

**Revd Dr Tim Woolley**

**‘The World is Our Home’: Ann Lucy Wheatley and Methodist Leadership in the Free Church League For Woman Suffrage**

The Churches Under Fire

On Sunday 10 May 1914, the American Baptist Revd Dr AW Dixon preached to a large crowd at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, where he was the minister. In the congregation somewhere, sat Miss Annie Bell. We know this because an hour after the service had finished, and the congregation had dispersed a loud bang accompanied by smoke and the strong smell of gunpowder drew the attention of the Tabernacle’s caretaker. The remains of an oval tin containing around two pounds of explosive, and a fuse was found under a pew in a side gallery. The stap holding the lid onto the bomb had slipped off and so damage was limited to ‘the displacement of two short rails and a book ledge.’<sup>1</sup> When she went on trial in July the Daily Mirror reported that a few weeks later Annie had also planted a bomb at St John’s Church Westminster during the evening service<sup>2</sup> which was retrieved and placed in a fire bucket. None of this was unusual for Annie Bell, who was arrested no fewer than 14 times between 1909 and 1914 for public order offences and damage to property.<sup>3</sup> What was unusual was the targeting of a Nonconformist church. Between 1913 and 1914, thirty-two churches were the subject of suffragette attacks but as far as I can discover the incident at the Metropolitan Tabernacle was the only free church targeted.

When the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) became frustrated at the lack of progress towards the granting of suffrage and turned to a campaign of bombing and arson in 1913, the Church of England were regarded as part of the political establishment standing in the way of progress. In a page long editorial in the WSPU’s newspaper *The Suffragette* entitled ‘The Appeal to God,’ Organising Secretary Christabel Pankhurst rebuked the Church of England for its failure to protect arrested suffragettes from torture. Quoting Scripture copiously, she described the Church a ‘hanger-on and lackey of the Government’ and contended that it was ‘shamefully and obsequiously compliant’ in the suffering and oppression of women.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *East End News and London Shipping Chronicle*, 12 May 1914. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Daily Mirror* 21 July 1914. 4.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.suffragettesandsuffragists.com/database/begbie-to-bell5206615>. Accessed 3.6.24

<sup>4</sup> *The Suffragette*, 8 August 1913, 10.

The WSPU's campaign against the Established Church took two forms; most prominent was the destruction of property: Around a tenth of the incidents of bombing and arson claimed by the WSPU in 1913 involved churches.<sup>5</sup> This was accompanied by a prayer campaign where suffragettes stood up in the middle of services and spontaneously prayed for prisoners and gave thanks for WSPU leader Emmeline Pankhurst. Unlike the bombing and arson campaign this did impact on nonconformity as well as Anglicanism, with incidents of Congregationalist, Baptist, Wesleyan, Quaker and Unitarian worship being disrupted.<sup>6</sup> Jenkins has argued that these interventions were largely unnoticed by the political elites and the wider general public as 'the suffragettes themselves rather drowned out the possible impact of the prayer campaign with their more dramatic acts'.<sup>7</sup>

However, even if the institution and the leadership of the Church of England was seen as part of the Establishment bulwark against women's suffrage, the church itself was far from united on the subject. There had been in existence within British Anglicanism since 1909 The Church League for Women's Suffrage (CLWS). Despite being launched 'in the teeth of either supreme indifference, undisguised suspicion, or intense opposition'<sup>8</sup> by 1913 the CLWS had 5080 members in 103 branches.<sup>9</sup>

#### 'A Much Larger Body of Sympathy'

Early on, the growth of the CLWS attracted attention from Nonconformists. The *Christian Commonwealth* newspaper, organ of the Liberal Christian League, carried a letter in its edition of 13 July 1910 from L E Turquand. Lizzie Emma Turquand (1857-1943) had a long history involvement in the campaign for women's suffrage, being an early member of the WSPU who worked for both them and the non-militant National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) as a branch secretary,. She then joined the Women's Freedom League (WFL) making a court protest and having her goods sold as a result of her resistance to paying Inhabited House Duty taxes.

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<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of this period see Christopher Bearman, 'An Examination of Suffragette Violence', *English Historical Review*, 120, no. 486 (2005), 31–32.

<sup>6</sup> For a full treatment of this campaign see Lyndsey Jenkins 'Where the Church had refused to perform its duty the women themselves came forward': the Prayer Campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union, 1913-1914', *Cultural and Social History*, 19:2, 2022) 161-184.

<sup>7</sup> Jenkins 'Prayer Campaign', 175.

<sup>8</sup> CLWS *Monthly Paper* Oct.1913, 300.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the CLWS and other religious suffrage organisations of this period, see Jonathan David Francis Inkipin, *Combatting the sin of self-sacrifice'?: Christian feminism in the women's suffrage struggle, 1903-1918.*, (1996) Durham University thesis. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/1517>

Nonconformists, Turquand wrote, suffered from

the great disability of having no place, except in an alien church, where we can bring our movement in touch with religion. Nowhere in our own body can we receive the joy and inspiration, and calm, and consecration which come from lifting a cause into the presence of God, but I believe that we have in our Free Churches a much larger body of sympathy. Only it is ineffective. Its presence is unknown. And it is not serviceable. There is no way of making use of it. What is needed is to organise it.<sup>10</sup>

Following a number of supportive letters published in response to her suggestion, Turquand wrote a letter to the NUWSS organ *Common Cause* which appeared in the edition for 28 July:<sup>11</sup>

Would you allow me, through the common course to ask for names of any men or women who would like to form a free church suffrage league? For Church of England suffragists there is the church league, which supplies a real need to those in the movement, who feeling their cause not only political and economic, but spiritual as well, desire suffrage services, meetings, and literature on religious lines. Those of us who are nonconformists are entirely without any such help and satisfaction. Then, too, there are a large number of women in our churches who hold back from the suffrage because they have a latent feeling that religion is opposed to votes for women. Search prejudices would be likely to be dispelled by a society run on religious lines. The league would be presumably non party and abjure all form of tactics, devoting itself to purely educational and devotional work.

Several months later, in the issue for 22 September 22, the following announcement appeared:

### **Free Church Women's Suffrage League**

The preliminary meeting of the free church women's suffrage league will be held, by kind permission of Mr Alfred Dawson, and the office of the Christian Commonwealth, 133, Salisbury square, Fleet Street, on Wednesday afternoon, 5th of October, at 3:00 PM.

We shall be glad to welcome at that meeting any free church friends who are in sympathy with this movement, which we believe will give to free churchmen the opportunity of advocating the cause from the highest plane. The church league for

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<sup>10</sup> *Christian Commonwealth*, 13 July 1910.733.

<sup>11</sup> *Common Cause*, 13 July 1910. 469.

women suffrage has set us a noble example. Let free churchmen not be slow to follow!

Yours Faithfully,

Jane E Strickland, Halsteads, Hastings.

Hattie Baker, Trebawith, Hove

LE Turquand, 38 Wheat Hill Rd, Anerley, S.E.

All three of the signatories were affiliated with churches associated with 'old dissent.' Jane Strickland (1849-1932) chair of the local branch of the WFL and described at her death as 'one of the greatest educational and social workers that Hastings has ever known' attended Robertson Street Congregational Church in the town.<sup>12</sup> Turquand was from a Walloon family and third generation in English nonconformity, her father being Revd Paul James Turquand (1826-1902) Congregationalist minister in Walworth, South-East London<sup>13</sup> and her grandfather James Turquand (1787-1836), Baptist minister at Milford on Sea in Hampshire.<sup>14</sup> Harriet (Hatty) Annie Baker (1863-1947) was a unique figure in the leadership of the FCLWS in being an ordained female minister, albeit it one not officially recognised by her denomination.

Ordained sometime in the 1890s<sup>15</sup>, Baker was invited by Louisa Martindale to minister at the newly built Congregational hall in Horsted Keynes in 1907. By 1909 as well as regularly preaching Baker had baptized children and officiated at the Lord's Supper. Baker's position was discussed in the General Purposes Committee of the Council of the Congregational Union in March 1909. which recommended to the Council that if a woman were to comply with the requirements of college training imposed on male candidates for the ministry, and if she were to receive a call to a specific congregation belonging to the Congregational Union, she should be accredited, and her ordination recognized. Baker had not complied with the first requirement and was seemingly unable to do so, and therefore her ministry continued to be unrecognised

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<sup>12</sup> *Hastings and St. Leonards Observer*, 17 September 1932.

<https://friendsofhastingscemetery.org.uk/stricklandj.html> accessed 14.6.24.

<sup>13</sup> 1881 England Census, <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/family-tree/person/tree/44427185/person/24069176189/facts> accessed 14.6.24.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.milfordonseabaptist.org.uk/about-us/> accessed 14.6.24.

<sup>15</sup> The Western Morning News, which interviewed her on her appointment in Plymouth in 1914, states 'about 20 years ago'. *Western Morning News*, 24 Apr 1914. [https://www.devonhistorysociety.org.uk/baker-rev-harriet-hatty/#\\_ftn6](https://www.devonhistorysociety.org.uk/baker-rev-harriet-hatty/#_ftn6) accessed 15.6.24.

by the wider Union. By the end of 1909 she was doing mission work in Brighton; and in 1917 she was acting as co-pastor of a church in Plymouth, and assuming the title 'Reverend.'<sup>16</sup>

The background of the three signatories to the letter advertising the first FCLWS meeting highlights that from the beginning there was a prominence of Old Dissent, and Congregationalists in particular involved in the leadership of the FCLWS. This reflects the theological prominence of the social gospel within Congregationalism at this time but is also surely partly a reflection of the comparative strength of the position of women with regard to leadership at this time in comparison to their Methodist sisters. Women had been admitted to the Congregational Union Assembly in 1892 predating their acceptance at the Wesleyan Methodist Conference by nine years.<sup>17</sup> Whilst the Congregational Union didn't officially recognise Hattie Baker, following Constance Colman's completion of her studies at Mansfield College Oxford and her ordination in September 1917, they admitted her on to the list of ministers in the Congregational Yearbook.<sup>18</sup> In contrast the last female minister of that era in Methodism, Bible Christian itinerant Lillie Edwards had been removed from the stations of the newly formed United Methodist Church in 1908.<sup>19</sup> In Wesleyan Methodism, where women's ordination was not even contemplated until just prior to Methodist Union in 1932,<sup>20</sup> female local preachers did not gain equal status with men until 1918.<sup>21</sup>

### 'Arise! It is Dawn'

The story of the FCLWS's nine-year existence has three distinct phases to it. From the formation in October 1910 to the outbreak of war in July 1914, the League<sup>22</sup> enjoyed a period of growth and of clarity of purpose. Local branches were soon established in Croydon, Brighton, Anerley, Battersea, Worthing, and North London.<sup>23</sup> From the beginning there was a great deal of co-operation with other suffrage societies, especially with Anglican counterparts

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<sup>16</sup> Elaine Kaye *A Turning-Point in The Ministry Of Women: The Ordination of The First Woman to The Christian Ministry In England In September 1917* <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0424208400012274> Published online by Cambridge University Press. Accessed 14.6.24.

<sup>17</sup> Pauline Webb, 'Women' in John A. Vickers (ed.) *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*. Peterborough, Epworth Press, 2000. 399.

<sup>18</sup> Following her ordination, Coleman (1889-1969) became an active supporter of the League.

<sup>19</sup> See C. Paul Burnham and Colin Short, 'Lillie Edwards, a Female Methodist Superintendent Minister from 1894-1911' in *Wesley Historical Society Proceedings*, vol.60 pp.64-73.

<sup>20</sup> It then delayed for another forty-two years.

<sup>21</sup> *The Coming Day*, Aug-Sept 1918.62.

<sup>22</sup> An early button badge illustrates that 'Federation' was initially considered for the name, and 'League' and 'Federation' appear interchangeably in news reports in the WFL's *The Vote* throughout 1911 <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/pinback-button-in-blue-white-and-green-issued-by-free-news-photo/1169645304?adppopup=true>. Accessed 22.7.24.

<sup>23</sup> *The Vote*, 21 January 1911.158.

in the Church League<sup>24</sup> and with the Women's Freedom League, with whom there was likely substantial overlap in membership. Set up in 1907 by members of the WSPU aghast at the dictatorial reign of the Pankhursts, the WFL was militant but non-violent, the position of many Free Church suffragists. A FCLWS contingent joined a WFL procession to the John Stuart Mill statue in the Victoria Embankment Gardens in London in May 1911.<sup>25</sup> A FCLWS contingent also carried their first banner, adorned with the legend 'Arise! It is Dawn' on the Women's Coronation Day Procession on 17 June 1911, attended by between 40-60,000 suffragists and suffragettes.<sup>26</sup>

By January 1912 the League was becoming less London-centric, with branches recently opened in Salisbury and Portsmouth, and proposed branches in Edinburgh and Wales.<sup>27</sup> This trend continued steadily during the following year and the Annual Report of 1913 reported the opening of new branches at Newcastle upon Tyne, Manchester, Oxford, Ipswich, Hampstead, Paddington and Ilford. In other districts where there were insufficient sympathisers to form a branch, such as Birmingham, groups had been constituted. At this point the League had to instigate a system of delegate voting to the annual meeting, instead of each member voting personally.<sup>28</sup>

The most significant development for the development of the FCLWS was the launch of its monthly paper the *Free Church Suffrage Times (FCST)* in April 1913. This was vital for nationwide communication for an organisation with the bulk of its activities necessarily focussed on London and most of its strongest branches established there.

### Methodist Leadership in the FCLWS

The first Methodist to be actively involved in the day-to-day leadership of the FCLWS was Revd Edward Clark. Clark entered the ministry of the Methodist New Connexion in 1902 and when the FCLWS was formed was serving in the United Methodist London Willesden Circuit and was minister at Harlesden UMC. He became the first Organising Secretary of the League<sup>29</sup> but did not remain long in the post. Notice was given at the end of September 1911 of a special meeting to elect a new Organising Secretary in place of Clark, who had resigned.<sup>30</sup> Clark

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<sup>24</sup> See for example an account of a joint procession in November 1911. *The Vote* 19 November 1911. 41.

<sup>25</sup> *The Vote*, 27 May 1911.64,

<sup>26</sup> *The Vote*, 24 June 1911. 113.

<sup>27</sup> *The Vote*, 13 January 1912.144.

<sup>28</sup> *FCST*, June 1913. 14-15.

<sup>29</sup> *Common Cause*, 2 February 1911. 8.

<sup>30</sup> *Common Cause*, 28 September 1911. 14.

continued to be involved in the work of the League and to serve on the Executive<sup>31</sup> and was in great demand as a speaker; it was reported that in the space of one week he addressed meetings for the Brighton and Hove, East Ham and Lewisham and District branches.<sup>32</sup> At the latter Clark was described as giving a 'clear practical speech' in which he 'called on the Free Churches in the land to practise their own doctrines and work for the political enfranchisement of women.'<sup>33</sup> A further extract from one of Clark's speeches outlined his view on the constitutional imperative of giving women the vote:

The reason why our House of Commons has maintained itself so long and so vigorously in England is because all along its history it has been constantly absorbing into itself new and young elements. Its history is a history of change, through a for-ever enlarging franchise. That has brought it constant fresh moral force. Such a moment is with us now. To reinvigorate, to renew parliament, women's life, women's influence, is necessary.<sup>34</sup>

After four years in the London Willesden Circuit Edward Clark was stationed to Barnstaple in Devon following the 1914 UMC Annual Conference at Redruth, Cornwall. By this time there were twenty-two local branches of the League, but sixteen of these were in London or the south of England<sup>35</sup> and the nearest branch to Barnstaple was Plymouth, some two hours away. Clark does not appear to have been actively involved in the League from this point on, a seemingly sad waste of the gifts of a talented speaker and advocate for women's suffrage, and an indication of the challenge for Methodist ministers with their itinerancy to maintain long term involvement at a local level in an organization whose branch coverage was always patchy across the country. This resulted in sympathetic Methodist ministers being involved at branch level actively for a few years before a new appointment beckoned which was not in an area of League activity, and their energy and oratory was lost to the movement. The busyness of circuit life meant that whilst a minister might find time and energy to join in the activities of an existing League branch, he did not have the capacity to be initiate a new one if stationing took him to one of the many areas where there was no FCLWS structure already in place. This was also the case with Wesleyan Revd William Bardsley Brash (1877-1952) who was a leading light and Vice President of the Oxford Branch of the League during his appointment there between

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<sup>31</sup> *FCST*, June 1913. 15

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 23

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 17.

<sup>35</sup> *FCST*, June 1914. 75.

1913 and 1916. Brash's advocacy of the FCLWS included holding a service at Wesley Memorial church on Sunday 25 July 1915, the sermon 'Women and Sacrifice' from which was printed in the *FCST*.<sup>36</sup> Sadly, Brash's next appointment, in Southport, did not offer the same opportunities and his considerable contribution was lost to the League. I can only find evidence of one minister continuing involvement at a local level in the League following a change of station and as will be explored below this was a special case.

In contrast, several UMC ministers who enjoyed a long-term station were amongst the most active contributors to the work of the League's London branches: Addressing the April 1915 meeting of the East Ham Branch was Revd Harry Williams, who was to spend nine years in the London Forest Circuit between 1913 and 1922.<sup>37</sup> In the following month, Willams was responsible for securing for the branch for its meetings the use of the hall at the UMC at Romford Road, Manor Park where he was minister.<sup>38</sup> Another supporter was Revd Arthur Henry Boyden (1868-1940) who had served in two Congregational church pastorates before entering the ministry of the United Methodist Free Churches in 1906. Boyden was stationed in the UM London Forest Hill and East Dulwich Circuit between 1913 and 1919<sup>39</sup> and was elected President of the League's Lewisham and District Branch in March 1916. Boyden was lauded as 'one who understands and appreciates the basis of our movement.'<sup>40</sup> Beyond London, mention should also be made of the Wesleyan Revd Allen Rees (1844-1914) who was made a Vice-President of the Ipswich branch of the League along with his wife Eleanor in the year before he died.<sup>41</sup>

The League was especially keen when establishing itself to gather together a roster of Vice Presidents from across the Nonconformist world to demonstrate the breadth of support for their cause and in the first edition of the *FCST* in April 1913<sup>42</sup> a published list appears, on which three prominent Wesleyan Methodist men feature. Sir James Yoxall (1857-1925) was Liberal MP for Nottingham (West), General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers and a Wesleyan local preacher. In August 1916 it was reported that Yoxall was one of the signatures to a letter presented to Prime Minister Herbert Asquith on behalf of the 'Votes for All'

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<sup>36</sup> *FCST*, August 1915.71.

<sup>37</sup> O.A Beckerlegge, *United Methodist Ministers and their Circuits*. London: Epworth Press, 1968. 259.

<sup>38</sup> *FCST*, June 1915. 59.

<sup>39</sup> Beckerlegge, *United Methodist Ministers*. 28.

<sup>40</sup> *FCST*, April 1916. 35.

<sup>41</sup> *FCST*, September 1913. 55

<sup>42</sup> *FCST*, April 1913.2.



Provisional Committee demanding ‘a single franchise - a vote for every adult man and woman on a short residential basis.’<sup>43</sup>

Another of the signatories to that letter was Yoxall’s fellow Vice President Revd John Scott Lidgett (1854-1953). Space does not allow here to fully list all of the achievements of a man described in his obituary as ‘one who has been called the greatest Methodist since John Wesley’<sup>44</sup> but most relevant for his participation in the FCLWS were his roles as Chairman of the Third London District, and Superintendent of the South London Mission from 1909 to 1918, keeping him close to the activities of the numerous London branches of the League. Scott Lidgett was also editor of the *Methodist Times* from 1907-1918. The paper advertised itself in the *FCST* as ‘The Religious Paper that Advocates Woman’s Suffrage’ and its readership amongst Wesleyan advocates of the cause was wide. On the outbreak of war in 1914 the paper, whilst still supportive of women’s suffrage, ceased to advertise with the League, but this seems likely to have been a financial decision rather than a policy one and Lidgett continued to serve as a Vice President.<sup>45</sup>

The third ordained Wesleyan Vice President from the commencement of the League was John Ernest Rattenbury (1870-1963) Superintendent of the West London Mission from 1907 to 1925. Founded in 1887 by Hugh Price Hughes,<sup>46</sup> the Mission was an attempt to bridge the gulf between Wesleyan Methodism and the working classes, with a combination of evangelism and social outreach. In 1912 the Mission opened its own purpose-built headquarters at Kingsway Hall. From 1914 the League began holding occasional Sunday Services in sympathetic churches and the second of these was held in Kingsway Hall on 29 November that year with Rattenbury as the preacher. The Hall hosted a variety of suffrage and women’s rights meetings including those of the League<sup>47</sup> and in March 1917 it was announced that the Kingsway Hall Fellowship had appointed a secretary to handle the ordering and distribution of twenty copies of the League’s newspaper, from January 1916 renamed *The Coming Day*.

Also amongst the first Vice Presidents listed in was ‘Mrs Philip Snowden.’ Ethel Snowden, (nee Annakin) (1881-1951) was born into a strong Primitive Methodist family and her faith was reflected in her Christian Socialist beliefs and her ardent advocacy of women’s suffrage.

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<sup>43</sup> *The Coming Day*, August 1916. 66.

<sup>44</sup> The Methodist Church, *Minutes of Conference 1953*.156.

<sup>45</sup> Regrettable at time of writing the British Library’s holdings of *The Methodist Times* for the period under study were inaccessible due to a recent cyber-attack.

<sup>46</sup> His widow Kathrine Price Hughes (nee Howard Barratt) (1853-1948) did undertake occasional engagements for the League; see *FCST*, April 1913.5; March 1917.28; April 1917.23.

<sup>47</sup> *The Coming Day*, March 1917. 23.

In 1906 she became one of the national speakers for the NUWSS. Snowden was in great demand as a speaker in the early years of the League, as well as from other suffrage societies and in 1914 she spoke at no fewer than 200 public meetings.<sup>48</sup> Her husband Philip, an MP and later Chancellor of the Exchequer in the first Labour Government of 1924, was also a prolific speaker for the cause. On the outbreak of war in 1914, Philip and Ethel were on a lecture tour in Canada. They planned to come straight back to Britain, but Philip was advised not to return because of their pacifist views. On their return Ethel continued to support the FCLWS, although from 1917 the Women's Peace Crusade, which led her to speak to half a million people, took up much of her energy. Sadly, as was the case with many of the Methodist speakers who advocated for the League, her church largely failed to appreciate, or make use of her passion for campaigning and her outstanding gifts as an orator. William Younger, who later became President of the Primitive Methodist Conference, wrote in a PM magazine in 1913,<sup>49</sup>

‘Mrs Philip Snowden is one of the most remarkable women of this generation. She is now in great demand at all meetings of national significance and has become famous in the United States. It is amazing that Primitive Methodists all over the country do not see the value of her services, and secure her for great gatherings, where she could represent the church of her girlhood with distinction.

Ethel did finally address the Primitive Methodist Conference in 1927 but Jill Barber is of the opinion that ‘[Primitive Methodism], while continuing to support the cause of temperance, lost its voice for peace when it came to war and, while paying lip service to equality, neglected to speak out for women crying out for the right to vote’<sup>50</sup>

One Primitive Methodist minister who did not neglect to speak out was Revd George Bennett (1855-1931). Another example of how extended stationing in a London circuit enabled sustained participation in the life of the FCLWS, Bennett was at Forest Hill from 1912 for eighteen years and in 1914 he brought what the headline writer in the *FCST* described as ‘A Wonderful Advance’<sup>51</sup>

At the Middlesbrough Primitive Methodist Conference on June 17<sup>th</sup>, the President, the Rev. G. Bennett, spoke with great urgency of the desirability of using women as church

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<sup>48</sup> <https://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/content/people-2/lay-people/surnames-beginning-with-s/snowden-ethel-nee-annakin-1881-1951> accessed 23.7.24

<sup>49</sup> William Younger, ‘Harrogate’, *Christian Messenger* (1913). 53.

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/content/people-2/lay-people/surnames-beginning-with-s/snowden-ethel-nee-annakin-1881-1951> accessed 23.7.24

<sup>51</sup> *FCST*, July 1914, 79.

builders. In this, he said, they were unsurpassable. And when women were permitted to vote, all the forces for good in a nation would be strengthened. On the grounds of humanity, of religion, of the welfare of the Church and the State, Mr Bennett welcomed the enfranchisement of women. This we believe to be the first time a president of a Nonconformist Conference has clearly and directly stated his unqualified belief in Woman Suffrage.

Later that year Bennett, who was the editor of *The Primitive Methodist Leader*, accepted the offer of a Vice-Presidency of the League.<sup>52</sup>

Such endorsement of the League's aims on Methodist connexional platforms and the resulting acclamation were rare occurrences: more typical were the sentiments expressed in the August 1915 edition of the *FCST* that 'Suffrage and feminism played so little part either of the United Methodist Conference at Exeter or the Wesleyan Methodists at Birmingham that the world, or rather the churches, might be composed of the masculine sex only.'<sup>53</sup>

#### 'The Final Dethronement of Force'

Once war had broken out in 1914, the League entered a second phase of its life as it faced the same choice as other suffragist organisations – to continue the campaign or to suspend it. The choice of the previously militant WSPU was to cease all agitation and to throw its weight full square behind the war effort, changing its name to The Women's Party and its newspaper *The Suffragette* to *Britannia*, and filling it with jingoistic tubthumping.<sup>54</sup> Both the moderate NUWSS and the militant WFL continued to campaign for the vote, and this was the position taken by the FCLWS. Many of its members were pacifists and this is reflected in both the letters and the articles carried by the *FCST* during this period.

In December 1914 it was reported that Revd J Hope Moulton had become a Vice-president of the League.<sup>55</sup> James Hope Moulton (1863-1917) was a distinguished Wesleyan Methodist academic, being the Nonconformist minister to be elected Fellow of a Cambridge college (King's) with a First in Classics. Having served as New Testament Tutor at Headingly College, Moulton was now in secular academia, as Greenwood Professor of Hellenistic Greek and Indo-

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<sup>52</sup> *FCST*, September 1914. 106.

<sup>53</sup> *FCST*, August 1915.70.

<sup>54</sup> Diane Atkinson, *Rise up, Women!: The Remarkable Lives of the Suffragettes*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019. 514.

<sup>55</sup> *FCST* December 1914.127.

European Philology at Manchester University, and was active in the local FCLWS Branch.<sup>56</sup> In October 1914 Moulton had contributed an article 'In Preparation for Peace' to the *FCST*<sup>57</sup> where he admitted to being conflicted as a pacifist who felt that Britain was right to defend itself against German aggression, but who nevertheless opposed compulsion on those who were being sent to do so. Whilst the League through its paper claimed to take no position on the war, the conclusion to Moulton's article encapsulated well the outlook of many FCLWS members:

Disarmament, not conscription, is the goal of this war, if the peace that follows it is not to be the burden that will finally crush nations already bearing the last straw. Here is a fitting message for those who as Christians believe in the Woman's Movement as the symbol of the final dethronement of Force.

Tragically Moulton was not to see the peace that was to follow as while returning from a trip to India his ship was torpedoed in the Mediterranean and on 7 April 1917 he died from exposure after three days in an open boat.<sup>58</sup>

### Won and Lost

The final phase of the life of the League followed the passing of the Representation of the People Act on 6 February 1918, giving women over the age of thirty the right to vote if they were either a householder, married to a householder, occupier of a property with an annual rent of at least £5, a graduate or equivalent of a British university. Thus were 8,400,000 women enfranchised and permitted to stand for parliament. Following the vote and the ensuing celebrations, thoughts turned to the future of the League. At the Annual Meeting a series of resolutions was passed which encapsulated the twin concerns of the FCLWS since 1914:<sup>59</sup>

1. That this annual meeting will the FCLWS places on record its gratitude to God for the attainment of parliamentary citizenship by a large number of women. This meeting expresses its regret at the failure of the representation of the people act to treat the sexes equally and reaffirms its determination to continue to work for the equal treatment of the sexes in reference to the vote, and for the extension of the suffrage to the large classes of both sexes who are still disenfranchised.

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<sup>56</sup> *FCST*, December 1913. 91.

<sup>57</sup> *FCST*, October 1914. 111.

<sup>58</sup> <https://dmbi.online/index.php?do=app.entry&id=2005> Accessed 23.7.24

<sup>59</sup> *The Coming Day*, June-July 1918. 47.

2. That this annual meeting of the FCLWS is profoundly conscious of the supreme responsibility of enfranchise women to work for the establishment of a world order in which war shall be impossible, and earnestly invites all women in the exercise of their vote an influence to give priority to this aim.
3. This meeting suggests that branches be advised to form study circles on the lines of resolution 2, and where possible to cooperate with organisations already existing.

The resolutions suggested a logical widening of the scope of the League's work to build on the progress of the Representation of the People Act but not to settle for the limited degree of suffrage it offered to women. To this end a proposal was made by the Islington Branch that the name of the organisation be changed to 'Free Church Suffragists' was offered for consideration by the Executive.

However, sadly for reasons which are unclear, the Executive seem to have had other ideas, as the October issue of *The Coming Day*<sup>60</sup> reported that the decision had been made to shorten the title to just 'The Free Church League' and that the objects were now to be defined as

- 1, To emphasise the spiritual aspect of social reconstruction
2. To foster the spirit of internationalism among the free churches
3. To work for the equality of men and women
4. To establish the recognition of freedom of conscience

With no explicit mention of the cause for which the League had been originally formed (which after all had still not been fully achieved) and an identity which now conveyed little about what its purpose might be, it is perhaps not particularly surprising that momentum was soon lost. From this point onwards little branch activity was reported and in the finance statements which appeared in every issue of *The Coming Day* balance figures from local branches regularly appear as income to the central organisation, presumably indicating branch closure. Finally, the December 1919 issue of *The Coming Day*<sup>61</sup> reported an Executive Committee resolution dissolving the League as a body, although the paper itself limped on a little longer, finally ceasing publication in June 1920.

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<sup>60</sup> *The Coming Day*, October 1918. 47.

<sup>61</sup> *The Coming Day*, December 1919. 74.

Just below the announcement of the closure of the League, the financial statement contained the column 'Amounts Received For "The Coming Day From July 3rd To July".' Listed therein, as she had been in virtually every issue of the League's newspaper since its commencement was the name of Mrs Wheatley.

### Ann Lucy Wheatley

As has been outlined, plenty of Methodists contributed to the life and witness of the Free Church League for Woman Suffrage, and many of them we know about were male and ordained, and in some cases famous. Ann Lucy Wheatley was none of those things and yet in terms of the breadth and strength of her support not just for the FCLWS but also for the wider suffrage cause she was amongst the most prolific, and as a woman the League's story is hers to tell.

Ann Lucy Pearce (1857-1944) was born in Exeter; one source<sup>62</sup> has her as related to the prominent Cambourne Wesleyan family of Pearses who produced the Wesleyan minister and prolific author Mark Guy Pearse (1842-1930)<sup>63</sup> but I have not as yet been able to trace a link. In 1878 she married Wesleyan minister Revd Timothy Wheatley, then stationed in the Torquay circuit. In 1907 Timothy was stationed to the Richmond circuit in West London and it was now that Ann's suffrage activities seem to have begun. By February 1909 she was speaking at 'At Home' meetings for the Richmond Branch of the WSPU<sup>64</sup> and in August of that year was addressing crowds at open-air meetings<sup>65</sup>. For reasons which are unclear, but perhaps were a reflection at unease with growing militancy within the WSPU, in 1910 Ann switched her speaking appointments to the WFL, following Timothy's removal to the London (Stamford) Circuit. She became active in the Stamford Hill WFL Branch<sup>66</sup> both a speaker and a chair of meetings.

On Sunday 2 April 1911 suffragettes from all leading organisations were encouraged to boycott the gathering of household information for the Census, on the grounds that they wouldn't be counted until they were counted when it came to the vote.<sup>67</sup> The census return for 66 Filey

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<sup>62</sup> <https://www.angelfire.com/poetry/ofthespirit/page33.html> Accessed 23.7.24.

<sup>63</sup> <https://dmbi.online/index.php?do=app.entry&id=2160> Accessed 23.7.24.

<sup>64</sup> *Votes For Women*, 11 February 1909. 342.

<sup>65</sup> *Votes For Women*, 19 August 1909. 1070.

<sup>66</sup> Later renamed the Hackney Branch.

<sup>67</sup> For a full account of the Census Boycott see Jill Liddington, *Vanishing for the Vote*, Manchester: MUP, 2014.

Avenue, Clapton<sup>68</sup> lists ‘Timothy Wheatley Aged 60, Married, Wesleyan Methodist Minister’ and ‘Mabel Emily Holt, Single, Aged 25, Servant.’ Of Ann there is no trace.

For the first time in 1911, the census was filled in by the head of household’s own hand rather than by a government official. Suffragettes who boycotted the census either chose to evade the census officials who collected the forms, hiding away in the house or elsewhere so that they were not counted. Or they chose to resist, remaining visible in their homes but defiantly refusing to supply any missing information the census official required. This was illegal and women who participated risked a hefty fine or even imprisonment. Whilst we cannot be sure of the action Ann took, both her refusal to comply and Timothy’s completion and signing of the form to affirm it were acts of considerably courage and conviction.

The strong indication given by the census return that Timothy was in full support of his wife’s convictions is born out soon afterwards by his early appearance on a FCLWS platform, at Rectory Road Congregational Church on 11 April.<sup>69</sup> It is a reasonable assumption that Ann’s involvement with the League began around the same time as Timothy’s, and in the first edition of the *FCST* in April 1913<sup>70</sup> she is named as a member of the Executive.

Ann’s leadership within the League was to take many forms:

### Orator

The initial edition of the *FCST* sets a pattern repeated in most months of its publication run: In ‘From the Branches’ it was reported that Ann spoke at a joint meeting of the Bromley FCLWS branch with the Church League on 27 March.<sup>71</sup> The League does not appear to have encouraged the holding of open air meetings, but at Branch meetings and ‘At Home’ gatherings Ann was a regular and widespread speaker and a chair. A profile of Ann in the WFL organ *The Vote* in 1920<sup>72</sup> describes her as ‘not actually an ordained preacher’ and a later erroneous claim in the article that ‘the Wesleyan Methodists have for some considerable time ordained numbers of women lay preachers’ suggests that Ann was not a local preacher but it is clear from the article that she had considerable experience of preaching, including in America and Canada, as well as speaking on behalf of the suffrage cause and the temperance movement. Ann’s considerable

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<sup>68</sup> [https://www.ancestry.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/2352/images/rg14\\_01045\\_0187\\_03?pId=2205929](https://www.ancestry.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/2352/images/rg14_01045_0187_03?pId=2205929)  
Accessed 23.7.24

<sup>69</sup> *Votes for Women*, 21 April 1911. 483.

<sup>70</sup> *FCST*, April 1913. 5.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

<sup>72</sup> *The Vote*, March 1920. 1.

gifts in speaking and preaching and charing meetings were constantly put at the disposal of the League.

### Organiser

In the initial April edition of the *FCST* it was noted that ‘Mrs Wheatley...is spending a fortnight in Exeter in early June, and is arranging a series of meetings’<sup>73</sup> In the June edition it was reported that Ann was hoping to ‘found a new centre there, either a Group or Branch’<sup>74</sup> Her efforts do not appear to have been successful but it is an indication of her passion for the work of the League that establishing a new foothold for it should have been a primary concern on what was most likely a trip back to see family.

At the 1913 Wesleyan Conference meeting in Plymouth Timothy’s stationing to Swansea was confirmed. Although distancing her from the centre of the League’s national activities, for Ann, the move was an opportunity to further the cause. In February of the following year it was noted with approval in *The Vote* that for the WFL in Swansea ‘Mrs Wheatley’s accession to the Branch is likely to prove a new source of life’ and as a result ‘Some of our members are hopeful of stimulating friends in the Free Churches to start a Branch of the Free Church League’<sup>75</sup> This time Ann’s organising bore fruit and in May she was able to report in the *FCST* in the report the successful birth of the Swansea Branch of the FCLWS<sup>76</sup> A garden party held by the branch in August 1915 saw ‘an interesting address’ from Timothy.<sup>77</sup> This is the only occasion I can find that a Methodist minister involved in the life of a branch after moving on from the station in which he commenced his initial involvement with the League. The move to Swansea does not seem to have limited too much Ann’s role on the Executive and on 4 December 1914 she was part of its deputation to the Free Church Federal Council<sup>78</sup> Timothy supernumerated in 1916 but returned to London to take pastoral charge of Northfields Church in the Ealing and Acton Circuit<sup>79</sup>

The League was always keen to encourage the promotion of women preachers and ministers and to this end in 1917 Ann convened a ‘Women Preachers Fellowship’ under its auspices, with the aim of encouraging the Free Churches to utilise women in their pulpits. A list of those

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<sup>73</sup> *FCST*, April 1913. 5.

<sup>74</sup> *FCST*, June 1913. 16.

<sup>75</sup> *The Vote*, 13 February 1914. 269.

<sup>76</sup> *FCST*, May 1914. 63..

<sup>77</sup> *FCST*, August 1915. 75.

<sup>78</sup> *FCST*, January 1914. 4.

<sup>79</sup> Wesleyan Methodist Church *Minutes of Conference 1924*.128. I am indebted to Revd Dr Martin Wellings for supplying this entry.



available was circulated in Nonconformist circles and regular updates of pulpit engagements were featured in *The Coming Day*; the one for September 1917<sup>80</sup> features amongst others Miss M. Ballard Dawson at Langton Wesleyan Church, Dorset, and Ann herself at Victoria Street Baptist Church, Windsor. Mr Reavell, the Victoria Street church secretary, commented “The visit of Mrs Wheatley was greatly appreciated by the church and congregation. It is the first time our church has had a woman preacher, and we hope to have others whenever the opportunity presents itself.” Sadly, the Fellowship does not seem to have survived beyond the closure of the League itself.

### Theologian

Reports of her talks in the *FCST* and *The Coming Day* suggest Ann had a high level of theological literacy and from 1917 onwards she offered this into the life of the League more explicitly. In the June 1917 edition of *The Coming Day*, an advert for ‘The Bible and Feminism’ study circle, conducted by Mrs Wheatley appeared.<sup>81</sup> Elsewhere in the issue, an extract from the leaflet promoting it appeared. In it, Ann declared:

This century has already been marked by the partial enfranchisement social political and religious of women. That movement is going steadily on, helped rather than hindered by the present disastrous war. There are still good women who doubt whether the movement is of God. I am prepared to hold a study circle to inquire what the Bible has to say about it.<sup>82</sup>

The course of twelve lectures was to cost 3s 6d with a fee for Mrs Wheatley of £2 2s which included travel expenses, and each one lasted an hour with an additional half hour for questions. Branches were encouraged to apply: if the experience of the Harrow Branch, reported in the same issue<sup>83</sup> was anything to go by, the booking would have been money well spent. There, Ann had been leading a series of Study Classes in the subject of ‘What The Bible Has To Say About Women?’ each week for two months. She gave addresses on the following subjects:

- Translation of The Scriptures:
- The Need of Women Translators:

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<sup>80</sup>*The Coming Day*, September 1917. 73.

<sup>81</sup> *The Coming Day*, June 1917. 54.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* 50.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* 53.

- Interpretations of The Scriptures (Rabbinic, Allegoric, Patristic, Scholastic, Reformation Post Reformation, Modern)
- The Creation of Eve
- Did Woman Bring Sin into The World?
- Ought Women to Obey? If So, Who?
- What About Paul's Teaching?
- Should Women Be Veiled?
- Ought Women to Keep Silent?
- The Threefold Name of Christ:
- The Worship of Mary
- What Did Jesus Himself Teach?

Sadly the content of these addresses does not appear to have survived but the response of the Harrow Branch has:

Mrs Wheatley's addresses were intensely interesting, original and provocative of thought, and a good discussion followed each address. Every member of the classes expressed regret at their termination. Perhaps the striking feature of the attendants was the number of non-members, and these we fully expect to become members of our branch. One student confessed at the close "It has made me read my Bible again, which I have not done for months," and perhaps this is the testimony to her work which would be most appreciated by the leader.

#### Denominational Advocate

Key to Ann Lucy Wheatley's leadership within the Free Church League for Woman Suffrage was her identity as a Wesleyan Methodist. In this she sought to advocate for the League to her Church, that the cause of woman suffrage might be increasingly espoused in it. It was announced in November 1913 that through the generosity of two Wesleyan Methodist ladies Dr Sinclair McDade and Mrs Digby F Shillington copies of the *FCST* were being sent to a certain number of Wesleyan ministers. Ann eagerly took up this work<sup>84</sup> and it was reported by

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<sup>84</sup> *FCST*, December 1913. 85.

April 1914<sup>85</sup> that over one thousand Wesleyan ministers [out of a total then standing at just over 2,500]<sup>86</sup> had received copies of the paper.

Ann also sought to commend her Church to the League. Her longest contribution to the *FCST* was in the October 1915<sup>87</sup> edition with a full-page article ‘Women in Wesleyan Methodism’. Here was a brief but honest summary of the role of women in Wesleyan Methodism since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It began by praising Susanna Wesley as the one who ‘moulded her sons’ young minds’ but asked why her daughters, talented as their brothers in childhood ‘grew up into sordid and unhappy womanhood’ in contrast.

The article commended American Methodist pioneer Barbara Heck, and then contrasted the attitude of John Wesley’s attitude to women preachers (‘much in advance of that of his contemporaries’) with the restrictions on such activity by the 1803 Conference, finally set aside in 1910. Ann then gave a brief survey of women’s organisations currently successfully at work within Wesleyan Methodism, before outlining the battle, since the first admission of lay representatives in 1878, for women to play a fuller role in the work of the Conference.

Whilst admitting there was still a way to go to convince all the preachers and congregations of ‘the great Wesleyan Church’ of the rightness of women’s political enfranchisement, Ann ended on a positive note which made explicit the link between her Wesleyan faith and her commitment to women flourishing:

Before long Methodist women will see a new significance in the classical saying of their revered founder. Your place is in your own parish said John Wesley’s critics. “The world is my parish” retorted the evangelist. “Your place is home,” cried the anti-suffragist. Our reply must be “The world is our home” and we claim a right to every method of making the world a home like place for daughters and sons. Only so can we help to realise our daily prayers for the coming of the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### Put Your Religion into Practice

Less than three years after Ann wrote these words, the first step was taken towards the aims of the League with the passing of the Representation of the People Act. Fittingly, when a ‘Service of Consecration for Political Enfranchisement of Womanhood’ was held by the League on the

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<sup>85</sup> *FCST*, April 1914. 43.

<sup>86</sup> Robert Currie, Alan D. Gilbert, and Lee Horsley. *Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles since 1700*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977. 205.

<sup>87</sup> *FCST*, October 1915. 89.

Sunday following the passing of the bill, Revd Constance Coltman shared the leading of it with Ann Lucy Wheatley. The bill spelled the beginning of the end for the FCLWS, but not for Ann Lucy Wheatley's involvement with the struggle for universal suffrage. Speaking from the chair of a Wednesday afternoon meeting of the WFL in June 1919 Ann declared that she had often said 'Thank God for the Women's Freedom League', and she continued to support the work of the WFL which was not formally wound up until 1961.

Ann lived to see the passing of the 1928 Representation of the People Act which granted all women over the age of twenty-one the vote, but sadly Timothy did not. His obituary in the Wesleyan Minutes of Conference for 1924 described him as "Gifted in mind and rich in sympathy, charitable in his judgments and courteous in bearing." He must also be commended for his brave and unfailing support of his wife, and not only in his collusion with her avoidance of the census in 1911. When the couple were preparing to leave London for Swansea Hackney WFL branch organised a drawing-room meeting hosted by Ann to bid her farewell, on 4 June 1913. The esteem in which Ann was held by her fellow suffragettes is indicated by the fact that the meeting was addressed by no less than Charlotte Despard, the national leader of the WFL. What the members of Timothy's churches might have felt about the Wheatleys welcoming into their manse this twice imprisoned suffragette of some notoriety, who brought along copies of her latest book on Theosophy to sell, was not recorded. That Ann spoke about 'the worldwide character of the [woman's] movement and the many societies who differing in methods worked for one goal' on 'a most delightful and interesting afternoon' happily was.<sup>88</sup>

On Sunday 10 May 1914 when the smoke had cleared in the Metropolitan Tabernacle, and the damage done by Annie Bell's bomb was being assessed, two items were found nearby. Annie had left a pair of black gloves, presumably by accident. More purposefully she also left a postcard, which read 'Put your religion into practice and see that women obtain their freedom.' The Free Church League for Woman Suffrage was an attempt to do precisely that, and Methodists like Ann Lucy Wheatley, by speaking, preaching, writing, organising, and no doubt praying, took their rightful place alongside their fellow Nonconformists in a noble endeavour.

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<sup>88</sup> *The Vote*, 13 June 1913. 116.

