



History of Early Methodism

The first Methodist Church was founded in Fountain Street in 1787. 19 years later a site was acquired from the Marquis of Donegal in Donegal Square East and a new chapel with seating for 800 people was opened on Sunday 16th March 1806. In 1809 a Thomas Ewart from Ballymacarrett started a Sunday School in his house which ran for a total of 17 years and was eventually transferred to Belvoir Hall and ultimately to the Newtownards Road Methodist Church Schoolrooms where it continued to flourish as the first and oldest Sabbath School in Belfast. In 1825 a field was secured adjoining the Newtownards Road and the first Ballymacarrett Methodist Church (as EBM was known then) and congregation was founded in 1826.

In 1913, the Newtownards Road Methodist Church was rebuilt with a seating capacity of around 1500. During the 1930's, the premises were not adequate for the work on hand. People's lives were so closely entwined with the variable fortunes of the shipyard and the slumping linen business that the changing economic circumstances of these years brought much hardship. Social work on an extensive scale was carried on for several winters. For a time between five and seven thousand free dinners were provided each month. Men of the church volunteered their time and skill to build the McIlwrath hall which was named after the Rev George A. McIlwrath. This and the other halls were destroyed with the church in the blitz of the Second Great War on the 4th and 5th May 1941.

For 11 years the congregation joined the Pitt Street Mission. On 6th September 1952 the new church that rose from the ashes of the old one was formally opened. The graveyard, wrecked by the havoc of war was closed. It was surfaced with tarmac to provide car parking. The new McIlwrath Hall was too small for the Churches activities so a new building was erected and took 4 years to complete.

In 1978, the Newtownards Road Methodist Church received a new minister - the Rev Jim Rea who began to work alongside the congregation. He identified issues of alcoholism, unemployment and debt within the local community. On 23rd November 1985 East Belfast Mission had an official opening and several years later in November 1991, a new homeless hostel, Hosford House – named as a tribute to the work of W.J. Hosford - opened as an Alcohol Rehabilitation Centre. In 1994, due to a lack of referrals and funding as a result of a change in direction of government policy, Hosford House closes as an alcohol rehabilitation centre but reopens the following April to offer accommodation to single people experiencing homelessness.

