

'New Creation' in the East End Mission, 1885-97

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This paper originated in the discovery among the effects of the late Laurie Gage, doyen of Methodist booksellers, of copies of The East End, the newspaper of the Wesleyan Methodist East End Mission, for 1894-97. Drawing on this resource together with original material held at the London Metropolitan Archives and other periodicals and published sources, it attempts to invite comparisons with other contexts by asking three questions about the East End Mission in its early years:

- 1) To what extent was 'new creation' seen as a matter of structure and organisation?
- 2) Did new structures facilitate spiritual renewal?
- 3) What theology of 'new creation' underlay the Mission's life and work?

1) 'New creation' as a matter of structure and organisation.

The setting up of the London Wesleyan Methodist Mission was certainly portrayed as a new departure. A simplified account of its genesis portrayed it as a response to the publication of George Mearns's The Bitter Cry of Outcast London in 1883, awakening the churches to the extent of 'spiritual destitution' in the metropolis. This may indeed have been the direct stimulus for the chain of events from the paper presented to the London Wesleyan Ministers' Meeting in that year to the Conference decision of 1884 to set up Special Committees to consider 'Old Chapels in Large Towns' and 'Spiritual Destitution in London'. But a more general awareness of new social developments also underlay these developments. In the words of the Methodist Recorder 'Now that democracy is in the ascendant, and the coming king is to be found not in royal palaces, but in our hives of industry, the evangelisation of the people is of more

importance than ever.¹ The new complexion given to the representative system by the Parliamentary Reform Act of 1884 with its introduction of a uniform household franchise; the general trend of political developments since the mid-1870's; the revolutionary socialist rhetoric just beginning to come to public notice – all these served to mark profound changes in politics and society. Some churchgoers might perceive democracy without evangelisation as a threat, but the church was not unaware of the ‘very complex social question … implicated … with the root of all things’². The Conference of 1885, besides setting up the London Wesleyan Methodist Mission, sent memorials to Parliament on the subjects of the age of consent and the housing of the poor. ‘Democracy’, commented the Methodist Recorder, ‘is not coming, it has come.’³ Many sections of the church shared also society’s optimism, confidence in the possibility of progress and search for solutions. J.H. Rigg went so far as to foresee ‘the ultimate victory of Christianity’ if the problem of spiritually destitute London could be solved,⁴ and this solution was most often described in terms of adapting, but not revolutionising, existing church structures.

The establishment of the London Mission in 1885 was rooted in what was already happening in London Methodism. The perceived success of Moody and Sankey’s missions, with their bright music and ‘strong, racy talk’ had already led to the call for ‘adaptation’ of the religious services criticised by Moody as ‘too long and too dull’⁵. Experience of mission work since the 1860’s gave rise to the call for missions to be freed from the normal circuit system (described by the District Missionary as ‘the

¹ Methodist Recorder (MR) vol. 25 (1885) p.29

² J.H.Rigg in ‘Wesleyan Methodism and Destitute London’, MR vol. 25 (1885) p.166

³ MR vol. 25 (1885) ‘The Wesleyan Conference and Social Reform’ p.553

⁴ MR vol. 25 (1885) p.169

⁵ MR vol. 25 (1885) p.29

mechanical round of mere circuit work⁶), and for suburban circuits to take mission areas under their wing. Finance (the loss of pew rents and collections for Connexional funds) was a controversial issue, but this had been the case at least since the publication of the 1851 religious census results, and support from the Home Mission Fund was available to help reconcile trustees to ‘setting free a pleasant part of the chapel for the accommodation of the poor’⁷.

It was the proposal to exempt the Mission from the rule of three-year itinerancy which created most controversy in 1885. Fears that ‘a new Methodism’ was going to be created needed particular reassurance from the President of the Conference (Dr. Frederic Greeves) at the annual meeting of the Home Mission Fund. The reasons for the new model of long tenure and special stationing arrangements for ministers in Mission appointments were spelled out – social and geographical mobility and lack of stable lay leadership - but the arguments against were nowhere made clear. It was apparently taken for granted that the structures of Methodism were an indivisible whole. The setting up of the Mission also meant that for the first time Wesleyan Methodism had an organisation for the whole metropolis (a role which the London Committee continues to fill at the time of writing).

These structural changes were hardly revolutionary, nor were they meant to be so. Some argued that Methodism was slow to react to ‘spiritual destitution’ and was only taking on what others were already doing – Dr. Moody, the Salvation Army, Toynbee Hall, Dr. Barnado, Henry Charrington and the London City Mission were all cited in evidence. In general, however, the debates of 1885 reflected a perception that

⁶ Rev. Caesar Caine, in MR vol. 25 (1885) p.476

Methodism had already begun to sketch out the answers to the problem and that what was needed was a more systematic application of the same. The Metropolitan Lay Mission, engaged in mission work in London on behalf of Methodism since 1874, and the Metropolitan Chapel Building Fund, providing 50 new chapels over 25 years (albeit not in the poorest areas) and freeing London Methodism from debt, were quoted with particular satisfaction. There were the five circuits in East London established and supported by the Home Missions Fund, and in particular the work of the Rev. Alexander McAulay at Spitalfields. The defence of this work was to some extent inspired by the need not to rock the boat, with the vested interests of the Home Mission Fund and its supporters clearly to the fore.

With the prevailing view of ‘official’ Wesleyan Methodism favouring (for whatever reasons) the maintenance of existing structures, critics of the proposals for the new London Mission berated their modest scope. The decision to base the work of the Mission around existing chapels in two centres, north and south of the Thames, gave rise to the suspicion that particular bodies of trustees were being rescued at Connexion expense. Some discerned the need for a more radical restructuring. A letter to the Recorder summed up the case for ‘thinking big’ when it called for purpose-built halls to seat 2000, with coffee-palaces, book-saloons and club-rooms, instead of ‘simply the more vigorous tentative working of some well-nigh forlorn hopes centred in two or three of the “old chapels”’.⁸ Hugh Price Hughes argued that the Mission should begin on a large scale with the help of the ‘thousands of devoted Methodists in London who were ready to help in any forward movement’ and argued for ‘a great mission centre (whatever the effect on certain chapels might be for a

⁷ MR vol. 25 (1885) p.139

time).’ Even these proposals, however, consisted at heart of organisational modification rather than radical theological or spiritual change.

2) The role of structures and organisation in facilitating spiritual renewal.

St. George’s Wesleyan Methodist Chapel was the ‘well-nigh forlorn hope’ chosen as the centre of the East London Mission. 1885 appears in its surviving records as a time of new emphases rather than a radical new departure. St. George’s had been a flourishing society until mid-century but had gone into decline as the social composition of the neighbourhood changed and it began to experience a rapid turnover of leaders and difficulty in replacing them. It received occasional financial support from other circuits, although not on a large scale. Far from being a decayed chapel, however, it carried out considerable building improvements in 1876-7 including the installation of hot water and WC’s, clearing the debt by 1882. Open-air meetings were held, a course of lectures inaugurated in 1877 and revival services planned in 1883. A ten-days’ mission was led by Rev. Caesar Caine in January 1885 and further Special Evangelistic Services were planned. (The timing is intriguing. Were the society’s leaders responding to a new mood of optimism, or were they trying to prove something to the Conference Special Committee?)

Whatever their motivation, their concern for mission was not new. Since 1872 a lay agent had been employed, his salary found partly by the Metropolitan Auxiliary of the Home Mission Fund and partly by the society, ‘to work exclusively in the

⁸ Lancelot Middleton in MR vol. 25 (1885) p.557

neighbourhood and on behalf of the St. George's Society⁹. Mr. Morgan took up this post in 1874 under the rules of the new Metropolitan Lay Mission. When in 1884 lack of funds forced the withdrawal of the Home Mission Fund grant, St. George's Lay Mission Committee protested forcibly. A supporting statement of his work showed that he was engaged principally in district visiting, together with open-air services, class meetings, Sunday evening meetings in lodging houses and the Mothers' Meeting that he had founded in 1880. He was required to work 5 hours per day and over a ten-month period had actually averaged 8 ¾ hours (*plus ça change*). He worked in association with the young people of the Mission Band, formed in 1877, who sought to evangelise the neighbourhood by house-to-house visitation (520 visits every Sunday in 1882-3), open-air meetings, cottage meetings and the distribution of handbills. When the grant was indeed withdrawn the St. George's society employed him entirely themselves. He was to 'occupy himself entirely for the benefit of the St. George's society and congregation; (to) visit such members of the society as need his visitation, and also ... systematically visit in the neighbourhood of St. George's with the object of inducing people to attend this place of worship.'¹⁰ The trustees agreed that he could have free sittings 'for any persons who are unable to pay for them, and will attend regularly.' By May 1885, however, the society was no longer able to afford the venture and his employment came to an end.

The language used by Leaders' and Trustees in this context is that of filling our chapel and building up our society (in the words of the minute book's heading, 'the Lay Mission *to* (not *of*) this Society'¹¹). Given, however, that the aim of any Methodist society might be described as 'growth' in the widest sense, this distinction

⁹ St. George's Lay Mission Committee minutes, 3rd September 1872

may be regarded as more apparent than real. Mission to the society must necessarily mean mission to its surrounding community. St. George's was thus already in missionary mode before 1885: did the structural changes associated with the setting up of the Mission orient it significantly to 'new creation' when the Rev. Peter Thompson was stationed in September 1885?

Church minute books are notoriously poor reflectors of what is really going on. The changes apparent in the records of the St. George's society, inevitably church-centred and conservative, may largely be summed up as old means applied with new enthusiasm. The lay member of the 1884 Special Committee who had advocated 'carry(ing) on the work very much in the way in which Methodism had always been carried on' by promoting 'familiar and social intercourse',¹² would have approved. Apart from a line drawn across the page and a large new heading for September 1885, the first major change registered by the Leaders' Meeting concerned finance. It had taken four years for St. George's to take up the Quarterly Meeting's recommendation of a weekly offertory instead of quarterly contributions, and the reservations about free seats have already been noted. Now at Peter Thompson's first Leaders' Meeting 'the Leaders were glad to hear that the sittings were to be free, but that a(*n offertory would be made at each service* – these words crossed out) collection would be made at each service.'¹³ The high-church associations of the word 'offertory' underlie the silent witness of the crossing-out, and the spirituality of giving underlies the whole sentence. The requirement for regular attendance to qualify for a free seat has disappeared. Here is a structural change with profound spiritual implications.

¹⁰ St. George's Lay Mission Committee minutes, 26th February 1884

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Mr. Beauchamp, quoted in MR vol. 25 (1885) 'Spiritual Destitution in London' p.599

¹³ St. George's Leaders' Meeting minutes, 29th September 1885

Other immediate changes indicate the arrival of a minister determined to use existing structures to strengthen the spiritual life of the society. The same initial Leaders' Meeting listed names of members to be visited 'to entice them to attend more regularly.' Classes were continually rearranged as class leaders left and new leaders had to be found – no change here. New members (30 and 50 at a time when numbers are mentioned) were admitted from 1886 (65 had left when the Mission was founded), although membership was always regarded as problematic, sometimes registering a decrease on the quarter. In the Sunday School, where eight teachers (about 40% of the usual attendance at the meeting) had resigned between May and September 1885, Peter Thompson took over the chairing of the meeting, beginning each meeting with a hymn as well as the customary prayer. 'Each alternate monthly teachers' meeting' was soon devoted to 'the consideration of the spiritual interests of the school and devotional exercises.'¹⁴

This pattern of reliance on tried and tested structures continued as the Mission developed and is evidenced from The East End (founded in 1894 as a newspaper for the East End itself as well as for the Mission's supporters in other areas) as well as the St. George's records. The class system was crucial: finding Class Leaders was a continual struggle, but classes were set up at subsidiary mission centres even if they never became separate societies. Special attention was urged for the Junior Society Classes 'with a view to the early conversion of the children'.¹⁵ In 1889 Peter Thompson proposed Friday evening prayer meetings jointly for the Leaders' Meetings of the three Mission societies 'for the purpose of stimulating each other to higher

¹⁴ St. George's Wesleyan Sunday School Teachers' Meeting minutes, 7th December 1885

Christian life and experience.¹⁶ A Select Band in all but name! Low attendance of members at worship at St. George's gave cause for concern. Singing and music in worship were improved and bands organised. The importance of attendance at 'Sacramental services' was emphasised and in 1887 a quarterly morning Communion was introduced at St. George's 'for the benefit of members unable to attend the evening celebration.'¹⁷ The next year it was decided that 'the ticket of membership should be shewn at the celebration of the Lord's Supper,'¹⁸ the context of this decision being the removal of a member for misconduct. Sunday Schools gave much attention to Outings and Anniversaries but also to teaching methods: the St. George's Sunday School decided in 1887 to use the Wesleyan Sunday School Union examinations and the Catechism, buying 200 copies in 1889 to 'induce' the scholars to buy them and study them at home (though the minutes of the Bible Class suggest that the young men at least took any opportunity to discuss something else). Other activities reported after the first year of the Mission's existence (open-air meetings, the Mother's Meeting, Bible-readings etc.) were impressive in number but not new in principle.

At the same time some new developments and emphases took the Mission into uncharted territory. Some of the activities described after the first year may have been new, rather than previously unrecorded – there is no earlier evidence for a Dorcas Society, a girls' sewing class, a Maternity Society, a Training Home for girls, Reading Rooms or the distribution of soup, coffee and clothing. Nevertheless, these were familiar activities both within Methodism and in the charitable world at large.

¹⁵ St. George's Leaders' Meeting minutes, 22nd October 1889

¹⁶ St. George's Leaders' Meeting minutes, *ibid.*

¹⁷ St. George's Leaders' Meeting minutes, 26th April 1887

¹⁸ St. George' Leaders' Meeting minutes, 23rd November 1888

The emphasis on temperance work in the Mission, with the establishment of Bands of Hope at all mission centres, does seem to have been singled out as new and important. 'Temperance', wrote the Revd. John Howard, '(is) not so much a branch of Mission work as a part of every work to be done'¹⁹. It was a relatively new emphasis within Wesleyan Methodism in the 1880's: its importance in the East End and similar mission areas, where drink was readily identified as an economic and moral evil, may have increased its prominence in the Connexion generally.

Structural changes implied in the use of the term 'mission centres' after 1885 reflect not so much a change of policy as a reaffirmation of traditional Methodist organisation. 'Mission' in areas such as the East End had been carried out since mid-century by means of mission halls under the care of a lay evangelist. By the 1880's this method was being criticised: not only was it manifestly unsuccessful in building up a worshipping congregation (which was assumed to be the aim) but it was perceived as patronising to the poor who were allocated inferior premises and (perceivedly) inferior staff. The 'mission centres' model adopted by the East End Mission was different. It was expected that premises would be hired in the interests of flexibility (going to the greatest need) although the main centres were in fact purchased. But 'mission centres' were brought onto the Mission plan and shared the attention of the ministerial staff. In 1891 Wilton's Music Hall became a society (the Old Mahogany Bar) with leadership provided from St. George's. This model of organisation combined the popular appeal of the mission centre with the leadership resources and nurturing structures of the central society and was seen as crucial to the success of the Mission.

¹⁹ EE 22 (Oct. 1895) p.2

The fulfilment of Conference's hope that better-off circuits would support mission work helped to create a new spiritual climate in the Mission area. Personal links created by Methodism's Connexional structure as well as by social and geographical mobility encouraged prompt and generous financial support: Addiscombe, Enfield, Blackheath and Redhill (Peter Thompson's previous circuit) were particularly prominent. The £600 debt on the Shoreditch Mission was cleared within a few months of Samuel Chadwick's arrival in 1893, legal expenses were paid for a libel action brought against Peter Thompson and John Howard, £1000 was raised at the Anniversary meetings for the £7000 Appeal of 1896. Contributions came from all parts of the country, channelled through ministers who had wide-ranging connections and were prepared to use them. The Cable Society, whose Secretary lived in Harrogate, collected clothes, bedding and money for boots from Wesleyan women in its far-flung branches. Resident Mission workers came from middle-class, often ministerial, families outside London, while some professional people chose to live at the Mission while working further West. Homes for Mission workers were set up in Cable Street (women's) and at Paddy's Goose (men's). Detached institutions were founded in more salubrious areas, such as the Girls' Home at Blackheath and later the Mother and Baby and Old People's homes at Southend. Well-off individuals opened their homes and grounds for summer outings, visited the Mission themselves at other times and financed children's teas and Christmas treats. The suburban residents who gave their support to the Mission frequently had business links with the area or had lived there in the past, and connexional structures gave these links a spiritual dimension.

In summary, then, the setting up of the East End Mission, although publicised as a new departure, was largely traditional in its organisation and methods. There were, however, crucial new structural elements – the ‘mission centres’ and, above all, the Mission Superintendent. Exempt from the rule of three-year itinerancy and stationed directly by the London Mission Committee, his position of authority was manifest from the beginning in the changes at St. George’s. His contacts were crucial in securing outside support for the Mission, although publicity was not his strong point. The Methodist Recorder commented in 1888 that ‘Mr. Thompson does not beg; we rarely hear from him²⁰’ – the comparison with the West London Mission is striking. His long-term commitment to the locality led to an ongoing involvement in local life and (despite disclaimers) politics, which inevitably coloured the Mission’s work and theology.

3) What was the Mission’s theology of new creation?

It would be a bold Methodist in the 1890’s who denied that Methodism’s primary task was ‘having nothing to do but save souls’. The tradition which emphasised the primacy of individual regeneration was clearly expressed whenever the East End Mission’s work was discussed. ‘If … we can secure for a man a changed heart, he will soon work out for himself a changed environment’²¹ proclaimed the Methodist Recorder, while ‘Notes for the New Year’ 1897 in The East End honoured those who were working to improve the conditions of the poor and ‘yield(s) to none in the effort to obtain such precious blessings, but if these stop short of the divine and spiritual change we call conversion, they will fail in the long run permanently to bless and save

²⁰ MR vol. 28 (1888) p. 841

the East End²². Nevertheless, the particular challenges of city mission work, and the East End in particular, led to some interesting nuancing of this basic stance.

The term ‘socialism’ was in common use by the 1890’s, but it was not yet strictly understood as ‘collective ownership and the redistribution of wealth’: it might mean many things from ‘co-operation’ onwards. ‘Christian socialism’ might therefore describe any form of church-sponsored social action, however mildly interventionist. By the early years of the twentieth century, as socialism acquired political definition, some Christians came to identify its increasingly specific goals with God’s kingdom. Samuel Keeble is generally held to be the only significant Methodist representative of this viewpoint. He fell out with Peter Thompson precisely because of his contention that Thompson was insufficiently radical in social and political matters. Thompson’s social agenda remained basically paternalist, aiming to inculcate middle-class values by means of religion: ‘... the greatest factor in the uplifting of a district is the religious influence which has been brought to bear upon it in recent years’²³. Theological paternalism also played its part in creating this stance of ‘mission to’ rather than ‘mission alongside’: The East End was to be ‘the messenger of Methodism to the ... people we are sent to help and save’²⁴. Whatever ‘new creation’ meant in the theology of the East End Mission, it was not socialism.

Despite its fundamental social and political conservatism, the drive to alleviate poverty and suffering nevertheless pushed the Mission away from a classical liberal agenda. The particular social complexity and mobility of the East End (the general

²¹ MR vol. 25 (1885) p.393

²² EE 37 (Jan. 1897) p.6

²³ EE 18 (June 1895) p.1: interview from London, May 30th 1895

²⁴ EE 1 (Jan 1894) p.1

'dumping ground for the moral and social refuse of the world') made it impossible to distinguish between deserving and undeserving ('by 'deserving' we mean, not so much those who have never done a wrong as those who have not been punished for it'²⁵). Extreme need could not be ignored: John Howard defended the St. George's soup kitchen against the charge of 'pauperising the children' by arguing that it gave 'what ... parents in many cases cannot, and in some cases will not, provide' while 'theories and schemes and plans are being worked out'²⁶, the charge of pauperisation being not so much dismissed as invalid as brushed aside as irrelevant. It also involved the Mission with some allies whose agenda was more explicitly collectivist. The advanced Liberal M.P. for St. George's-in-the-East, Mr. J. Williams Benn, wrote a monthly 'Commons and Council' column of comment on national and municipal affairs, until he was defeated by four votes in the Parliamentary election of 1895. Thompson was a founder-member of the Anti-Sweating League which aimed to improve wages for home-workers. The well-known links between the Mission and 'the various meetings ... of Trades Unions, Benefit Societies and Lodges'²⁷, who were offered the use of Mission premises in order to get them out of the public houses, resulted in support being given to the dockers in the strike of 1889. Continuing links led to occasions such as the Workmen's 'Free and Easy' at Paddy's Goose at which 'Mr. Ben Tillett (the dockers' leader) had been enlightening the dockers on some industrial questions and then turned vocalist'²⁸. Thompson was challenged for allowing the use of the Old Mahogany Bar for a Dock Labourers' meeting to protest against the 'Contracting Out' clauses of the Employers' Liability Bill. He insisted that the 'no politics' rule, forbidding the use of Wesleyan premises for political meetings, was not thereby

²⁵ EE 35 (Nov. 1896) p.7

²⁶ EE 22 (Oct. 1895) p.2

²⁷ EE 4 (Apr. 1894) p.5

²⁸ EE 8 (Aug. 1894) p.7

infringed. Rather than reading his argument as a disingenuous piece of special pleading or a claim that a higher morality transcends politics, we should view it as a reflection of the transitional status of trades unions in 1894, only a year after the foundation of the ILP and well before any formal link between trades unions and a political party. The raising of the question does however indicate the transition that was being made. Whatever its theology, the Mission was inevitably adopting a more collectivist stance.

Another interpretation of what it might mean to proclaim ‘new creation’ in a city mission context in the 1890’s was provided by the incarnational theology which was particularly strong in contemporary Anglican social thought. Once again one name represents Methodism in this area: Scott Lidgett stands out in his use of the language of ‘the city of God’ and ‘Christian brotherliness’, arguing for the establishment of a Settlement in South London on the grounds that ‘... all which develops the powers of body and mind has its place in Christ’s redemptive work, as the Gospel of the Incarnation and Resurrection proclaims to men’²⁹. Such language is conspicuous by its absence from the discussions around the founding of the London Mission and the early years of the East End Mission. ‘Christian brotherhood’ was certainly invoked, but was not defended on incarnational grounds. Thompson, preaching on ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ in the context of the LCC elections of 1895, answers in the affirmative on the grounds that ‘we ought to lay down our lives for our brethren.’³⁰ Underlying this assertion we may discern a theology of the imitation of Christ, and maybe that all-pervasive paternalism, but no incarnational identification either between them and us or between them and Christ. Similarly, although the East End

²⁹ Wesleyan Methodist Magazine (WMM) 6th ser. Vol. 14 (1890) p.76

Mission became involved in many projects of social relief and regeneration, there was no defence of it along the lines of Lidgett's argument quoted above.

The 'Forward Movement' in general acted as a focus for new developments in theology because of its optimistic and ameliorationist outlook. In 1890 it, and Hugh Price Hughes in particular, was described by the Christian World as moving away from 'medieval Methodism' with its reliance on the fear of hell, and aligning itself with the 'New Theology' by its emphasis on the love of God. Hughes was attacked for saying that God does not hate sinners, and defended by Benjamin Gregory in the Wesleyan Methodist Magazine for retaining a theology of atonement by adding that Christ died because God loves them. Gregory also cited many examples from early Methodism of the preaching of the love of Christ. This use of Methodist tradition to find resources to support social action is fundamental to the theology of the East End Mission. Preaching proclaimed, and social action was justified by, a broadly humanitarian theology grounded in God's universal love in Christ. A discourse of 'saving to' fullness of life rather than 'saving from' eternal damnation was generally prevalent. This theology was not however seen as anything new in Methodism.

Such a discourse could easily become one of social amelioration pure and simple. Social evils were perceived as hindrances to 'higher things' – in Mission terms this meant the gospel. Municipal reformers in general also defined their aims in terms of 'higher things' and 'human brotherhood', so the two were natural allies: public libraries, art galleries and music in the parks, slum clearance and the Progressive programme in the LCC generally all received Mission support. Mission attitudes to

³⁰ EE 15 (Mar. 1895) p.7

poor relief displayed 'progressive' compassion (the extension of outdoor relief, greater discrimination), mixed with the more 'traditional' Benthamite stance of 'distinguish(ing) between the loafer ... and the real seeker after a better life'³¹. In addition Thompson in particular was closely involved with projects which sought alternatives to the workhouse, chairing the Committee set up by the Mansion House Conference on the Unemployed to administer a work relief scheme at Abbey Mills, Stratford, advocating both internal colonisation (land settlement) and emigration, and serving on the committee of the Christian Union for Social Service and on the Central Committee of Farm Colonies and Rural Industries.

Does this lead then to the conclusion that distinctive Wesleyan, and even Christian, theology had been taken over by contemporary social agendas? On the contrary, the theological tone of the East End Mission is best characterised as radical action justified by traditional theology. The nature of Wesleyan theology was such that it did not need to be modified to lend support to the Mission's programme. The primary aim was the proclamation of the gospel, and poverty was a hindrance to such proclamation - partly because it prevented the poor from developing a concern for spiritual things and partly because the more comfortable situation of those associated with the churches alienated the poor and gave cause for scandal. Thompson thus asserted in a sermon to the Conference of 1895 that 'My experience among the people of the East End leads me to the conclusion that many people must be carried to Christ if they are ever to be saved.' The work of 'carrying to Christ' could however lay the Mission open to the charge of neglecting the gospel for the sake of merely secular improvement. The Methodist Recorder believed that the strategy of humanising

³¹ EE 37 (Jan. 1897) p.1

‘rough girls’ by means of music and beauty, ‘that they may be reached and touched by spiritual forces … savours of disbelief to some.’ Thompson’s Annual Report, in which the problem was highlighted, merely asked how they were to be converted, quoting the ‘lady worker’ who asked ‘Is it that these girls must be gradually prepared?’³²

Despite the misgivings of those outside the Mission, its workers were convinced that their work of ‘humanising’ was only preparatory to conversion. Its missiology thus began by ‘going out’ (by visiting in the courts and alleys, open-air work, processions, ‘reclaiming the streets for Christ’ and involvement in local movements for reform) with the ultimate aim of ‘gathering in’, through meetings adapted to different groups, primarily offering Christian teaching but having a strong sub-text of ‘civilising’. The final goal was conversion.

The Methodist understanding of conversion meant, however, that this was not a purely individualistic, internal transaction. Change of heart meant change of life, expressed and sustained by signing the pledge and joining the Society; or, to use a different terminology, assurance of salvation must be followed by sanctification. Conversion could not be described (or experienced) separately from assimilation to Methodist institutions and *mores*. And Methodist institutions and *mores*, in their turn, acted to transform their social context. This understanding of conversion, informed by basic Methodist theology, is essential to understanding The East End’s language about mission. It explains its seamless transition between social action and evangelistic preaching and its lack of need to justify either. The Girls’ Parlour, the Mothers’ Meeting, the Pleasant Saturday Evening and the Children’s Mission functioned as introductory stages from which people could progress to the Bible

³² MR vol. 27 (1887) p.781

Class, the Society Class or the Sunday School. But it remains true that conversion was seen as something alien to the *mores* of the East End itself : a different terminology again would emphasise the correlation between 'Christian' and 'middle-class' values. In the explicit language used of the Children's Mission, 'These children belong to a rougher class than those in our Sunday School, but we are seeking to prepare them for membership there'³³. Less committed observers commented on the relatively small numbers of both children and adults making the transition.

Conclusion – some further questions.

Examination of the East End Mission in its foundation and early years leads to the conclusion that there was a strong element of structural conservatism in Wesleyan Methodism, but that this was not perceived as a major disadvantage. Anxiety about the success of the East End Mission focused on the particularly difficult conditions of the area rather than organisational maladaptation. Was Hughes right in viewing this as the malign influence of vested interests, or were those who instinctively relied on traditional Methodist structures building better than they knew?

The changes that were made in 1885 certainly succeeded in infusing a new spirit into East End Methodism. It may be the case that any change, and certainly any sign of commitment from the rest of the Connexion, would have produced the same effect. It seems likely, however, that the establishment of a strong, personal, paternal authority in the person of the Mission Superintendent, was particularly well suited to the area and the time. It is unfortunate that this model should have outlived its usefulness, as my own experience in ministry bears witness. How may the spiritual dynamic which

³³ EE 12 (Dec. 1894) p.5

necessitates new structures best be discerned without the structures becoming ends in themselves?

Examination of the Mission's theology reveals an implicit assumption of identity between agendas generated within the Christian church and those generated elsewhere. Christian discipleship was not a private, internal matter; it had to be socially expressed, but there was no perceived need to justify the nature of this expression, which was assumed to be self-evident. Equally there was no theological articulation (by way of an incarnational theology or a theology of the Spirit, for example) of the relationship between the two sets of agendas. Nevertheless, the basic Methodist theology of conversion and holy living gave a structure which enabled the Mission to function theologically. Whether this theology enabled it to critique its own agenda and to adapt its structures is a question that must await further investigation.

Margaret Jones. August 2002