

The Wakefield Church Congress, 1886

The greatest gathering of church people ever held in Wakefield was the Church Congress in October 1886. The annual Congress had been founded in 1861 when, on a modest scale, it took place in Cambridge. It was a voluntary gathering, bringing together Anglican clergy from archbishops to curates, together with lay people, and embracing evangelicals, ritualists and the broad church party. Wakefield seems to have been chosen because it was shortly to become the cathedral city of a new diocese. Every major building in the centre of Wakefield was in use. The trade floor of the Corn Exchange was converted into the Congress Hall with the erection of a platform that could hold 200 and galleries on the other three sides. The assembly room above it became the Sectional Hall for smaller gatherings. New doors were opened on the east and west sides towards the southern end of the building. The offices of the Wakefield Charities became the press room and the Wakefield postmaster, William Pye, ensured that reports could be sent by electric telegraph to all parts of Britain. Nonconformist chapels lent their premises for 'fringe' meetings. The Music Saloon, the hall of the Church Institute, and the schoolrooms at West Parade Methodist Chapel and Holy Trinity Church were taken over by local caterers for those who chose not to eat at public houses or inns. There were papers, followed by discussion, on, for example, church and state, the relationship between the church and the rural population, the relationship between the church and the urban population, Religious Education, and visiting the working class in their homes. Fringe meetings included one seeking support for opposing the legalising of marriage with one's deceased wife's sister, one (for men only) on sexual purity, and one promoting the Church of England Funeral and Mourning Reform Association. One of the country's leading clerical outfitters exhibited his garments in the Industrial Cooperative Society's store in Bank Street. Grace's fine art gallery in Westgate exhibited Sir Noel Paton's painting, 'Watch and Pray'. The Congress opened on Tuesday 5 October with a reception at the Town Hall for the leading speakers, organisers and attending clergy, followed by processions to the parish church, St John's and Holy Trinity where services took place simultaneously.

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