

Doctor is placed between the churches

By SYDNEY CLARK

IT is not only for the Queen's Silver Jubilee that commemorative plates are being made this year.

They are also being made for the 200th anniversary of Hope Baptist Church at Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire on the road to Lancashire.

They will present a picture of the Hope Church and the Wainsgate Baptist Church, with the great Dr John Fawcett between. A vivid history of 200 years of influential witness.

Plate No. 1 has been offered to Dr David Russell, general secretary of the Baptist Union, and it is hoped to present it to him at the Baptist Union Assembly this week.

The bi-centenary celebrations started with a birthday party on March 19. Altogether there will be three Birthday Parties arranged by the Women's Social Hour, and I understand that "the form they will take is a closely guarded secret".

Among other events will be a John Fawcett Rally at Wainsgate, and the 200th church anniversary conducted by Dr Russell.

The church was founded under the leadership of Dr John Fawcett, the influential Yorkshire minister and teacher, who wrote the hymn, "Blest be the tie that binds" —

reckoned by some Yorkshire Baptists to be their anthem.

In fact, the church still possesses its original leather-bound Church Book.

It starts with the covenant, written by one of the first members, and there follow the names of members as they have joined throughout the two centuries. The first name is John Fawcett, followed by Susanna, his wife. Over 1,500 signatures have been added through the years.

About half of those who joined up to 1835 just made their mark because they were unable to write.

COVENANT

The book is no mere museum piece. From it the covenant is still read out, and in it new members still sign in the 200-year succession.

The great John Fawcett went as minister to Wainsgate up on the hill in 1764. He also taught pupils, including John Sutcliffe, whom he baptised in 1769.

Sutcliffe walked 200 miles in winter to Bristol Academy to train as a minister and settled at Olney.

He moved the resolution for a prayer tryst among the Northamptonshire Association that was an influence in the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society.

Fawcett's pupils at later educational establishments included William Ward, of Hull, who became one of the Serampore Three in India and printed Carey's translations of the Scriptures.

In 1777 Fawcett started the church down in the valley, Ebenezer, at Hebden Bridge. Here he baptised John Foster, influential essayist, to whom there is a memorial in the Hope Church unveiled by Sir Robertson Nicoll in 1913.

Fawcett remained minister at Ebenezer until 1817, the year of his death. In 1792 he had declined an invitation to become president of the Bristol Academy.

About 1786 he started a Sunday school — shortly after Robert Raikes had started the movement.

In 1787 Fawcett took a leading part in the formation of the Lancashire and Yorkshire Association.

And at the association meeting at Hebden Bridge in 1804 the Northern Education Society went forward, and Horton Academy was started for training Baptist ministers.

From this, Rawdon College was opened in 1859, and this amalgamated with Manchester College in 1964 to form the Northern Baptist College.

So the Hebden Bridge Church has taken a great part in our wider Baptist life. It moved from Ebenezer, which still stands, to the new Church, Hope, in 1858.

The church has continued to take a full part in local and wider Baptist life. It has provided nine presidents to the Baptist Associations from John Fawcett to the Rev W.S. Davies, minister 1939-1958.

For a number of recent years the church had the interesting organisation of a Hand Bell Team with a set of 39 bells. It does not operate at the moment because of the death of the leader and failure to find a successor, but some members still belong to the Handbell Ringers of Great Britain.

LIBRARY

Education has always been a hallmark here and we remember that an early school library was started in 1834 — when many as we see in the Church Book — could not even write. By 1888 it had more than 1,500 volumes. Fitting that more recently the former and modernised Baptist hall has housed the West Riding Public Library.

Since the church went to Hope 119 years ago, there have been only nine church secretaries. Arthur Latham was secretary from 1923 to 1952.

And this year, the present secretary, Mr Stanley Shackleton, celebrates his silver jubilee, having been appointed in 1952.

Pastorless since the retirement of the Rev Leonard Knight (1923-76), the church is modernising the manse and installing gas-fired central heating for the next occupant to lead into a new century.