

PLYMOUTH BRETHREN

GENERAL STATEMENT

History.—Early in the nineteenth century there appeared in England and Ireland, especially in the Anglican Church, considerable restiveness under the general church conditions. This was occasioned largely by dissatisfaction with the close connection between church and state, with the stereotyped forms of worship, and with the church organizations by which believers were separated from each other and were gathered into so many different sects. As a result of this feeling, a number of independent gatherings sprang up spontaneously, both in England and Ireland, in which men and women who were desirous of a “spiritual communion based on New Testament religious principles” met together for the “breaking of bread” and for prayer. Of such gatherings, the most important, from an historical standpoint, was one at Dublin, Ireland. Here, in the spring of 1827, a few Christians, some of whom had already been meeting more or less regularly for prayer, instituted the practice of “breaking of bread,” though it was not until 1829 that the first permanent meeting was formed. There were also meetings of importance at Plymouth and Bristol, England, and the fact that the meeting at Plymouth at the first had some prominence in members and teachers eventually gave rise to the name “Plymouth Brethren,” which has come to be their popular designation, though it has never been adopted by the different communities, who speak of themselves simply as “Believers,” “Christians,” “Saints,” or “Brethren.”

As the different meetings, or “gatherings,” as they were often termed, learned of each other, it was natural that there should be more or less fellowship between them, although no regular organization was formed. A number of men of exceptional ability and great personal power identified themselves with the movement, among them John Nelson Darby; George Müller, of Bristol, whose famous orphanages were but a development of one phase of the Brethren idea; Samuel Pridcaux Tregelles, the famous Biblical critic; Anthony Norris Groves, the missionary; and many others. These men for the most part worked along more or less independent lines, as Müller in his orphanages, and Groves in his missionary work in Mesopotamia and India. In England the strongest influence was exerted by Mr. Darby, who devoted to the development of the idea which had gained complete ascendancy over his own mind an ability and intensity of purpose seldom if ever surpassed. He was not only instrumental in the establishment of a number of congregations in England, but extended his work into continental Europe, visiting Switzerland, France, and Germany, where many permanent meetings were the result of his labors. At about the same time Mr. Müller also visited Stuttgart, although with less success.

In the absence of any ecclesiastical organization, and in the presence of an intense individualism and sense of personal responsibility, divisions naturally arose, and the congregations gathered around different leaders. This did not, however, prevent the extension of the idea and the formation of numerous meetings which exercised a powerful influence upon the religious life of the churches.

The movement first came to America as a result of the emigration of a number of Brethren to the United States and Canada about the middle of the nineteenth century. Mr. Darby made several visits across the Atlantic, and a number of congregations were formed, and since that time the meetings have multiplied rapidly. As in England, so in the United States, divisions have arisen, but no exact classification is recognized. Some meetings are called "exclusive" and others "open," but there is no one term that applies accurately to any single division.

The doctrine of the invisible membership of the church under the sole authority of the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit has operated to prevent the collecting or recording of statistics of the different communities of Brethren, and the tabular statements, while as complete as it is possible to secure, probably do not include all the individual gatherings or the full membership.

Doctrine.—In doctrine the different bodies of Brethren are in substantial accord. They acknowledge no creeds, but look upon the Scriptures as their only guide. They accept the general evangelical doctrines of the Trinity, the sinless humanity and absolute Deity of Christ, and Christ's atonement by His sacrificial death, and hold that the Holy Spirit is present in the believer and in the church, and that believers are eternally secure. They look for the personal premillennial coming of Christ and believe that the punishment of the unregenerate will be eternal. The following statement, published as an answer to inquiries, summarizes their general belief:

We believe in the absolute and perfect [verbal] inspiration of the Bible, which we hold to be, not in name only, but in reality, the Word of God.

Having in it the perfect revelation of the mind of God, we refuse all human creeds as being both unnecessary and a slur upon His Word.

We, however, have no uncertain belief in the doctrines unfolded in the Scriptures: The fall and absolute ruin of man; his guilty, lost, and helpless condition; the utter worthlessness of works, law keeping, or reformation as a ground of salvation; the amazing love of God in providing a Savior in His blessed Son; the spotless perfection of Christ, both in His divine nature and His true humanity; atonement by the blood-shedding of Christ on the cross, by which alone redemption has been accomplished; His resurrection as the proof of God's acceptance of that atonement.

We also see in Scripture the absolute necessity for new birth by the Holy Spirit, through the Word of God, and of justification by faith alone, without the works of the law.

We see that the believer is warranted to have the fullest assurance of his present and eternal salvation, and that this assurance comes not through feelings or experiences, but by the Word of God.

We also see that being saved by a work [Christ's] once for all, the believer can never be lost but is as secure as though he were in heaven already, because of Christ's death and resurrection.

We see, however, that Scripture guards from abuse of this doctrine by insisting upon good works as the fruit of salvation; that the believer is to reckon himself dead to sin and to live not only a moral life, but one of love and devotedness to Christ and of separation from the ways and thoughts of the world.

We believe that the proper hope of God's people is not the improvement of the world, but the coming of Christ for His own, to raise the dead in Christ, and change the living, and then take them all out of the world, which He will then purge and cleanse by judgments preparatory to the millennium, when Israel and the nations of the earth will inhabit it under His rule; but His Church will always be in heaven.

We hold that rejectors of the gospel and all the wicked will "have their part in the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone," eternal punishment, and not extinction or restoration. We therefore believe in an earnest and affectionate presentation of the simple gospel of the grace of God.

Organization.—The view held by the Brethren is that the Church is one and indivisible—"Christ is the head of it, the Holy Spirit the bond of union, and every believer a member. It was begun at Pentecost and will be completed before the second Advent." They acknowledge no ritual or definite ecclesiastical organization and do not believe in human ordination of the ministry. They hold that the personal gift is a sufficient authorization for the exercise of the privileges of the ministry, and that this involves the priesthood of all believers under the special guidance of the Holy Spirit. Hence they have no presiding officers in their assembly meetings, but anyone who has the gift is privileged to exercise it. Women take no part in the public ministry.

Discipline is generally regarded as "restorative in its character," and they hold that "the solemn act of separation should be resorted to only after loving and faithful dealing has failed to reclaim."

Considering the various denominations as unscriptural because based upon creeds, an ordained ministry, separate church organizations, etc., they do not fellowship with them. They observe the ordinance of baptism, usually by immersion, meet every Sunday to "break bread" (which is the term they use to designate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper), and have meetings for prayer and Bible study, and gospel meetings for the unconverted. They own few church edifices, but meet in halls and private houses, some of which are the personal property of individual Brethren.

There is no special form of admission, at least no set form of words, but the applicant is expected to give to the assembly satisfactory evidence of new birth, of having passed through genuine repentance, and of unfeigned faith in Christ and in the Scriptures as the Word of God, with life corresponding thereto. Giving that evidence, he is regarded as a member of the body of Christ and is accepted as such by the meeting at the Lord's Supper. In some cases announcement of the application is given, so that there may be conversation with the applicant by individual Brethren.

Work.—All the branches are active in gospel work, contributing as meetings and as individuals to the support of missionaries, though they have no missionary societies and give no pledge of personal support to their missionaries, who have gone into every part of the world. They have no distinctive missions like those established by the different denominations but have formed communities corresponding to those in England and America.

Statistics.—The Plymouth Brethren bodies are six in number. Roman numerals are used for the sake of distinction, but they do not imply any precedence in chronological order or strength of membership; they simply indicate the order in which the different bodies came to the knowledge of the Bureau of the Census. A summary of the principal statistics for these six bodies, in 1926 and 1916, with a similar summary for the four bodies reported in 1906, follows.

PLYMOUTH BRETHREN II

STATISTICS

Summary for the United States, with urban-rural classification.—A general summary of the statistics for the Plymouth Brethren II for the year 1926 is presented in Table 1, which shows also the distribution of these figures between urban and rural territory.

The membership of the Plymouth Brethren churches, or assemblies, comprises those persons who have been admitted to fellowship upon their application, after careful examination as to the reality of their faith and evidence of a Christian life.

TABLE 1.—SUMMARY OF STATISTICS FOR CHURCHES IN URBAN AND RURAL TERRITORY, 1926: PLYMOUTH BRETHREN II

ITEM	Total	In urban territory ¹	In rural territory ¹	PER CENT OF TOTAL ²	
				Urban	Rural
Churches (local organizations).....	307	230	77	74.9	25.1
Members	13,497	11,704	1,793	86.7	13.3
Average per church.....	44	51	23		
Membership by sex:					
Male.....	5,527	4,767	760	86.2	13.8
Female.....	7,930	6,897	1,033	87.0	13.0
Sex not reported.....	40	40			
Males per 100 females.....	69.7	69.1	73.6		
Membership by age:					
Under 13 years.....	77	62	15		
13 years and over.....	13,380	11,602	1,778	86.7	13.3
Age not reported.....	40	40			
Per cent under 13 years ³	0.6	0.5	0.8		
Church edifices:					
Number.....	108	83	25	76.9	23.1
Value—Churches reporting.....	108	83	25	76.9	23.1
Amount reported.....	\$909,952	\$847,227	\$62,725	93.1	6.9
Average per church.....	\$8,425	\$10,208	\$2,509		
Debt—Churches reporting.....	46	39	7		
Amount reported.....	\$188,031	\$180,531	\$7,500	96.0	4.0
Churches reporting "no debt" on church edifice.....	62	44	18		
Expenditures during year:					
Churches reporting.....	286	216	70	75.5	24.5
Amount reported.....	\$369,416	\$334,418	\$34,998	90.5	9.5
Current expenses and improvements.....	\$197,881	\$182,990	\$14,891	92.5	7.5
Benevolences, missions, etc.....	\$170,463	\$150,356	\$20,107	88.2	11.8
Not classified.....	\$1,072	\$1,072		100.0	
Average expenditure per church.....	\$1,292	\$1,548	\$500		
Sunday schools:					
Churches reporting.....	239	187	52	78.2	21.8
Officers and teachers.....	1,340	1,164	176	86.9	13.1
Scholars.....	13,634	11,392	2,242	83.6	16.4

¹ Urban territory includes all cities and other incorporated places which had 2,500 inhabitants or more in 1920, the date of the last Federal census; rural territory comprises the remainder of the country.

² Per cent not shown where base is less than 100.

³ Based on membership with age classification reported.

The data given for 1926 represent 307 active assemblies of the Plymouth Brethren II, with 13,497 members. The classification of membership by sex and by age was reported by 306 assemblies, including, however, only 29 which reported any members under 13 years of age. There are no regular ministers in the Brethren assemblies, hence there are no parsonages.

Comparative data, 1890-1926.—Table 2 presents, in convenient form for comparison, a summary of the available statistics of this religious body for the censuses of 1926, 1916, 1906, and 1890.

TABLE 2.—COMPARATIVE SUMMARY, 1890 TO 1926: PLYMOUTH BRETHREN II

ITEM	1926	1916	1906	1890
Churches (local organizations)	307	129	128	88
Increase over preceding census:				
Number.....	178	1	40	
Per cent ¹	138.0	0.8		
Members	13,497	5,928	4,752	2,419
Increase over preceding census:				
Number.....	7,569	1,176	2,333	
Per cent.....	127.7	24.7	96.4	
Average membership per church.....	44	46	37	27
Church edifices:				
Number.....	108	25	3	
Value—Churches reporting.....	108	25	3	
Amount reported.....	\$909,952	\$108,751	\$17,500	\$1,265
Average per church.....	\$8,425	\$4,350	\$5,833	
Debt—Churches reporting.....	46	10	2	
Amount reported.....	\$188,031	\$23,950	\$2,400	
Expenditures during year:				
Churches reporting.....	286	123		
Amount reported.....	\$369,416	\$89,694		
Current expenses and improvements.....	\$197,881	\$39,433		
Benevolences, missions, etc.....	\$170,463	\$50,261		
Not classified.....	\$1,072			
Average expenditure per church.....	\$1,292	\$729		
Sunday schools:				
Churches reporting.....	239	101	93	
Officers and teachers.....	1,340	607	514	
Scholars.....	13,634	5,884	5,475	

¹ Per cent not shown where base is less than 100.

State tables.—Tables 3, 4, 5, and 6 present the statistics for the Plymouth Brethren II by States. Table 3 gives for each State the number and membership of the churches classified according to their location in urban or rural territory and the total membership classified by sex. Table 4 gives for selected States the number and membership of the churches for the three censuses from 1906 to 1926, together with the membership for 1926 classified as under 13 years of age and 13 years of age and over. Table 5 shows the value of church property and the debt on such property, for 1926 alone. Table 6 presents, for 1926, the church expenditures, showing separately the amounts expended for current expenses and improvements, and for benevolences, etc., and also gives the data for Sunday schools. Separate presentation in Tables 5 and 6 is limited to those States in which three or more churches reported the principal items shown (values or expenditures), in order to avoid disclosing the financial statistics of any individual church. The States omitted from these tables can be determined by referring to the complete list which appears in Table 3.

TABLE 3.—NUMBER AND MEMBERSHIP OF CHURCHES IN URBAN AND RURAL TERRITORY, AND TOTAL MEMBERSHIP BY SEX, BY STATES, 1926: PLYMOUTH BRETHREN II

GEOGRAPHIC DIVISION AND STATE	NUMBER OF CHURCHES			NUMBER OF MEMBERS			TOTAL MEMBERSHIP BY SEX			
	Total	Ur- ban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Male	Female	Sex not re- ported	Males per 100 females (¹)
United States.....	307	230	77	13,497	11,704	1,793	5,527	7,930	40	69.7
New England:										
Maine.....	1	1		40	40				40	
New Hampshire.....	1	1		13	13		5	8		
Massachusetts.....	19	17	2	857	798	59	336	521		64.5
Rhode Island.....	3	3		251	251		94	157		59.9
Connecticut.....	7	6	1	307	267	40	118	189		62.4
Middle Atlantic:										
New York.....	31	25	6	1,613	1,466	147	638	975		65.4
New Jersey.....	34	30	4	1,526	1,415	111	622	904		68.8
Pennsylvania.....	21	18	3	1,215	1,045	170	502	713		70.4
East North Central:										
Ohio.....	7	6	1	438	430	8	189	249		75.9
Indiana.....	7	4	3	165	80	85	60	105		57.1
Illinois.....	16	14	2	1,054	1,025	29	474	580		81.7
Michigan.....	25	20	5	1,273	1,188	85	503	770		65.3
Wisconsin.....	2	2		45	45		18	27		
West North Central:										
Minnesota.....	7	5	2	184	161	23	68	116		58.6
Iowa.....	18	7	11	720	322	398	320	400		80.0
Missouri.....	15	7	8	736	581	155	286	450		63.6
North Dakota.....	2		2	32		32	10	22		
Nebraska.....	3	1	2	77	48	29	31	46		
Kansas.....	10	1	9	237	39	198	106	131		80.9
South Atlantic:										
Maryland.....	3	2	1	66	41	25	27	39		
District of Columbia.....	2	2		29	29		14	15		
Virginia.....	5	4	1	189	169	20	80	109		73.4
West Virginia.....	1	1		9	9		2	7		
North Carolina.....	1	1		19	19		9	10		
Georgia.....	1	1		20	20		8	12		
Florida.....	6	5	1	138	121	17	64	74		
East South Central:										
Alabama.....	1	1		5	5		3	2		
Mississippi.....	1		1	11		11	5	6		
West South Central:										
Arkansas.....	1		1	16		16	8	8		
Oklahoma.....	1		1	8		8	3	5		
Texas.....	13	9	4	300	266	34	113	187		60.4
Mountain:										
Montana.....	1	1		10	10		4	6		
Idaho.....	1	1		9	9		5	4		
Colorado.....	6	4	2	152	133	19	66	86		
New Mexico.....	2	2		17	17		8	9		
Arizona.....	1	1		11	11		6	5		
Pacific:										
Washington.....	12	9	3	537	477	60	224	313		71.6
Oregon.....	2	1	1	154	140	14	69	85		
California.....	17	17		1,014	1,014		429	585		73.3

¹ Ratio not shown where number of females is less than 100.

TABLE 4.—NUMBER AND MEMBERSHIP OF CHURCHES, 1906 TO 1926, AND MEMBERSHIP BY AGE, 1926, BY STATES: PLYMOUTH BRETHREN II

[Separate presentation is limited to States having 3 or more churches in either 1926, 1916, or 1906]

STATE	NUMBER OF CHURCHES			NUMBER OF MEMBERS			MEMBERSHIP BY AGE, 1926			
	1926	1916	1906	1926	1916	1906	Under 13 years	13 years and over	Age not reported	Per cent under 13 ¹
United States	307	129	128	13,497	5,928	4,752	77	13,380	40	0.6
Massachusetts.....	19	9	8	857	576	415	1	856	-----	0.1
Rhode Island.....	3	1	4	251	154	195	-----	251	-----	-----
Connecticut.....	7	3	2	307	91	24	5	302	-----	1.6
New York.....	31	11	15	1,613	571	728	8	1,605	-----	0.5
New Jersey.....	34	19	10	1,526	903	440	11	1,515	-----	0.7
Pennsylvania.....	21	10	11	1,215	475	465	4	1,211	-----	0.3
Ohio.....	7	3	5	438	117	218	1	437	-----	0.2
Indiana.....	7	6	4	165	97	53	-----	165	-----	-----
Illinois.....	16	9	8	1,054	670	539	2	1,052	-----	0.2
Michigan.....	25	7	9	1,273	434	286	11	1,262	-----	0.9
Minnesota.....	7	4	5	184	119	158	1	183	-----	0.5
Iowa.....	18	9	6	720	347	114	6	714	-----	0.8
Missouri.....	15	7	5	736	318	309	16	720	-----	2.2
North Dakota.....	2	-----	3	32	-----	22	-----	32	-----	-----
Nebraska.....	3	-----	2	77	-----	25	-----	77	-----	-----
Kansas.....	10	6	11	237	117	215	5	232	-----	2.1
Maryland.....	3	-----	-----	66	-----	-----	-----	66	-----	-----
Virginia.....	5	3	1	189	84	40	-----	189	-----	-----
Florida.....	6	-----	-----	138	-----	-----	-----	138	-----	-----
Texas.....	13	4	3	300	178	84	1	299	-----	0.3
Colorado.....	6	2	2	152	25	64	-----	152	-----	-----
Washington.....	12	4	1	537	95	20	5	532	-----	0.9
California.....	17	6	7	1,014	384	210	-----	1,014	-----	-----
Other States.....	20	6	6	416	173	128	-----	376	40	-----

¹ Based on membership with age classification reported.

TABLE 5.—VALUE OF CHURCH PROPERTY, AND CHURCH DEBT, BY STATES, 1926: PLYMOUTH BRETHREN II

[Separate presentation is limited to States having 3 or more churches reporting value of edifices]

STATE	Total number of churches	Number of church edifices	VALUE OF CHURCH EDIFICES		DEBT ON CHURCH EDIFICES	
			Churches reporting	Amount	Churches reporting	Amount
United States	307	108	108	\$909,952	46	\$188,031
Massachusetts.....	19	8	8	79,250	4	27,700
New York.....	31	10	10	179,579	6	70,945
New Jersey.....	34	10	10	97,500	7	22,360
Pennsylvania.....	21	8	8	90,000	3	9,785
Ohio.....	7	5	5	49,500	-----	-----
Illinois.....	16	8	8	53,500	3	8,200
Michigan.....	25	5	5	47,000	1	300
Iowa.....	18	10	10	35,350	4	1,825
Missouri.....	15	8	8	80,475	2	12,500
Virginia.....	5	4	4	13,000	-----	-----
Colorado.....	6	3	3	7,700	1	250
Washington.....	12	5	5	33,500	3	5,050
California.....	17	8	8	45,480	4	10,196
Other States.....	81	16	16	98,118	8	18,920

TABLE 6.—CHURCH EXPENDITURES AND SUNDAY SCHOOLS, BY STATES, 1926:
PLYMOUTH BRETHREN II

[Separate presentation is limited to States having 3 or more churches reporting expenditures]

STATE	Total number of churches	EXPENDITURES DURING YEAR					SUNDAY SCHOOLS		
		Churches reporting	Total amount	For current expenses and improvements	For benevolences, missions, etc.	Not classified	Churches reporting	Officers and teachers	Scholars
United States.....	307	286	\$369,416	\$197,881	\$170,463	\$1,072	239	1,340	13,634
Massachusetts.....	19	18	23,135	13,481	9,654	-----	15	91	742
Connecticut.....	7	7	10,118	6,522	3,596	-----	7	41	342
New York.....	31	31	59,589	38,204	21,385	-----	23	171	1,516
New Jersey.....	34	32	56,549	28,084	28,465	-----	29	176	1,748
Pennsylvania.....	21	21	30,754	17,296	13,458	-----	18	106	1,016
Ohio.....	7	6	11,691	3,869	7,822	-----	6	38	457
Indiana.....	7	7	2,716	1,680	1,036	-----	6	23	205
Illinois.....	16	16	41,910	25,678	16,232	-----	15	112	1,257
Michigan.....	25	23	25,540	11,612	13,691	237	18	85	961
Minnesota.....	7	6	5,464	2,835	2,314	315	5	28	308
Iowa.....	18	17	9,903	3,996	5,907	-----	15	51	856
Missouri.....	15	14	19,113	10,700	8,413	-----	11	76	948
Nebraska.....	3	3	1,707	514	1,193	-----	2	11	88
Kansas.....	10	10	3,470	1,263	2,207	-----	7	19	299
Maryland.....	3	3	1,481	884	597	-----	3	8	120
Virginia.....	5	5	4,782	2,239	2,543	-----	4	26	235
Florida.....	6	6	4,615	2,198	2,417	-----	4	22	194
Texas.....	13	9	6,933	2,860	4,073	-----	6	24	270
Colorado.....	6	6	2,798	1,419	1,379	-----	4	14	174
Washington.....	12	10	8,867	4,765	4,102	-----	11	62	623
California.....	17	15	27,865	13,677	14,188	-----	12	85	703
Other States.....	25	21	10,416	4,105	5,791	520	18	71	572

HISTORY, DOCTRINE, AND ORGANIZATION¹

HISTORY

Plymouth Brethren II comprise those known as "Open" Brethren, though this designation is not accepted by themselves. In 1848 a teacher at Plymouth was charged with heretical doctrines concerning the Person of Christ. The other assemblies were in accord in condemning the teaching and in refusing fellowship to the false teacher. But a sharp divergence of principle and practice developed in the matter of fellowship with individual Christians coming from Plymouth. Some assemblies, thereafter known as "Exclusive," put under a ban not only Plymouth but any other assembly that received anyone who had sat under the unsound teaching. Bethesda (Bristol) Assembly received into fellowship from Plymouth those who had not themselves imbibed the evil doctrine. Thereupon the "Exclusive" Assemblies put under the same ban as Plymouth not only all the members of the Bethesda Assembly, but all the members of any assembly that did not repudiate fellowship with Bethesda, as well as with Plymouth. Thus, successively, throughout the world many thereafter known as "Open" Assemblies were declared outside the "Exclusive" circle of fellowship. Generally speaking, the "Open" Brethren, in receiving fellow believers, put emphasis on the question, "What does the person himself hold?" They are "open" to receive Christians that are personally sound in the faith, unless there is clear

¹ This statement, which is substantially the same as that published in Part II of the Report on Religious Bodies, 1916, has been revised by Charles Bellinger, 75 Maiden Lane, New York City, and approved by him in its present form.

evidence of intentional association with known evil. They reject the theory that ecclesiastical position is in itself disqualifying; but intercommunication with assemblies tolerating heresy has never been contemplated nor allowed.

The "Open" Brethren, inasmuch as they are for the most part "congregational" in government, do not form a homogeneous body. Within the limits of evangelical orthodoxy there is a great variety of teaching and practice among them. As to the preaching and teaching functions, some claim that the open ministry is preferable but not obligatory, others that it is obligatory but of secondary importance. Some are on terms of friendly equality with evangelical Christians of every name. Others again are intolerant of any divergence of view. While all divisions of the Brethren look upon discipline in general as reformatory rather than punitive, the Open Brethren are more apt to judge of individual cases by themselves than to undertake to apply to each offender general principles of universal application.

WORK

This branch has entered heartily into missionary work, scores of missionaries having gone out from the United States. In addition, there are between 700 and 800 from other countries who represent the Open Brethren in foreign missionary work, besides those laboring in the home fields. While the Plymouth Brethren have no humanly ordained ministry, there is a considerable number of persons who give their entire time to evangelistic work, either in connection with local congregations or in general missionary work.