that the Sunday Schools should be looking to share such activities with schools (BCCE, Annual General Meetings – enclosed letter, March 1967). Criticism of the churches is evident from the same General Secretary of the Birmingham Union, in May 1959, in his editor’s letter in *News*.

Several things have raised the question “Are we over organised” or is the B.Y.S.S.U. too far removed from the general conditions of our churches to be of any real service? First the question arose at the Youth Conference at Barnes Close, where it was realised that we were presenting ideals to young people who would have little opportunity of putting those ideals into practice in their own churches... Secondly, the question of being “over organised” arose when we had to press so hard to fill the Easter Conference, even with such an attractive programme.

Is the blame with churches who refuse to move with the times rather than with us being too far ahead? Whatever the answer, the fact remains that the church must move faster in this period of rapid social change if it is to communicate the Good News to this day and generation.

Another aspect of this problem is when we find so many results of bad organisation and administration in our schools and Youth Groups. Slackness in correspondence, incorrect entries for the Scripture Examination; is all this indicative of the state of our local church organisation? I have heard this word ‘indicative’ quite often in the office when discussing the many evidences of our difficulties in serving the local church dealing with children and young people.

(BSSU, *News*, May 1959)

There is a distinct contradiction borne out in the text above between the Union’s notion that it is promoting ‘ideals’ to young people (and being ahead of the times in this) and its ongoing obsession with bureaucracy and administrative matters. The ‘ideal’ most consistently promoted appears to be that of administrative efficiency. Union conferences and events may have promoted certain social ‘ideals’ in theory. In practice, however, the Union’s constant demands and attempted control of Sunday Schools did not leave much freedom to respond to social currencies.

The editor of *News* appeared to have a particular disdain for church secretaries, the gatekeeper between him and his target audience. His communication became quite aggressive at times.

Some Secretaries deliberately refuse to pass on information sent to them, because they think it is in the interest of their school not to become interested by outside efforts, however good they may appear. I know this to be true for some, as this is disclosed when we send out the Barnes Close Conference Notices. Some secretaries feel that having a few teachers away one Sunday is to the detriment of the school. Instead it could be the very shot in the arm the school needs... If you have a secretary who does not attend the school each week, please think again as to the purpose of such an officer... If you are a secretary, please see that the information you receive is passed to the people concerned and not put it aside as something that does not matter... It is a pity so much of our time appears to be wasted, when replies are sought, even stamped addressed envelopes, do not mean anything to some people. Are we approaching an age when the courtesy of replying is of no account?

Less than a third of Secretaries returned the Annual Returns this year, whereas your affiliation strictly is dependent on this being done. For we pay an affiliation to the National Sunday School Union based on the teaching staff of our schools, and all the services of the N.S.S.U. are available to you, if your school are affiliated. If you do not return the Annual Returns we have to take an average and hope it is correct. The Scripture Examination should be withheld from schools that do not comply with this simple rule of replying with the Annual Returns.

(BYSSU, *News*, April 1964)

There is a clear link between the Union’s obsession with administration and its disdain for secretaries. This seems somewhat unfair when it is considered that the Union had full-time staff whereas church secretaries were probably volunteers with other occupations. If the above is representative of Union to church communication, it is not surprising that the Unions faced decline as Sunday Schools became more closely affiliated with churches.

It is difficult to tell how widespread church-Union conflict was within the Birmingham Union due to much of *News* being written by the editor and a few regular authors. However, Cliff (1986) confirms these tensions between Unions and churches in his discussion around the national Union’s reluctance to embrace ‘family church’ until the 1960s despite church support for the model. He suggests that the NSSU opposed ‘family church’ and church ownership of Sunday schools for two decades (Cliff, 1986: 244).

With churches and Unions in conflict, it was inevitable that as the Sunday Schools became more closely affiliated and increasingly controlled by their churches, the Unions were effectively redundant. Whether this was positive or negative is difficult to establish. With less Union control, the Sunday Schools should have been freer to define teaching at a local level, to choose their own materials and to respond to their local social currencies. It is not clear whether many individual churches allowed or even desired this to happen. Closer affiliation with church largely appears to have marked a shift towards becoming more inward-focused rather than more community-focused. This shift from outreach to nurture is explored in the next chapter.

### Gender

Orchard (2007: xviii) states that little is known about the women who made up the majority of the Sunday School labour-force. Although the NSSU Annual Reports did not regularly provide a gender breakdown of their teachers, they did so for a couple of years in the early twentieth century. In 1907 and 1908, between 48% and 49% of teachers serving NSSU affiliated schools were female (NSSU Annual Reports, 1907 and 1908). This demonstrates that, at the start of the twentieth century, there was a reasonably equal distribution of male and female teachers. In interview, Rita stated that in the 1960s, in her experience, ‘the leaders were more men, the actual teachers, probably predominantly female’. Jim also suggested the majority of his teachers were female. However, it is the men that he can remember by name. In terms of leadership at Union level, men remained the dominant voice. The Birmingham Union was presided over and represented by men throughout the historical periods of this study.

Priestley explains that George Cadbury, NSSU president in 1901 and key to the development of Sunday Schooling in Birmingham as well as nationally, had particular views on the role of women. Marriage meant an automatic termination of employment in his factory: ‘their place, he insisted, was at home’ (Priestley 2007: 139). Holmes describes Cadbury as engaging in ‘benevolent paternalism’, citing a gender aspect to this in his provision of daily worship services for women yet only weekly ones for men (2009: 135). The obsession with the training of Sunday School teachers, initiated by Cadbury in the early century, may well have been an attempt to control these women.

The first female president of the NSSU, in 1917, was Mrs Barrow Cadbury, the wife of George Cadbury’s nephew (Cliff, 1986: 211). This may have been due to so many men being away for the First World War. This appears to be a time when the NSSU acknowledged the contribution made by women to Sunday Schooling, as demonstrated by the NSSU’s 1916 Annual Report which praised women for filling the shortfall as male teachers declined and described Sunday School teaching as ‘the work of women’.

[T]he shortage of male teachers has been interpreted by women as a golden opportunity for the exercise of their gifts, and one hears of some Sunday Schools now entirely staffed by women; whilst in several others the women workers outnumber the men. No historian of the modern Sunday School can fail to record this fact and to pay a tribute of admiration to such noble and self-sacrificing labours.

(NSSU Annual Report, 1916)

The Unions’ positivity about the role of women largely ends there. Though making up the main Sunday School taskforce from this time forwards, the voice of these women is difficult to find in the Sunday School archives.

Within the NSSU records, there are minute books available of a ‘Ladies Sunday School Extension Committee’ for the years 1909-1927. Mrs George Cadbury was the vice president at the start of the records in 1909. Their function appears to have been largely fundraising, particularly for the Sunday School Union’s country and convalescent homes. They also held Annual Meetings of the Ladies Committee which were celebrated events, particularly in 1909 when Mrs Lloyd George, the wife of the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, presided over the meeting. There are regular press cuttings reviewing their meetings and activities within the minute books, presumably from the NSSU’s *Sunday School Chronicle*. They were affiliated to the National Council of Women of Great Britain and Ireland, and invited to send representatives to Council events. Members of the Ladies Committee also sat on other Sunday School committees. The newspaper article below, from 1927, demonstrates that these women were aware of gender inequalities within Union structures.

**The Mainstay of the Church**

Now that Mrs. Carey Bonner has broken the ice and taken the first plunge, so to speak, I would like to follow in her wake. At the annual meeting of the Ladies’ Extension Committee of the National Sunday School Union, last week, she made a protest against the title of that admirable little society. She favours the use of the word “Women’s,” instead of “Ladies”. And, wholeheartedly, so do I. The word “Lady,” especially when used in the plural with the definite article before it – “the ladies” – is my *bête noir.* Some time ago a witty writer, whose name I have forgotten, remarked that there appeared to be a third sex: men, women – and ladies! Members of the two former can talk quite sensibly and interestingly together, but when “Shall we join the ladies?” comes all worthwhile conversation ends. A man sort of pulls himself together, and makes an effort to be “manly,” facetious, complimentary, gallant, or superficially chivalrous, according to his type, picking up handkerchiefs, balls of wool, reclaiming handbags, fetching shawls, etc. – all services required by “the ladies” – well, you know what “the ladies” are. They are arch, reproachful, twittery, flirtatious, appealing, according to the nature of the man they are with. They are supposed to do all kinds of unintelligent and irrational things which are “peculiarly feminine.” They are expected to be pre-eminently interested in hats and husbands, or potential husbands. They are the sex which has to be protected. They must not bother their pretty heads about politics; and business – “things to do with figures” – is beyond them. An elderly man said to me recently, “I do feel sorry for poor B--- Fancy having five sisters to look after!” The sisters are all over forty, and with their own incomes!

So I would certainly say that the members of the Ladies’ Extension Committee of the National Sunday School Union are women, and downright, earnest and hard-working women too, who, as Mrs. Bonner suggested, are the mainstay of the Church and Sunday School, not an extension of it. Withdraw the women, and much of our religious work would fall down like a pack of cards. As for “Lady,” it might regain its prestige after a time if used only as a title as we use the word, “lord.” Then applied to such women who are specially worthy of honour – names quickly suggest themselves – it would soon be restored to popular esteem.

*(Sunday School Chronicle,* May 12th 1927)[[1]](#endnote-1)

The article’s author highlights the crucial role women played in Sunday Schooling and church life, and criticises the committee’s status as an extension to the main Union. The article also demonstrates that the Sunday School Unions were not immune to changing societal norms, and that there was pressure for reform. However, The Ladies Sunday School Extension Committee was disbanded that same year due to a lack of people interested in involvement with it. The text demonstrates the emerging clash of discourses in that some women were starting to question the lack of recognition given for their services to church and Sunday School and the expectation of their continued role in such activities. It also potentially foreshadows what was to come: ‘Withdraw the women, and much of our religious work would fall down like a pack of cards’ (ibid.). The persistent criticism directed at these teachers throughout the twentieth century may have amounted to a rejection of them.

Archival narratives directed at teachers in the mid-twentieth century appear to be speaking to women – as is observed in the examples below. Many of them use the word ‘her’ when referring to teachers. There is clear evidence of a paternalist discourse towards teachers in the Birmingham records. The issue of women going to work is a regular theme in the 1960s. The extract below is just one of the examples showing that working women were not viewed favourably by the Union.

The teachers that care and take time to care, soon reap the reward of their caring.

There are not many hungry or ill clad children in our country to-day, but there are hundreds of unloved and unwanted children. Some near your church!

Mothers who go out to work when their children come home from school, in order to maintain a material standard, do not always realise that they are denying their children the one thing they alone can give – love.

Children can go hungry and ill clad, if they are wanted and loved and still become responsible citizens. This is not an excuse for poverty, but if you deny a child of its parental affection, you create a social problem which may reach into the third and fourth generation.

A teacher who opens her home to her class during the week may be doing more for the Kingdom than she realises.

(BYSSU, *News*, August 1964)

Though the criticism is directed at the mothers of Sunday School children, the message that women who go to work will see a negative impact on their children is clearly communicated, reflecting wider feminist struggles of the time. The suggestion in the above example appears to be that the Sunday School teacher should take on a pseudo-mother role to the young people affected. The implicit message to the teachers, through the equation of mothers going to work with child neglect or lack of love, may be that teachers who work are neglecting their calling to love and serve Sunday School children.

The explicit criticism of teachers by the Birmingham Union has already been discussed. It would be logical to assume that gender is significant in this criticism. Much of the communication draws on stereotypical female roles such as the call to ‘spring clean’ their Sunday Schools below.

[Insert Figure 16]

Figure 16 – Image and text published by BYSSU in *News*, May 1956.

The assumption here is, yet again, that teachers should have the time for a great deal of activity beyond the Sunday lessons. The emphasis on domestic tasks demonstrates the struggle to maintain gender-bound traditions.

Callum Brown (2001: 191) suggests there was a particular gender significance to the 1960s religious crisis that was not present in previous periods of temporary decline. McLeod (2007: 13) suggests that Brown’s thesis uncovers a ‘crucial dimension’ as to why the 1960s religious decline was so significant. It was the first time that as many women as men rejected Christianity and this resulted in a dramatic decline in the passing of religious habits from mother to child down the generations, unlike the temporary crises of previous centuries (Brown, 2001; McLeod, 2007). This gender significance is also highly relevant in exploring any decline among Sunday School teachers. Indeed, Brown (2001) asserts that the religious decline of the 1960s was caused by the very autonomy of religiously practising women choosing to leave the church. The significance of this particular generation of women in the decline of Christianity from the 1960s is also noted by other scholars (Eccles, 2010; Woodhead, 2008). It could be suggested that women were taking a stand against the oppression of paternalistic religious authorities. It is certainly clear from the archival evidence that the structural gender issues that existed in the church extended to the Sunday School authorities. Arguably, the wider gender struggles of the time were acutely present in religious organisations that relied on female volunteers.

It appears from the Birmingham data, presented earlier in this chapter, that numbers of scholars declined faster than teachers between 1955 and 1972 (although this does not account for age fluctuations in the wider population). When looking at the NSSU records for numbers of teachers and scholars affiliated to the national Union in the twentieth century (figures 3 and 4 in the previous chapter), it can be observed that the decline in teachers accelerated to meet the levels of decline in scholars as the century progressed, as presented by the calculations below:

[Insert Table 4]

Table 4 – Percentage decline of teachers and scholars affiliated to the NSSU between 1910 and 1970 (NSSU Annual Reports, 1910-1961; NSSU/NCEC Official Statistics, 1961-1965 and 1966-1974).

It can be observed from these calculations that the decline in teachers each decade from 1910 onwards is significantly less than scholars (other than during the Second World War) until the 1960s when they come in line. The overall decline in teachers for the 1955-1972 period was 62%. For scholars it was 66%. Again, it should be noted that these statistics represent absolute decline rather than being relative to any population changes.

The fact that the decline in teachers accelerated dramatically in the 1960s could indicate less need for them with fewer scholars, but it is likely that it also reflects the changing roles of women during this time in terms of work and rising autonomy. The attitude that teachers faced from the Sunday School Unions, in terms of criticism and calls for greater commitment, may have influenced whether and when they ceased to teach as their other commitments grew. When looking at the graph in the previous chapter that shows that morning schools did not open at the rate afternoon schools closed between 1958 and 1966 (Figure 10), it should not necessarily be assumed that this was due merely to a decline in scholars. It may also reflect the decline in teachers during this period. It is likely that if women began to feel increasingly stigmatised by their churches and religious authorities during the post-war period, that they became the ‘believers who do not belong’ described by Davie (1994). The archival evidence of the BSSU certainly portrays a level of hostility towards female teachers.

The question of whether female teachers left because they became disillusioned with their Sunday School work remains unanswered because it is difficult to find in the archives the voice of the women whose efforts sustained the Sunday School movement in the twentieth century. What is clear is that they faced much criticism from their dominantly male institutional authorities. Orchard goes as far as to suggest ‘It may be that one of the unexpressed reasons for hostility between church and Sunday School is bound up in what we would now term “gender issues”’ (2007: xix). Though these gender issues are evident to an extent in the early part of the century, the impact of the Second World War when many women started going out to work appears to have inspired more fevered criticism and attempted control of teachers. The communication from the Birmingham Union to its schools was aggressively paternalistic. The apparent ‘takeover’ of Sunday Schools by churches under the notion of ‘family church’, as discussed in the previous chapter, may well have had an intrinsic gender element as male clergy took control of the Sunday Schools, not trusting the religious lives of the young to a female workforce.

## Conclusion

What is most strikingly apparent from the dominantly institutional themes of this case study is that though the voice of the teachers was faint, the voice of young people was non-existent. In looking at decline, this apparent lack of regard for the community being served by those determining the direction of Sunday Schooling is surely a key issue. The narratives contained in the East Midlands Oral History Archive from people who were children in the early twentieth century make some mention of Sunday School. Where this occurs, it is not the teaching of lessons or highly prioritised scripture exams that are recounted but the treats, trips and special events that took place (East Midlands Oral History Archive, 2002). In a discussion of the role of treats and trips in Sunday Schools between 1880 and 1920, Cranwell suggests that young people only endured the week-by-week religious instruction at church-led groups in order to engage in these ‘pleasures’ (2003: 45). As young people’s social mobility increased, through transport developments, for example, these ‘pleasures’ would have held less weight. One of my interviewees, Rita, who attended Sunday School in the 1960s, recounts the special events that took place:

And so I remember promotion Sundays, Sunday school anniversaries we had when we came into church and sang lots of songs… we stood on the platform en masse, and would sing songs to the congregation. And I remember that, that was quite special. I remember the harvest festival which was very big when all the children used to traipse in a long line into church with their baskets of harvest goodies and there were so many of us that we met in the church hall and then the church was a separate building but we stood in this long queue between the church hall and the church building and gradually sort of filed into church with our harvest boxes. So that was a special occasion as well. (Rita)

These events are mentioned in Union records, but they are largely presented as unquestioned and institutionalised traditions that existed before the young people, and as subsidiary to the teaching of scripture and religious observance. The events in the narrative above are times when the young people had a participatory role in services such as through harvest festivals, prize-givings and anniversary services. Arguably, these were times when two-way investment in social and spiritual currencies could occur, at least to a limited extent. In the present-day fieldwork discussed in the subsequent chapters, I found that young people value participation and ‘having a voice’ in their church and youth work communities. Sunday School decline may have been gradually occurring before Union and church intervention but the period of long-term and fatal decline followed the strategic change from Sunday School to ‘family church’, implemented without consultation or consideration of, and arguably in direct contrast to, the views of the young people or their families. Social currencies were largely ignored, and it is arguable that the irrelevance to the lives of the young, and lack of negotiation with them, was a dominant factor in Sunday School decline.

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