

THROUGH CHANGING SCENES



Belfast Central Mission

The Story of the first 125 Years – 1889-2014

Foreword



Almost 25 years ago the Rev Dr Eric Gallagher wrote a comprehensive and widely acclaimed history of the Belfast Central Mission (BCM)

to mark its centenary (*At Points of Need – The Story of the Belfast Central Mission 1889-1989*). The book focused on the events, people and places associated with the Mission during its century of work and witness at the heart of Belfast. It remains an excellent testimony to BCM's first 100 years.

As we now celebrate a further 25 years of the developing work of BCM, a fresh reflection on the nature of its work and witness seemed timely. Following a life-time membership of and commitment to BCM, Mr Wesley Weir kindly agreed to take a renewed approach to charting the journey of the Mission.

Whilst it is impossible (and undesirable) to think of the lives influenced through BCM without reference to the Ministers, staff, congregational members and volunteers through whom care has been offered, *Through Changing Scenes* seeks to emphasise the significant streams or themes of care evident throughout its

history. As such, whilst within chapters a chronological approach is taken, the chapters often span extended periods of time, overlapping each other, as Wesley traces the journey.

Through Changing Scenes also offers us the opportunity (though perhaps looking through a glass dimly) to point toward the future beginning to unfold for a Mission that remains deeply committed to seeking fresh, innovative and timely responses to the Gospel imperative: to look after bodily needs; to care for the sick; to welcome the stranger (Matthew 25).

At the heart of BCM's continuing commitment to 'supporting those who need it most' lies a conviction that in so doing, we must seek to care for the whole person – body, mind, soul and spirit. *Through Changing Scenes* captures our small part in the ongoing unfolding narrative of God's activity in God's world.

Richard C Johnston
Superintendent Minister
13 February 2014

Thanks



It has been a labour of love for me to fulfil BCM's request to write an updated history of the Mission. I hope that this little volume not only

provides new insights into a remarkable past but encourages the present generation of Irish Methodists to become more involved in its unfolding future.

My thanks are due to the Revs David Kerr, Sam Burch and David Campton for their memories of Grosvenor Hall; to Bertie Sharpe, Brian Burns and Bob Webb for information relating to the social work of the Mission; to the present Superintendent the Rev Richard Johnston for sharing his vision of the future; and to the Grosvenor Hall congregation for their encouragement.

The Rev Richard Johnston, Alan Ker, Sharon Barry and Maureen Weir read drafts of the text and highlighted errors... factual and typographical. Naomi Braithwaite, Jonathan Glover and Marc Pyper took many of the photographs above the closing chapters. Ricky Stone provided graphic design skills which combined words and images into a visually appealing format. The marketing team at BCM arranged for the printing of the book and also provided invaluable administrative support.

I also wish to pay tribute to my late father Jack Weir who loved to share his tales of the people and events of 'the old days' at the Grosvenor Hall and inspired me to work to preserve the history of the Belfast Central Mission.

J R Wesley Weir

Contents

Introduction	3
1. Beginnings	4
2. Conversions	11
3. Practical Christianity	22
4. Christian Socialism	31
5. The End of the Beginning	39
6. Ecumenism & Peacemaking	46
7. Regeneration & Renewal	54
Where to Next?	62
Endnotes	66

Superintendent Ministers

1889-1905	R Crawford Johnson
1905-1926	R M Ker
1926-1950	John N Spence
1950-1954	R R Cuningham
1954-1955	Joseph B Jameson
1955-1957	Samuel H Baxter
1957-1979	R D Eric Gallagher
1979-1987	Norman W Taggart
1987-2003	David J Kerr
2003-2007	Donald P Ker
2007 –	Richard C Johnston

Through Changing Scenes – Author's Introduction

When approached by the Mission Executive to produce an updated history celebrating the first 125 years of the Belfast Central Mission (BCM), I realised very quickly that it would be wrong to attempt to improve on *At Points of Need*. That volume was however, written primarily with the past and present members of the Grosvenor Hall congregation in mind to help them recall long-forgotten faces and cherished memories. I have attempted in this new booklet to present a more thematic approach in the hope of introducing a diverse 21st century readership to the continually evolving story of BCM as it has sought to respond to the needs of the city (and in recent years to the needs of Northern Ireland).

The Mission throughout its history has been involved with all sectors of the community, irrespective of religious or political affiliation. Its aim has long been to support those most in need in society and to enable them to reach their full potential. One cannot read through the early Minutes and records without experiencing a feeling of awe and admiration for those who turned their visions into reality despite encountering many obstacles. As the city and society has changed over 125 years so too has the response of the Mission to contemporary needs, with each Superintendent adding his own unique perspective.

This booklet documents the variety of ways through which the Mission has been able to serve the community within the context of its own history. It draws substantially from BCM records and from a variety of other documents to loosely follow a general chronology of events throughout its life. The chapters reflect the key themes that were important in the different eras. Each theme is linked to the Superintendent(s) with whom they are most associated but also traces their progress throughout the life of the Mission. Interwoven into the narrative are the day to day events of Mission life.

In the chapter 'Beginnings' I have provided some background to the origins of the work of the mission in Belfast in the late 19th century. To put this into its theological context and to assist the reader in understanding some of the influences at work, I refer to the 'Forward Movement' and the 'Holiness Movement'. I have also outlined the opportunities and problems encountered in setting up a Methodist Central Hall in Belfast.

The next theme is 'Conversions' which presents the early work of the Mission in an age of evangelicalism. There were powerful sermons, week-long crusades, tent campaigns, open-air meetings and numerous conversions. We see that during the course of the 20th century attitudes changed markedly towards this type of outreach and new forms of witness had to be adopted.

Following this I have outlined a picture of the Rev R M Ker's era of 'Practical Christianity' – how he identified great social needs in the city and attempted to respond to them. The reader will see how, during his Superintendency a multitude of schemes were put in place including the establishment of residential care and holiday homes. We then consider how the arrival of the Welfare State and the professionalisation of social work in the latter part of the 20th century threatened this aspect of the Mission's outreach. BCM responded to the new circumstances and this chapter also outlines how it adapted creatively to ever-changing community issues.

'Christian Socialism' is the next theme to be considered. From its earliest days the Mission attracted working men to its services. This chapter reviews how the Rev John N Spence worked tirelessly in the 1930s to relieve distress and to arbitrate on behalf of strikers when violence threatened.

Then we come to what I have described as 'The End of the Beginning' which charts some of the major changes of the 20th century. Here the reader will witness the slow decline of the Grosvenor Hall congregation which resulted from major events, wartime, social change and unrest. Unusually, this theme follows the work of not one but three Superintendents.

The old saying 'cometh the hour, cometh the man' has never been more appropriate for the next theme to be visited. 'Ecumenism and Peacemaking' looks at the work of the Rev Eric Gallagher, who was widely regarded as 'a prophet for the times'. It considers the contribution he made towards bringing the Church leaders together and his efforts to create the conditions for peace in Northern Ireland. We then look at the continuation of his work by the Rev Norman Taggart and how he took the first steps towards professionalising BCM's social work.

The penultimate theme of 'Regeneration and Renewal' focuses on the leadership of the Rev David Kerr and Mr Bertie Sharpe (the Mission's first Director of Social Work). The reader will appreciate how they brought new visions, new hope and a series of major developments alongside much-needed updating. As this chapter closes, we see that BCM was ready to face the challenges of the 21st century under the leadership of the Rev Donald Ker.

It is very appropriate that the final section 'Where to Next?' which looks to the future, has been written by the current Superintendent, the Rev Richard Johnston. Here he shares his vision and dreams with you.

Many photographs and images from the BCM archive have been included to enhance the text. It is planned that access to the archive, which until now has only been utilised by professional researchers, can in future be made available to a wide audience.

J R Wesley Weir



CHAPTER I

Beginnings

The Belfast Town Mission was started at the end of the 19th century to provide a Methodist response to spiritual and social need. Mid Victorian industrialisation had produced rapid growth and expansion for the town of Belfast. During the second half of the century its population increased nearly fourfold and new districts grew up to accommodate workers flooding in from the countryside to the metropolis. Like most Victorian towns it also experienced high unemployment, overcrowding, insanitary conditions, and low life expectancy. These no doubt contributed to the alcoholism, immorality and child neglect from which many of its inhabitants suffered. In addition there was the continuing problem of sectarianism which was exacerbated by the ongoing Home Rule legislation. The established Churches attempted to respond to these issues but failed to engage with much of the population.

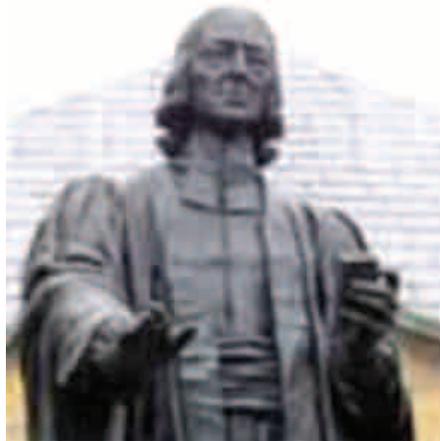
To understand why some of the town's leading Methodists came together in 1889 to found a new Mission for the 'un-churched' people of what was by then the city of Belfast, would benefit from an understanding of the 'Holiness' and 'Forward' movements of that era. It is clear that those proposing to start this work possessed the religious assurance and the social conscience which each of those movements represented.

The key beliefs of the '**Holiness Movement**'¹ were:

- Salvation from sin – God's people are saved by grace through faith in Christ who made atonement for human sins.
- Entire sanctification – A second work of grace in which the believer is cleansed of the tendency to commit sin enabling them to live a holy life.

It was also believed that the moral aspects of God's law were important for human society and therefore its proponents were strongly opposed to alcohol, gambling, smoking and entertainments.

One of the key contributions of the Rev John Wesley to the theology of Methodism had been his teaching on the worth of the individual in the sight of God. He believed that every man could be saved by faith, that every man could be assured of his salvation, and that every man could be fully saved. He also taught the worth of fellowship and gathered



John Wesley.

his followers into bands and classes. He wanted them to know that they were part of an earthly community and had obligations to their fellow man. One of his most famous sayings was, 'Do all the good you can, in all the ways you can, to all the people you can.' When Wesley defined holiness in terms of perfect love for God and one's neighbour he recognised that holiness was both individual and social. His thinking on Christian ethics led him to believe that service to the poor, the sick and the distressed was all part of one's calling.

After Wesley's death, Methodism, staunch in its Toryism and fearful of 19th century Radical agitation, largely stood aside from all the great movements for social and political reform. The two finest preachers and most influential ministers in British Methodism during the first half of the 19th century were the Rev Jabez Bunting and the Rev Robert Newton. For both, their entire focus was on the personal life of the Christian with no regard for the needs of the community. The Rev William Burt Pope, the great Methodist theological writer of the second half of the century, also showed little interest in the application of the Christian faith to society².

All was not lost however as Revivalist preachers such as Bramwell, Bourne and Clowes continued to emphasise entire sanctification. Bourne was greatly influenced by Lorenzo Dow, the somewhat eccentric American Methodist evangelist, which led him to holding an American style camp-meeting at Mow Cop (in the north-west of England). From there

Bourne and Clowes went on to found the Primitive Methodist Connexion³, opening their first chapel in May 1811 (William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army and one of the key personalities in the British Holiness Movement, had himself been a Primitive Methodist). Ireland provided another impetus because there 'entire sanctification' had more acceptability among Wesleyan Methodism. The country benefited too from visits by trans-Atlantic Holiness revivalists such as Phoebe Palmer and James Caughey. The 'awakening' of 1857-58 which began under the ministry of Dr and Mrs Palmer in Hamilton, Ontario during September, 1857 soon spread to Britain, coming to Ulster in 1859 and extending to Wales and Scotland later in the year.

William Booth had been blessed in 1847 under Caughey's ministry. Catherine, his wife, was influenced by the work of Palmer and became a very powerful voice in the British Holiness Movement. They left Primitive Methodism in 1861 because they believed that the church and chapel congregations were no longer interacting with the 'un-churched' in the East End of London. Their concern for those lost souls was demonstrated by the way they cared for their physical and economic, as well as their spiritual needs. The Salvation Army was one of the chief proponents of Christian Holiness during the latter part of the 19th century. In the 1870s the Holiness Movement developed further in Britain with 'Higher Life' conferences being held, including one at Keswick and 'The Keswick Convention' soon became the British headquarters of, and the watchword for, the movement.

The Rev John Scott Lidgett was the first major Methodist theologian of the 19th century to have the vision to draw out the implications of Wesley's theology.



From the beginning, Dr Lidgett recognised that his view of the relationship of God and man had direct social implications. His statement regarding the Universal Fatherhood of God⁴, which promoted the idea of God loving and working with his children in the world, resonated with the thinking of the age. The Rev Hugh Price Hughes,



the other great visionary of that era of English Methodism, both supported and profited from the meetings of the Holiness Convention, re-consecrating himself to God in 1875 and vowing his 'all' to God without qualification or reservation. His greatest achievement was to be in promoting the 'Forward Movement'⁵.

Through the efforts of Lidgett and Hughes, many Methodists were freed from the old individualism and began to better recognise their strengths and understand their obligations. Hughes had embraced socialism but it was always informed by evangelism, and reciprocally, his evangelism was infused with socialism. He was the first prominent Wesleyan preacher to declare himself a 'Christian Socialist.' Hughes was convinced that only Methodism could address the social issues in Britain but the Church had to make a choice. It either had to demonstrate a capacity to effect spiritual renewal with consequent social and national renewal, or it would fade into obscurity.

The initial impetus for change had come from the Congregationalists who began to open mission halls in some of the more needy areas of London to create new bases for social and evangelistic work. This outreach led to the publication of a pamphlet in October 1883 entitled *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*⁶. It brought home to people a realisation that, in the inner cities, out of sight of the rest of society there were, 'areas of heart-breaking misery, moral corruption and absolute godlessness.' The author, Rev Andrew Mearns, said that, 'While we have been building our churches, and solacing ourselves with religion... the poor have been growing poorer, the wretched more miserable, and the immoral more corrupt; the gulf has been daily widening which separates the lowest classes of the community from our churches and chapels and from all decency and civilisation. We are simply living in a fool's paradise if we suppose that all the agencies now in operation, when combined, are doing a thousandth part of what needs to be done.' The pamphlet was widely read, the nation was stirred, consciences were temporarily awakened and a Royal Commission was appointed⁷.

Methodism, in common with other denominations, was paying a heavy penalty for not addressing these issues. It had become outdated in the 19th century because of its rigid conservatism. In all the large cities of England there were huge chapels that were once crowded but were now nearly empty. Their types of service and the methods of working had not adapted to the changing environment. There was an almost total absence of the



selfless spirit which cared for the salvation of others and as a result hundreds of Methodism's best workers were leaving to join the Salvation Army. 'Coddling the Saints' was a description of Church life often used by the Rev Hugh Price Hughes. He said 'The old familiar services of Nonconformity suit immense numbers of persons, and ought to be carefully preserved. Many love a quiet homely service, with sober music, a good long sermon, a comfortable family pew and not too many collections. But these are not to the taste of the working classes. They know nothing about the long terms of Puritan theology, and they like a short vigorous sermon in which a spade is called a spade. As for pews, they hate them, but they enjoy a collection at every service.' For the people outside the churches there was little or no thought.

Hughes defined five essentials for the success of any Mission being operated on Forward Movement principles:

- A suitable mission centre.
- Social work.
- A free hand.
- Concentration.
- Removal of the 'three year limit.'⁸

The British Wesleyan Conference of 1884 appointed a Committee (as Methodists usually do) to consider the subject of spiritual destitution in London and to present a scheme to the following Conference.

On Tuesday 12 March 1885, at a meeting in City Road Chapel, the Forward Movement in London took on a definite form⁹. Dr Riggs spoke of the two elements of non-religious London with whom they needed to engage. Firstly, connecting with the strong, highly-skilled working man and, secondly encountering, 'Those who constituted the drift and scum of the whole universe.' He went on to say, 'If we solve the problem now, it will be solved for every city in England, and virtually for every city in the world. It is a sort of battle of Armageddon. If we win this, the whole victory will be ours.' Percy Bunting (Editor of the *Contemporary Review*) outlined the future. 'They were founding a new organisation – but still a Methodist organisation. All were agreed that red tape was to be thrown aside, that the whole economy of Methodism was to be shelved if necessary, and a fresh start made... so they were going to use not new doctrines,

or even new men, but new methods.' He condemned the frittering away of strength on small mission rooms and proposed that they should work from large centres, which were required to attract workers as well as hearers. Advocating the necessity of social work, he said they could not go to the slums without feeding the hungry, and as a consequence of that step would come the necessity of providing all that was essential to a decent, quiet and sober life.

When the Rev Hugh Price Hughes came to speak he declared that: 'What they wanted in Methodism was a revolution. Old truths must be put in forms suitable to these days. The old lines, the old pews, the old pew-rents, the old quarterage collections, and if necessary, the old trustees, the old officers and the old congregation must retire from the scene to some congenial resting-place. The time had come when the salvation of 10,000 souls would be no longer subordinated to the imaginary interests of a handful of excellent Christians.' He urged that:



'The enterprise must be carried out on a large and unprecedented scale or it would be worse than useless. London was already overdone with feeble and isolated mission halls. Large central buildings were absolutely essential to success. Without them it would not be possible to attract workers, to stimulate enthusiasm, or to generate the energy necessary to carry on such a work.'

The General Committee reconvened in July to agree on the programme to be presented to the 1885 British Conference but diluted the scheme. Hughes resorted to the pages of *The Methodist Times* in order to voice his opposition to, 'The cautious and moderate proposals of the Committee.' Although Conference did make two significant appointments to London it failed to support the aggressive policies being proposed by Hughes. It was left to the provinces to pioneer the work by building a Central Hall in Manchester. This debate was no doubt followed closely by those Irish Methodists who would soon consider a similar project in Belfast.

Whilst Hugh Price Hughes was not the creator of the Forward Movement, his West London Mission was for many its living symbol. When the General Committee reconvened in January 1886, it was persuaded to take a bolder approach to the needs of the capital and it was unanimous in both recommending the West End as a centre for outreach and



in requesting Hughes to take charge. His vision for the new enterprise was now being championed by men who, 12 months earlier, were either doubters or in opposition to it.

Over 3,000 religious meetings were held each year as well as Sunday Schools, temperance and mothers' meetings. There were clubs to encourage thrift and a labour bureau to give the unemployed a fresh start. It had a soup kitchen, dispensaries and employed hospital-trained nurses. There was also a crèche for the young, St Luke's hospice for the dying, and a preventative, as well as a rescue, home for street girls. In addition there were 'people's drawing rooms' for the poor, cycle clubs, rambling clubs, lectures, and legal advice was even available.

'SHOULD WE HAVE A MISSION HALL IN BELFAST?'

Was Belfast Methodism, or indeed Irish Methodism, ready for the type of 'revolution' envisaged by the Rev Hugh Price Hughes? The debate probably began with an editorial in a February 1888 edition of *The (Irish) Christian Advocate* entitled 'The Mission Hall Question?' The Editor commented that it was occupying a lot of attention at the time, especially in England, where, 'This method of Gospel propagation is largely adopted. (From the days of the Wesleys) Methodism has carried on its mission by improvising, utilising and adapting unconsecrated buildings for the purpose of preaching the Gospel.' The article went on to point out that, at St James' Hall in London, the Methodist services had to share with Christy Minstrels, popular concerts, political and other meetings – good, bad and indifferent. In the following week's paper the Editor addressed the question 'Should we have a Mission Hall in Belfast?' He concluded that, 'It would be an easier matter, once the purpose was decided on, to determine whether a central hall should be the heart of such a movement. Our own conviction is that it would be indispensable. Its influence would be much more vigorous, its resources would be more adequate, its attractiveness comparatively more potent.'

On Monday 23 April, a meeting of Belfast Ministers and Circuit Stewards was held in the school-room of Carlisle Memorial Church. Its purpose was to discuss the condition of, and prospects for, Methodism in the town, with a view to more efficient working and possible extension. A much larger meeting took place at Donegall Square Church during the following month at which a number of important resolutions were unanimously passed. As a result a Town



Donegall Square Church.

Mission Committee was inaugurated (Belfast only became a city later in the year), a guarantee fund conditionally established (£275 per annum for three years towards the support of a ministerial Town Missionary) and an urgent request made to Conference to grant such an appointment. They proposed to:

- Commence operations in different centres, and to develop them one by one, as opportunity offered, into self-containing causes.
- Secure new sites, especially at Short Strand, Castlereagh, Old Park, Grosvenor Street, and The Plains (Botanic Avenue/University Street area).
- Revive and extend the work of some of the older Mission Halls such as those at Wilton Street and Mitchell Street.

On the second day of the Irish Methodist Conference, held that year in Dublin, the Secretary read the memorial, 'From certain gentlemen in Belfast with reference to the appointment of a Minister for special mission work.' The response of Conference to the concept could at best be defined as lukewarm. Whilst it expressed sympathy with the ideal it concluded that it was unable, for technical reasons, to agree to the request. (The project had not been considered by the Belfast District Committee or by the General Committee of Management). It resolved:

1. 'That the Conference expresses its gratification at the lively interest which the members of the Committee exhibit in the extension of the work of the Methodist Church in the important town of Belfast who are interested in the establishment of a 'Belfast Town Mission', and will be prepared to consider very favourably any matured proposal which is likely to effect this object and which shall not bring any additional burden upon our Connexional Funds.'

2. 'That the Belfast District Committee be directed carefully to consider, at its meeting in May next, any plan which may be submitted to it, and to forward its recommendations upon

the subject to the General Committee of Management, which shall report to the Conference whether such plan be approved of and whether the guarantees against present or prospective claims upon Connexional Funds be judged sufficient.'

Methodism in Ireland was suffering from severe financial difficulties at the time and its governing body was simply not prepared to take a risk of having to commit funds to a speculative Belfast Mission either then or in the future. It was not an auspicious beginning.

Undaunted, the Town Mission Committee met again in August and decided to unite mission work and literature distribution and appoint two lay evangelists. Their focus would be on existing halls and also the Duncairn Gardens locality. In September John Coulter and John Adams were deputed to take responsibility for the work at Mitchell Street and Wilton Street. They visited over 7,000 homes between October and January and considerably exceeded that number during the subsequent period from February to June. In street after street they found very few families who attended Church and no evidence of evangelistic outreach by any denomination. They also encountered extreme poverty in these slum areas. A building site had earlier been secured at Duncairn and it was resolved by the Committee at a meeting in January 1889 'that £1,000 at least, be raised and expended as soon as possible on the construction of a suitable building and that it be made the centre of the present operations of the Belfast Methodist City Mission.'

Exactly one year from the start of the debate *The Christian Advocate* returned to the same subject under the headline, 'The Forward Movement in Belfast.' It asked: 'Why should there not be set on trial in Belfast a movement similar to that in London and the other large cities in England?' It continued a week later by reflecting on: 'How to reach the masses?' There were many people in Belfast who were outside the churches and untouched by evangelistic agencies. They couldn't be enticed into churches or mission halls regardless of good advertising, attractive services and able preachers. The Gospel needed to be taken to them in a simple, hearty and earnest way. The editor made some interesting remarks about existing attempts to reach out. As far as he was concerned, 'The weakness of the Salvation Army is that it does not give teaching enough. The weakness of the modern evangelist is that they harp always on one string and present only a half or a quarter



of the truth. To avoid these extremes is true wisdom.' He concluded by stating that even the famous evangelist Moody's work failed to touch the non-churchgoing portion of the population to any extent.

These articles were the precursor of a public meeting which was held in Donegall Square Church on 11 February 1889, 'In the interests of the forward movement of the City Mission.' One of the speakers, Thomas Foulkes Shillington, the treasurer of the Town Mission Committee (who was to steer the Mission's finances during its first 25 financially turbulent years), set out the position as he perceived it to be: 'A large scheme was thought to be inopportune just at present considering the amount of money recently subscribed by the Methodists of Belfast for building new churches, etc.' He then pointed out that the cost of the limited work already being undertaken would total £150 of which only £50 had been promised to date. Personally he, 'would very much have liked to see this mission having a large central hall to work from and, for instance, at Donegall Square. Perhaps that may come some day, and if the good people of Donegall Square would present it to them, they would be glad to use it; but at present they were not financially strong enough for such a large undertaking.'

Following the public meeting the Town Mission Executive asked the Trustees of the Duncairn Gardens site to obtain plans for a school building which would also be suitable for Mission work. The cost should be around the £1,000 previously discussed and it was specified that it would contain a room capable of seating not less than 500 persons (multi-purpose use is not just a feature of the 21st century). At the same time the Executive decided to send a deputation to the Rev R Crawford Johnson, then Belfast General Missionary, seeking his acquiescence in a request to Conference for his appointment to the Belfast Methodist City Mission (it had a number of names before finally settling on Belfast Central Mission)¹⁰. Having obtained his consent, approval was now sought from the District Meeting and the General Committee prior to Conference. The latter was not satisfied with the information provided and appointed a delegation to confer with the Mission Committee on a range of questions before forwarding its recommendation to the Conference which finally accepted it.

INAUGURATION OF THE BELFAST METHODIST CITY MISSION

Having been confirmed in his new role as Superintendent, the Rev Crawford

Johnson approached his task with considerable trepidation. He was heard to remark one day, 'I am appointed to a Mission in Belfast. I do not know where to begin. I have no church, no mission hall, no congregation and no money.'

The Executive Committee circulated a printed letter (15 August 1889) informing people of his appointment. Attached was a brochure containing 'facts' about attendance at public worship and an appeal to the, 'entire Methodism of the City' to subscribe to a fund amounting to at least £5,000 to enable evangelistic work to commence. It denoted the way forward which had been charted for the fledgling Mission: 'Until the large hall is built in Duncairn Gardens, Mr Johnson will hold a series of Evangelistic Services in the several Mission Halls now in use in various parts of the City. This will give him an opportunity of testing their worth, and of ascertaining where it may be necessary to extend the work.'

The Rev Crawford Johnson began the outreach in Sandy Row and, after an initial setback, found great success in the locality. The 'un-churched' from the poorer areas flocked first to the tent and then to the Circus (see Chapter 2). These people could not be ignored and, as the staff sought to minister to their spiritual needs, opportunities for new forms of outreach proliferated. Despite the huge handicap of not having a Central Hall, the new Belfast Mission found ways to function at the heart of the city, utilising a wide variety of venues, even though it had little or no finance for the task in hand.

The original plan had however, to be radically altered in response to rapidly changing circumstances which appears to

have suited the Superintendent, Crawford Johnson. Interviewed in 1894, at the time of the opening of the Grosvenor Hall, he had this to say, 'Originally our Mission was intended to serve a twofold purpose. Firstly, church extension and, secondly, the supervision of a number of small halls. These ideas, however, were not mine, this plan of campaign having been formed before I came on the scene. The multiplication of small halls was not favoured by me, for I regarded them as an unmitigated evil in a large city, except as preliminary to some more extended effort. The other part of the plan, viz, building new churches, had my hearty approval, but the funds were not forthcoming.'

The Mitchell Street Hall having been given up there was only the small hall at Wilton Street from which to operate initially. There was no fund to pay their Missionaries and so the services of John Adams, who was a single man, were dispensed with. John Coulter was to leave a year later and a new Missionary, Mr Poulton, then took charge of Wilton Street. He was given an interesting incentive to be both numerically and financially successful. His payment was to be 10 shillings (50 pence) for the first week to be reduced by one shilling a week until his work had received a fair trial (and presumably collections at the meetings were increasing). Although the evangelistic work drew praise in *Advocate* reports his tenure was not prolonged. In 1893 an opportunity presented itself to let the Hall as a school, whilst still retaining the Mission work. The school was subsequently placed under the National Board and the Mission work was transferred to the Agnes Street circuit following the 1894 Conference. It was later brought back into Mission use but that was discontinued for a second time at the end of 1899.

Behind the scenes there was some discontent about the lack of focus on the original proposal to centre operations at Duncairn. One member of the Mission Executive even ventured to suggest that this division should be handed over to the Carlisle Memorial congregation, together with the money provided for building purposes with a request that they should complete the scheme. The Mission Committee decided that this idea was inopportune and did not recommend any change in the relationship between it and Duncairn Gardens. Several years later (2nd Annual Report – 1892), the Superintendent, Crawford Johnson sought to address the wider issue: 'The Central Mission work differs from the work proposed, in that it is no part of the original scheme, but we believe it





Johnson, Robert Crawford, DD



Born on 15 June 1841 at Antrim – son of Alexander Johnson and Anne Thompson of Ardmore.

• • •

- Converted in 1858.
- Received into full connexion as a Methodist preacher in 1870.
- Representative to the British Conference 1879.
- Assistant Secretary of Conference 1880.
- Chairman of Enniskillen District 1885-87.
- Delegate to Oecumenical Conference, (Washington) 1891.
- Secretary of Conference 1893-97.
- Member of the Legal Hundred 1896-1906.
- Delegate to General Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church of America (Cleveland, Ohio) 1896.
- Honorary DD from Victoria University, Canada, in 1896.
- Chairman of the Belfast District 1898.
- Vice-President of the Irish Conference 1898.

1888	General Missionary (Belfast)	1
1889	Belfast City (Central) Mission	13
1902	Belfast Central Mission (Supernumerary)	1
1903	Belfast Central Mission	2
1905	Belfast, University Road (Supernumerary)	9

- Died at Belfast on 5 April 1914.

'The Belfast Central Mission must ever be regarded as Dr Johnson's chief and lasting monument.'

has been of Divine appointment and therefore, we could not shirk it.'

In October the Executive turned its attention to the question of a new Lagan View Hall (just across Queen's Bridge). Having started with a cottage meeting in the home of David Robson (a member of the congregation) in Laganview Street

during October 1873, it had transferred into a rented carpenter's shop during the following year. Evangelistic meetings and a Sunday School took place there but the accommodation was unsuitable and the work was only kept going with the support of the Donegall Square congregation. The Rev Samuel Hollingsworth, their Minister, reported the desire of the 'Square' quarterly meeting to build a new school and Mission Hall to the Mission Committee and received its approval. It fitted the remit of the Mission's work and the architect Mr Phillips was once again asked to draw up plans and obtain tenders.

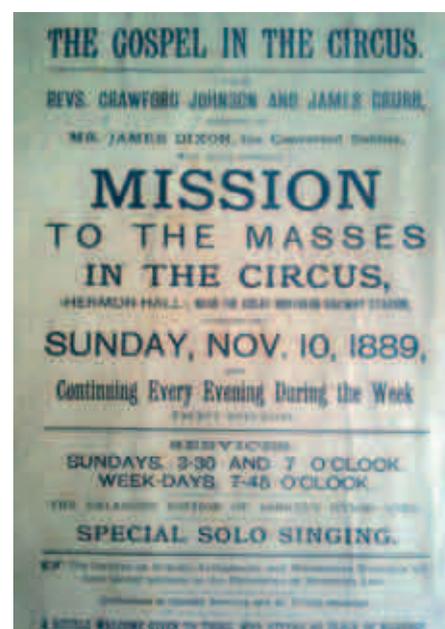
By December however, the 'Square' had offered to accept a grant from the Mission Fund and to undertake the construction scheme itself. £150 was offered (being a refund slightly in excess of donations already given to the Mission by members of Donegall Square circuit) and accepted with the condition that subscriptions would not be canvassed from Mission contributors nor would it seek support from Donegall Square members. The new Laganview Hall was built and furnished at a cost of £450. At the foundation stone-laying ceremony one speaker was at pains to point out that '(Donegall Square) would compare favourably with any other Methodist church... in regard to the mission character of her work.' Far from the 'Square' becoming the base for the new Belfast Mission, as T F Shillington had hoped, it had chosen to compete with it for the limited available resources.

The move into Ginnett's Circus (where the Grand Opera House now stands) on Sunday 10 November 1889 is regarded as the birthday of the Mission. For the first time it had a solid roof over its head and, even though it had to wait for a further five years before it was able to build its own Central Hall, the foundations were being laid for a long-term future. During November the Superintendent found time to visit England where he recruited the Rev James Grubb and obtained the services of Miss Mary Munro from Mr Clegg's Training Institution (see Chapter 2). He also took the opportunity to visit other Mission centres where he gained an understanding of the range of their activities.

At the same time the Mission Committee was able to address the question of the hall at Duncairn Gardens. At the end of July Mr Phillips the architect, having provided acceptable plans, was invited to obtain tenders for the multi-purpose building. Less than a month later 14 tenders were opened but all were found to be far beyond the proposed

outlay. The architect was then instructed to alter the plans to reduce costs and by the beginning of October a tender of £1,295 was provisionally accepted. By December the Executive had authorised the Trustees of the site to, 'Raise the balance of the money necessary for proceeding with the building as quickly as possible, by loan or otherwise...' The foundation stones, of what was called, 'The New Lecture Hall,' of the Belfast Mission, were subsequently laid on Saturday 19 April 1890 and the building was formally opened on 27 September. It was expected that this would become the model for similar efforts in other parts of the city.

In August 1892 the Committee decided to proceed with the construction of the Duncairn Gardens Church and plans were approved. Tenders were opened on 15 November and the lowest tender of £3,093 was accepted. It was thought that this would leave a debt on the combined scheme of Church and schools at around £2,000 (the total cost was in the region of £5,500). The foundation stones were laid in March 1893 and the building was opened before the close of the year. By the end of 1894 the Church was well established with 175 members and over 1,000 scholars at the schools, supervised by 28 teachers. The Mission Committee concluded that it was time for it to achieve its independence and their proposal to make Duncairn Gardens a circuit in its own right was sanctioned at the 1895 Conference. The Rev James Grubb (see Chapter 2) went to take charge of the new circuit leaving the Superintendent, the Rev Crawford Johnson alone in the Mission. The buildings were destroyed in the May 1941 blitz and were not rebuilt.





THE FIRST GROSVENOR HALL

Just when the Mission was achieving considerable success it had to face up to the possibility of closure during the winter of 1893/94. In the course of one week it was discovered that it was about to lose the use of both St George's Hall (being turned into a cafe on 18 February) and the Ulster Hall where it had moved to for Sunday services (booked for a three month exhibition from 11 March). There were no other suitable buildings in the city. Even the Circus was in use nightly, including Saturdays, and was totally unsuitable for some meetings – but it provided the only option. The workers therefore went down late on Saturday evenings and, when the performance was over, cleaned the place out, built a temporary platform, arranged chairs, and made the place fit for public worship. Some of those who attended the services in this makeshift church, many years afterwards recalled that the preacher often had to compete against the sounds of caged animals in the vicinity.

The range of venues created an almost impossible situation for the members and followers of the Mission. Morning worship was held in Linen Hall Street Hall, the men's meeting in the afternoon was in the Circus and, until deprived of its use, the evening meeting was in the Ulster Hall. The Sunday afternoon service had to be abandoned and that time was devoted to 'slum-work' and a meeting at the Custom House steps (see Chapter 2). A compelling case had been created for the construction of a Central Hall. The need had already been discussed (1891 Annual Report) and was also referred to by the Treasurer at the Anniversary meeting. It was always an



Duncairn Gardens Church and Schools.

aspiration of T F Shillington's and it was appropriate that he, in February 1893, introduced to the Mission Committee 'a conversation on matters of central premises.' Regrettably there is no Minute on record of the ensuing discussion.

As ever in those early days, action quickly followed thought. At a Mission Committee meeting on 8 December 1893 Mr Shillington, the Treasurer, reported that he had agreed to purchase a site in College Street South (now Grosvenor Road) extending to Glengall Street at a cost of £5,000. The pressures and anxieties imposed on the Rev Crawford Johnson for taking forward such a major undertaking without adequate (indeed any) funding are implicit in the documentation relating to the planning for the new Central Hall. The first estimate received from Humphreys Limited of Knightsbridge, London on 5 February 1894 was for £4,033. This was followed by weekly revisions to reduce costs and eventually the contract was awarded to Shillington's own firm of Musgrave and Co who provided the cheapest tender at £2,800. Building work commenced on 1 August and three months later the new 'Grosvenor Hall', which accommodated 2,500, was dedicated (although final works and decoration were still incomplete).

The intention was to add a minor hall to hold a further 500 but that had to be put on hold for a number of years. It, however, was only a minor impediment for the Rev Crawford Johnson. On 25 October 1894, immediately following the Dedication Service, a special meeting of the Trustees was convened. The Superintendent proposed renting the adjoining four-storey premises for the purpose of social work and

smaller meetings. The members of the Committee then went to inspect the building which was thought to be very suitable. A resolution was passed unanimously that it should be taken for a period of 12 months at a rental of £150 per annum. During their tenure it was known as 'Glengall House' and so, on that momentous day, the Mission acquired not one, but two suites of buildings.

THE ANNEXE

Glengall House, whilst invaluable for the work of the Mission, proved to be far too costly and quickly became a source of financial embarrassment. With this in mind T F Shillington recommended building on the unoccupied half of the Grosvenor Hall site as a potential solution. At the end of March 1896 the Trustees undertook to become responsible for borrowing £1,000 to meet the cost and a decision was made to proceed with the scheme. The logic was that it would be better to pay £42 10s (£42.50) interest annually rather than £150 rental. The Annexe was opened six months later on Sunday 4 October by the Rev Samuel Chadwick of Leeds. It incorporated a



The Waif School in the Annexe.



Minor Hall seating 600 which opened up to become part of the main auditorium by way of revolving shutters. This enabled over 3,000 people to be squeezed into the combined space. The new complex had many uses. The Arab children (see Chapter 3) had their tea there every Sunday afternoon and it was the venue for classes and after-meetings. It also had a large kitchen a reading room, the Ministers' vestry, a room for the Deaconesses and toilet facilities.

By the summer of 1906 the new Superintendent, R M Ker was advising the Mission Committee that it was 'absolutely necessary' to remodel the annexe. The Trustees were requested to consider this proposal whilst at the same time enlarging Grosvenor Hall to embrace the space at a lane in the back with the object of having an organ installed. A year later plans involving an expenditure of approximately £4,500 had been prepared. Dr Crawford Johnson, following the death of one of his sons, Phillip, donated a sum of money left by him to complete the organ scheme.

A FINANCIAL MILL-STONE

From the outset and for many years one issue was to dominate the agenda. Finance, or rather the extreme lack of it, was a recurring problem for the Rev Crawford Johnson and his Finance Committee. He had originally accepted the position of Superintendent on the clear understanding that the Committee would accept the inevitable financial burdens. The Treasurer and Trustees fulfilled their obligations and personally underwrote much of the outlay but the wider community failed to fully fund the ever-widening work. Conference was happy to applaud the achievements but it did not provide any financial support. For example – it would only sanction the appointment of an additional Minister on the following conditions:

- That no grant be asked towards the appointment of an unmarried Minister.
- That at the end of six years a married Minister shall be appointed without any additional charge upon the (Home Mission) Fund, save the usual grant for furniture; with this proviso, however, that if the Mission is not then fully prepared to meet this condition, it shall pay to the Home Mission Fund £40 a year until it is so prepared, so as to save the Fund from the cost of the allowance to a junior married Minister.

At the end of the 1896 Report the sense of despair in Dr Crawford Johnson's words was evident as he penned his closing sentence. 'These financial difficulties are a burden too heavy to be

borne by those who have the care and toil of the Mission and we are earnestly praying that some of those to whom God has entrusted the talent of wealth may... become sharers with us in the joy of seeking and saving the lost.' The financial position at that time was set out by the Treasurer of the Mission. The current account was in a satisfactory condition but the building account was overdrawn to the extent of £7,270. The site had cost £5,000, the large hall £3,000, the annexe £1,000 and fixtures and fittings added £500 but, to date, only £2,230 had been raised.



Grosvenor Road entrance.

In response, Mr F Megarry JP, a leading Methodist layman, put forward a proposal to enable the debt to be cleared by the time the Irish Conference met in Belfast in June 1900. This involved 530 individuals each committing to pay varying amounts for a four year period. He said, 'If you can attain that very desirable object you will place the Central Mission in a good position.' He did not however end there and went on to say: 'I hope that we shall soon see a Children's Home in Belfast. There are children about our streets, children wanting to be brought up aright instead of being a curse to the city and the nation; to be brought up to work and in future enabled to earn their own living.' He was already anticipating another of the major projects with which the Mission was to become involved (see Chapter 3).

This system of annual payments was inaugurated by John Fulton, a Mission Committee member, and supported by other benefactors. A very welcome bequest of £750 was also received during 1900 which enabled the Mission Committee to finally pay off the balance of £2,000 due for the Grosvenor Hall site. During 1902 a further effort was made to clear the remaining debt on the premises helped by a first instalment of £1,250 (out of a total grant of £2,000) from the Twentieth Century Fund. William Walker, a Liverpool Methodist, then challenged the trustees to raise a further £2,000 by offering to contribute the final balance of £1,000 if they succeeded. The Central Hall debt extinction scheme was brought to a successful conclusion in March 1903.

DEATHS OF DR R CRAWFORD JOHNSON AND T F SHILLINGTON

The two men who did most to shape the embryonic Mission died early in April 1914 within three days of one another, having both committed themselves to its work for a span of 25 years. The combined skills of the evangelist and the businessman had been required to initiate and establish the Belfast Central Mission and build the first Grosvenor Hall. The Superintendent, Dr Crawford Johnson, was enthusiastic, impulsive, eloquent and always coming up with new ideas, whilst T F Shillington, the treasurer, was quiet, reticent, calculating and always wanting to see the end from the beginning. Unfortunately ill health, almost certainly induced by the associated workload and pressure, limited Crawford Johnson's active work to 15 years of ceaseless toil although he continued to preach throughout his retirement years. T F Shillington, who was probably the first person to have a vision of a Methodist Mission at the heart of Belfast, proved to be a wise counsellor for almost a quarter of a century.

Responsibility for the future of the Mission had already passed on to the Rev R M Ker in 1905 (see Chapter 3) and although these deaths signified the end of an era they had minimal impact on the continuity of the work.





CHAPTER 2

Conversions



Rev Crawford Johnson.

When the Belfast Town Mission was inaugurated, Ulster Protestantism still had its memories of the religious fervour stirred up by the 1859 Revival and

lived with the expectancy that another 'outpouring of the Spirit' would resolve the moral and social problems of the age.

The Rev Crawford Johnson was first and foremost, an evangelist. Extracts from the obituary tributes paid after his death clearly confirmed this: 'His consciousness of his own relationship with his Lord and Master was very real... The influences of the '59 Revival lingered with him all his days and those who heard him speak knew how often his theme was personal consecration... His interest in the Holiness Movement revealed how much he desired to be like Christ... Loving his God, he was intensely interested in the uplifting of his fellow-men... Challenged to reach out to the non-churchgoing masses of Belfast he sought to follow in his Lord's footsteps, when he had sorrow for the city, and embarked on the culmination of his life's work at the Central Mission.'

His preaching emphasised the privilege and possibility of entire sanctification, never an entirely popular doctrine even among Methodists. The theology can perhaps be recognised in the introductory remarks he delivered at the very first service in Ginnett's Circus. He spoke about his recent visit to the Keswick Convention¹. Having quoted a statement attributed to Father Ignatius (a Church of England monk) 'Don't take half a Christ, take a whole Christ' he went on to point out that many wanted to be saved from hell rather than sin. 'Paul had three wishes. He wanted to be in Christ; to be with Christ; and to be like Christ. Many want to be in Christ here in order that they may be with Christ bye and bye but they have no special ambition to be like Christ, and yet what is Christianity if it is not likeness to Jesus Christ?'

His focus was very evident in the choice of the evangelistic team that he assembled to join him in his task. History has demonstrated that he possessed the uncanny ability to find the right people



Rev James Grubb.



James Dixon.



Mary Munro.

for the job in hand and the willpower to insist on having them. The Rev James Grubb was a case in point – he was an Englishman who had written, whilst a theological student at Richmond College, to ask if the Rev Johnson could utilise his services on the Enniskillen circuit during the 1888 summer holidays. The offer was accepted and the 'boy preacher' (he was then little more than a teenager) won his way into the hearts of the congregations in Enniskillen's Darling Street Church. The older man recognised his undoubted talents and that autumn invited him to come over to help in the establishment of a special mission in Belfast but Grubb declined the offer. He was however to discover that Crawford Johnson was not to be denied and later wrote:

'When, in June 1889, he (the Rev Johnson) had undertaken the work he insisted on having a colleague, and he came to Richmond to insist on having me. It was impossible he should be withstood. Iron-willed, masterful, resolute, determined, he had his way. As I was to learn he usually did and we knelt together in my study at Richmond to give ourselves to God, and to one of the highest, if hardest, pieces of work the Church of Christ, anywhere, ever undertook.'

The third member of the team was James Dixon with whom the Rev Crawford Johnson had already worked during several of his crusades as a General Missionary. Born in County Antrim about 1860, he had been converted at Aldershot whilst serving with the 2nd Highland Light Infantry prior to embarkation for Egypt in 1882. He was wounded in the left arm at the Battle of Tel-el-Kebir and had to have it amputated a few days later.

On his return to England he received his campaign medal personally from Queen Victoria. He was later to write a book about his war experiences, entitled *With Christ at the Front*² and regularly delivered a popular lecture on the same topic. The Superintendent advertised him in early Mission literature as 'The Soldier Evangelist' and wrote of his attributes: 'Physique accounts for something in a preacher and his massive figure gives you the idea of manliness and strength. If Brother Dixon has not the rhetoric of the schools, he has the tongue of fire, the very eloquence of God.'

Completing the line-up was Mary Munro, a young lady from Glasgow, who was only about 22 years of age when she arrived in Belfast. She appears not to have been employed in the more familiar role of a 'mission sister'. The Salvation Army had shown what could be accomplished by young women when wholly set apart for Christian service and so George Clegg, a Halifax Methodist, decided to devote a proportion of his personal wealth to setting up a Female Evangelist Home there (it was the predecessor of Cliff College). The Superintendent was therefore, very much in the vanguard of British Methodist thinking on equality issues by having the foresight to recruit a female evangelist/visitor (John Wesley had always encouraged those females who had an 'extraordinary call' but, following his death, the Irish Methodist Conference had decided that 'it is contrary both to scripture and to prudence that women should preach or should exhort in public'). The services of Miss Munro were initially provided free to the new Belfast Mission by Mr Clegg.



THE WORK BEGINS

In April 1889 the Town Mission Committee had determined to secure the use of a large tent, to begin services in Duncairn Gardens at the end of June, but that idea didn't come immediately to fruition.

The plans which had been produced for a new building there were at the same time referred back to a sub-committee to make necessary revisions to bring them within the original estimate. Attending his first City Mission Executive at the end of July, the Rev Johnson had to report that no further use could be obtained of the rooms in Duncairn House, where meetings had previously been held, and that it had proved impossible to obtain another temporary hall in the neighbourhood.

He went on to propose that, until the Hall was built, he would hold missions around the city. It may have been Divine guidance, or more probably the prompting of T F Shillington, its Treasurer, that subsequently moved the focus of the Mission closer to the centre of the city.

Two weeks of special evangelistic services in Sandy Row Church at the beginning of September produced packed congregations drawn from regular churchgoers but caused the disappointed Superintendent to comment that: 'As an effort to reach the lapsed masses the mission was a total failure.' He therefore moved away from the ecclesiastical setting and put into action the idea, previously discussed, of using a tent. It was arranged that one owned by the General Mission (available now because its summer schedule of crusades around the Ulster countryside had been completed) would be pitched on brickfields in Hunter Street. Its arrival attracted the local children who passed on the news to their parents and when services commenced on the 18th of the month, the 'un-churched' crowded



The tent in Hunter Street.

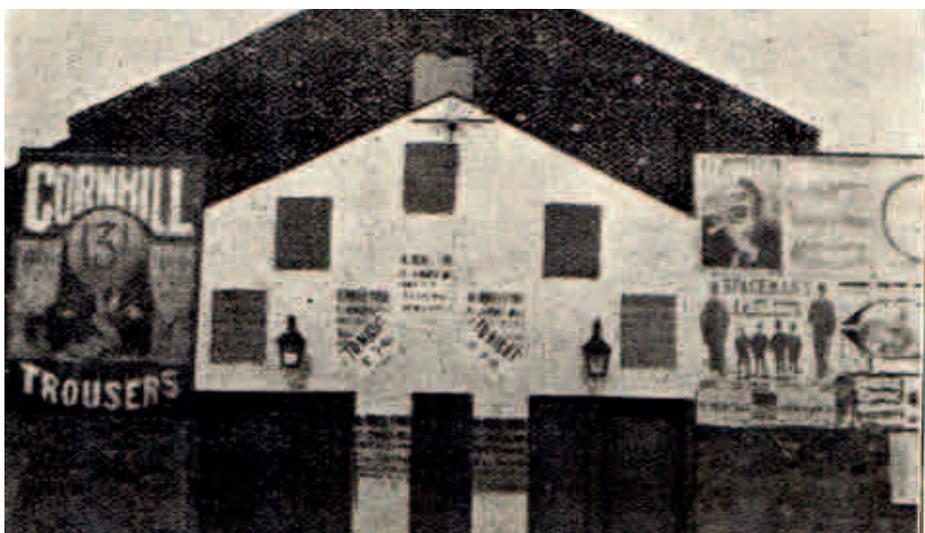
into the canvas tabernacle. Afternoon meetings were added for women and also for the children. Many lives were changed (a newspaper report claimed 94 conversions) and the nucleus of a congregation created. Among the early converts in the tent was John Young who went on to fill many key roles in the developing life of the Mission.

Since winter storms were threatening the tent, services were moved into Hermon Hall in Great Victoria Street. This was a masterstroke! It was the Belfast base for the well-known Ginnett's Circus, and enabled the Superintendent, always one to maximise every publicity opportunity, to promote the 'Gospel in the Circus' and the 'Mission to the Masses in the Circus.' At the opening services on Sunday 10 November 1889 there were about 700 present in the afternoon. In the evening the Hall was packed, with a congregation numbering over 1,900, necessitating an overflow meeting which was held on the street outside. Services continued on every weeknight except Saturdays. *The Christian Advocate*

recorded that, 'The aim of the Missioners is synonymous with the purpose of the annual gathering at Keswick – namely the deepening of the spiritual life.'

The *Advocate* reported another development on 30 November which applied the combined thinking behind West London Mission's successful Saturday night concerts and their 'Happy Sunday Evening' gospel services to the acute problems of Belfast on a Saturday night. It was, 'Our first experiment in the way of trying to provide, on the devil's busiest night, when he holds so many "at homes" a happy evening for the people. We are extremely anxious that these should not consist of merely pleasing entertainments. We do not understand our mission to be that of amusing the unconverted, but we hope in these gatherings by cheerful singing and bright music, and happy testimonies to God's saving power, homely talks, and interesting readings, to carry joy and gladness into many a heart, causing the sorrow and sadness of sin to flee away.' It was a format which was to stand the Mission in good stead for very many years until replaced by the 'Film Service' (see Chapter 5) which sought to fulfil a similar role.

Sunday 1 December 1889 was one of great thanksgiving and rejoicing for the Mission when a traditional Methodist class-meeting took place in Hermon Hall for the first time. The young converts (although many were not young in years) told of the great things the Lord had done for them. It was a very joyful gathering and the occasion denoted the beginning of what would later become known as the Grosvenor Hall congregation. This ever-growing flock was however to remain homeless for the next five years earning them the description of 'ecclesiastical gypsies' from the Rev Crawford Johnson. They moved around the main halls of the city not knowing from week to week



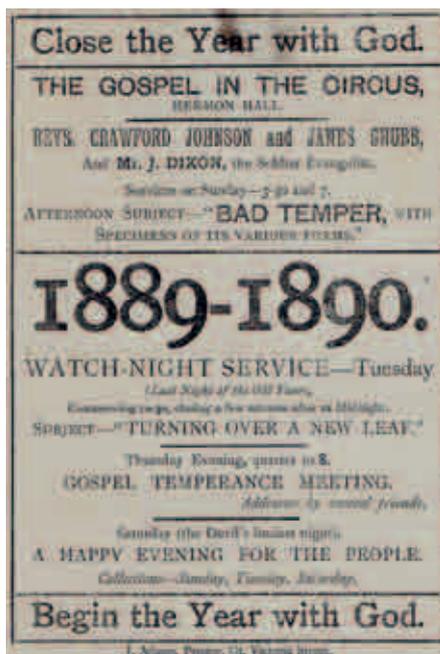
Hermon Hall, the home of Ginnett's Circus.



where they might be worshipping and had to rely on newspaper advertisements or the handbills which promoted the weekend services to inform them of the latest venue.

By the start of 1890 the Mission had attained both substance and structure despite the lack of a permanent home. On Sundays there were now three meetings in Hermon Hall with services at 3.30pm and 7.00pm and one especially for boys at 5.30pm. An evangelistic service was held on Thursdays at 7.45pm and on Saturday were the 'Happy Evenings for the People.' Those who were thinking of coming along to any of the meetings were advised that there would be 'a seat, hymn book, and a hearty welcome' awaiting them and there would only be 'collections' on Saturdays and Sundays. Congregations continued to be exceptionally large especially on Sunday evenings when they numbered close to 2,000 although there were occasional reports of depleted attendances, 'Unmistakably affected by stormy weather and the prevailing sickness.'

The return of the proprietors of the Circus necessitated the Mission's first change of venue and on 9 February it relocated to St George's Hall in High Street. The work at Hermon Hall ended with a full week of meetings for the promotion of Christian Holiness. The attendance at the closing service was similar to the opening one and the stewards had, 'Against a continuous stream of people, to shut the doors and turn many away.' The Executive next rented a large room in Linen Hall Street (an old dancing room) in which



to hold weeknight meetings. The move to High Street enabled Mission workers to participate in the open-air meeting at the Custom House steps supporting those who had devoted themselves to this work for many years (T A Fullerton, a prominent lay member of the Mission Committee, and the Rev John White of the Congregational Church, had established it at least as far back as 1868). They then processed to their own 4.00pm service in St George's Hall encouraging many of the 'steps' audience to follow them there. The new neighbourhood also brought them into contact with hundreds of young men and women, 'apparently without aim or purpose, wandering the streets.'

Fine tuning of the Mission's strategies for evangelism was taking place on an almost daily basis and new methods of outreach were constantly devised:

- A monthly prayer meeting on Sunday mornings.
- Fellowship classes on Tuesday evenings at Linen Hall Street (with over 200 attending).
- A monthly prayer meeting for young men on the first Monday of every month.
- A system to ensure the immediate visitation of 'enquirers' (those desiring salvation).
- A choir built up under the leadership of Charles McDermott.
- A Mr Cotter was appointed Temperance Secretary in which role he recorded pledges of abstinence.
- Posters announcing meetings were put up in the Belfast hotels to inform commercial travellers.
- A Mr Macaulay (one of the workers) began a fellowship group at

home in Joy Street on Monday evenings.

- Evangelistic services were held for six nights in Carlisle Memorial Lecture Hall at the beginning of April.
- A Tea Meeting – a Victorian Methodist institution – was held on Good Friday, 1890 with 250 present.
- Weekly meetings for young women were established at Linen Hall Street.
- An 'Out and Out' Band was formed for those 'desiring holiness and God' – nearly all its members were Mission converts

On 14 March, following consultations with the officials of Frederick Street Circuit, services commenced at Dock Street Hall (above the Sailors' Institute) which had been offered to the Mission free of charge. It had been noticed that quite a few of the addresses taken at the after-meetings on Sunday evenings were from the 'docks' area and this was seen as a way of reaching out to these enquirers. Using the Custom House steps model an open-air service was normally held in one of the adjacent streets before the workers 'sang their way' towards the hall. It was also seen as being close to Duncairn and could therefore serve as a 'feeder' for the new church once it had been built.

The open-air meetings during the summer months, which were an integral part of the Mission calendar for many years, began for the first time on Saturday 24 May 1890 (appropriately on the anniversary of John Wesley's conversion experience) at Queen's Bridge. The occasion was not uneventful: the wagon being used by the Mission as a platform was drawn up opposite to the





Custom House steps.

landing stage for the Bangor boats and a large number of workers and friends assembled there at 7.00pm. Whilst the Rev James Grubb was preaching, some 'representatives of the law' appeared and requested them to 'move on.' After enquiries, it transpired that the Harbour Commissioners had prohibited meetings of any kind there and so they had to submit to eviction. That proved however, to be a wonderful advertisement. There were many willing hands available to roll the 'platform' over to the other side (Sandy Quay) and the unusual spectacle of preacher, organist, harmonium and pulpit being wheeled across the road attracted an immense congregation.

At the end of his first year at the Mission, the Superintendent articulated the principles he had formulated to a well-attended Conference breakfast meeting. He believed that the Mission and circuit work complimented one another: 'In the history of Methodism there were four stages – the evangelical, ecclesiastical, educational and philanthropic – and all were necessary to the perfection of the body. Those who were engaged in specifically evangelistic work were going back to first principles:

- Preach the 'old, old story of the cross' and not a modern or mutated Gospel.
- Apply the principle of adaption – there were new methods but still the same old Gospel.

- Make every convert a missionary – a worker – all at it – always at it. Teach every convert that a Christian is saved to serve.

- Promote the use of Christian literature.

- Encourage systematic and proportionate giving (follow Wesley's teaching, "Make all you can, save all you can, and give all you can").'

One of the principles set out by the Rev Johnson was that converts were 'saved to serve' and the early reports demonstrate that the new Christians quickly became Mission workers:

'We have been greatly encouraged by the readiness with which the young men speak or pray or steward and in every way give us assistance. We are gathering around us, by the blessing of God, a noble band of workers and they have many and varied offices to fill. Some on Saturday evenings become 'special constables' and keep the pathway clear: some are turned into 'sandwich men' and carry about our notice boards: while others have to take charge of some poor drunkard who is interrupting the service, sell our literature and distribute hymn sheets and handbills. Nor must it be imagined that our sisters are any less backward in rendering their efficient aid. During the past few Sundays they have distributed hundreds of tracts around the docks and the way they stand round us in the open-air services in rain, wind and sunshine is simply delightful.'

BILLY SPENCE

Billy Spence, undoubtedly the best known of the early Mission converts, was awakened to his need for salvation at the Custom House steps one Sunday afternoon as the Rev James Grubb was preaching – he was generally acknowledged to be an inspirational orator. On one occasion, when the Rev Crawford Johnson and James Dixon (the 'Soldier Evangelist') were talking about the work, the Superintendent commented, 'Brother Dixon, Mr Grubb has got the ear of the people and we must stand behind him and do all we can for him so that he may have leisure and opportunity to prepare his messages.' That particular sermon led to Billy's conversion as the following account illustrates:



When he was drunk Billy Spence had often behaved like a man possessed. The police were afraid of him and his encounters with them were terrifying. It took three or four of them to get him into the police station. He first told the story of his conversion, using his own vernacular, at an open-air meeting in Lisburn:

'Last Easter (1890) was a year I had a spree a whole week. My wife had to laive the house, and ivery night she had to come down to watch for fear o' me settin' fire to the house. I took things out of the house and drunk them: and three weeks after Easter I took a careless 'dander' down round the Custom-House Steps, thinkin nothin' about praichin' or onything else, only badness, for I didn't go to church or meetin', only when I was on the militia. When I did go then, it did me no good. I took a fancy to Mr Grubb. I thought he was a great political spaker, and my attention was called to him while he was spakin', and I was 'juking' about for fear o' my mates would see me outside the crowd; but afore long I forgot myself, and thought there was only me and Mr Grubb there, and ivery word went home to me; at last, he said he wished he could get men and women to study ten minutes about their latter end. Somebody asked if any were anxious to come up and speak to them. I did not go up, but God went home with me.

I got no paice, studyin' about my latter end. It wrought on me three days. The first night I waited till my wife had gone up to bed and then I kneeled in the kitchen to pray. I was ashamed for fear she might see me, but when I was in bed, I had to jump out 'fornenst' her and pray. On the middle of the fourth day,

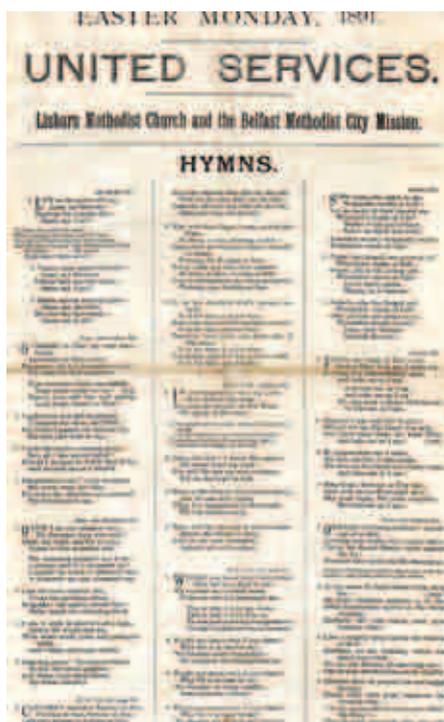


I thought I was just going down to hell, and I went down into the scuttle-hole of the 'ould scow' (a flat-bottomed boat) and I prayed the Lord Jesus to have mercy on my soul, and that minute I felt the hands going down my back, and taking away the burden. I jumped up praising God, and went up again on my tiptoes. I used to curse and swear, but now I felt a hand across my throat preventing me, and I asked the Lord to deliver me from anger.

And what – I am a gintleman now, and a son of God, a prince. Before I was converted, when I was comin' along the street in which I lived, the people used to say," here comes that blackguard Spence," but now they say, "Here comes Mr Spence." Why, the Lord has made a gintleman of me. Afore I was converted I couldn't read a word, but the Almighty has been larnin' me and now I can read my Testament.'

He became anxious for the conversion of his relatives, especially his wife, Mary Ann. She had remained devoted to him even in his degenerate days and marvelled at the change but couldn't understand it. She only knew he was the same – yet not the same – man he had been. She happily prepared their tiny kitchen for Saturday night and Sunday morning prayer meetings and their home became like a little gospel hall. Soon Mary Ann was also converted through a simple conversation with the Rev James Grubb in their home. She was never a vocal believer but always a true one.

Billy Spence first attempted to testify in public on Easter Monday 1891 when a group from the Mission travelled to



Gospel Mission Car – PEACE (© methodist.org.uk).

Lisburn to join with the Methodists there for united services. He wore a huge muffler round his throat, had on a pair of white moleskin trousers which smelt most offensively of mud from the 'scow' and spluttered as he tried to speak. Being in close proximity to him was not a pleasant experience. When he was converted he could neither read nor write but Mary Ann 'larned' him. One Sunday afternoon at the Custom House steps a vast congregation stood spellbound as it watched him, letter by letter spell through the words of John 1, verse 12.

He could not be silenced on the matter of his great salvation and after a few years became a full-time evangelist. Ministers of all denominations welcomed him as a colleague. Calls for his ministry came from all parts of the British Isles and twice he crossed the Atlantic to labour in the United States and Canada. It was said that in the Cooke Presbyterian Church in Toronto a work was done, 'Unequalled since the days of Moody.' Thirty years of incessant and strenuous labours in tents and halls and on street corners however wore him out with exhaustion which affected his throat and chest. He died after a brief illness early in 1924³.

THE GOSPEL CAR – 'PEACE'

The Mission utilised the relatively new concept of the 'Gospel Car' for evangelistic outreach (started in England when Mr F B Young built one which he called 'Faith' in 1886). Each was akin to a Romany caravan and was equipped for daily living and overnight sleeping. There was a stock of religious books for sale and a little library of theology and exposition for the use of the Missioners. The men in

charge were all accredited local preachers and their duties included visiting in an area and selling their books. An American organ was used to lead the singing at their meetings. A Captain McFee offered to pay half the cost of a fourth car on condition that it would be sent to the North of Ireland and 'Peace' subsequently arrived in Belfast, along with its two missionaries, during April 1892. The Superintendent the Rev Crawford Johnson oversaw this work in addition to his other responsibilities. The car was officially unveiled at Carlisle Circus on Saturday evening, 16 April and its first outing was to Bangor with the Belfast Central Mission workers on Easter Monday.

THE WORK CONTINUES TO DEVELOP BUT TAKES ITS TOLL

During the winter months of 1893 a summary of the punishing Sunday schedule for both staff and workers was:

- Early-morning Fellowship Meeting followed by the service in Linen Hall Street Hall.
- Visitation and meetings in the slums during the afternoon.
- The service at the Custom House steps followed by a parade and open-air march.
- The Arabs' meeting and 'tea'.
- Meeting for working men in St George's Hall.
- Provision of tea for the Grosvenor Hall workers by Mrs Crawford Johnson.
- A service in the Ulster Hall followed by an after-meeting for 'enquirers'.

The incessant and exhausting demands of the challenge exacted an enormous personal toll. After only three



months of the Mission, *The Christian Advocate* was reporting on 'Mr Johnson's intention to preach in the evening' (at the Circus) 'but he found himself scarcely equal to the task' and a substitute had to be found at short notice. A few weeks later however, the City Mission report in the *Advocate* was pointing out that, 'The clear and perpetual revelation so constantly and persistently made to us, of the imperative necessity for such an effort as this, forbids our restraining or slackening anything which will tend to strengthen and make it still more effectual.' This statement brings to mind the phenomenon of 'worn-out preachers' which was closely associated with the earliest days of Methodism. Within a few years the Superintendent, the Rev James Grubb and Mary Munro had all suffered from serious breakdowns in health.

From the outset the 'Happy Evenings for the People' attracted a lot of criticism from those who perceived them to be merely providing entertainment. The actual aim was to respond to the reality that on Saturday evenings thousands of young people with nothing to do wandered the streets and were liable to get into mischief. The Mission believed that, if it provided, 'An attractive, elevating and educational programme' (cinematograph subjects included 'wireless telegraphy, descriptive lectures on Rome, Switzerland, etc) for them, it would be doing some good. Each evening was opened and closed with prayer and opportunities to evangelise were never overlooked. Many people were first introduced to the Mission on a Saturday night and returned again on the

following day. The 'Happy Evenings' were to continue for over 50 years although the programme had to be adjusted regularly to react to the alternative entertainments becoming available in the city (In 1911, for example, the Committee was informed that attendances had fallen off considerably due to the increased numbers of cinematograph halls).

OTHER CENTRES OF WORK

Woodvale Hall was opened in Cambrai Street during 1896. Initially the Belfast Central Mission provided moral support and pulpit interchange but did not accept financial responsibility. In the autumn of 1897 the Superintendent reported that, 'Owing to painful local circumstances (which were not specified) he had had to temporarily close the Hall.' At a later meeting he confirmed that it was still closed, 'and that it would be impossible for the present Grosvenor Hall staff to work it.' It was re-opened in 1898 by the Rev William Maguire.

The Falls Road Church in Divis Street, together with the Church and school at Andersonstown, also came under the remit of the Mission for a short period. In March 1904 the Committee was asked to undertake responsibility for the work there, which was close to a community interface and was becoming more and more difficult. For two years the Rev John N Spence, the junior minister on the circuit, assisted by a Deaconess, focused on it but the results were disappointing. In June 1906 a formal request was made to the Methodist Conference to relieve it of a responsibility which 'Kept two of our best workers there while so many fields are white unto harvest. Had the same amount

of concentration been available in Avenue Hall (Garfield Street) last winter the nucleus of a new congregation would have been easily formed.' It was transferred to the Agnes Street circuit.

MIDNIGHT MEETINGS

Towards the end of the century yet another form of outreach was employed and one drunkard was heard to remark, 'Why can't you people be content with preaching the Gospel on Sunday... without coming out after us at this hour of the night?' He was part of a midnight audience one Saturday night, or rather Sunday morning, in Wilson Street Mission Hall (Brown Square). An article in *The Irish Methodist Church Record* conjured up a vivid word picture of one such evening:

'We left Grosvenor Hall shortly before eleven o'clock accompanied by a band of 40 workers... As we marched through Royal Avenue... "Oh! For a thousand tongues to sing" could be heard echoing and re-echoing through the streets. On through North Street we passed and when we reached Peter's Hill our torches were lighted, and we made ready for an attack on the Shankill Road... After proceeding for some length... we went to our Mission Hall in Wilson Street. When our audience is seated and we have time to look round upon them, what a proof of the power of Christianity is evidenced. Here were workers clear-brained, clear-eyed; here were men bleary-eyed, besotted and befogged through the fumes of drink. Our service began just as any other service would begin. There was no difficulty in inducing the victims of alcohol to join in our opening hymn; they joined, whether they knew it or not; but many of them



Open air meeting in Hill Street.



seem to have heard it before in their boyhood days, and already the tears were coming to their eyes at the memory of the past... The great majority of them were very reverent and orderly, and listened as well as they possibly could... When an appeal was made to them to sign the pledge, some 18 responded. The following Sunday we were more than glad to see some of those... come into our services in Grosvenor Hall.'

CRITICS OF THE MISSION

The Rev Crawford Johnson was never without his fault-finders and detractors. Towards the end of his active ministry he wrote in the *Grosvenor Hall Monthly* (January 1901).

'We have two classes of critics, but we find that argument is often a work of supererogation (beyond the call of duty), because critics, like microbes, kill each other. One set of these gentlemen in visiting Grosvenor Hall and seeing the devotion, reverence, and enthusiasm of 2,000 worshippers, immediately exclaim – "Oh, you are not getting at the right class of people; these folk are quite too respectable for a mission hall." They expect to see a motley group of tramps, and bring a plentiful supply of Eau de Cologne for use. Yes, dear friends, but you did not see our converts in the rough. We have another set of detractors who taunt us with the low status of our members. When one of our workers invited a woman to come to Grosvenor Hall, she tartly replied "No! Indeed I won't; you are nothing but a parcel of gather-ups there." A well-known divine spoke in the same strain in warning people to avoid our precincts, and said that we only preached "a gospel fit for corner boys and the lapsed masses of society." Hallelujah!



NED HOWARD

Ned Howard was another name which ranked alongside Billy Spence in the annals of Mission converts. Ned also grew up on the Shankill Road but later moved to East Belfast. As

a young man he was jovial, irresponsible and had a special talent for 'singing and playing the fool.' In due course he fell in love with a girl who was much given to attending religious services. He and his mates followed her to Salvation Army meetings. As the friendship deepened they went together to the Grosvenor Hall on Sunday evenings like many young



'Sleeping it off!'

couples, but his only object in going was to please her. When they married and settled down they got out of the way of attending any church. Ned was an iron-turner and they were comfortable and 'well-to-do'. He began however to drink heavily and things quickly went from bad to worse.

On the Sunday morning after Easter 1905 he tasted whiskey for the last time. He was standing at the corner of Dee Street... 'Drink-sodden, miserable, no money, health shattered and head throbbing.' He went home to sleep off the effects but woke from his drunken slumber in the early hours and lay until morning in a fit of mental agony. He described it later, 'All my sins came up before me as plain as if they had been chalked on a blackboard.' He was to spend the next two days in anguish. He finally decided that his Christian workmates would try to help him and left home at 5.00 in the morning, 'Crying all the way to the Queen's Island, seeking peace, and not knowing where to find it.' He got in early. The night-shift men were still on. He sat down beside a religious machine man and told him his story but got no help. Ned waited on for the day shift, looking out anxiously for Davy Walsh, a staunch supporter of the Grosvenor Hall. Davy sat down beside him, produced a well-worn Bible, and made Ned repeat over and over again, 'For God so loved Ned Howard...' but he was unable to comprehend the 'good news'. Finally he decided to take God at his word but he still had no peace of mind.

His description of his conversion could rank alongside John Wesley's account of his 'Aldersgate' experience: At 8.20am Ned left the engine shop, his misery so great that he could no longer disguise it, and made his way homeward across Victoria Park. At precisely twenty five past eight...

'As I passed Swan's dining-rooms I cried from the bottom of a broken heart

for God to be merciful to me a sinner. That moment I yielded my all, and the great burden of sin rolled away, and a peace and joy came into my life, and then and there I was a new creature in Christ Jesus my Lord. The old desires at that moment were taken away, and, thank God, seven years have passed away and I never had the least desire to go back to the old habits again; and new desires to be amongst God's people took place, and I have been found amongst them ever since, the very last place that ever I thought I'd be.'

His first impulse was to go home and tell his wife. Afterwards he hurried back to work to spread the news in his workplace which caused a great deal of excitement and derision but he faced it all calm and confident in his new-found strength. He threw in his lot with the Grosvenor Hall and became one of the best known of its workers.

Soon after his conversion Ned began to testify and it was quickly realised that he possessed more than usual gifts. Wherever he spoke large crowds gathered. He was, for twenty years, the principal speaker at the Custom House steps and conducted special missions in Belfast and many other centres. Ned was never happier than when he was pleading for, or working with, the children who came into contact with the Mission. In his later years he also took prime responsibility for its outreach to men among whom his own personal experiences gave him a wonderful power of appeal.

EVANGELISTIC MISSIONS

In the 1897 Annual Report, the Superintendent (by then Dr Crawford Johnson) wrote about the twofold work of the Mission – evangelistic and social – but emphasised, as he had always done, that the first of these was, 'Primary and paramount.' ... 'You may change the environment and not change the man; but if you change the man you will soon change his environment also.' Once the Grosvenor Hall had been built, it became the venue for a series of Evangelistic Missions in pursuit of this aim (see examples of handbills on page 18). Many of the leading evangelists of the age spoke from its platform including:

1895 Mr O'Toole:

1897 The Rev C H Yatman: New York – Minister of US Episcopal Church. (Return visits in 1900; 1901).

1898 The Rev Thomas Waugh:

1898 Dick Hendry: 'The Converted Carter.' (Return visit in 1908).

1901 Father Connellan: A regular evangelist and preacher in Grosvenor Hall.

1902 Simultaneous Mission: Held in conjunction with the Twentieth Century



EVANGELISTIC SERVICES
 BROWN'S SQUARE,
BILLY SPENCE
 STAFF of CENTRAL MISSION,
Commencing Sunday Evg., 27th July, at 8-30
 WEEK-NIGHTS: Wednesday 8-10
 SUNDAY EVENING: 8-10
EVERYONE WELCOME.

Happy Evening to People, Grosvenor Hall
BELFAST.
 RETURNED, 10 DECEMBER, 1901.

Mr. YATMAN'S MISSION
GROSVENOR HALL.
EVERYONE WELCOME!

GROSVENOR HALL.
SPECIAL EVANGELISTIC MISSION,
 December 12th to 20th.
 MR. W. R. LANE (London)
 SUNDAYS - 3-30 & 7 p.m.
 WEEK-NIGHTS 8 o'clock.
 You are Cordially Invited,
 Sunday, 19th December, 3-30 p.m.
 MEETING FOR MEN ONLY.

Special Mission.
Mr. ADAM BARR
 (THE SOURCE EVANGELIST)
 AND GROSVENOR HALL WORKERS.
In the Tent, Matilda Street,
 Commencing Sunday, 3rd May.
 Sunday Evenings, 8-15
 Week Nights (except Wednesday), 8-10

GROSVENOR HALL.

Mr. W. Pearson
 THE WASHINGTON
 TEMPERANCE MISSION.
 Temperance Mission,
 In THE GROSVENOR HALL.
 SUNDAY, 26th Sept at 3-30 & 7
 SUNDAY EVENING: "Why do Men Drink?"
 SUNDAY, 3rd OCTOBER: "The Fight and the Prize"


REV. J. GRANGE BENNETT
 MR. T. ARMON JONES, R.A.M.
 (Just Married)

UNITED
 Evangelistic Mission,
 SERVICES
Grosvenor Hall
 Donegall Square Church,
Commencing January 24th, 1904
REV. J. GRANGE BENNETT
MR. T. ARMON JONES, R.A.M.
 (Just Married)

The Sisters Oliphant
 (OF CHICAGO).

 YOU ARE AT PRESENT CONDUCTING A MISSION

GREAT TEMPERANCE MISSION.
 TITLES OF ADDRESSES
By Rev. L. M. ISITT
 GROSVENOR HALL, Belfast, April 6th to 12th.

CONNELLAN MISSION II
Grosvenor Hall
(20th--27th).
 Sunday, 3-30—"Rome's Miracles
 the cause of
 Infidelity."
 Monday, 5—"A Week's Mission in
 Limerick."
 Tuesday, 6—"Confession."
 Wednesday, 7—"Mass."
 Thursday, 8—"Purgatory."
 Friday, 9—"Salvation without
 money."
 Saturday, 10—"The Christian Preach-
 hood."
EVERYONE WELCOME.

COME TO
HENRY-HEMMINGER
MISSION
GROSVENOR HALL,
 Every Night this Week at 8.
 UNITED CHURCH of 1000 Tenants will give a
 Special Service at 7.30.
REMEMBER!
DR. HENRY'S BIBLE READINGS
 DONEGALL SQUARE CHURCH,
 Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday.
CHILDREN'S SERVICES
 EVERY SUNDAY

GROSVENOR HALL.
 EVANGELISTIC MISSION.
Mr. CHARLIE ROSS
 Ex-Bookie and Gambler,
 Begins SUNDAY, 12th October, 1913.
 SUNDAYS—11-30, 1-30, and 7. WEEK-NIGHTS—8.
SOLOS BY MISS ROSS.
Mr. Ross wants YOU to Come!
The "Dread" of Cos, Potters, & Donegal Street

Just to let you know that
Mrs. Booth-Clibborn
 (Miss Daughter of General Booth)
BELFAST

MISSION
GROSVENOR HALL
 GOSWELL STREET, BELFAST.
 Mrs. BOOTH-CLIBBORN.
 On 19th March, 1911.

GROSVENOR HALL.
 EVANGELISTIC MISSION
 CONDUCTED BY
GIPSY SMITH
 Sunday, 26th May at 3-30 and 7 p.m. Week Evenings at 8.
COME AND BRING A FRIEND WITH YOU.

GROSVENOR HALL.
 Saturday, 22nd Sept. at 7-30
 SUNDAY, 6-30 & 7.
 ANOTHER
Special Week-end Visitation

Return Visit of
Rev. J. Grange Bennett
GROSVENOR HALL,
 SERVICES
SUNDAY, 26th JULY,
 11-30 a.m. and 7 p.m.
 A LECTURE—
MONDAY, 27th JULY, at 8 p.m.,
**"100,000 Miles through Britain in
 Christ's Service."**
ADMISSION FREE. COLLECTION.

Special Services in Tent
 (Corner of Townsend Street and Malpas Street),
 Harrogate—
DICK HENDRY,
 The Converted Carter,
 AND
GROSVENOR HALL WORKERS.
 Sundays, 8-30. Week-nights (except Wednesdays), 8.
EVERYBODY WELCOME.

CHOOSE THE HIGHEST.
 TO
 WOMEN,
 BY
 SISTER
JEANIE BANKS,
 IN
GROSVENOR HALL.

Fisk Jubilee Singers' Trio
 The Programme will include Glee,
 Trio, Solo, Musical Sketches,
 and Medley.
 UP-TO-DATE
 Cinematograph
 Pictures 24, 34

Grosvenor Hall,
 GROSVENOR ROAD.
Ten Days' Mission
JOSIAH NIX
 COMMENCING
 Sunday, 18th Sept., 1904.
 SUNDAY, 11-30, 3-30, and 7.
 WEEKDAYS, 8 p.m.
 THE MISSIONER'S LETTER.
 JOSIAH NIX.



Forward Movement.

1902 The Rev L M Isitt: From New Zealand – ‘Great Temperance Mission’

1902 Gypsy Smith: Described by *The Times* as, ‘Romany with a swarthy complexion, flashing eyes and compact build of the full-blooded gypsy.’

1904 Sister Jeannie Banks: ‘Special Mission for Women’ Sister Banks was a Wesleyan deaconess.

1904 The Sisters Oliphant: Minnie Estelle and Genevive Oliphant from Chicago – spoke and sang.

1904 Josiah Nix: ‘Gospel Temperance Mission.’ Was colleague of the late Hugh Price Hughes at the West London Mission and now working with the Wesleyan Home Mission Committee in London.

1905 Henry-Hemming: This Mission led to strengthening of the class-meetings in Grosvenor Hall.

1907 Harris Lloyd: Superintendent of South-West London Mission.

1908 Bennett-Jones Mission: Under auspices of Belfast Methodist Council.

1909 W R Lane: Free Church Missioner.

1911 Mrs Booth-Clibborn: Eldest daughter of General Booth.

1912 W Pearson: Temperance Missioner – United Kingdom Alliance

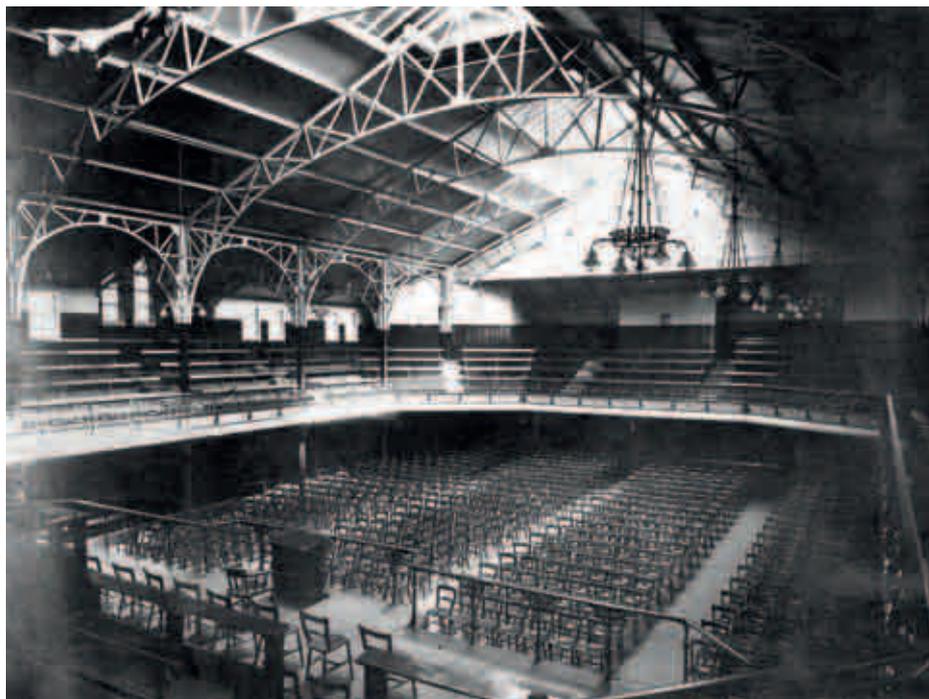
1913 Charlie Ross: Former gambler and bookmaker.

1914 Adam Barr: The Scotch evangelist.

1915 Gypsy Smith: Conducted a short three day mission.

The Rev John N Spence wrote of the 1902 Gypsy Smith Mission... ‘I first made the acquaintance of the Gypsy at the close of my first year of ministry when he came to Grosvenor Hall.’ ‘Christ found him in his mid-teens and, at 17, William Booth, after he had heard him singing at a meeting at Whitechapel, invited him to become an evangelist. Later he joined the Wesleyan Methodist Church and became a great friend and loved colleague of the Rev Samuel Collier.’ ‘When the Gypsy came it was as with a breath of spring. His voice, with something of the dove’s last note and the sweet abandon of the thrush, was exquisitely suited to proclaiming the wistful tenderness of the Father’s love. Night after night the building was crowded and the Spirit of God moved mightily among the people.’

World War I proved to be a turning point and afterwards this form of outreach was no longer as successful. Traditional objectives, such as the conversion of souls, were being jettisoned in favour of individual improvement, social concerns and political harmony⁴. Even Gypsy Smith, who had audiences of 7,000 in the 1880s, found himself the object of heckling at a



Grosvenor Hall (1894-1926).

Sheffield meeting of working men in 1922. The shouts of, ‘What is your remedy?’ and ‘What practical solutions have you?’ indicated an audience more concerned with social issues than with the salvation of souls⁵. This trend was obviously recognised by the Mission and its efforts were subsequently concentrated on less confrontational forms of evangelism.

THE GROSVENOR HALL CONGREGATION

The 1900 Report, written by the Rev R M Ker, emphasised that the Grosvenor Hall was more than just an evangelistic agency – it now had a congregation whose needs had to be ministered to in sickness or in trouble. After only 11 years there were 480 who recognised the Hall as their Church, joined in the fellowship classes, and received the Sacraments there. The Report went on to state that, ‘This “membership congregation” is the very strength of the Mission.’ The Rev Ker divided the city into four districts, so arranged to make it possible for each family on the roll of membership to be visited once in six weeks by some member of the staff and for each member of the staff to visit all the members at least twice every year. The system was still in use 60 years later.

In the 1920s the focus was very much on the young people and on the many organisations now associated with the Mission. The 1921 Report stated that, ‘12 separate organisations have been at work to win (young people) for Christ and the Church.’ These included Boys’ Brigade,

Girl Guides, Sunshine Choirs, Young Peoples’ Guilds, Sunday Schools, Bible Classes and Christian Endeavour Societies. Another Report pointed out that, ‘it is hardly necessary to add that all these organisations are not considered ends in themselves, but simply as a means to an end – the eventual winning of the young for Jesus Christ.’ That being said, there were many notable achievements over the years. In 1920, for example, the Band was placed first in the competition held at Bellevue for Brass and Reed Bands (a feat often emulated by its successor – the Grosvenor Hall Military Band); the Boys’ Brigade won a shield for ambulance work; the shield for Temperance and Sunday School Choirs was retained by the Sunshine Choir in the Belfast Musical Competitions; and a Ladies Choir (drawn from the Grosvenor Hall Choir) won a cup for Church Choirs also in the Musical Competitions.

The 1925 Annual Report (the last from the Rev R M Ker) made an important statement of the future intent of the Belfast Central Mission:

‘The Mission still believes that the Church of the future will be that Church which makes the most ample provision for the spiritual culture of its young people.’ ‘The fact that some of those who were once its scholars are now endeavouring to teach others in the way of righteousness and truth is an eloquent witness that the Mission is successfully fulfilling its aim.’

There was to be a very poignant footnote to this declaration. The final Minute of the last Committee meeting



attended by the Rev R M Ker related to his own son's candidature for the ministry: 'Evangelist – It was moved by the Rev J N Spence and seconded by Mr H M Johnson and passed unanimously that Mr Ernest Ker BA, son of our superintendent, be employed as an evangelist. The Rev R M Ker was congratulated on the distinguished successes of his son at Queen's University and on the maintenance of the family tradition in Mr Ker's offer of himself as a candidate for the Ministry of our Church.'



Queue for Film Service.

FILM SERVICES

J Arthur Rank (of the Rank Organisation and son of Joseph Rank – see chapter 4) had a strong personal desire to promote evangelism through the medium of film. In 1939 he wrote to the Rev John N Spence asking for his support in developing this 'Movement'. The response he received was fairly non-committal. The Superintendent first pointed out that cinematograph, using standard sound films, was already constantly in use both for entertainment and for worship in the Grosvenor Hall.

He then went on to state that the wider possibilities of sound film as an evangelising agency had not yet been appreciated in Ireland. It was his judgement that it would not be advisable to run film services on Sundays and pointed out that Belfast was not suffering from the often depleted congregations which were already the rule in many places in England. In addition, as he knew from experience, there was a very strong prejudice against such services. Finally, he expressed a concern that many cinema owners would use it as a means to plead for Sunday opening. It was not the reply which Rank would have hoped for but it was probably a realistic assessment of the position on the ground.

During the autumn of 1950 however a 'Cinema Mission' finally took place and arising from that the Saturday evening 'Film Service' was started. The Rev Hedley Plunkett, then a member of staff, told the Mission Committee that large numbers of people with problems and difficulties

were being reached through it. The Rev David Kerr remembers them well: 'Like many young people growing up in 1950s Belfast, I attended the Grosvenor Hall Saturday night Film Service on a regular basis. It was a great meeting place for young people from all over the city. If you were careful with your "half-crown" pocket money (12.5 pence) you could give the silver collection which was requested, buy a cup of coffee and a bun for sixpence (2.5 pence) but you would have to walk home because there was no money for a bus fare.'

In later life, when he was collecting on Christmas Eve he always found it heartening when someone stopped to put something into his box and said, 'You know I met my wife (or husband) at the Film Service.' The films were finally discontinued in 1970 when numbers attending fell dramatically because of civil unrest in the city.

REACHING OUT TO POST WW2 BELFAST

Although the congregational and social work activities of the Mission continued to function throughout wartime there is little evidence of any special evangelistic outreach during that period. The concept of 'saved to serve' had however lived on in Grosvenor Hall long after the era of Crawford Johnson. It can be evidenced from the Rev Sam Burch's call to ministry. He grew up in the Grosvenor Hall congregation in the 1940s and his early experiences were gained speaking at Christian Endeavour (CE) meetings and taking the Boys' Brigade Bible class. On

one occasion he spoke at a CE open-air meeting in Sandy Row and the evangelist, John Hoad, hooked the handle of his umbrella around his neck and drew him out of the ring. You should consider entering the ministry' he said,

The Rev R R Cunningham brought him to the Custom House steps on a number of occasions to speak and he shared in leading services in Springfield Road Church. This led him, after much prayer and reflection, to believe that God wanted him to become a Methodist minister. He took a position as an evangelist at Hydepark to test this call and after two years study and service he candidated in 1955 (one of more than two dozen young men and women to have entered the Methodist ministry in Ireland from the Grosvenor Hall congregation.) During the 'Troubles' he undertook the important task of building bridges between communities in West Belfast (see Chapter 6).

The 68th Anniversary Services (1958) of the Mission lived long in the memories of those who were privileged to be there. The guest preacher on that occasion was the charismatic Dr Sangster, one of the leading Methodist Ministers of the 20th century, who preached to a packed Hall on four occasions over the course of the weekend. It was also the Rev Eric Gallagher's first opportunity to speak to such a gathering in his new role as Superintendent. In the course of his speech he echoed the words of his predecessor, Dr Crawford Johnson. 'Important and necessary as their social work was, they realised that the Mission



The Mission staff with Dr Sangster, 1958.



would have failed in its greatest purpose if the spiritual and evangelistic side of their work was neglected.' 'They would always remember that the ultimate aim of the Mission was 'to make Belfast like unto the City of God.'

In January 1959 the Rev Gallagher preached a sermon reflecting on the Ulster Revival which had occurred 100 years earlier and asked the question 'Could it happen again?' He commented, 'That psychologists and psychiatrists were busy but that there was not so big a queue for ministers' consulting rooms. There was neither inside the Church nor outside it any sufficient conviction that the Church and Gospel were relevant. The Christian pulpit was no longer the frontier of evangelism. The call in 1959 was not to emulate 1859... it was a call to faithfulness and obedience and a quality of life that would make its own appeal.' He spoke on other occasions about the gains which could come to the community if it could actually experience such a revival.

Sermons by the Superintendent and his colleague the Rev Richard Greenwood regularly provided Christian comment on current issues. Later in the year, for example, Rev Greenwood addressed the question of immorality in Northern Ireland. He stated that prostitution was on the increase and referred to the growing number of unmarried mothers. He was convinced that, without making a judgement on the merits of family planning, it was morally wrong to bring children into the world if there was not the means to make provision for them. This was farsighted and a very brave comment to make in those days.

A BILLY GRAHAM CRUSADE?

During the early 1970s the Superintendent received an unexpected invitation to attend a meeting in Ravenhill Presbyterian Church to discuss the advisability of persuading Dr Billy Graham, the US evangelist, to conduct a 'special mission' in Belfast. Perhaps the thought was that the Grosvenor Hall might be pressed into use for the services although that was never articulated. The meeting was chaired by the Rev Dr Fitch who knew Graham and believed that he might respond to a strong invitation. Among the 18 or so present, despite the fact that most were well known in 'evangelical' circles, there appeared to be no enthusiasm and the mood appeared to be defeatist. When all had spoken, Dr Fitch said that there was still one person from whom nothing had been heard and he would like the Rev Gallagher to comment. Prefacing his remarks by saying that he had no mandate to speak on behalf of

the Methodist Church he said that the defeatist attitude had surprised him as he believed that Belfast and Northern Ireland were in need of spiritual challenge and that Dr Graham could well be God's man for the hour. His intervention reactivated the discussion and a decision was reached to invite Dr Graham to come to Belfast to assess the viability of a campaign.

At a breakfast conference, convened in the Conway Hotel at the end of May 1972 and attended by Dr Graham, a number of the guests rose to express a wish that he would undertake a crusade. The evangelist indicated that he would very much like to come to Northern Ireland where he recognised there was great need. He went on to say that his ministry had developed in a way he had never anticipated and that now, wherever he went, he had the goodwill of the local Roman Catholic leaders. If he could be assured of that he would be delighted to include the province in his schedule. This provoked a change in the atmosphere and difficulties suddenly began to surface – the Catholic leaders would not agree; it would be impossible to secure a neutral venue; there could be trouble at or after the meetings. The breakfast ended inconclusively and the invitation was never issued. An important opportunity had been lost!



THE ALAN WALKER 'MISSION TO THE EIGHTIES'

The 'Mission to the Eighties' (May – June 1980) was the last occasion on which the second Grosvenor Hall was used for a major evangelistic outreach. It was not organised by the Belfast Central Mission itself but by wider Irish Methodism. Dr Alan Walker, Superintendent of the Methodist (later Uniting Methodist Church in Australia) Wesley Mission in Sydney and World Director of Evangelism for the World Methodist Council, was the special preacher. It was a time of hijackings, hoax bombs and actual explosions in the city but the crowds still flocked into the Hall. Numbers built up throughout the week until a great march of witness on Friday night by 1,000 young people. The climax was on Sunday evening when the main auditorium was packed to capacity with people sitting on the floor and the minor hall and youth wings were also crowded. The *Methodist Newsletter* reporter said 'that it was a moment never to be forgotten when the appeal was made against the background of the hymn "Just



The Rev David Campton.

as I am". People seemed reluctant to leave the building.'

That was a life-changing moment for David Campton (now Methodist minister at Belfast South circuit) as he was one of those reluctant to leave the Hall:

'I was a member of the 9th Scout Group and we had been invited to take part in the Youth March to the Alan Walker Crusade from the grounds of Methodist College to the Grosvenor Hall on Friday 30 May 1980. We ended up sitting in the first row on the ground floor, and I felt a very strong prompting to go forward during the classic appeal at the end of Alan's talk that night... but even though it would only have involved taking a single step forward into a large crowd, I was wary of what my friends would say. God had been working on me for some time in various ways and this was him bringing things to a head... but I genuinely thought I had missed the boat that night. Then on the Sunday the Youth Fellowship (YF) were taking the morning service in my home church of Sydenham... I wasn't part of the YF at that point, but one of the parents said they were going to the last evening of the Alan Walker Crusade, and did I want to go with them... I took them up on the offer, and sat through the whole of the service, and when the appeal came again at the end, again I knew I should go forward, but I was at the back right hand corner of the balcony looking from the stage, and couldn't face the long walk with, as I saw it, everyone looking at me... So I waited until everyone was going out, and as they were heading for the door, I slipped down the side of the crowd heading in the "wrong" direction, toward the stage. That evening 1 June 1980 I finally gave my life over to God.'



CHAPTER 3

Practical Christianity



Life in the slums.

In the earliest reporting of the Mission's activities (1889/90) there was little written about its response to the undoubted social needs of the slum areas of the city apart from an occasional letter to *The Christian Advocate* from one or other of the Missionaries appealing for, 'Old clothing, boots, shawls, bread, butter, eggs, etc.' The Superintendent the Rev Crawford Johnson believed in social, philanthropic and educational work but primarily, 'Sought to put the risen Christ in the midst of his scheme' and converts regularly spoke of how it was their changed lives which had also brought about improvements in family circumstances often through release from the shackles of alcohol and gambling.

This should not infer that 'faith and works' didn't go hand in hand from the outset. An insight into how the early converts began to quietly apply practical Christianity to those less fortunate than themselves can be found in a Mission report in *The Christian Advocate* (February 1892): 'The Lord is pleased to bless our work in ways and quarters of which we have been ignorant... The self-denial of our workers, secret and spontaneous, was delightful information to us. Truly, and without invitation, they have been providing for the "accessories of the saints" and of many other distressed ones whom they meet in the course of their visiting.'

Here are some of the ways in which the Belfast Central Mission began to express practical Christianity:

THE 'STREET ARABS'¹

The children of the slums were always of particular concern to the Rev Johnson. The Mission's social outreach to the 'street Arabs' however commenced quite accidentally because the massive Sunday evening congregations in Hermon Hall prevented children being admitted... and so another meeting was started for them at 5.30pm. An early report describes those attending as, 'of the poorest classes; dirty, ragged, and in many cases, hungry. They are of different sects. They are lively, very lively, yet withal teachable and respectful. Some of them are orphans, some are our city news-boys, some of them sleep in the open air (and) some of them lodge in the common lodging houses of the city. We teach them our hymns, talk kindly and lovingly to them, and give them to know we are their friends. They trouble us at times, for they have all the cunning and "knowingness" of street children.'

Miss Munro (see Chapter 2) provided a brief but graphic account of the first meetings. 'With whistling, shouting, singing, blaspheming, spitting and actually playing at pitch-and-toss you may well imagine the state of our feelings, and tension of our nervous system. Then in appearance they looked like little barbarians. They were positively filthy and begrimed with dirt. But times have changed.' On Christmas Eve 1889 a magic lantern exhibition display was organised for the boys and girls who attended the Sunday afternoon meetings. 'Admittance being free, with no collection, the result

(was) truly better to be imagined than described. We have seen a few assemblies of street boys (but they could not be compared with the) crowd of noisy and excited lads and lassies who thronged into the Circus an hour before the time last Tuesday evening. However if they were not orderly they enjoyed themselves, though certainly "Some folk's pleasure may be other folk's pain".'

When the Mission had to relocate to St George's Hall, tea for the workers was provided between the services by Mrs Johnson, the wife of the Superintendent, as many came from a distance and spent their whole Sunday afternoon and evening there. That created a dilemma for Miss Munro: 'How could we enjoy it when we found these little waifs looking about us with hungry glistening eyes? We commenced to give them some bread and tea with the result that their weekly meal is now a standing institution.' In fact it began one bitterly cold day when one little lad came in shivering and starving – 'Shoeless, capless, he wore a pair of old pants and an old jacket full of rents, showing his shirtless body, the stamp of disease and death upon his frail frame' – and the teachers kept him behind once the service was over to give him some warm tea and bread and butter. The little boy went out and returned on the following Sunday with at least a dozen others, perhaps dirtier and more



Street 'Arabs' outside Grosvenor Hall.



A little 'mother'.

neglected than himself, whom he had told about the food. By the end of 1890 the Mission was providing 150 meals every Sunday. 'The children) only receive one of the kind once a week. What a sight it is! It must be seen to be realised. We are trying to provide them with a treat on Christmas Day. We expect there will be a select gathering and a busy time. But it is our Master's work and we dare not despise one of these little ones.' The Christmas treat became an integral part of the outreach of the Mission as did a day in the country or at the seaside during the summer.

During the autumn of 1891 an 'Arab' service was also started on Thursday evenings with about 50 or 60 attending regularly. The children were helped to learn to read and write and were taught a text of Scripture each night. At the end of the session four boys and six girls received prizes for repeating 12 texts. A few years later a night school began on Friday evenings for the 'Arabs'.

THE MOTHERS' MEETING

It was the children of the slums who were initially attracted to the Mission tent in 1889 but soon a service was being held for the benefit of their mothers too. Many of these could be found trudging at dawn to the mills where they laboured all day and they were still busy late at night at home. These women were bound by the harsh laws of necessity – for them there was little time for leisure when the need for food, clothes and shelter was ever-present. The 'Mothers' Meeting' took place each week during the winter months and consisted of tea followed by hymns, prayers and an address. It was not unusual for it to be the first meal for many of these women during the course of that day.

'It is a sad sight to see these long

rows of women (up to 500 attended) with shawls drawn over their heads, sitting bent forward. Young and old alike have white, prematurely aged faces. Those a little over 20 look almost middle-aged, while the middle-aged have the sunken cheeks, sharp chins, and white hair of old women of 70.' 'Even in the most prosperous times their days are spent in trying to keep the home together and feed a large family of hungry little ones on an inadequate sum of money but how many are prosperous for 12 months in the year? Very few! There are homes where the husband is out of work for half the year; others where he regularly spends more than half his week's wages in the public-house. In such homes as these it is upon the wife and mother that the hardships press most severely, for when money is scarce she generally has to combine the duties of wage earner and wife.'

The work of the Mission did not end with a weekly meeting. As was the case with the 'Arab' Sunday School, the homes were visited regularly and personal contacts established. Some of the saddest cases of poverty relieved by the Mission were brought to its attention by means of the 'Mothers' Meeting'. A 'Christmas Festival for Poor Women' was instigated for the first time on 26 December 1913.

IN THE RED-LIGHT DISTRICTS

The 1890 Mission Report spoke about another area of social outreach which the Mission workers had voluntarily undertaken even though it was heartrending and depressing. In Brown Square, Boundary Street, Abbey Street, Mary's Market, Academy Street and similar 'red-light' neighbourhoods, every Tuesday evening and seven or eight times on a Sunday, they held open-air services. Arising from contacts made the Mission attempted to find homes for some of the girls but with little success. One story was quoted in the Report, 'A few Sundays ago two of the very worst of them had been in our hands. They had expressed a great desire to come away from their surroundings. We brought them both away, but we had no home or shelter of our own to bring them to; and after an interview with them and tea in St. George's Hall, seeing our difficulty, the young women threw off the cloaks we had provided them, and deliberately walked back to their old haunts.'

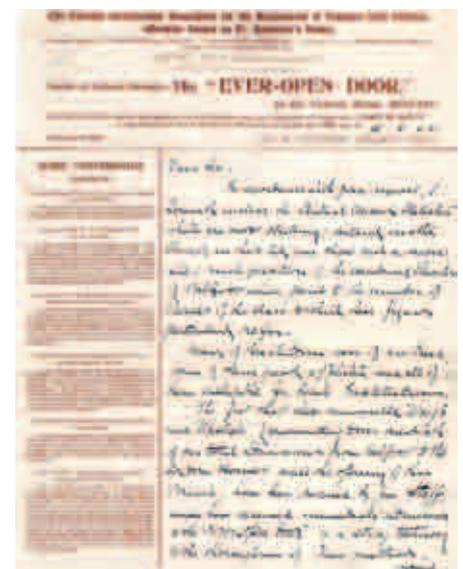
On this particular occasion the Mission had been unable to help because of lack of funds and accommodation. Establishing a Home would prove to be a major undertaking and so an appeal could only be made for the provision of temporary lodgings. Despite having

numerous other issues to address, and no money, the Mission Committee still found time in December 1891 to think about establishing a rescue home. No action was taken at that meeting because it was deemed advisable that the Committee should have more information on the subject. Fifteen years later the Annual Report was still stating that, 'The Deaconesses... have been hindered, terribly hindered, through having no Rescue Home attached to the Mission. When will the kind friend be found who will supply for us this pressing need?'

A CHILDREN'S HOME

In 1896, Major-General Geary, a distinguished soldier, with a record of service stretching back to the Crimea, but now in command of the Belfast District, offered to help the Mission in the establishment of a Children's Home. Dr Stephenson was already considering an expansion of his Children's Homes (later NCH) to Belfast which prompted the Rev Johnson to contact him to ascertain his thinking. In June 1897, as a result of an interview with Dr Stephenson, he was able to report that he was proposing the formation of a Committee in Belfast... to which cases of urgency would be submitted and that lodgings might be secured. If the cases were good ones they might be transferred to one of the Children's Homes' in England. This was referred to the Belfast Methodist Council. By March 1898 Dr Stephenson had visited Belfast and a Committee had been formed.

The Mission was still anxious to have a night shelter for boys and girls and a 'working boys' home. The Committee initially resolved to rent a vacant house in Queen Street in which to begin this



Arthur Dedman's letter.



work but subsequently the matter was put on hold. During the following year it was the charity, Dr Barnardo's, which opened a branch in Belfast and the pressing necessity for a Children's Home was temporarily resolved. The suggestion was then put forward that the Home for Working Girls might be established in the Queen Street house but this did not progress.

The Mission worked very closely with 'The Ever-Open Door' (Barnardo's) from its arrival, as was confirmed in a 1902 letter to the Rev R M Ker from Arthur Dedman, the resident agent:

'In accordance with your request, I herewith enclose the Central Mission statistics which are most striking; certainly no other church in this city can show such a record, and I much question if the combined churches of Belfast could point to the number of rescues of the class to which these figures particularly refer.

Many of these children were of no creed, some of them greatly afflicted, and all of them ineligible for local institutions. The fact that these unwanted 'Waifs' and 'Wastrels' (amounting to over one sixth of our total admissions from Belfast to the London Homes since the opening of this branch) have been rescued by your staff and have received immediate admission to the 'Ever-Open Door' is a strong testimony to the thoroughness of your methods. Indeed I cannot remember a single case in which we were unable to assist.

Personally I am very grateful for the help I have always received from Dr Johnson and every member of his mission staff – our first admission was a Grosvenor Hall rescue and from then until now our relations have been most cordial. May this blessed alliance long continue?

The schedule attached to the letter showed that (to 25 May 1902) the Mission had made 60 applications, 35 of whom had been admitted into the London Homes (out of a total of 202 admissions from Belfast). The other 25 had 'been assisted according to their need,' sheltered for a period and later restored to family or friends.

One story in particular must be told: A Mission sister came across a bright, intelligent young boy of about three years of age in an adult lodging-house in one of the worst neighbourhoods of the city. About a year previously he had been left there by a man, supposedly his father, who never returned to claim him. He became one of the Mission's admissions to the 'Ever-Open Door' but, before his departure to London, he was baptised by the Superintendent at a Sunday evening service; the congregation

present guaranteeing to raise the money necessary to support him in Dr Barnardo's. The entry in the baptismal register read: 'this child was found deserted in a lodging house by Miss Spence: she took charge of him and handed him over to 'The Ever-Open Door'. He was baptised Arthur Grosvenor Hall... Arthur after Mr Dedman... Grosvenor Hall to signify he was adopted by the Central Mission.'



CRAIGMORE BOYS HOME AT AGHAGALLON (AGHALEE)

A telling entry was recorded in, but subsequently deleted for unexplained reasons from, the Minutes of the Mission Committee on 17 March 1899: 'It has been arranged to affiliate the Aghagallon Home with Dr Stephenson's Homes.' This was clearly a reference to the house and land at Craigmore which was subsequently gifted by the Mission Treasurer, T F Shillington, to the Methodist Church in Ireland. The Annual Report for that year sheds some light on the issues involved:

'What we should like to have is a Home for Waif and Orphan Children, and also a Home for Working Boys and Girls. Children are frequently left in our charge who are not the type for the Workhouse, and if we had a Home in which these could be maintained and trained, we are convinced it should be a noble work. We are also brought into contact with large numbers of boys and girls who are left to fight the battle of life without home, or parents, or friends. These young people are a source of great anxiety to us as they are constantly exposed to the severest temptation. We long to provide Homes for these working boys and girls. There was a time during the year when there seemed a possibility of these schemes being effected but we were compelled to postpone them for the present. The burden of debt was already too heavy and we had no warrant for incurring further.'

The 1899 Conference proposed an allocation from the Irish Methodist Twentieth Century Fund, 'In view of the necessity of a Children's Home' and two years later a committee was appointed

to draft its Constitution. The failing health of the Superintendent and the financial state of the Mission had almost certainly prompted the astute Treasurer, T F Shillington to gift his ancestral home 'Craig Villa' at Craigmore (Aghalee) to Irish Methodism rather than the Belfast Central Mission. The Home however was still linked directly to the Mission through its Trustees and the personnel of its Management Committee. Its official administration address was Grosvenor Hall, the monthly meetings were held there and the Rev John N Spence was appointed Secretary. The associations were clearly very strong.

R M KER – 'SOLICITOUS FOR ALL IN NEED'

The Rev R M Ker arrived at the Mission in 1898 as its junior Minister when it had been only nine years in existence. His father, the Rev Robert Ker, belonged to the Primitive Wesleyan tradition (which had contributed so much to the beginnings of the Holiness Movement) prior to Methodist union in Ireland in 1878. The new Minister's influence as an evangelist was soon recognised: 'The simplicity of his words; the passion and the sincerity, the spiritual power of his appeal – these combined to lead men and women, boys and girls, the old and the young, to conviction, to decision, and to newness of life.'

As a young man of not yet 30, he had to undertake almost total responsibility for the work, whilst the Superintendent, Rev Crawford Johnson, was recuperating from a breakdown in health.



Opening of Craigmore.



Cheap breakfasts.

His overriding concern to find ways of helping those in physical need was evident from the outset of his ministry in Grosvenor Hall: 'It may seem a small thing to do, but we believe we were privileged greatly to be allowed to do it, when we sent a sickly girl to "The Homes of Rest" in Bangor, or provided a good dinner for her, or bought for her some strengthening food that perhaps helped her to shake off the dread consumption that almost laid hold on her... It may have seen a trivial thing to send a bag of coal or a few loaves to a house where the children were starving, but the mother's tears of gratitude made us feel as if we were travelling in the footsteps of Christ. It seems but a little effort that we made when we got some man into a situation, but we feel now God-honoured because we saved him from the workhouse. It was a year (1900) of heart-grinding poverty and our Poor Fund is greatly overdrawn but how could it be otherwise in a Central Mission. We would feel as if we were not doing our work should the balance be on the right side.'

In the 1905 Annual Report, R M Ker, by then Superintendent, penned some additional thoughts about the role of the Mission:

'Too often has the Church left herself open to reproach and scorn by proclaiming what is purely a selfish salvation. Too often have we failed in fully interpreting the parable of the lost sheep, and have forgotten that salvation applies to body as well as soul... The Belfast Central Mission has sought the path of safety by steering between these two extremes. "Keep the centre right in the twin facts of sin and redemption" has been its guiding star. With such a centre it has been possible to draw a very big circle, to include a Labour Yard for the unemployed, a Soup Kitchen for the hungry, a Happy Evening for the man who is tempted to drink, a Night School for him who seeks to "break his birth's invidious bar".'



The labour yard.

The origins of much of the social work undertaken by the Mission, past and present, can be traced back to Rev R M Ker's observation of human need and his ability to always find a way to do something about it. What follows are details of some of the schemes initiated whilst he was ministering at Grosvenor Hall:

Cheap Food Depots and Soup Kitchens: In 1898 a cheap food depot was opened every week-night for hungry children where a large bun and a mug of tea could be had for a halfpenny. It was patronised by hundreds of the street 'Arabs'. The hope was that other depots could be opened in different parts of the city but it didn't happen at that time due to lack of funds. Four years later however, because of the extent of poverty in the city, another house was rented in one of the neediest neighbourhoods and meals were supplied to all-comers at a nominal cost during the winter months. Soon 1,400 breakfasts were being supplied there every month. From time to time, when the weather was very severe and large numbers of hardship cases were being brought to the attention of the Mission's workers, the kitchen in Grosvenor Hall was also pressed into service to provide hot soup and potatoes.

The Labour Yard: This was a facility, already operating in other Missions, which was felt to be badly needed in Belfast. Men often turned up at Grosvenor Hall, shivering, hungry, but still displaying lingering tokens of decency. Their stories were all too familiar – out of work for several months, wife and children starving, but willing to do anything. The help they



Ker, Robert Moubray



Born on 15 December 1872 at Newtownbutler – son of the Rev Robert Ker and Jane Moubray.

• • •

- Converted in 1889 (after suffering from pleurisy).
- Lay-evangelist at Swanlinbar in 1893.
- Received into full connexion as a Methodist preacher in 1900.
- Elected to Board of Governors of Methodist College 1908. *Ministerial secretary of the Board from 1910.*
- Appointed to the Conference secretarial team 1908.
- Representative to British Conference 1909.
- Secretary of Conference 1922-25.
- Chairman of the Belfast District 1926.
- President of the Methodist Church in Ireland 1926.
- Member of the Legal Hundred 1924-1898 Belfast Central Mission 28
*Acting superintendent 1901-02.
Superintendent from 1905.*
- Died on 27 October 1926 during his Presidential visit to Cork.

'Solicitous for all in need, the care of the destitute and orphan children was his chief delight.'

were given was rarely long term but even then the staff were troubled about pauperising them by handouts. It was the unmistakable hallmark of the acting Superintendent the Rev R M Ker that when he encountered a need he found a way to address it – setting up a labour yard was one of the first of the many schemes he pioneered at the Mission. In 1902 suitable premises adjoining the Hall were rented and the work of chopping and bundling firewood commenced, with the one object of helping men back into employment. James Dixon (see Chapter 2) undertook the role of Manager. Whilst



men were there, the harder they worked, the better they could care for their families and importantly their sense of independence was preserved.

'Brother Men': Mrs Johnson's Sunday evening teas led not only to the waifs' meals but also indirectly to the initiation of the Brother Man Service 15 years later. For some time two or three men 'down on their luck' were in the habit of dropping into the Waif School to obtain some food. Others gradually joined them and it was soon realised that this was an inappropriate place for these 'wrecks of city life' and the Brother Man Service was organised (initially described as being for 'broken down' men). A typical early service was described in the 1906 Report. The narrative was prefaced by the comment, 'We do not question them at these meetings' and that mantra remained true throughout its lifetime (it continued into the 1970s). A number of the Mission's young people would gather around the organ and sing for the men. At the same time, the stewards were distributing mugs and (bread) buns, and they then brought round large kettles of hot tea. When the tea was over, and the mugs collected, hymn books were distributed. The men were invited to choose their favourite hymns which were sung heartily. After prayer a Gospel Address was given by a member of staff or one of the workers. Sometimes stirring testimonies were delivered by converts of the Mission. They were then invited to attend the services in the Grosvenor Hall and many of them did.

Within five years there were over 250 meeting for a meal and a service in the Grosvenor Hall Annexe on a Sunday evening. It was a motley congregation in 1910: There were those whose clothes were marked by dust which revealed that they had been sleeping in the brickfields. The way in which others kept their coats buttoned tightly to their throats indicated that shirts were not plentiful. Some showed the unmistakable marks of having been 'entertained' 'at His Majesty's pleasure' more than once. Yet others had



Bricks for a bed.



'Brother Man' service in 1907.

the sad countenance of a man who had failed. There were the well-known barrel organ players and street singers but also strangers to Belfast who had found their way to Grosvenor Hall hoping to find new friends there.

In the Brick-fields at midnight:

When rumours reached the ears of the Superintendent, the Rev Ker, that men were so hard pressed by poverty that they had to sleep out in the brick-fields he decided to see for himself if they were true. He recounted his experiences afterwards. 'Picture three inches of snow on the ground, the air keen and piercing, because of a little frost, and there lying with his back to the brick-kiln... was an old man. Overhead his only canopy was the sky, and for a couch, a single row of bricks. We passed on a few yards and now the answer to the question 'Did men sleep in the brick-fields?' was alas, alas, only too emphatically given. A few yards, and not one or two met our gaze, but dozens of men of various ages... There they lay in the shelter of the kilns; some huddled together for warmth; some by themselves – not one or two or 20, but 65 we counted.'

Two days later he returned accompanied by the Rev John N Spence, James Dixon and Dick Addis (Head Steward of the Mission) carrying mugs,



Visiting in the slums.

cans of tea and a hamper of buns which were handed out to the men and boys.

Mission staff as Probation Officers³:

The Sisters of the Mission in their purple uniforms were already a well-known sight in the slums and in the Police Courts by the early years of the 20th century. The 1903 Annual Report recounts one occurrence when a phone call was made from the Police Court to request that someone should go there to give evidence. A young boy whose parents were drunkards, had run away from home and had been charged with vagrancy. The police had enquired if anyone was taking an interest in him and he told them 'the Grosvenor Hall.' The story continued: 'The member of staff who knows him best hastened to the court and the Magistrate was very glad to receive whatever testimony or advice may be tendered on behalf of the culprit; the representative of the Mission was quoted as saying that "particular attention will be paid to him".'

At the start of 1908 a new branch of work did commence in the Police Courts with cases dealt with under the Provision of Offenders Act 1907 being handed over to the care of the Mission. Magistrates had authority to appoint persons to act as probation officers for the period of a year with their contracts being renewed annually. They used their powers to utilise individuals already working with the Presbyterian Temperance Committee, Belfast City Mission, St Vincent de Paul and the Belfast Central Mission. Miss Elizabeth Curran, one of the Mission sisters, was the most prominent and best known of these 'probation officers:' 'Years of painstaking and persevering effort had won for her the whole-hearted approbation and implicit confidence of those in authority' (She left the Mission in 1919 for employment with the War Pensions Committee but continued to work as a probation officer until after the



Second World War). Two colleagues from Grosvenor Hall, Miss Elliot and James Dixon, were also reported to be acting in this capacity. By the end of 1911 the deaconess work in the Police Courts, 'was developing as quickly as our means will allow' and two years later it was reported that it 'has been most satisfactorily carried on by the Mission Sisters and almost daily their services are sought by the magistrates in cases of girls and women in trouble.'

A DAY AT NEWCASTLE (1910) – BY A WAIF

Here is a descriptive article reproduced from *The Grosvenor Hall Herald* in the summer of 1910:

'So ye want me to tell ye all about the trip till Newcastle, and ye'll put it in the paper; (*The Grosvenor Hall Herald*). All right mister. Begin at the beginnin' did ye say? Where else did ye think I'd begin?'

Well Jimmie and me; Jimmie's me wee brother, ye know; sleep tilgither; an on the mornin' av the trip, when I waked up, he was sleepin like a top, so I gave him a shot in the ribs and towl him did he not know what day it was. An', dae ye know, he'd clean forgot. So sez I till him 'It's the day av the Govenor trip, and then sez I till him, James dear, intil your striped trousahs and your frock coat like a strake of lightinin' an' I'll run over an' wakin Scotchy – Scotchy and me's chums, ye know. I hooked it over till Scotchy's but he's ma had him up long ago, an when I got home again Jimmie was ready, an we set out. What about our breakfasts? Sure we put them in our pockets an ate them goin' down the road.

I thought we'd be fust at the Govenor. I wanted till get with No 1 flag; they go out first, ye know; but when we got down there was a hole lock of fellas and girsles there afore us, stannin at the dure. We hadn't long to stan, for the dure was opened and we wur tuk in. Me and Scotchy took Jimmie's hand, an' we got gran' sates near the front. We had a good while till wait till they all got in, and then we saw the Balmoral Sailors; it's their ban' goes



The procession leaving Grosvenor Hall for the seaside.

wi' us. They're not rale sailors, ye know; they're only wee boys in sailors' cloes; but, man. They're gran players.

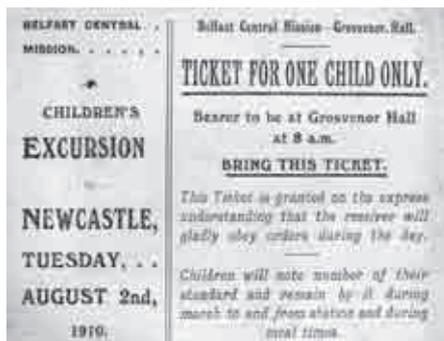
When we were going out to form into percession Scotchy wanted till carry the number, but the teacher told him better let a bigger'n boy an him carry it; but there was a man at the dure givin' out flags, an' he got carryin' one of them. Well, when we were got intil the percession the ban' began to play, an' we marched till the station. We had to stan' a wee bit till get our tickets ready, an' then they let us in. We got intil a gran' kerridge, with windaes all roun, an' cushioned chairs. Av coorse, the kerridges wur'n't all as good as ours, but, ye mind, they wur'n't bad. When the train began to go we started countin the telemagraph poles. I counted two hundred an' nine and then they went by too quick; for the train goes far quicker'n the 'lectric trams.

Nothing eventual occurred till we got till Newcastle. We wur furst train, an' had to wait till the rest come; then we all marched till the fiel', an the first thing I sees was a hole lock av smoke, an sez I till Jimmie – he was niver at the trip afore – Thons the men what makes the tay. When we all got intil the fiel' the man rung the

bell, an' the teachers made us sit down roun' our numbers, an' then they gave us mugs, an' after that bags av buns, quare'n good ones, an then tay, an then – ah man!

Well, when the tay was done they towl us to play, an' we had a quare lot of games and swings, an' then, after a while, we wur took down till the say. Did ye iver see the say at Newcastle? Mind you there's far more'n water in it than there is in the Ormeau Park nor the Lagan. When we got down till the water, sez I till Scotchy "Dar ye bathe?" "Av coorse I dar bathe" sez he "what dae ye tik me for?" We peeled aff our cloes an' giv them til wee Jimmie till watch till we came out. When we were swimming – Scotchy swims with one foot on the ground; so do I, but don't tell him that – we caught a great big fish, and we tuk it out with us, an' Mr Carr tuk our futty graphs with it.

We wur just gittin' tired av the bathin' when somebody said the tay was ready, an' we went back til the fiel', an' right enough the great big kettles was smokin' away. The teacher made us sit down again roun' the numbers, and they give us buns an' tay, an', mind ye, I didn't see one refusin' them; I know Scotchy an' Jimmie an' me ate all ours. When the tay was



Waifs excursion 1910.



Buns and tay.



I'm lost!



over we had a hole lot more games, an' then the ban' begun till play, and we all marched round the fiel', an' out intil the road, an' up till the station, an' then we knowed we wur goin' home, an' I wished it was mornin' again.

At the station we had till wait a while till a train come in, an' then we got in an' started for home. We had the best fun comin' home. Did I tell you that me an' Scotchy got two big crabs an' a hole lock av limpets to tik home wi' us, an' the girls wur afear'd the crabs wud ate them. We had such fun I didn't know till somebody shouted "There's the lamps" an' then I looked out av the kerridge windey and saw we wur goin' intil the station. When we got outside my ma wus waitin' for us, and she tuk Jimmie in her arms an' carried him home.

"Didn't we get a very wet day?"

I should think not, indeed; right enough it rained a bit in the mornin' an' at night, but all the time we wur at Newcastle till we wur comin' away it was gran' weather.

"Would I like to go back again?" Ah mister! Would ye tik me?"

Clearly the children fully enjoyed their one day at the seaside regardless of the weather conditions.

The Holiday Programme: The 'Holiday Fund for the Sick Poor' first appeared in the Mission's balance sheet in 1900 but without any explanation as to its exact purpose – the early records merely reveal that holidays were provided. It is known that the Superintendent the Rev Ker, during the Mission's 1908 Easter Monday excursion to Helen's Bay, spotted a tiny cottage⁴ and rented it to enable some of the workers to have a holiday. So successful was it that a house was taken at Whitehead for the following summer and almost 500 women and girls enjoyed time there between the months of June and September. Much of the credit was attributed to the 'wholehearted service' of Miss Harrison who undertook the running of the scheme. By 1913 a new and more suitable Home had been rented, also in Whitehead, to further expand the programme. This house, together with the adjoining one, was later purchased by the Mission.

The larger Home brought about yet another new venture. It was decided to send a number of delicate children for at least a week's holiday at the sea – that began in September 1913.

Soldiers' children at Whitehead:

Towards the end of 1915 the Mission responded positively to an unfortunate consequence of the war. For some time the Superintendent had been urged by the Police Court Magistrates, the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and the

Soldiers and Sailors Families Association to undertake the care of children whose fathers were serving their country and whose mothers or guardians were: 'incapable through drink, vicious habits or broken health of attending to the little ones.' He decided to utilise the Holiday Home at Whitehead for the purpose provided that the children's allowance payable by the Government should be remitted to the Mission. The decision to proceed with the scheme was supported by the Finance Committee but only ratified by the Mission Committee after it was already in operation.

The extent of the need quickly became apparent because of the frequency of the breakdown of the moral, as well as the physical, wellbeing of mothers. The top flat of an adjoining house was taken to provide additional accommodation. Soon there were 48 children in residence although some of the children had to be admitted to hospital prior to being accepted into the Home because of their extremely poor state of health. Within six months there were 60 children in residence, a few were in hospital and a further 20 were boarded out in cottages under



The Whitehead Home.



Soldiers' Children at Whitehead.

supervision. By the end of the first year of operation an additional 40 children were being housed in Dublin, Balmoral and Craigmore. A few were restored to their mothers but not in every instance to the satisfaction of the Mission's staff. During the period from 1915 until 1919 the Rev R M Ker became the appointed Guardian of almost 500 children and continued to act as such until the rightful guardians had proved themselves fit to resume their responsibilities.

A decision of crucial importance was taken by the Mission Committee following the signing of the Armistice in 1918. The future of the Whitehead Home provoked much thought and it was finally determined that the work there should be continued:

- For the sake of the soldiers' children who had been deprived of both parents and for whom the Mission had accepted responsibility until they had a fair start in life.
- For such destitute children as the Mission discovered and needed to be removed from their surroundings.

For the first time the Mission had a Children's Home it could call its own.

Belfast's underworld: During the early 1920s the Rev W L Northridge, then on the staff of the Mission, decided that it would be good for a Christian Minister to gain first-hand knowledge of the life and habits of the people of the 'underworld'. His aim was to find out why it was that a large percentage of the population of every city was down morally and socially. He approached Ned Howard (see Chapter 2) who jumped at the opportunity to join him in the adventure. They disguised themselves beyond recognition to appear as two 'down and outs' and set off. The workers of North Belfast Mission (NBM) were conducting an open-air meeting at the corner of Gresham Street and some of them advised the Rev Northridge that he was in a grave spiritual condition. The Superintendent of NBM then gave him a ticket for the free breakfast next morning.

The pair concentrated their attention on the public houses and lodging houses. In the first lodging house they entered Northridge sat down beside a man on his own and told him, 'I am from Cork and have never been in one of these houses before. Tell me what to do.' 'Have you your bed yet?' he was asked. When told that he hadn't he was directed to the office. 'How much are the beds?' 'You can have one in the room for 9d (3.75 pence) or a public one for 7d.' If they were hungry there was a place upstairs where they could get a, 'Pinnerth of tea and haperth of sugar.' Next they tried the



Salvation Army where they asked for two mugs of cocoa but were told that they were too late for either cocoa or beds and finally 'Matilda Street' where they had to disclose themselves to the Chief Superintendent, a BB captain whom both of them knew well, to gain admittance.

They spent considerable time too in public houses but only visited one each night. Northridge noted:

- The amazing amount of money spent on liquor.
- Most of those who frequented them represented the very poorest elements in the city.
 - Every man had an exaggerated opinion of his own importance.
 - Without exception each man, in his own way, gave expression to a spiritual longing.
 - Whilst 'church' meant nothing to the 'down and outs' the Mission was held in the highest esteem.
 - The deepest impression on Northridge was that the pub was the greatest of all social evils.

Northridge told his yarn again in one of the pubs. 'I am from Cork. Is there any place in which I can get a free meal tomorrow?' 'Go to "Maguires" (North Belfast Mission) in the morning and you will get your breakfast free and you'll get your tea in the 'Govenor' (Grosvenor Hall) at five free... That and "Maguires" are two places where the poor are looked after – the dacentest places in Belfast for the poor.'

The 'silent sufferers': Amidst all its other social outreach the Superintendent R M Ker, did not overlook those who might be described as the 'silent sufferers'. One of the Reports just after World War I stated that, 'The poverty that flaunts itself is not always the most desperate. There are plenty of people in every great city, including Belfast, who are content to endure hunger, cold and sickness, in silence. For such the Mission has special sympathy, and, as lay in its power, it has sought to stretch out a helping hand. During the late autumn, owing to depression in trade, the claims on the Poor Fund could never have been met but for the kindness and generosity of many of God's stewards.' Conditions did not improve over the next 12 months.

'During a trying year, by reason of unemployment, the Mission tried to relieve want, to put coals in the hearth, and to save the decent family from eviction.' By 1923 the work had been further extended. 'At Christmas a larger amount of good cheer in the shape of coal, meat, fruit loaves, etc, was given to those homes where the wolf of poverty was at the door. The work of relief,

however, is not confined to the festive season.' In this regard the kindness of an unnamed firm of caterers in the city was put on record: 'Their almost daily gift of bread has been of the greatest service in the Mission's dealings with the needy and desolate.'

The holiday programme re-established: In 1919 a little cottage was obtained at Ballyhalbert where the waves almost came up to the threshold of the door. To this idyllic setting weak and delicate children were regularly sent for a summer holiday. They came back to the city with sunburnt faces and were stronger and better fitted to face the cold of winter. Because of its proximity to the 'Butter Lump Stone' the cottage was affectionately known by that name. Volunteers from the congregation took responsibility for the holidays there.



Orlock.

Five years later an unexpected legacy was received from someone who had been greatly impressed by the devotion of the Grosvenor Hall workers to the children under their care during one of the Waifs excursions to the seaside. It provided the Committee with an opportunity to promote a project which had long been contemplated – a permanent Holiday Home for delicate children. At the last Mission Committee which he attended (30 July 1926) the Rev R M Ker reported that he had purchased a property in Groomsport and proposed to spend part of the residue of the bequest to enlarge the building to hold about 26 children. This was what the Report for that year described as, 'Our new Holiday Bungalow at Orlock.'

It is unclear whether that description related to before or after 'renovation work' by the Mission. Sadie Nicholson, a lifelong member of the Grosvenor Hall congregation who had enjoyed breaks there in her youth, had her own memories of what it was like. She was able to recount them to the Rev Eric Gallagher some 60 years later. She described it as, 'Like a ship downstairs and a train upstairs. You went upstairs by climbing

a straight-up steel ladder. The upstairs windows were train windows. You opened them with a leather strap.' She was right! The building consisted of a County Down railway carriage mounted on a block base to create a two storey edifice. The train part had 30 bunks but there were no indoor toilet facilities – everyone had to go outside, whatever the weather, to use the 'privies'.

PLANNING FOR A NEW HALL

The Superintendent and his Committee always had the financial and property affairs of the Mission, as well as its spiritual and social concerns, to keep under review. As early as 1919 the Annual Report alluded to the necessity for a new building:

'The Finance Committee is glad to be able to report that through the generosity of the members and friends of the Mission the income has been splendidly maintained and all the expenses of the year have been fully met. During the year the glad announcement was made that every penny of debt on Grosvenor Hall had been paid off. The Committee feels warranted now in proceeding to establish a Reserve Fund with a view to the remodelling of the premises in due time. Those who know Grosvenor Hall know that it was not substantially built, and while with constant care and watchfulness it has been maintained in fair repair, yet the time is at hand when very considerable sums must be devoted to renovation and equipment.'

Early in 1923, discussions had taken place about the necessity of rebuilding the entire Mission premises. Before decisions could be taken a special meeting of the Committee had to be called to consider proposals being put to the Forward Movement Committee by the Trustees of Donegall Square. These included the building of central connexional offices and committee rooms and also a large hall suitable for services. R M Ker outlined his objections:

- The impossibility of running two central missions if the new hall was to be used for mission purposes.
- An unseemly rivalry would result if it was used for Sunday afternoon preaching services.
- Other objections might arise if the scheme were to be presented in more detailed form.

In April 1924 the Rev R M Ker intimated that a request had come from the Chairman of the District that no plans for new premises for the Mission should be developed until the trustees of Donegall Square had clarified their scheme. The Mission Committee



R M Ker's funeral procession.

expressed its reluctance to inconvenience the 'Square' Trustees in any way but, considering the urgency of the problems of Grosvenor Hall, resolved to ask the Forward Movement Committee to provide a definite answer by 1 September 1924. In December the Committee unanimously agreed to proceed with planning and the Superintendent was instructed to consult with Hugh Turtle, a Director of the building firm of McLaughlin & Harvey, re the choice of architects and the general outline of the scheme.

Within a year plans had been approved and a quote from McLaughlin & Harvey in the amount of £45,968 accepted. Unusually the project was not put out to tender – probably an indication of the confidence the Mission Committee placed in the professional advice being provided by Hugh Turtle (who had also been appointed as a member of the Mission Committee in June 1925). A request for grant under the Relief of Unemployment Schemes⁵ was initially refused by the Minister for Labour but, having received a deputation from the Mission, he conditionally agreed to 60% of wages provided that the work began before 25 December 1925. Closing Services were held in the old Hall on the first Sunday of January 1926 and the first pile for the new one was driven before the end of the month. (It was one of the last major buildings in Belfast to use driven wooden piles in its foundations⁶).

DEATH OF R M KER

The unexpected demise of R M Ker in October 1926 (who had joined the Mission's staff in 1898 and was

Superintendent from 1905) marked a point at which the forward momentum of the Mission, always in evidence from its earliest days, appeared to stall at least temporarily. His period of unbroken service in one appointment can rarely, if ever, have been equalled in the annals of Irish Methodism. An extract from the Mission Committee minute paid tribute to his work and summed up his achievements notably in the sphere of practical Christianity:

'During that long period, which included the term of the Great War, under Mr Ker's guidance every branch of the Mission's work was consolidated and extended. In particular, an orphanage for both boys and girls has been established at Whitehead and lately a Home for Delicate Young People has been opened at Groomsport. Yet under the ever-increasing pressure of the claims of social work the spiritual side of the Mission has been maintained in quiet and steady efficiency. Mr Ker's prudent management of the Mission's finances made it possible, in the autumn of 1925, to take advantage of the opportunity presented by the Forward Movement to enter upon the great undertaking of rebuilding Grosvenor Hall. His great gifts as a leader, preacher, pastor and organiser were used without stint or reserve in the service of our common Lord and Master.'

His death, at the relatively young age of 53, was a great shock to all associated with the congregation and especially to those for whom he had been a permanent fixture throughout their Christian experience. On the day of his death one of the oldest members said to Dr Northridge,

a former Minister at Grosvenor Hall, 'The heart has gone out of the Mission.' Ned Howard (see Chapter 2) weeping, said, 'Some of us will never get over this.' The Belfast Central Mission and its Grosvenor Hall congregation had suffered a grievous loss from which it was going to be difficult to recover.

Friday 29 October 1926 should have been the occasion for the Stone Laying Ceremony at the new Grosvenor Hall but instead the Funeral Service for the Rev R M Ker was taking place in Donegall Square Church. It was an impressive occasion. The church was so crowded that the outer gates had to be closed almost an hour before the service commenced and many clergymen and members of the public were unable to gain admission. The Lord Mayor and the City Chamberlain represented the citizens of Belfast and the children from the Orphan Home were accorded a place of honour alongside the Ker family. The Moderator of the Presbyterian General Assembly joined the officiating Methodist ministers in the pulpit. An enormous gathering waited outside and the cortege passed through dense crowds as it made its way through the city centre. The Band led the way followed by the Boys' Brigade and the Whitehead children whilst the hearse was flanked by the Mission's Stewards. As the procession reached the Assembly Buildings noon struck and its bells tolled out the notes of 'Abide with me'. It stopped briefly on the Grosvenor Road where construction of the new buildings had been halted before continuing its way on foot to the City Cemetery.



CHAPTER 4

Christian Socialism

The social problems of the late 19 century weighed heavily on the conscience of Methodism and that sensitivity became heightened as the issues continued to grow. Two years after the publication of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* and the 1848 Paris uprising, a group of Anglicans began to publish a weekly paper '*The Christian Socialist*'. They argued forcefully for a renewed social order in which co-operation would replace conflict. At the same time secular social thinkers like John Ruskin were also widely read. 'Christian Socialism' exerted its influence on Methodism through the preaching of Hugh Price Hughes and the writings of John Scott Lidgett. By the time '*The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*' had been published in 1883 Methodism was finally addressing its increased sense of responsibility for the urban poor.

The Wesleyan Movement's response to the Rev Hugh Price Hughes' call for action was the 'Forward Movement' founded in 1885 as a determined effort to bridge the increasing chasm between Methodism and the poor (see Chapter 1). This led to the creation of Methodist Central Halls which were an outward and visible sign of a changed attitude to the working classes. One seat was like another, each was comfortable and all were free (ie no pew rents). The buildings were designed to ensure that non-churchgoers would not experience awkwardness or self-consciousness in new surroundings. The Movement was epitomised by the West London Mission with its phenomenal growth in membership, passionate evangelism and numerous social agencies. From the

platform Hughes denounced the evils of drink, gambling and impurity and also inefficiency and corruption wherever it was to be found. It was an indication of a new desire to reach the masses outside the boundaries of organised religion and was a powerful proof that Methodism was at last anxious to reach out to and serve the poor and the working classes.

THE EARLY DAYS

The first Superintendent of the Belfast Central Mission, the Rev Crawford Johnson, was a man very much in the mould of Hughes. It was said of him that he was a champion of civic righteousness when it was far from popular and that he possessed the courage to speak out against the evils of the day without fear of the consequences. The afternoon services were largely attended by men. 'Every Sunday afternoon a great eager mass of intelligent hard-working men surged and crowded their way into the hall... They said of themselves, some of them, and others told us of them, that they had lost all faith in the Church, and the "Parson", and Christianity.' The services made a deep and widespread impression throughout the city and were talked about by working men everywhere. An extract from one of many letters received was quoted in the 1893 Annual Report: 'I have been at some benefit from your words. It is a long time since I attended regularly a place of worship, not for some years now, and I feel your sermons have done me some good. I say this, as I feel it is due to you. – (signed) Social Democrat.'

As early as June 1890, the *Advocate* was reporting that the Rev Crawford



Johnson had conducted a dinner hour service for the shipyard workers at the 'Queen's Island'. In April 1893 he made a very significant judgement about the use of Methodist property and, on two occasions, loaned the school-room at Duncairn Gardens to the unskilled labourers of 'the yard' who were out on strike. It was a bold decision since the Superintendent was fully aware that there would be vocal objectors against such a departure. The request had originated from some of the strikers who attended the Mission services. They asked for help to bring the strike to a close and to this end the staff devoted much time and labour. It brought about a realisation that other halls and school-rooms were being denied to them and workers were being forced to hold their weekly meetings in public-houses. Leaving aside the merits and demerits of the strike, free use of the school-room was granted. The men were spoken to advisedly and a significant contribution was made towards settlement of the dispute.

That issue remained in the minds of the Rev Crawford Johnson and his Committee and as usual, they sought to act on as well as think about, the problem. In the newspaper reports of the opening of the first Grosvenor Hall it was stated that, 'It is also intended to have a portion of the building devoted to the use of working men as clubrooms. The value of this accommodation to artisans' organisations, many of whom have no suitable premises in which to meet and not a few of which have to transact their business in public-houses, will be very great indeed, and will, we have no doubt,



Street life in 1912.



be largely availed of and fully appreciated.' The Grosvenor Hall has subsequently been used on a number of occasions by workers in dispute with their employers.

Many of the early converts lacked social and educational skills and so the Mission began a series of classes on Thursday evenings. Reading, writing, arithmetic, sewing and first aid classes were held regularly throughout the winter months. A reading room was also opened and stocked with books, newspapers and periodicals. At the start of the new century the Superintendent also arranged for the first of many series of science lectures. His thinking was that a lot of the most intelligent of Belfast's artisans frequented the Grosvenor Hall and whilst the Happy Evenings were educational, much more could be done. Eminent lecturers on scientific and literary subjects could not fail to educate and elevate and their lectures were much appreciated by the working classes.

THE REV JOHN N SPENCE

By the early summer of 1901 the health of the Superintendent the Rev Crawford Johnson was providing serious cause for concern. Initially his medical advisors had insisted on a short period of complete rest and freedom from the worries of the Mission but that was soon extended. The Superintendent's breakdown in health persuaded those close to him to conclude that it was time for part of the burden of responsibility to be lifted from his shoulders. The 29 year old Rev R M Ker proved to be a more than able deputy and a request was made to the Irish Methodist Conference for the appointment of an additional member of staff. In response

the Rev John N Spence, two years younger, was sent to the Grosvenor Hall and he quickly fitted into the life of the Mission. The Rev Crawford Johnson also returned after a lengthy period but much of the work was now devolved to his junior colleagues.

The Rev Spence spent the next 13 years at the Belfast Central Mission. In 1958 he recollected his earliest days at the Grosvenor Hall: 'The social conditions in the City when I began my ministry didn't bear thinking about. The social conscience scarcely existed. There were no old-age pensions; no sickness or unemployment benefits; no Health Services as we understand them. The only form of relief, apart from that given by charity, was that given by the Poor Law Authorities which was miserable in the extreme.' During his first period in the Mission he received public criticism for his 'socialist' views as he attempted to relate the implications of the Gospel to the world around him.

THE SMITHFIELD MILL DISASTER

The Smithfield Mill disaster, when a part of what was also known as the Pipe Lane Mill at Smithfield collapsed in January 1902, confirmed on several levels the significant role which the Mission had begun to play in the industrial life of the city. About 700 people, mostly women and girls, worked there and 13 died in the accident with many others injured. The youngest of those to lose their life was Martha McAuley, a 'doffer', aged only 13. The Superintendent was invited by the Lord Mayor to join a Committee being set up to administer a Relief Fund. Two memorial services were held on the following Sunday in a packed Grosvenor Hall when hundreds seeking admission had to be turned away. The handbills advertising the services stated that 'some of the deceased children's school-mates will sing at both services' (which of course today would be regarded as inappropriate but was the norm 100 years ago). It highlighted the fact that four of those killed were connected with the Central Mission including children who regularly attended the Waifs Sunday School.

CHRISTIANITY SOCIALISED

The Rev Crawford Johnson related the following story at an early Anniversary Meeting (January 1897). The published report of that occasion began with these words 'If we cannot Christianise Socialism, we can at least socialise Christianity. This is one of the mottos of the Mission.' His illustration (see below) underlined the fact that the social work undertaken in the name of the Mission was intrinsic to almost every Grosvenor Hall worker.

- A few days previously the workers had heard of an old woman who was lying dead on a bed of straw; no one saw her die, no one knew that she was dead. Her daughter had been drinking to such an extent that she was oblivious of her duty. The house in which she had lived was desolate beyond description and the poor old woman had eked out a miserable existence by selling sticks. 'When Brother McKeown found her he appealed to the members of the Mission to bury her. The poor befriend the poor, and their liberality to each other in times of suffering is magnificent.'

He was making the point that the members of his congregation applied their Christian principles in practical ways.

The baptismal and marriage records of the Mission offer an opportunity to profile some of the individuals who regarded Grosvenor Hall as their spiritual home. Two family names recorded in

Spence, John Nettleton, MBE



Born on 8 May 1874 at Magheralin. Son of Thomas Spence (linen manufacturer) and Anna (née Nettleton).

• • •

- Lay evangelist at Caledon.
 - Received into full connexion as a Methodist preacher in 1905.
 - Secretary of Conference 1937-40.
 - Chairman of Belfast District 1941.
 - President of the Methodist Church in Ireland 1941.
 - Awarded MBE in 1959.
- | | | |
|------|--|----|
| 1901 | Belfast Central Mission | 13 |
| 1925 | Belfast Central Mission | 25 |
| 1950 | Belfast Central Mission
(Supernumerary) | 12 |
- Died on 24 September 1961.

'He will be remembered particularly for the special nature of his Mission work, his concern for social righteousness and his wise leadership in the wider affairs of the Church's life.'



The Smithfield Mill disaster.



the baptismal records of this era serve to illustrate some of the long-term effects of this practical religion which was being preached week by week from the Grosvenor Hall platform and lived out day by day in the homes, streets and workplaces of the city:

- **Patterson:** Three children of William and Sarah Patterson (Woodvale Street) were baptised by R M Ker – including Sarah (Saidie), born on 25 November 1904 and baptised on 21 September 1907. Her father William,



Saidie Patterson.

a blacksmith, died at the age of 27 and her mother Sarah was later remarried in Grosvenor Hall. Saidie started work as a weaver in a linen factory at the age of 12. A combination of her Methodist upbringing and her experience of work converted her into a Christian Socialist. She was active in the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union helping to organise many strikes to improve the conditions of the mainly female workforce. Saidie worked hard during the 1945 and 1949 elections to try to improve the Northern Ireland Labour Party's representation at Stormont. In the 1950s she promoted a 'United Ulster' movement hoping that the Labour Party could become the non-sectarian voice of the people. She also became involved with the Moral Re-armament Movement after the Second World War and was a founder member of Women Together, an organisation that preceded the Peace People. She was the first winner of the World Methodist Council Peace Award in 1977.

- **Blood:** Three daughters of William and Agnes Blood (Fallswater Street) were also baptised in Grosvenor Hall. William (who was an active fundraiser for Methodist outreach on the Springfield Road) and Agnes were



Baroness May Blood.

the grandparents of Baroness May Blood. May Blood worked as a 'cutter' in a linen mill from 1952 to 1990 and soon became a trade unionist and shop steward (her father was a 'union man' in the shipyard). She was involved in creating a women's committee and in promoting equality for women at work. Later to become a Baroness, May Blood was a founder

member of the Women's Coalition and was part of their 'Talks Team' during the multi-party negotiations which culminated in the Good Friday Agreement.

The late Saidie Patterson and the still very active May Blood have both been internationally acclaimed for their achievements in the spheres of social justice and inter-community relations. They, and many anonymous individuals who over the years have endorsed similar principles and practices, are almost certainly influenced by the ethos of the leaders and members of the Grosvenor Hall during the early years of the 20th century.

THE 1907 DOCKS STRIKE

The Mission was well attuned to the commercial heartbeat of the city by the time Jim Larkin, an organiser for the National Union of Dock Labourers, arrived in Belfast from Liverpool to create a trade union for the dock-labourers, carters and coal-fillers of the city. In the summer of 1907 he united the Protestants and Catholics of Belfast into an effective labour movement all marching together in defence of trade union rights. The government countered by attempting to stir up the old sectarian hatreds and drafted thousands of troops into Belfast concentrating them mainly on the Falls and Grosvenor Roads. Demonstrations against the troops led to rioting, bloodshed and deaths.

The introduction to the Mission's 1907 Annual Report commented that the year would be remembered as a time of, 'intense social unrest' and also one of 'great social depression'... For weeks a fierce war waged between Labour and Capital – in many business concerns during that time the hum of the machinery was silenced; in some parts of the city were to be seen companies of His Majesty's soldiers ever on the watch to maintain law and order; while all that time disappointment, misunderstanding and anger ran rampant. One Sabbath night, as a member of the Mission Staff preached in Grosvenor Hall, the noise of the cavalry as they dashed past to the fray echoed through the building... The staple trade of the capital of Ulster – the linen trade – was hard hit, and masters and men must henceforth suffer. At the moment of writing the clouds do not as yet break, and the meaning of 'want' is understood in homes where it was an unknown word and experience before.'

This was a very measured statement which did not seek to apportion blame. The Superintendent, R M Ker and the Rev John N Spence were both fully aware of the unjust employment practices

operating in the Belfast docks and of the grinding poverty which was the inevitable consequence. One gets a sense that their sympathies and those of many of the working men who attended Grosvenor Hall were probably on the side of the protesters.



THE SINKING OF RMS TITANIC

It was not unusual for the Superintendent of the Mission to be invited as the guest of the Directors of Harland and Wolff to view the launch of their latest ocean-going liner. The Rev R M Ker certainly watched that of the Titanic, along with his son Ernest, from some vantage point. The workmen in the yard were very proud of their new ship and the people of Belfast turned out in large numbers to see it glide down the slipway. Its loss, when it collided with an iceberg in the Atlantic on 15 April 1912 during its maiden voyage, had a devastating impact on the city. The pride of the workforce was deeply wounded but, more importantly, many people mourned for a loved one, a close friend, or a colleague.

A memorial service was held in Grosvenor Hall on Sunday 21 April 1912. The Superintendent took as his text 'I was dumb; I opened not my mouth because thou didst it' (Psalm 39: 9). In the course of his address he said that they were all dumb, 'When it became known to them that the wonderful liner which some in



the congregation had helped to build, and which most of them saw launched – which was the pride of Belfast and one of the wonders of the 20th century – lay with the majority of her crew and passengers two miles below the surface of the ocean... As they dwelt on the calamity they found themselves unable to understand the Providence that permitted it. If the vessel only had been lost they could have understood its fate being a warning to their pride, to the mad commercial competition which urged captains to race their boats across the Atlantic; but it was the loss of so many lives that made their brains reel and seemed to shake their faith to its very foundation. He could not explain the mystery...'

GROSVENOR HALL REBUILT

It proved to be more than fortunate that the Rev John N Spence was reappointed to the Mission at the Methodist Conference of 1925 since he was the ideal candidate to take over the responsibilities of Superintendency after the sudden death of the Rev R M Ker in October 1926. The Mission Committee, probably anticipating the additional workload which would be imposed on the Superintendent with the rebuilding of the Grosvenor Hall, must be credited for having persuaded such an experienced man to accept the position of second minister (effectively a demotion within the hierarchy of Irish Methodism). He had just 15 months to reacquaint himself with all the activities, old and new, before having to take on the role of leadership himself.

Like the Rev Crawford Johnson the new Superintendent the Rev Spence started with no premises and a congregation which was once again 'a pilgrim people' worshipping in hired halls

and tents. A part of the legacy however, from the Rev R M Ker was the rebuilding programme for the second Grosvenor Hall. He became Superintendent when work on the new Hall was already in progress and benefited greatly from the continuity provided by Hugh Turtle (the Director of McLaughlin & Harvey responsible for the building work). The 1927 Annual Report paid a fulsome tribute, 'To Mr Hugh Turtle, more than to any other individual, the success of the new buildings is due. A generous donor to the Building Fund, this was, in some respects, the least of all his gifts. Unsparring he gave both of his time and his unrivalled practical knowledge. No trouble was too great for him, and no detail too insignificant for his attention. The Mission, and indeed, our whole Connexion, owe him a great debt of gratitude.'

The new Grosvenor Hall (1927) was an impressive structure built this time with a steel frame, reinforced concrete and brick. The auditorium seated almost 2,000 and, since the only column supports were at the back of the gallery, everyone had unobstructed vision. A projection room was included and there was a screen which could be lowered in front of the organ to facilitate the showing of films. A recess was provided for the reinstallation of the existing organ. Considerable research was carried out regarding the best method of heating the building and the recommendation of the architects to use oil was accepted. The minor hall was described as having seating accommodation for 500 children thus defining its primary purpose. Offices, a kitchen, vestry, and deaconess's rooms were also incorporated into the Glengall Street building (designated by the Mission Committee as the 'Ker Memorial Wing.')

THE OPENING SERVICES

The official opening of the Ker Wing, which was to be used for the social work of the Mission, took place on 2 April 1927. The opening services of the actual Grosvenor Hall



Joseph Rank.

on 22 September were planned to enable Joseph Rank to fulfil the role of Chairman at the evening service. It had been his donation of £10,000, together with the contribution from the Forward Movement¹ (approx £12,000) and Mission contributions and gifts from its friends (approx. £10,000), that provided the initial funding allowing the project to go ahead. Rank had himself been converted at a mission which led him to become one of the most generous benefactors of the Methodist Church. When he came to appeal for financial support to pay off the balance the Superintendent stated that, 'It was largely through the generosity of Mr Rank that the finances of the Mission were in such a favourable state.' He also announced that the builders of the Hall, Messrs McLaughlin & Harvey, had returned £3,000 of the contract price, ('through the assistance of sub-contractors, some fall in wages and the earnest support of every worker') and that £800 had been collected during the day leaving a balance of £16,200 to be raised.

Before the end of the service Joseph Rank returned to the rostrum and announced that if a further £1,200 could be raised during the Opening Services he would donate an additional £5,000 (his total contribution of £15,000 equates to in excess of £750,000 at 2014 values). John H Weir (the author's father) who



Entrance to Grosvenor Hall.



Vestibule.



Opening Service.

was present in the congregation as a 14 year old, often spoke of the audible gasp from the congregation, which was then followed by prolonged applause, when the offer was made (see also *'At Points of Need'* p 64). Just three weeks later, on 10 October, the Superintendent was able to inform Rank that the money had been raised and his promised cheque was in the post two days later.

CHILD HAVEN

An extraordinary meeting of the Mission Committee took place at Templepatrick House, Millisle, County Down, on 4 August 1928. Its purpose was to receive formal possession of the house and grounds, 'Which Mr and Mrs Hugh Turtle had purchased and were most generously giving to the Mission for the purpose of the work among the poor children. In handing over the property Mr Turtle indicated some of the ways in which it was hoped to develop it for this work. The property was given without any conditions whatsoever and with the hope that it might be a blessing to many.' Ten days afterwards another meeting took place to appoint an architect in connection with alterations and additions at Millisle and a month later the decision was taken to sell the Whitehead Home (see Chapter 3) as soon as possible and transfer the work to the new site. By November the Committee had authorised a major scheme which included:

- Alterations to the existing building to create a Children's Home.
- The building of a Holiday Home for boys and girls.
- The building of a 'Mother's Home of Rest.' (Rose Cottage)

The site was named *Child Haven* bringing together, in more suitable premises and in idyllic surroundings, the



work which had previously been carried on at Whitehead and Orlock. This new name became synonymous with the children's work of the Belfast Central Mission and it remained in use for the next 60 years (when the residential care became focused solely on teenagers it was considered inappropriate and the name of the former Children's Home, *Craigmore*, was brought back into usage). John Young, for many years the superintendent of the Afternoon Sunday School agreed to act as Manager. The children moved from Whitehead on 25 April 1930 and the formal opening took place on 24 May that year.

CONCERN FOR SOCIAL RIGHTEOUSNESS

The new Superintendent the Rev John N Spence was quickly to highlight the 'abnormal distress' in the city and to respond to it: 'For the last two months

of 1926 our Sisters devoted all their time to seeking out and helping those in direst need, hundreds of cases being investigated and helped.' In the autumn of 1927 he, 'Observed increasing signs of abject poverty among people formerly in comfortable circumstances and feared a time of general distress during the winter.' A free food depot was soon opened and was in use for five months through the winter. In June 1928 it was reported that over 40,000 free meals had been dispensed since the previous November. In addition, a room in the Ker Wing was made available to the Education Authorities where many needy school children were fed on a daily basis. Groceries, clothing, coal and other necessities were also distributed in large quantities by the Mission.

The Sixty-First Annual (UK) Trades Union Congress took place in Grosvenor Hall from 2-7 September 1929. It was reported that 'the atmosphere of the Congress was deliberative throughout and the debates were constructive and devoid of sensationalism.' 'The authorities at Grosvenor Hall, the well-designed and spacious premises belonging to the Belfast Central Mission, spared no efforts to assist the organisers of the Congress in the efficient discharge of their task, and the result was an exceptionally smooth and quick despatch of Congress business.'

The outdoor relief dispute²: In the depression of the early 1930s, the Superintendent undertook what he later spoke of as the best piece of social work in which he had the privilege to share. 'Poverty was deep and widespread and poor relief meagre in the extreme. Tempers got out of control, rioting broke out and poor relief was stopped for a time.' 'We decided that we could best help by confining our service to those



Child Haven.

who had been recipients of out-door relief in the district around us. An appeal brought an immediate and generous response, both of money and provisions, and each morning for a critical period we were able to distribute 250 family parcels of groceries, milk and bread, without distinction of creed, to those in dire need.'

At the Mission Committee on 10 September 1932 a letter from the Outdoor Relief Workers' Committee, asking for use of the Hall for a public meeting to consider their present position and needs, was considered. The Superintendent was directed to reply asking for a copy of the resolutions to be submitted and for the names of the Committee in charge. Permission was obviously granted since, on Tuesday 27 September, the outdoor relief workers marched to the Workhouse and a deputation asked to see the Guardians. 'A letter received from the Committee stated that at a meeting in the Grosvenor Hall a number of demands were drawn up to be forwarded to the Guardians.'

In her book *Poor Law in Ireland*³ Angela Clifford, referred to the important role played by the Rev John N Spence and the Mission:

'Several of the unemployed meetings were held in the Grosvenor Hall, belonging to the Methodist Central Mission. The Methodists were involved in the relief workers' struggle for better conditions from an early stage. They helped the relief workers formulate demands, and continued to support them even when the decision to strike, with which they

disagreed, had been taken. During the strike they helped as best they could: materially, in increasing their own efforts in distributing food and politically, in pushing the case for improvement.

The Rev Spence attached to the Central Mission (Grosvenor Hall) was particularly active for the unemployed, and was generally closely involved with the wider labour movement. It was he who had conducted the service inaugurating the British Trades Union Congress held in the Grosvenor Hall in 1929. (At that time the TUC always started its proceedings with a religious service).'

On 27 September an influential letter signed by members of the East Belfast Rural Deanery (of the Church of Ireland) was published. '(We) daily experience the fact that large numbers of our people live on the borderline of starvation... we find that normal methods of relief are proving inadequate. We would respectfully call on those in civic and State authority to deal with the matter.' This was strongly reinforced by a letter from the Rev John W Stutt (Superintendent of North Belfast Mission) on the following day and one from the Rev John N Spence on the 30th.

Clifford states that these were the two Methodist clergymen who were involved with the relief workers. She wrote: 'Spence's letter estimated that 13,000 to 15,000 people were trying to live on 3s 6d (17.5 pence) per head per week. He demanded an "immediate and substantial increase" in rates and pointed out that in Manchester the outdoor relief allowance for a couple was 18s (90 pence)

plus rent. He added: "The saddest sight I know is that of the 'bread queue' at our doors daily, and our bitterest experience is to have to say to so many 'We cannot help you today...'

In conclusion Spence referred to the long-running dispute as to responsibility for unemployment relief between the Government and Guardians: "It is said that the Guardians think the Government should take the responsibility of the additional burden, and that, on the other hand, the Government insists that the Guardians are responsible. If there be any such a difference I would plead for an immediate agreement that the work may begin.'

This letter was published in the local press on the day after the relief workers had taken a decision to strike. On this occasion they had met in the North Belfast Mission's premises in York Street. The Board of Guardians had refused to receive their deputation which had precipitated the mass meeting and the strike vote. The Revs John W Stutt and John N Spence were both present and strongly urged against such drastic action. Methodists and Communists on this occasion were sharing the same platform. The Rev John N Spence moved an amendment to defer action but it was ruled out of order. *The Daily Worker* newspaper reported him as saying, 'I ask you not to jeopardise your case by precipitate action. There are many forces working on your behalf.'

Despite being defeated he allowed his letter to be published unedited. It included the following passage:

'Together with a number of other Ministers and laymen of the Protestant Churches I have been in close touch for some weeks with the leaders of the outdoor relief recipients, and gladly bear testimony to the way in which they have conducted their campaign for better conditions. We have found them exceedingly willing to be advised and to listen to reason. Whilst I do not agree with all their demands, I am convinced that there is an unanswerable case for both immediate and substantial betterment.'

He added a postscript: 'Since writing this letter I have been present at a mass meeting of the outdoor relief workers where a course of action was decided upon. This was put to the meeting, in spite of strong protest by the Rev J W Stutt and myself, in such a way that it really carries little weight as an expression of the mind of the meeting; and I hope it will not be allowed to prejudice what are just claims on the part of suffering men.'

The strike went ahead on 3 October 1932 utilising a variety of meetings, marches and other forms of protest.



Queueing for help at the Ker Hall.

Various attempts at mediation failed to end the dispute. Speaking in Grosvenor Hall, on Sunday 9 October, the Superintendent the Rev John N Spence addressed the subject of the distress in the city. He said:

‘Let me appeal first to the authorities, the Guardians, to create a different atmosphere. At present there is a spirit of mutual distrust and antagonism on both sides that is making matters difficult for all concerned... To the outdoor relief recipients I would say: Do not allow yourselves to be led into acts of lawlessness or disorder. A threat against a sympathetic people – and the people are sympathetic – will carry you nowhere. Society must, and will, protect itself. We must all be together in this. Only through united action and goodwill can we pull through... The Christian Church declared that those who, through no fault of their own, found themselves in need had a right to expect and to receive the efficient help of those more favourably situated and that, not as charity, but as an indefensible right... I believe that I am right in saying that... the State is ready to say to the Guardians: “If there are restrictions that hamper you... ask for their removal and we will comply.” The remedy for the present emergency lies with the Guardians; they are the legally appointed body and have the necessary powers to fulfil the duty... as long as they hold their office they cannot be allowed to shirk their responsibility.’

A huge demonstration planned for Tuesday 11 October, was banned and 2,000 policemen were mobilised. This led to widespread rioting in which one person was killed and a further 30 were injured. Things moved quickly on the following

day with the Government, the Lord Mayor and the Trades Unions holding intensive discussions which resulted in a new offer being made. The strikers sought the advice of the Superintendent and on Friday night, ‘A large deputation from the outdoor relief workers in the Grosvenor Hall dispensary area... waited upon the Rev J N Spence... The deputation claimed to speak for the vast majority in the district in stating that they were prepared to accept the terms, although some pointed out there would still be hardship in the case of men with big families. Mr Spence counselled the deputation to accept the terms and to call attention to outstanding cases of hardship.’

The relief workers held their final meeting in St Mary’s Hall on Saturday night and the Rev John N Spence was on the platform (as he had been at their first

meeting). He stated that, ‘The Christian Churches in the city had stood together in striving to do what they considered was the right thing. He thought that the terms that had been arranged were just the terms that the Churches had asked the Guardians to adopt.’

THE PROTESTANT CHURCHES DISTRESS RELIEF FUND

On Friday 21 October 1932 a representative meeting of the clergy and laity of the Protestant Churches of Belfast was held in Clarence Place Hall. They agreed that a united effort would be made to help the poor of the Protestant community during the winter months. The Superintendent the Rev John N Spence and Hugh Turtle were both members of the sub-committee appointed to work out the details of the scheme. The former was also appointed to act as one of the Honorary Secretaries of the Fund. In a letter sent to the newspapers it was stated that, ‘Whilst the increased grants from the Poor Law Guardians will help to relieve many cases of extreme need, there will still be large numbers of our people, often the most deserving, who, if not assisted, will suffer much hardship during the coming winter.’

Arrangements were put in place to establish the Fund and also to store farm produce and other commodities for distribution. It continued in operation until 1 June 1936 and provided help for 3,961 families.

THE MISSION’S OWN RESPONSE

At the December 1932 BCM Committee, the Superintendent reported that: ‘The distress in the city made it necessary to devote a great part of the energy of the Mission staff to the relief of the needy and



Feeding the children.



Food parcels.

gave a brief, but very clear, account of the important part the Mission had played in the relief work organised by the Churches throughout the city.' The Mission's Annual Report revealed that 80,000 dinners had been provided during the year for the poorest individuals and families.

In conjunction with Newtownards Road Church dinners were also distributed to needy folk in the East End of the city. During what was known as 'strike week' in the previous October over 250 food parcels were given out each day. 'The queues of men, women, and little children, which daily gather at the doors of Grosvenor Hall, seeking for food and clothing, make a sad sight.'

Six months later John Young, the Manager at Child Haven, told the Committee that when children were being selected for holidays the claims of the very poorest were considered first. 'He had noticed among these (children) signs of grave deterioration – physically owing to poverty and poor and improper feeding; and morally probably owing to the cumulative effects of poverty and idleness enforced among their parents.' The Annual Report said that, 'No company of children was sent to the (Holiday) Home that had not a large number suffering from septic sores in different parts of their body, in a large measure, if not entirely, due to the lack of sufficient and proper food.' Seven-hundred children were provided with a fortnight's holiday at Child Haven in the summer of 1933.

THE EFFECTS OF WORLD WAR II

Although the Second World War appears not to have resulted in numerous lives

lost from the congregation there were still many ways it impacted on the life of the Belfast Central Mission. They included:

- **From Vienna to Millisle by 'Kindertransport':** In April 1939 Gertrude Warmington and her little brother, the children of Austrian Jews, were smuggled to safety on a Kinder train with the assistance of Quakers. They were part of a party of 200 and the journey took three days through Germany and Holland before crossing into England at Dover. The two children had labels saying 'Londonderry, Northern Ireland' and that was their ultimate destination. They were soon to be on the move again – to *Child Haven*. 'We were quite happy at Child Haven. We had each other. That was the main thing. And people were very kind. The visitors, some of the parents, used to come down to visit their own and they would give us a wee bag of sweets because we had no money. The matron gave us stamps to write home.' Her father and most of his relations were killed. At 18 Gertrude left the home and took up a career in nursing and... Three years later her brother, on reaching the same age, went to England to train as an engineer. She did not see her mother again until 1960 because it was difficult to find her after all that had happened.

- A deputation was received from the Society for Aiding the Deaf and Dumb requesting use of the Holiday Home as a refuge for their children in the event of air raids. This was agreed, 'Should the premises not have been previously occupied by the Mission for urgently pressing work.' At the start of 1942 the Ulster Schools for Deaf and Dumb took

possession of the Holiday Home (and installed electricity from the grid). Their premises had been taken over by the Civil Defence Authority.

- The Soldiers and Sailors Family Association once again approached the Mission about taking some children into care should the need arise.

- During the second week of September 1941 a number of elderly ladies from the Mission, who would not otherwise have had a holiday, went to Millisle, 'And the hope was expressed that such an excellent departure would become a regular feature each year.'

- An air raid shelter was created at Child Haven which remained there for many years afterwards.

- Large numbers of soldiers, who were allowed to come into Belfast on weekend leave, had great difficulty in finding sleeping accommodation. With the help of the military authorities, the Mission made the Ker Memorial Hall and the Primary Room into comfortable dormitories although the beds were on the floor.

- During the summer of 1944 the NSPCC sent 36 children to the Holiday Home and other groups were sent by the Children's Hospital and the City Hospital.

THE (PREMATURE) RETIREMENT OF THE REV JOHN N SPENCE

At the June 1949 Mission Committee tribute was paid to the retiring Superintendent:

'This Committee wishes to place on record its deep appreciation of the services rendered to the Mission, and through it to a much wider community, by the Rev John N Spence over a period of 37 years, during almost 23 of which he has been Superintendent. Few men have a more intimate knowledge and experience of social conditions in our city than Mr Spence, and this knowledge and experience he freely placed at the disposal of the Mission, and of those who needed it most... Mr Spence is completing his 48th year in the active work of the ministry and his 41st in Mission work. The latter is a record in either British or Irish Methodism, except for the father of the British Conference, the Rev John Scott Lidgett DD.'

The following meeting, however, reflected what had happened at the ensuing Irish Methodist Conference:

'A welcome was extended to the Rev John N Spence who, at the request of Conference, had returned for another year's service in the Mission (see Chapter 5). It was appreciated that this entailed some personal inconvenience to Mr and Mrs Spence.'



CHAPTER 5

The End of the Beginning



The Belfast Central Mission probably achieved its high point (in terms of numbers attending services) just prior to World War I and thereafter a series of events conspired to reduce the congregations to dozens rather than the thousands who crowded into the first Grosvenor Hall.

THE BREAK-UP OF THE REV CRAWFORD JOHNSON'S TEAM

The team, who had been brought together in 1889 to launch the Belfast Mission (see Chapter 2), became dispersed over a relatively short period of time. When Duncairn Gardens was made a circuit in its own right (1895) James Grubb transferred to become its minister. The next to leave was Miss Munro who two years later took up a new appointment at the Bolton Mission. James Dixon, the 'soldier evangelist' first severed his connection with the Mission at the end of 1899 to devote himself entirely to evangelistic work but returned to Grosvenor Hall for a second spell after which he emigrated with his family to Canada (1919). In all he gave about 28 years of invaluable service. Due to ill health, no doubt brought on by the extreme demands of his 13 years as Superintendent, Crawford Johnson, on medical advice took time off from May 1901 including a supernumerary year during which he visited South Africa. He returned to the work but finally retired in 1905. Other early members of staff, including the Rev Thomas Yates and the

Rev Louis Crooks, were lost not only to the Mission but also to Methodism.

EMIGRATION

As has unfortunately occurred through the annals of Irish Methodism, many of those associated with the Grosvenor Hall congregation left Ireland in search of a better life. As early as April 1890 *The Christian Advocate* was reporting that, 'One brother, who professed to obtain salvation in the Circus, has with his family recently left for America; and this week having received the passage money from her sons, one of our sisters, a most devout attendant at our services, sailed for New York'. These stories of poor folk were to be repeated over and over again. Those who had found faith and help over the years, through the auspices of the Belfast Central Mission, together with their families and descendants, emigrated in large numbers. The Mission's losses however, regularly benefited the new churches and communities into which they were assimilated.

It continued unabated over the years. *The Grosvenor Hall Herald* reported many instances including this typical example: 'Brother Allan adds another to – now the large group of Grosvenor Hall workers and members – who, we are proud to think, adorn the doctrine of Jesus Christ in lands across the sea. Converted in a Mission conducted by Dr Torrey, he soon united himself with the Central Mission and from that day has been one of the Mission's most tried and trusted workers.' The 1914 Mission Report also reflected on the flow of emigrants:

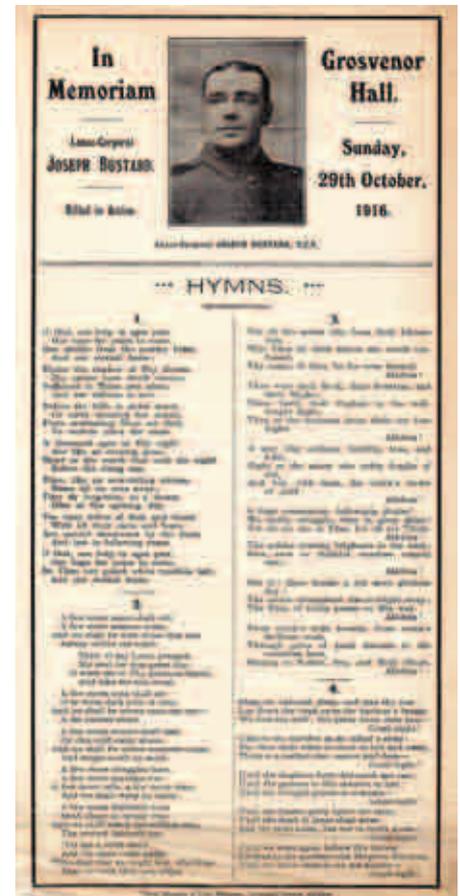
'No summary of the work for the first 25 years of its existence would be complete without recognition of the fact that the Mission has given hundreds of its best and most promising lives for the enrichment of the Colonies. There are moments when one finds oneself wishing that the tide of emigration did not flow so swiftly, but there are other moments when gladness fills the soul at the remembrance that in most instances those who represent the Mission in far-away lands do so worthily, to the glory of God and to the credit of their spiritual birthplace. In some of the large towns and cities of Canada can be found enough ex-Mission members to form by themselves a small congregation, and frequently

from employers of labour, as well as from pastors of Churches, come testimonies to their stability, industry and high moral character.'

The exodus continued until the 1960s as many of the most devoted young people associated with the Grosvenor Hall married and left to find new lives in the United States, Canada, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Hong Kong. Unfortunately the 'Troubles' of the following decade led to a further migration of virtually all the remaining young people to the suburbs of Belfast, Great Britain or further afield creating a multi-generational gap in the congregational profile – the consequences of which are still very evident.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

When war broke out in 1914 the members of the Mission were quick to join the army. The next Committee Minute reported their response:



Joseph Bustard Memorial Service.



‘The War – The appeal of Lord Kitchener for recruits was loyally responded to by the Workers of the Mission. About 40 men, of all departments, including Mr John Young, a member of the Committee and Superintendent of the Arab Sunday Afternoon School, joined the new armies. Besides a considerable number of reservists were called up from families under the care of the Mission. Some departments of work had to be reorganised and are now doing well.’

The Annual Report for the year added the following commentary: ‘For a quarter of a century the great principles of loyalty to truth, sympathy for the oppressed, justice and righteousness in the individual, civic and national spheres have been proclaimed from (the Mission’s) platforms, and it is not surprising that when the call of King and Country made itself heard last August that hundreds of those associated with the work immediately responded.’

A special prayer service was held on Sunday 6 December 1914, at which the Superintendent the Rev R M Ker read out a Roll of Honour containing the names of 136 men associated with the Grosvenor Hall who had by then responded to their country’s call. Special prayers were offered for the relatives of Private Dickey, a member of the congregation, who was the first to be killed in action. Several men were prisoners and others were home wounded but only the one fatality had been reported. The Soldiers’ and Sailors Families’ Association (SSFA) asked to be allowed to open a branch in Grosvenor Hall for soldiers’ dependants and the committee room was placed at their disposal. A branch office of the Citizens’ Distress Committee was also



Farewell Services.

located there.

On 16 July 1916 an address was delivered in Grosvenor Hall, to possibly the largest congregation ever seen there, in remembrance of the men of the Ulster Division who had been involved in the recent Battle of the Somme. The *Herald* commented that, ‘It is impossible even yet to say how far the Hall has been affected by the events of the opening weeks of July. That many of its members and adherents have been wounded in the fight is now well known. Several of our best workers are mourning the loss of their loved ones, while “missing” is all that can be learned concerning others.’

THE CLOSING SERVICES OF ‘THE OLD HALL’

The first Grosvenor Hall fulfilled its purpose for over 30 years but its cheap construction necessitated a replacement which was built on the same site (see Chapters 3 and 4). In the homes of elderly Grosvenor Hall members, up to the end of the 20th century, one would almost certainly have found one or more copies of the booklet produced to commemorate ‘*The Passing of The ‘Old’ Grosvenor Hall – for Thirty Years the Headquarters of the Mission.*’ This was the programme and souvenir produced for the ‘farewell services’ held on Sunday 3 January 1926, a seminal moment in the history of the Mission. It recorded the fact that:

- More than five million had attended Sunday services there.
- Often 8,000 people were reached by weekend meetings and services.
- Thousands in all parts of the world revered it as their spiritual birthplace.
- Hundreds of thousands had attended the ‘Happy Evenings for the People’ there.
- Millions of the city’s poorest children were made welcome in it.

Major A W Johnson, a son of the first Superintendent, wrote of its passing:

‘Though the outward fabric has perished, the spirit that fired its earliest workers and worshippers has been renewed day by day... Alive and carrying on the torch in many a community at home and abroad, there are today those who link the beginning of their more abundant life with holiest memories of Grosvenor Hall... To those who, like the writer, recall the unwearied labours of the late Thomas F Shillington in its erection, the prospect of a more stately mansion being built on the same valuable site brings unutterable joy... None knew better than he, that the iron girders and corrugated roof, however well constructed, had only a limited lifetime...’

Cunningham, Robert Richard, DD



Born on 4 September 1908, at Killaloe, County Clare – son of Robert Cunningham.

• • •

- Evangelist on Portadown circuit 1929.
- Entered ministry from Portadown circuit, aged 21.
- Received into full connexion as a Methodist preacher in 1937.
- Honorary DD from Whitworth College, Spokane, Washington.
- Chairman of Vancouver-Burrard Presbytery.
- General Council Commissioner on two occasions.
- President of the British Columbia Conference of the United Church of Canada 1969.

1939 Belfast Central Mission 1

1943 Belfast Central Mission 11

- He died suddenly on 8 February 1975.

‘His reputation as an industrial arbiter, family councillor, social worker, philosopher and preacher made him an important figure among the poor of Belfast. In 1954 following an earlier preaching engagement in the city, he received a formal call to the pastorate of St Andrew’s-Wesley, United Church of Canada, Vancouver where he had a most outstanding ministry for 20 years, both as a preacher of distinction, and as a leader in Church and civic affairs.’

The hour of destiny for Grosvenor Hall has come, and the present writer believes that it will prove to be an hour of consolidation and enormous impetus for Belfast Methodism, when from truly consecrated ground there rises a new hall.’ ‘There need be no sadness of farewell.’

THE CLOSURE OF CRAIGMORE CHILDREN’S HOME

In 1928 Craigmore affiliated with the National Children’s Homes (NCH) and,



Craigmore Home.



The 'old' Springfield Road.

although the relationship did not provide for financial support, it did have two main benefits:

- NCH was able to secure apprenticeships for a number of Craigmore boys with English companies.
- Trained staff were made available to the Home.

The 35th Annual Report (1937) of Craigmore was, however, to be its last. 'The financial position of Craigmore has caused the committee keen anxiety for a number of years. Expenditure exceeded income, in spite of the greatest care in management, and we were obliged to call on our reserves. At the same time the social legislation of recent years and the extension of Widows' and Orphans' pensions made the necessity for Craigmore Home not so great as when it was established 35 years ago. In addition, the Orphan Home which came into operation during the war years, under the auspices of the Belfast Central Mission and which afterwards was transferred to Child Haven (Children's Home at Millisle), was doing a substantial share of the work.'

It was decided to amalgamate the two Homes and the work became centred at Millisle. The Craigmore Home closed at the end of August 1937¹ after providing care for over 300 boys. Eight children were transferred to Child Haven.

A DECLINE IN ATTENDANCES BUT NEW OPPORTUNITIES

The decline in churchgoing, which had been evident for many years in the remainder of the United Kingdom, was also beginning to have an impact on the Grosvenor Hall congregations. No longer were people having to be turned away on Sunday evenings – a 1937 Minute recorded that, 'The Sunday congregations are well maintained and it is not unusual to have 1,400 people present on a Sunday evening' (the second Grosvenor Hall held 2,000.) Sunday morning congregations numbered around 300 and an afternoon service was still being held. The aftermath

of the blitz which caused many families to leave Belfast, had a devastating effect on congregational numbers and these never returned to pre-war levels (averaging less than 1,200 in 1947).

In April 1943 a decision was taken to transfer the work at **Springfield Road** from the Sandy Row circuit to the Belfast Central Mission. Earlier in the month a fund had been established to assist in the building of a new Church there at the earliest opportunity. The Sandy Row Leaders did not feel that they could take on the additional responsibility at that time and so Springfield Road was transferred to the Mission circuit. **Conlon Street Hall** in the Skankill Road area was secured for use on Sundays and Thursdays at the end of 1944. The success of the work there was attributable largely to the fidelity of Willie Midgley (a long-term member of the Grosvenor Hall congregation), his wife, daughter and son-in-law Billy Boyd who had initiated it before requesting the Belfast Central Mission to take it under its care. A Saturday morning open-air service was started in the summer of 1948 by the Rev R R Cunningham, the second minister on the circuit, at the **High Street blitz site** and attracted an audience which could not be, 'Reached at any other time or in any other way.'

R R CUNNINGHAM – AN IRREPARABLE LOSS

The Methodist Conference first appointed the Rev R R Cunningham as second Minister at the Mission in the summer of 1939. At his very first Committee meeting he spoke of the splendid opportunities offered by the open-air work of the Mission and the rich rewards which sometimes resulted. The 'black-out' was soon to place the workers who attended at a disadvantage but, as the Rev Cunningham put it, 'When a man has something to say, he can gather and hold a crowd.' At the following Conference he moved to the Mountpottinger circuit but

his single year's service was recognised by an affectionate tribute at the Mission Committee which: 'was sorry to lose one of the best of the junior ministers whose personal charm of manner had been so much an asset.' He was, however, to return to Grosvenor Hall three years later as second minister on the circuit.

During the 1949 Irish Methodist Conference there was a seemingly insignificant request which was to have quite profound, although unforeseen, consequences for the future of the Belfast Central Mission. Arising from a discussion on the stationing of ministers, a very strong appeal was made to the Rev John N Spence, who was to have retired, to remain in the active work for another year. Having taken the weekend to think it over he decided to remain as Superintendent for a further year despite his apparent awareness that the Rev Cunningham was ready and willing to step into his shoes. In March he had made what was to have been his valedictory address at the 59th Anniversary services of the Mission. It is insightful to note some of the reflections he wished to impart to his audience on that occasion.

- In the previous 24 years the Mission had raised almost £100,000.
- In Grosvenor Hall and in the Child Haven Homes they possessed buildings admirably equipped for the work of the Mission.
- If ever the Mission were tempted to be a mere social agency it would cease to fulfil the purpose for which it was designed and would write its own epitaph.
- Its primary business was and is to bring men and women into living contact with God.

The Rev R R Cunningham did finally become Superintendent in 1950 but within three years he had made known to the Mission Committee his decision to become minister of St Andrew's-Wesley Church in Vancouver (part of the United Church of Canada). Many of the Grosvenor Hall congregation were devoted to the



Jameson, Joseph Browne



Born on 24 April 1903 at Mullycar, near Dungannon. Son of James Jameson, farmer, and Mary Jane (née Browne).

• • •

- Entered ministry from Ligoniel and Hyde Park circuit, aged 22.
- Received into full connexion as a Methodist preacher in 1931.
- Secretary of Conference 1948-55.
- 1954 Belfast Central Mission
- Died at Belfast on 20 August 1955.

'His dedicated gifts of leadership were used with distinction in the service of the Church.'

1

Baxter, Samuel Henry, MA DD



Born on 4 August 1908 at Belfast. Son of William, manager, Thomas McMullan & Co and Jane (née Foster).

• • •

- Converted aged 14.
- Lay evangelist at Crumlin Road 1928.
- Entered ministry from Crumlin Road, aged 20.
- Chairman of Londonderry District 1960-61.
- Chairman of Belfast District 1963-64.
- President of the Methodist Church in Ireland 1964.

1954 Belfast Central Mission

- Died 16 August 1988.

'He proclaimed the good news of the Gospel with fidelity and success.'

3

Rev Cunningham and they had eagerly anticipated his taking over the leadership of the Mission. He was perceived to have been formed in the same mould as his predecessors – Johnson, Ker and Spence – and still possessed the vigour of youthfulness. His decision to go was to leave many of them, 'perplexed, regretful, mystified and uncertain.' The deferral of the Rev John N Spence's retirement proved to have been too emotionally unsettling for him since it occurred just at the point when he was fully prepared to take on the role... and it was that frustration, together with a perceived lack of support from his ministerial brethren, which ultimately took him to Canada. Even with the benefit of hindsight it is difficult to evaluate just how significant a loss this was for both the congregation and the Mission.

Much was still achieved within the Grosvenor Hall congregation during the Rev Cunningham's four years in charge:

- The Saturday evening film service was established in 1950 following a Cinema Mission.

- Child Haven was registered as a Voluntary Children's Home on 27 September 1950.

- In 1952 a Leaders' Meeting was started, with two representatives being invited to attend from each organisation, in an effort to consolidate the work.

- A new company of the Girls Life Brigade (the 11th Belfast) was formed.

- In February 1953, 20 members were set aside as Leaders. Each would be responsible for visiting around 30 homes of congregation members.

- A communion table and rail were installed in the Hall and dedicated on 30 May 1954.

- It was from this era too that a service on Christmas morning for staff and workers originated.

In December 1950, the Superintendent obtained from the Mission Committee permission to lease a site on which to build accommodation for the work at **Conlon Street**. There were already over 60 girls attending a Bible class on Sunday afternoons and a Community Youth Centre was envisaged for the new premises. Two years later the need was still great but a licence to build could not be obtained. Good work, however, continued to be done in the existing Hall under the leadership of Billy Boyd. Plans for the proposed new building were produced in 1953. A tender for the new church at **Springfield Road** was accepted at the beginning of 1954 and the stone-laying ceremony took place in May of the same year.

The departure of the Cunningham

family for Canada in 1954 was the final occasion on which the congregation came together to say farewell to one of their own seeking a different life in new surroundings. This author was present, as a three year old on that evening. His late father, Jack Weir, wrote about the scene²: 'Thursday evening, 3 June, found all roads leading to the Liverpool shed in Belfast. The Grosvenor Hall Military Band, accompanied by the stewards of the Mission, marched from the Hall to the boat. The Hall Choir was present on the quayside. At about 8.15 Mr Cunningham and his family arrived. By this time, according to one press report, over three thousand people were present. Trying to press their way from the street to the boat through this tremendous crowd was no easy task. Shaking hands, a parting word here, and a farewell salute to someone in the distance, they made their way on board. Several times Mr Cunningham had to come down the gangway at the request of the crowd. The band played outside the shed and as the boat moved off the choir, together with the vast company of people, joined in singing 'The Lord's my Shepherd'. Mr Cunningham and his family stood on deck and waved to those tear-stained, sore-hearted people on the dockside, his own loyal people of the Mission.'

CHANGING SCENES

'Changing Scenes' was the title of the Belfast Central Mission's report for 1954. It noted that for the first time in its history the Mission had a complete change of ministerial staff; and for the first time it had a Superintendent who had no previous association with the work. 'Accustomed as it has been to sustained and stable leadership' the removal of all three ministers meant a serious dislocation to the work at all centres of activity. The **Rev Joe Jameson** had seemed to be an ideal choice to take on the responsibilities of Superintendent at such a critical moment. His intellectual gifts had already been recognised by the wider Church with his appointment as Secretary of Conference in 1948. He was an efficient administrator but was also an able preacher and a most helpful pastor. His premature death in August 1955, at the age of 52, following a short illness, brought a sense of great loss and uncertainty to the members of the Mission.

His senior colleague, the **Rev Samuel Baxter**, was appointed to act for the remainder of the connexional year before his role as Superintendent was ratified at the following Conference. During that transitional period he found the vast experience and wise counsel of the Rev



On the quayside.

John N Spence invaluable. In March 1957 he intimated to the Mission Committee that he wished to retire from the position at the forthcoming Conference as he believed he did not possess the necessary qualities to be Superintendent of a City Mission adding that he hoped they would accede to his request. His resignation was accepted.

The new **Springfield Road** premises were opened and dedicated on Sunday 17 September 1955. Work was also ongoing at **Conlon Street** but discussions about building a new hall were becoming more complex. A request for permission to build went to the 1955 Conference but, because the area was within the bounds of the Agnes Street circuit, the Belfast District Synod appointed a committee to consult on the matter. After exhaustive discussions the decision was taken not to proceed and all activities in Conlon Street terminated at the end of June 1956 because of the inadequacy of the existing premises.

A PERIOD OF REFLECTION

When the Rev Eric Gallagher took on the role of Superintendent in 1957 he invested time in assessing the state of the city and the functionality of the Mission as it approached its 70th year in existence. His notes provide important information and insights:

- There were now only two services on Sunday. The Mission 'faithful', never amounting to more than 150, attended both services. The evening congregation, still in excess of 1,000, was comprised of four different elements (the 'faithful'; other Mission members who maintained the old Belfast habit of only attending in the evening; members from other Churches who attended regularly; people who were attracted by the subject of that week's sermon). There was also a Morning Sunday School; Men's Class; BB Bible Class; the Afternoon Sunday School; and the Youth Fellowship (following the evening service).

- Meetings and organisations occupied every weeknight (Boys' Brigade – including Life Boys and Old Boys' Association; Male Voice Choir; Women's Fellowship Guild; Christian Endeavour; Bowling Club; Military Band; Wednesday Women's Meeting; Meeting for Prayer and Bible Study; Choir; Girl's Life Brigade; Youth Club).

- The Film Service took place on Saturday nights. It was not unusual for a queue to begin to form 90 minutes before the 7.30pm start and often many had to be turned away.

- Pastoral oversight was provided for about 900 families scattered throughout Belfast and beyond.

- Breakfasts were provided every morning for men from the city's lodging houses.

- Residential care for children and adolescents together with a holiday programme for both young and old were still provided at Child Haven.

The new Superintendent took a very different view to that which had been expressed by his predecessor the Rev John N Spence only eight years earlier:

- Neither the Grosvenor Hall nor its Ker Memorial Wing were suitable for the kind of work needed in the late 1950s but there was little which could be done to adapt either building.

- Child Haven was now being inspected by the Children's branch of the Ministry of Home Affairs and it had been highlighted that it did not possess the comfort or amenities of statutory Homes. A member of the Mission Committee described it as, 'The coldest and bleakest building on the County Down coast.' As the Committee had decided not to accept children sponsored by the Welfare Authorities its future was also questionable.

- The Holiday Home had also been designed at a modest cost to accept as many children as possible at a time of deprivation and mass unemployment. It was no longer fit for purpose.

- Springfield Road Church, which had opened only a few years earlier, had an ineffective heating system and drainage and sewerage problems with serious health implications.

The Superintendent also visited Mission centres in Bradford, Sheffield and Leeds and learned of problems which had not yet reached the Belfast Central Mission. These included ageing buildings requiring major repairs and upkeep but no resources for the work; depopulation of the inner cities; and even the effect of rising bus fares on city centre congregations.

Almost 50 years ago, in September

1965, the Mission Committee discussed the effects of change and concluded that:

- Compulsory purchase of houses for redevelopment would cause real hardship for residents.

- Church boundaries would certainly change and some churches would close.

- It would be necessary to keep in mind the changing pattern of social service needs.

At that time it was a realistic assessment of the future but could not have anticipated the effects of the 'Troubles' which were to change everything before the decade was over.

Dr Gallagher later wrote that, in 1968, although urban re-development was beginning to affect the congregation, it had not reached alarming proportions. For example, there were still four 'visiting districts' on the Grosvenor Road (based on the plan originally set out by the Rev R M Ker in 1902) and each would keep a member of the pastoral staff busy every afternoon for a week. However, ten years later there was only one family with links to the congregation in that whole area. In 1968 members from the Lower Shankill (and there were many of them) could walk to church along Townsend Street and Conway Street or utilise other similar arteries between the 'Shankill' and the 'Falls'. Two years later the 'Peace Line' had made that journey impossible.

DONEGALL SQUARE JOINS THE BELFAST CENTRAL MISSION CIRCUIT

Another issue emerged, which was to greatly trouble the Rev Eric Gallagher and take up an inordinate amount of Finance Committee, Mission Committee and Leaders' Meetings time over a lengthy period of years. On 1 July 1976, following lengthy discussions, Donegall Square and the Belfast Central Mission were united into one circuit at the 'direction' of Conference. In August he wrote a paper reflecting on the historical background and identifying a number of 'new possibilities.' These included:

- Co-ordination of preaching and congregational worship.

- Introduction of systematic teaching to counter religious ignorance and misunderstanding.

- Establishment of new forms of communication between the three congregations.

- Provision of pastoral concern for workers and others at the centre of the city.

- Undertaking of relevant forms of spiritual outreach.

- Provision of 'civic' witness



CE Society Missionary play 1950.



'Brother Men'.



'A helping hand'.



Women's meeting.

especially to City Hall and its staff.

- Establishment of new forms of service in and to the community.
- Promotion of Christian witness through music, drama, poetry, etc.
- Presentation of the Christian viewpoint to politicians, trade unionists and community leaders.
- An ecumenical stance – if we belong together we should act together.

In the course of his thinking he made an important observation. 'The Grosvenor Hall means too much to its members and its name to the general public to warrant any early decision to vacate the site. The financial loss involved in such a decision could be colossal.' It was, however, an acknowledgement that the future of the Mission was already under discussion.

By November 1978, Donegall Square was proposing an amalgamation of the congregations. Towards the close of the following year the new Superintendent, the Rev Norman Taggart, spoke at some length to the Finance Committee on this matter. He believed that its future was within the circuit and referred to the centrality of their site. He also suggested that, in view of declining numbers, it would be possible for the Donegall Square minister to assist in the work of the Mission. The general discussion which followed produced a cautious response. Five years later the 'Square' leaders requested that Conference should permit them to withdraw from the circuit. The rationale given was that they wished the Church to regain its circuit status, have its own minister and be able to control its own future. Permission was granted.

DID THE GROSVENOR HALL HAVE A FUTURE?

As early as 1979 consideration was being given to the future of the 'Hall' and the possibility of reducing the area used for ongoing Sunday worship. The Finance Committee initiated a review of the sustainability of the Grosvenor Hall, of future demand for lettings and the advisability of a plan for further improvements. A year later the suggestion was put forward that the Ker Memorial Hall could perhaps be adapted instead, which would substantially reduce heating costs, and that idea was favourably received. The Grosvenor Hall Leaders approved overwhelmingly. The necessary alterations were begun and the congregation ended worship in the main auditorium. The future of the main Hall was now seriously in question, both for Methodist usage and for other purposes, with the likelihood of ever-diminishing occupancy leading to further deterioration.

The Mission was approached in 1980 by the Extern organisation for use of part of the warehouse premises, 'For needy people requiring day facilities and possibly overnight accommodation.' As this was in keeping with the Mission's social ethos, the concept received encouragement. Whilst renovation work was being undertaken however, a serious case of dry rot was discovered which considerably delayed the project. By the end of August 1982 that work was finally completed but other structural issues were discovered and further major remedial work continued into 1984. The Extern project operated in the factory building until its lease expired in May 1991. Around the same period NSPCC was granted daytime use of the Youth Wing (at the Grosvenor Road side of the main hall complex) for use as a play school.

In 1981 a direction from the Belfast District Synod required the Mission to consider possible co-operation with the Sandy Row circuit. The Rev Taggart advised the Finance Committee that he had given the matter considerable thought and outlined a number of possibilities:

- Co-operation but using only the Grosvenor Hall premises.
- Construct a new building in Sandy Row and end some work at Grosvenor Hall.
- Only retain administration at Grosvenor Hall and all worship to be in Sandy Row Church.

No action was approved other than that exploratory meetings were to be organised with both sets of leaders. After these initial consultations had taken place, the impression emerged that there would be a willingness within Primitive Street and Sandy Row Churches for them to work together to form one congregation in a new building somewhere in the area. It was, therefore, generally agreed that some form of Methodist witness should continue in Sandy Row based on modest multi-use premises linked, in some way, to the Mission. By the end of 1982 a plan had evolved to replace the existing Sandy Row Church with a dual-purpose hall.

A wide variety of expensive property problems, encompassing all the Mission sites, were by now dominating the agenda of Finance Committee meetings. Early in 1982 a potential solution to the Grosvenor Hall question presented itself. The Ulster Orchestra was considering its use as a permanent rehearsal centre and envisaged occupying it for about three days a week. It had made an offer of £4,000 rental per annum and would assume responsibility for heating the building. Billy Patterson, the Mission Secretary, voiced his concern that rating



exemption could be lost since the Hall now had only nominal religious use. It appears that his point of view prevailed and a significant opportunity to keep the Hall in regular use and heated throughout the year was lost.

By the spring of 1983 the question of the large hall was again occupying the minds of the Finance Committee. It was agreed that an approach should be made to City Hall to see if any interest could be aroused there concerning its future. Significantly, The Committee was in agreement that the Mission should seek to maintain a presence of some kind on the site and that the name, Belfast Central Mission – Grosvenor Hall, should be retained.

The effect of the ‘Troubles’ was, however, taking its toll and the Mission Committee faced up to the probable demise of the Grosvenor Hall. It passed the following resolution in September 1983:

1. The Mission Committee, conscious of the contribution made by the Belfast Central Mission to the life of Belfast over many years, reaffirms its commitment to Christian service and outreach amidst the many changes taking place and planned for the city.

2. Recognising that the main Grosvenor Hall is underused by the Mission and by wider Methodism, and that the cost of maintaining the property is becoming increasingly prohibitive, the Mission Committee recommends to the

Trustees that urgent attention be given to releasing the financial assets locked up in buildings so that the work of the Mission can be advanced.

3. The Mission Committee expresses the hope that, if the main Grosvenor Hall is disposed of in the interests of the wider Mission, it will be possible to retain the present Ker Memorial wing, or a site in the same vicinity, as a strategic centre for continuing work in the inner city.

Four days later, following a lengthy discussion, the Trustees adopted a subtly different proposal unanimously:

‘The Trustees, in the light of the discussion, resolve to consider whatever steps may be necessary for re-planning or replacing its present buildings on all or part of the present site. The importance of continuity of witness on the present site is stressed. They authorise the Superintendent and Finance Committee to investigate all possibilities and report back to the Trustees.’

During the course of 1985 the Donegall Square Trustees had taken professional advice from property surveyors concerning the future of their Church and were told ‘Do not spend any money on this building.’ At their Quarterly Meeting in January 1986 their Trustees proposed, ‘That we seek to have the building de-listed (the Church was a listed building), redevelop the site with Church premises in the new building and hold the congregation together for a further witness in Donegall Square.’

The legal advice they had received was that if there was no explicit intention of replacing the existing building with another which incorporated Church premises there would be no hope of receiving de-listing. An amendment was added to the original resolution, ‘and that we hold conversations with Belfast Central Mission and Connexional Officers to seek their co-operation’ and the composite resolution was passed. The Rev Sidney Frame, the Donegall Square minister, then wrote to the Superintendent, the Rev Taggart, inviting the Mission to share in discussions about co-operation in Methodist witness in the city centre. In March the Rev Frame confirmed what had formerly been implied – that Donegall Square felt compelled to think in terms only of continuing Methodist witness and possible co-operation on their site.

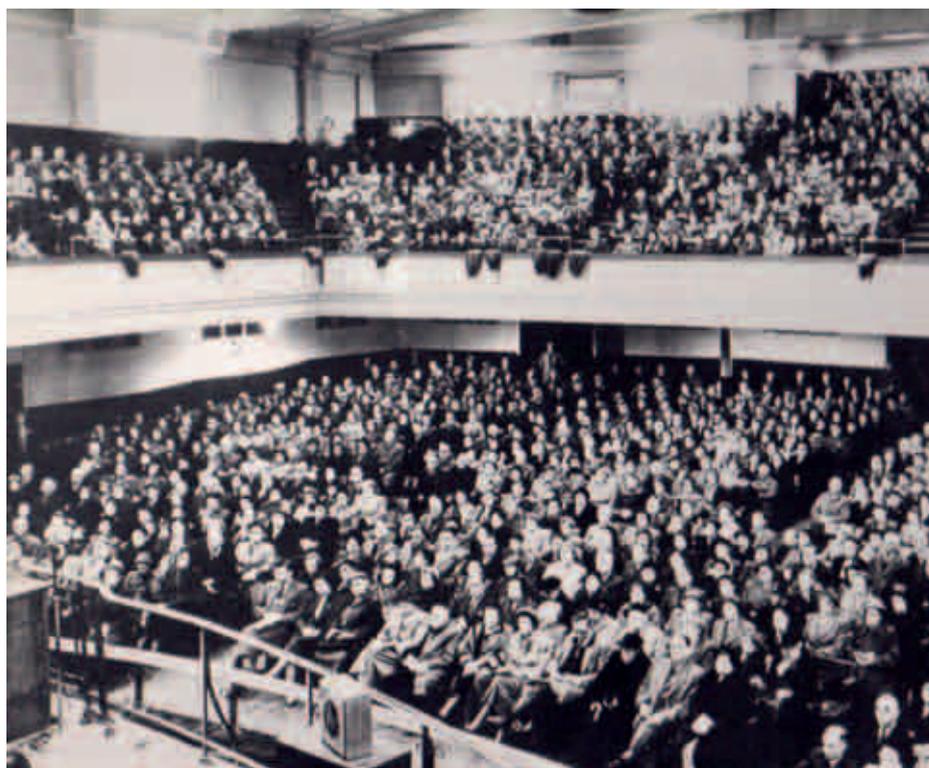
The Mission Committee and the Grosvenor Hall Leaders accepted the invitation and informal contacts were established. By December both these bodies had clearly defined their position:

‘The relationship between the Grosvenor Hall congregation and the wider work of the Belfast Central Mission has always been close, the one complimenting the other. It is the unanimous view of the Mission Executive and the Grosvenor Hall Leaders that this is best maximised by housing the congregation and the Mission’s headquarters under one roof. On the basis of information received from Donegall Square, it would appear that, for lack of space, important aspects of the Mission’s work could not be accommodated within the area reserved for church purposes in the proposed new development.’

‘Serious consideration has been given to the possibility of the Mission buying additional space within the Donegall Square development. It is, however, the view of the Executive that to do this would not be an act of wise stewardship. The costs would be exceptionally high on such a prime commercial site and the advantages would be questionable from the point of view of missionary strategy.’

‘The Committee (and Leaders) therefore reaffirms its (their) convictions that the best long-term interests of the Mission’s witness and service lies in developing its work in new or refurbished premises on or near the present site.’

There was a renewed vision and there was hope but there was no certainty about a future for the Belfast Central Mission at its historic location. During the Superintendency of Rev David Kerr, however, the third Grosvenor Hall did become reality (see Chapter 7).



Grosvenor Hall (1927-95).



CHAPTER 6

Ecumenism & Peacemaking

The Belfast Central Mission was established at a time of great turmoil in the city which it sought to serve. Throughout its history it avoided sectarianism and responded to need without reference to creed. As the 20th century progressed the focus on ecumenism (initiatives aimed at greater Christian unity or co-operation) and peacemaking necessarily increased. The Rev Eric Gallagher, Superintendent during the era of the 'Troubles', was one of the architects of the peace process in Northern Ireland.

ATTITUDES TO SECTARIANISM AND POLITICS

The Rev Crawford Johnson, the first Superintendent, was a Liberal Unionist and during the Home Rule agitation of 1893 he: 'Interviewed many of the leading English Nonconformists and placed the views of their Ulster co-religionists before them in an effective manner.' As a supporter of the Holiness Movement, he also delighted in the movement towards Christian union which had been encouraged towards the end of the 19th century. 'Formerly Christians tried to find out their points of difference; now they are employed in the happier task of finding out their points of agreement... At Keswick the power of Christian holiness to unite was beautifully exemplified and during the time that I spent there I never saw an Episcopalian, a Presbyterian, a Baptist, and thank God, I never saw a Methodist.

In September 1902 the Rev R M Ker preached a sermon 'Protestantism – True and False!' in the course of which he set out his position regarding those of a different religious background: 'Toward you I have nought but a feeling of kindness and brotherly interest. I am not here to play the part of the political enthusiast; I am not here to damn all those who disagree with me; denunciation never leads any man into light. I am only here to give my experience and tell you what I consider to be Protestantism.' Early in 1910 he received a telephone enquiry, 'May I ask is it a fact that you advised your Sabbath audiences in Grosvenor Hall to vote for (named candidates) in the Belfast elections?' A prompt and plain denial was the answer but the charges of partisanship continued. In responding, he

set out the position of the Mission very clearly. 'Our members will sympathise with us: they have heard our utterances from the platform and know how unusually careful the staff has been not to interfere with any man in the exercise of the franchise. We hope that those who worship in the Hall and who have votes, did vote; as to how they voted we know not, we take it that was a matter that they settled between their conscience and their God.' Throughout the years this has been the position articulated by every Superintendent of the Mission.

THE HOME RULE CRISIS (1912)

In 1912, the Trustees of the Mission had to respond to two significant requests for use of the Grosvenor Hall which tested their neutrality further. The first was from the Lord Mayor of Belfast to employ it as a military barracks, if needed, in connection with Mr Winston Churchill's controversial visit (Churchill was a supporter of Home Rule). After due consideration a response was sent to the Lord Mayor regretting that they would have to refuse his request as the use of the building for the ongoing work associated with Grosvenor Hall left them no option in the matter.

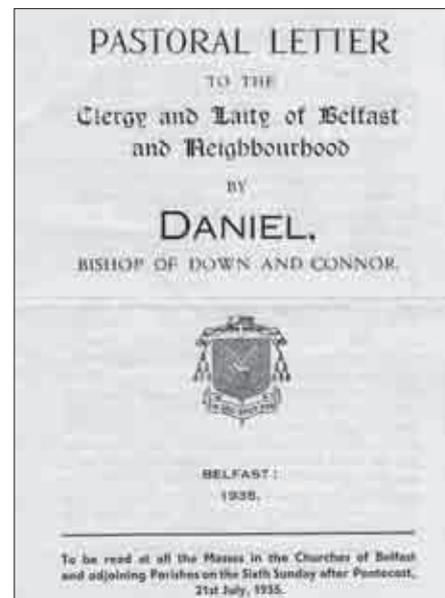
Around the same time a letter was received from the Secretary of the Methodist Anti-Home Rule Committee asking that the Hall be reserved for their purposes on 14 March. A preliminary meeting of this group had been held in the minor hall of the Ulster Hall and a letter was subsequently sent by them to *The Irish Christian Advocate* announcing the decision to hold a massive Methodist demonstration. Amongst its signatories was John B McCutcheon, one of the honorary secretaries, who also happened to be the Mission's solicitor. The Rev R M Ker referred to the advice he had received from Mr McCutcheon that meetings should not be held in the Hall which were not associated with the work of the Mission. He asked any Trustees who were on the Anti-Home Rule Committee to explain, more clearly than he could by way of letter, the Mission's position on the matter. A second request was made and the Trustees received a deputation which pressed for the initial decision to be reversed. When they withdrew the Minutes report that, 'A long and earnest conversation took place – the matter

being regarded from both the legal and also from the standpoint of the influence such a demonstration might have upon the work of the Mission itself.' When a vote was taken the request was declined on a 4-2 vote (the Rev Crawford Johnson, the Rev R M Ker and T F Shillington all voted against).

THE TROUBLED 1930s

Historians differ regarding the roles of the respective Churches during the Poor Law disputes of 1932 but it is clear that Protestants and Catholics focused on providing support to their own communities. The 'Protestant Churches Distress Relief Fund' provided aid to one group whilst the St Vincent de Paul Society helped the other. There is little on the record to indicate that co-operation of any sort between the Churches might have taken place. The Outdoor Relief riots, however, did bring individual Catholics and Protestants together to demonstrate side by side in protest at the cutting of unemployment assistance (ref Chapter 4).

Unfortunately violence soon resumed its sectarian pattern. In 1935 after several months of rising tension, riots broke out during the Orange parades on 12 July. Over the next week, 2,000 people, mainly Catholics, were forced from their homes by the rioters. They were driven out of workplaces and several were killed in sectarian attacks. The majority of the 11 people killed in the 1935 riots were





Protestants but most of those forced from their homes (86%) and injured were Catholic.

On 19 July, the Superintendent the Rev John N Spence wrote to Bishop Mageean (Bishop of Down and Connor) on behalf of the Protestant Churches proposing an appeal from the leaders of all the Christian Churches to promote peace. The letter received a very positive response:

‘Gentlemen,

In reply to your letter to hand this morning, I wish to say that I learned with pleasure that a meeting of the Clergy and Ministers of the Protestant Churches in Belfast was held last evening in order to promote the peace of the city.

I quite agree with the opinion unanimously expressed that an appeal for peace in the names of the leaders of all the Christian Churches should be very helpful in the interests of peace. In accordance with this conviction I had already issued an appeal in a Pastoral Letter, now in the hands of the clergy, which will be read tomorrow, Sunday, in all the Catholic Churches of the city and of adjoining parishes. I beg to enclose a copy of this pastoral, in which you will see that I express an assurance that all such efforts will have the help and co-operation of the whole Catholic community.’

The penultimate paragraph of his Pastoral Letter¹ read as follows:

‘Before I conclude I bear testimony with pleasure to the courage and vision of many high-minded Non-Catholics of this City, clerics and laity, men and women, who are endeavoring to assuage the angry passions of men that have been evoked within the past few weeks to establish tolerance and fraternal charity in our midst, to wipe out the bitter memories of the past and to rehabilitate Belfast in the eyes of the civilized world. In your name and in my own I assure them that they will have the help and co-operation of the whole Catholic community.’

THE REV R D ERIC GALLAGHER

In 1957 the Mission Committee was confronted with the daunting task of nominating a fourth Superintendent following the retirement of the Rev John N Spence less than seven years earlier (having had only three in the previous 61 years). The Rev Gallagher later admitted (in his autobiographical notes²) that he had never perceived himself to be a ‘mission type’. The Rev R R Cunningham had exerted a lot of pressure in 1950 for him to join as ‘Associate Superintendent’ but he had turned down the invitation on the grounds that he did not feel suited for the role nor did he believe

that Irish Methodism would accept such a departure from the status quo. He was not to know then that, in addition to having to oversee the work of this major city mission, his ministry at the Grosvenor Hall would encompass the worst of ‘the Troubles’. During his period as Superintendent he was to speak consistently and fearlessly, with prophetic words, from the Grosvenor Hall platform although he probably often felt that he was ‘the voice of one crying in the wilderness.’ History has subsequently proved that there was no one better fitted for the challenges which were to lie ahead.

From early in the Rev Gallagher’s ministry, ecumenism was to the fore. In 1946 the Irish Methodist Conference appointed him as a member of the newly formed Youth Committee of the Irish Churches which led to his attendance at the World Conference of Christian Youth in Oslo (1947). In the following year he became one of the representatives on the Irish Council of Churches (then known as the United Council of Christian Churches and Religious Communion in Ireland). After the inaugural Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam, he and the Rev Jim Boyd (later Professor James R Boyd of the Presbyterian Union College) organised a follow-up residential conference at the Methodist College Belfast in July 1949. In the same year he became convenor of the Church’s Committee on Co-operation with other Churches (later known as the Inter-Church Relations Committee).

THE GROSVENOR HALL PULPIT

The churches in 1958 were still of interest to the media and the Rev Eric Gallagher’s words became increasingly reported because of his dual role as Secretary of the Methodist Church in Ireland and Superintendent of the Belfast Central Mission. Much of what was preached from the Grosvenor Hall pulpit attracted attention and reporters regularly attended the Sunday evening services (from the earliest days of the Mission it had been the custom to publicise the sermon titles in the weekend newspaper advertisements). The Saturday evening Film Service, although not suitable for sermons on either the gospel or current affairs, nevertheless provided an opportunity to make a special plea for commitment or to refer to significant events. The open-air services on the steps of the Custom House on Sunday afternoons were also a public occasion. They were attended by regulars and casual observers (of all denominations) as well as a number of hecklers and

Gallagher, Robert David Eric, CBE MA BD DD



Born on 24 August 1913 at Ballybay, Co Monaghan. Son of the Rev Robert Henry Gallagher and Helena Sarah (née McIlroy).

• • •

- Secretary of Conference 1958-67.
 - Chairman of Irish Council of Churches 1966-68.
 - Vice President of British Council of Churches.
 - Chairman of Belfast District 1967-70.
 - President of the Methodist Church in Ireland 1967.
 - Member of the Opsahl Commission. 1957 Belfast Central Mission 43
21 as Supernumerary
 - Died on 30 December 1999.
- ‘He worked tirelessly for a just society, spoke clearly and consistently on the side of fairness, and led by example in taking risks to create peace.’*

from time to time there was also orchestrated opposition.

During the autumn of that year, prompted by a series of talks being given in Clonard Monastery, the Superintendent and his colleague the Rev Richard Greenwood preached a succession of sermons about Protestant principles to explain the theology upon which Protestantism was based. On 12 October the Rev Gallagher took as his subject ‘the Catholicity of Protestant belief and how Protestants viewed Apostolic Succession.’ It so happened that Pope Pius XII had died a few days earlier and he expressed sympathy with the Catholic people. ‘Whilst Protestants could not accept all the theories and dogmas associated with the Papacy, they nevertheless realised that the late Pope had, by the quality of his life and influence, borne a witness in the world that was beyond all computation.’ After the service he was thanked by some for the sermon but only minutes later he received an anonymous phone call containing a torrent of abuse for daring to appreciate,



or sympathise with, any Roman Catholic let alone the Pope. The November issue of *The Revivalist* (the newspaper of the Free Presbyterian Church) also included an attack on both the sermon and the preacher. This was just a foretaste of what the Superintendent was going to have to become accustomed to as time went on.

A PROPHET OF IMPENDING DISASTER FOR ULSTER

As early as 1960 the Rev Gallagher was warning of ominous developments in the religious life of the Province. *The Northern Whig* quoted from his address at the Remembrance Day service in Grosvenor Hall. He had said, 'We in Ulster are waging a senseless and suicidal religious civil war which could easily bring disaster.' At the start of the following year he participated with Principal James Haire (Presbyterian) and Professor Canon Anthony Hanson (Anglican) in a series of discussions on Christian Unity. The Superintendent stated his position thus, 'Whether I like it or not I am driven inexorably to the firm conclusion that God's will for the Church is that it should be one.' He considered the question of union to be purely academic but, 'That does not remove the obligation to remember that members of the Church of Rome are part of Christendom.'

In the following years there was growing evidence of an anti-ecumenical attitude within the Protestant churches and by 1964 Irish Methodism felt it necessary to re-affirm its doctrinal position³. The Superintendent found himself increasingly under attack and criticism. After the Irish Methodist Conference he stated that the action taken had been caused by, 'Misapprehension at best and misrepresentation at worst.' Referring to Roman Catholicism he said, 'Let us remember that our adherence to our beliefs and doctrines must never mean a Pharisaic sense of superiority to our Roman Catholic fellow-countrymen. They are neighbours in the New Testament sense as well as in the civic sense... In this Province there is much for us to do together... There is the greatest evangelistic task this century on our doorstep. I cannot believe that God is calling us to that task and asking us at every turn to maintain our religious guerrilla warfare... A gospel of reconciliation will never be preached effectively by those who have no desire for reconciliation among themselves.'

During that autumn trouble erupted in Belfast. Sinn Féin had displayed a tricolour (illegal at the time) in the window of a shop on the Falls Road which it was using as an election office. Ian Paisley warned that if either Sinn Féin or

the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) failed to remove the flag he would organise a march and take it down himself. As tensions increased and the deadline approached the police broke into the shop and took it down. Predictably there were riots and buses were burned in Divis Street. As the situation worsened representatives of the three main Protestant churches decided to meet to consider what, if any, action they should take. On the morning of the meeting John Sayers, Editor-in-Chief of the *Belfast Telegraph*, called the Superintendent at his Grosvenor Hall office to find out what the Churches were doing. He asked if the Roman Catholic Church was involved and the negative response was unacceptable to an Editor who had also been encouraging Ulster to think along forward-looking lines. 'If Monsignor Mullally (acting for Bishop Philbin who was in Rome) is prepared to join you – would you meet with him?' The Rev Gallagher said 'yes but he couldn't speak for the other representatives.' In the event, an inclusive gathering took place and the result was a joint appeal in the name of all four Churches.

At the 1965 Mission Anniversary the Chair was taken by Mr Sayers who paid tribute to the work and influence of the Mission in the emerging unrest. That evening the Rev Gallagher said 'I look out tonight on a city that needs, as it has never needed before, the gospel of reconciliation. What Ulster needs above all is a new soul, a quality of life and a new understanding of all that the Christian gospel of reconciliation stands for. That will mean more than adopting rigid postures.' Clearly some in Irish Methodism were listening to his words as the Conference of 1966 designated him as President of the Methodist Church in Ireland from June 1967.

By January, however, Northern Ireland was inexorably *en route* to the violence which was to erupt so disastrously two years later. An invitation to the Bishop of Ripon (then co-chairman of the Anglican Roman Catholic Consultation process) to visit St Anne's Cathedral had to be withdrawn by the Dean, Cuthbert Peacock, after threats of demonstrations and consequent pressure from the RUC and government. The *Belfast Newsletter* had as its main front page lead on Monday 6 February, under a banner headline 'Ulster Now in Danger', a report of what the Rev Gallagher had said in the Grosvenor Hall on Sunday. In heavy type were the words 'Fear is rampant in Ulster with three of the *Four Freedoms*⁴ called into question.' It went on to state that, 'Freedom of speech has been called in

question. Freedom from fear is denied and freedom to worship without interference and annoyance is at risk. The issue is the soul of Ulster and its place in the modern world.'

The Belfast Central Mission Superintendent became increasingly in demand for contributions to both radio and television and was frequently interviewed regarding both church and community issues. Whilst there were often messages of gratitude for his comments there were also numerous, mostly anonymous, communications received which were very personal, abusive and occasionally threatening. Although he was able to protect his family from reading such mail, hostile telephone calls to the manse were much more problematic. These generally came in the evening although a favourite time was between two and five in the morning. Arrangements had to be put in place to ensure that the children did not answer such calls. There was even an attack on a former Mission manse in Wellington Park shortly after the family vacated it. A high price had to be paid for speaking out.

ULSTER AT THE CROSSROADS

Meanwhile signs of unrest continued to appear and by 1968 the 'civil rights' marches were taking place. On the advice of the university chaplains who feared that the situation was getting out of hand, and acting in his capacity as Chairman of the Irish Council of Churches, The superintendent led a delegation (comprising the Primate, Moderator, Dr Alfred Martin and himself) to meet Terence O'Neill, then Prime Minister of Northern Ireland. They expressed concern at the deteriorating situation; that many students were motivated by idealism and a desire to see a just society; and that as Churches they were anxious to be of help. The Prime Minister said that a message signed by all the Church Leaders would be of great help. A statement was released over the signatures of the Primate, Moderator and President – the Cardinal did not put his name to it but indicated that it had his approval.

On 7 December, the Rev Jack Weir, Primate McCann and the Superintendent met and decided to write 'confidentially in their personal capacities' to the UK Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, to express their view that the situation was becoming polarised and that they feared an explosion of real violence if confrontation continued. Two days later Terence O'Neill made his dramatic 'Ulster at the Crossroads' broadcast which generated much goodwill across the community. In the light of that response Ulster



Television put out a special Christmas broadcast, which the Rev Gallagher was asked to chair. Terence O'Neill and the Leader of the Opposition, Eddie McAteer read passages of Scripture of their own choosing.



Wilson also responded individually with long letters to the Rev Jack Weir, the Primate and the Superintendent on 23 December. He hoped that the reform programme which had been announced would help and continued 'I very much agree with your views about the importance of holding moderate opinion together and trying to relax tension. I understand that for a few weeks at least the Civil Rights movement intends to stop public demonstrations.' Unfortunately the Burntollet⁵ 'ambush', which left its mark on Irish political history, happened at the beginning of 1969.

In the New Year, having met Cardinal Conway informally prior to Christmas, the Rev Gallagher had a more formal meeting with him to discuss the Irish Council of Churches' (ICC) idea of a Joint Advisory Group on community relations. After considerable discussion the Cardinal said that there were difficulties on his side which needed consideration but the proposal was worth looking at. He would like to bring a letter from the Leaders of the Protestant Churches, setting out their suggestions, to a meeting of his Bishops. The ICC Executive met during the following week and, as well as drafting the letter to the Cardinal, put out another to the press concerning the Burntollet ambush which stated 'that activity of this kind is in flagrant contradiction to the accepted principles of true Protestantism.' The Superintendent also felt strongly that it should press for a judicial or high level enquiry into the recent events and their causes and had prepared another draft letter to the Northern Ireland Prime Minister. The Executive approved, the Prime Minister was grateful for it, and the Cameron Commission was set up within days. The response from the Cardinal was also favourable and a meeting was arranged.

On the evening of 21 April a representative of Ulster Television (UTV) scoured the city for the Superintendent and discovered him listening to trial sermons by probationer Ministers in Primitive Street Church. He had been

commissioned to find the Rev Eric Gallagher and persuade him to go to the UTV studios immediately but that was out of the question until the service was over. He got there shortly after 9.45pm and was met by Brum Henderson, the Managing Director of UTV and several of his religious advisors. They said that the Province was in turmoil but the Prime Minister and his Cabinet had been silent over the weekend, the Primate and the Moderator had said nothing, and people wanted someone to give a lead. Would he speak at the end of the Ten O'Clock News?

'I asked what they wanted me to say and for how long.' The response was – whatever you like and for as long as you like. They had already, in faith, put out a number of news flashes indicating that the Rev Eric Gallagher would speak to the Province at 10.30pm. 'It was like being in a condemned cell. It was hard to think. I prayed. I jotted down seeming irrelevancies. Then I was brought to the studio. In the rush I forgot the notes and had to start without them. They were pushed in while I spoke. I cannot remember what I said or how long it took to say it. It did however meet with a quite unexpected response. Ulster Television claimed that it had a marked and calming effect.'

Four days later the Cabinet Office contacted him with an urgent message from Terence O'Neill. Earlier in the week he had announced the policy of 'one man one vote' which appeared to take heat out of the community situation and a number of planned protest marches had been called off. One was still to take place on Saturday in Strabane and this was causing great concern. Could he contact 'Armagh' (meaning Cardinal Conway) and use any influence he had to get the march called off? He was at liberty to quote the Prime Minister's concern. Within two hours the Cardinal had released a statement calling for a reduction in tension and contact had been made with the Strabane organisers. The march was called off but by Monday 28 April the Prime Minister had resigned.

The Province was moving into self-destruct mode. Friday 15 August 1969 turned out to be a very significant day both for the Mission and its Superintendent. Early that morning a request was received from the Belfast Welfare Office to make Grosvenor Hall ready to act as a refugee centre. Provisional plans already in place for such an emergency were put into action. During the course of the next week shelter was provided to 56 people, from both sides of the community. Long term, meaningful, contacts were established with Catholic agencies in West Belfast and

the Belfast Central Mission was able to share supplies of food and clothing with them.

At about the same moment the Secretary of the Unionist Party (whose headquarters was next door to the Grosvenor Hall) asked to see the Superintendent urgently because, waiting in his office, were some men from the shipyard who wanted to talk to him. They were a group of shop stewards led by Sandy Scott who explained that they were deeply troubled by events taking place in the city. On the previous night violence had erupted in the Shankill/Falls area and feelings were running high in the yard. They wanted to do everything possible to ensure that it did not break out there. The decision had been taken to hold a mass meeting at lunchtime and they were hoping to get a Cabinet Minister to speak at it but they also wanted the Rev Gallagher to talk to the men. In his autobiographical notes the Rev Gallagher wrote, 'I simply did not see myself as having either competence or qualification or acceptability to address such a meeting and I told them so... they must be aware of the stance I had taken over the years.' One of the men whom he knew to be a strong Unionist replied that they had taken that into account and Sandy Scott said that it was time everyone stood up and was counted. That clinched it as far as the Superintendent was concerned.

The Rev Jim Rea, then a theological student working in Grosvenor Hall during the summer months, was deputed to drive to enable the Rev Gallagher to have some thinking time. He recalled that on the way to the shipyard he was asked, 'What am I to say?' The outdoor platform was the flat roof of a single-storey building and was reached by climbing a ladder. Sandy Scott opened the meeting and was followed by Roy Bradford, a Minister in the Stormont government. Whilst this was happening one of the stewards tugged at his arm and said 'Will you finish your speech with a prayer?' He wrote in his notes... I looked at him and I looked at the crowd and I thought him bereft of his senses. 'Look at the crowd,' I said, 'How would they take it? Ask the other stewards, and if they want it, I will have a prayer.' Just as he was being called to speak there was another tug at his arm and the word was 'They want you to pray.'

He recorded that he had no recollection of what happened next but the event was the subject of a series of articles in the *Irish Times* later that year which provided a helpful record. The journalist, Michael McInerney based his report on information provided to him by Sandy Scott:



‘After Councillor Elliott had read out an appeal from the Lord Mayor and Mr Bradford had spoken of the relationship between peace and employment, the Rev Gallagher rose. ‘His was a most valuable contribution’ Mr Scott told me later. His speech was poetic and even romantic, somehow, but it went down very well.’ He spoke of ‘our beautiful land of Northern Ireland’ and how all should work for the welfare of its people, of the need to act in the interest of common humanity and with the highest standards of human behaviour; to act as brothers. There was silence as Mr Gallagher spoke. He was in complete control. He concluded his speech, movingly, by asking the men to join him in a prayer for peace. To the astonishment of everyone in that atmosphere of hard work and toil the men responded and joined him as he said a prayer for peace in Northern Ireland and for all to be inspired for brotherhood and happiness. Somehow, Mr Scott said, the way the men listened to that prayer brought home to him more than anything else their seriousness. ‘I was proud of the way the men responded’ he said.’

CONTACTED BY THE IRA

On the following Sunday afternoon he spoke as usual at the Custom House steps. Just after he got home the phone rang and the voice at the other end said, ‘You don’t know me. My name is Hugh McAteer.’ The Rev Gallagher asked him, ‘Are you a brother of Eddie McAteer?’ ‘I am’ he said. He was talking to the brother of the leader of the Nationalist Party and Hugh was a former chief-of-staff of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). ‘There are no buses running on the Falls, he said ‘and if they don’t start running immediately there will be trouble. If men can’t get to their work they will find something else to do.’ The Superintendent replied that there were no buses on the Shankill either and

asked why he had been contacted. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I want buses on every road and I am asking you because we think you could do something about it. We have noticed the things you have been saying.’ The Rev Gallagher responded by saying that he had no idea what could be done but that he would undertake to make contacts where they might count. Before the call ended Hugh McAteer made a comment which the Superintendent never forgot. He said, ‘We have been shouting at each other for far too long and the time had come when we had to start talking to each other and make something of this lovely country.’ Immediately afterward he phoned Kenneth Bloomfield, then at the Cabinet Office, and told him about the call. The buses were back on the roads next day.

THE DEATH OF A COMMUNITY

Dr Gallagher’s autobiographical notes of this period recorded the deteriorating state of the city and especially the exodus of the Protestant community from the Grosvenor Road which had previously been home for many members of the Grosvenor Hall congregation. ‘By the end of August and through September we were witnessing the death of a community. A van load of furniture had only to leave one house and a whole street was on the move. Unrest and violence broke out on the Grosvenor Road interface. The Rev Joe McCrory (then the second minister on the circuit) and I learned to take shelter in doorways from flying bullets. Somehow the air raids seemed more wholesome.’ The work of the Mission, however, continued unabated despite ever-present dangers.

After a further period of unrest in the early summer of 1970 the Superintendent preached a sermon in Grosvenor Hall setting out the choice for Ulster: ‘Your God or your gun... you cannot have both!’ He

spoke of reforms without reformation; a peace line which was a battle line; a bitter Ulster instead of a better one; a place which young people wanted to leave rather than live; the most religious country in the world now infamous for the blasphemy of its violence.

On the last Saturday in June the Welfare Authorities again requested use of the Hall. The Co-operative Society building in York Street was ablaze and there were other fires elsewhere in the city. There had also been gunfire and evacuations were taking place from New Barnsley and East Belfast. From 27 June until 9 July it served as a ‘refugee centre’ for families leaving the New Barnsley estate and at the peak 138 people slept there.

The current author has personal memories of arriving for church that Sunday evening and effectively living in Grosvenor Hall for the next two weeks: It was work during the day, accompanying the children in the evening to play in one of the parks and then an overnight shift in the main hall watching over the evacuees. They were attempting to sleep on hard camp beds with the sound of gunfire and blast bombs outside and tear gas regularly drifting through the building. There was just time in early morning to go home for a quick wash and a change of clothes before this daily routine was repeated. There were many whose experiences were the same and a real camaraderie developed among the large group of volunteers who came from every walk of life.

MEETINGS WITH THE IRA

Whilst at a meeting of The British Council of Churches at Dunblane during September 1971, the Rev Gallagher received a personal phone call from Belfast. It was from Father Des Wilson of Ballymurphy who said that he had a message from, as he put it, ‘some hard men’ for him and he would like to meet as soon as possible. He was to discover that the message was that the IRA wanted to talk to him about the possibility of bringing the struggle to an end. After considering the matter he agreed to act as an intermediary but not a negotiator. The IRA’s idea of a Unionist politician also being involved was dropped. An initial meeting took place in West Belfast attended by a man who said that he was a messenger on behalf of others. A document, which was the introduction to a resolution likely to be moved at an IRA Army Council meeting (possibly taking place on the following day) was produced and the Superintendent was asked to read it:

‘The situation in the North continues



The Rev Gallagher at Custom House steps.



The last of the New Barnsley residents in Grosvenor Hall. Photo © Belfast Telegraph.

to escalate. The death toll rises and while Irish men and women on both sides of the divide, and holding extremely conflicting views, suffer death, injury and imprisonment, British soldiers also die or are injured doing a job they don't understand or want.'... 'Each of us is victim of a situation that we seem unable to arrest or affect.'... 'The fact remains that there are no victors in the present struggle, but that the great mass of the people continue to suffer and that we will all lose if we are each content to retire behind our own wall of prejudice and regard any move toward peace as being futile and unworthy of the sacrifice already made by our people. Peace can and will come but not until we are all prepared to admit that possibly we have had something to contribute to the creation or sustaining of the present situation. True peace is not merely the absence of violence, but also the creation of a society where legal force is minimal,'... 'No military solution is possible for either side.'...

The 'messenger' spoke about the IRA's wish for a ceasefire that might last long enough for the British government to respond adequately and enable it to become permanent.

Father Wilson later contacted the Rev Gallagher with the news that no decision had yet been reached but that another meeting had been requested. It took place in November and was held in the Imperial Hotel in Dundalk. Present on that occasion were Sean MacStiofain (Chief of Staff of the Provisional IRA) and his associates Rory O'Brady and Joe Cahill. During the course of a lengthy dialogue MacStiofain indicated that the leadership was anxious for a ceasefire leading to a complete cessation of hostilities. They wanted that message conveyed to Harold Wilson whom they knew would pass it on to Ted Heath, then UK Prime Minister. That opportunity arose at a lunch at Hillsborough Castle and the message was

relayed to the PM. In March 1972 the IRA called a brief ceasefire.

THE VIOLENCE CONTINUES

Shortly after, on 22 March 1972, a massive van bomb exploded at the bus station across from the Grosvenor Hall. A few seconds before it went off a vigilant soldier noticed the caretaker standing at the door and shouted to him to move. When he was told that there was a hall full of elderly women attending their regular Wednesday meeting the soldier, in fairly colourful language, told the caretaker to get them moved as quickly as possible. As this was happening the bomb exploded and the heavy window frames were blown in across the seats where the ladies had been sitting. A few seconds more and many of them could have been killed. Some did suffer quite badly from cuts and bruises caused by the flying glass and debris and had to be ferried to hospital in a fleet of ambulances. The Superintendent been due to address a joint Methodist – Presbyterian Lenten service in Dublin that evening but, in his understandable absence, the sermon he had prepared was read by the Rev Dennis Cooke. In it he referred to the unlikelihood of positive courageous action from the Churches but stated that there were certain things they could and should do:

- Spell out what each meant by 'the just society' for which they claim to pray (whilst making clear that maintenance of the Protestant faith did not require an ongoing Protestant Ascendency).
- Promote as many joint activities as possible.
- Review entrenched and traditional positions.
- Engage in the long overdue process and discipline of teaching.

His opinion was that it would be futile to expect quick solutions from the Irish Churches and concluded, 'As far as I know, God loves Catholics and Protestants. The

inference is obvious. We have very little time to work out the implications of that inference. That is what the mission of reconciliation is all about.'

The first Ballymascanlon Conference in September 1973⁶ brought together large numbers of representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and the member Churches of the Irish Council of Churches (Church of Ireland: Presbyterian: Methodist: Non-Subscribing Presbyterian: Lutheran: Moravian: Society of Friends: Salvation Army) and was addressed by Bishop Casey and the Rev Gallagher on the subject of 'The Church and Social Problems.'

A year later, at a Social Studies Conference in Dungarvan, County Waterford, the Superintendent was invited to speak on 'Roads to Reconciliation – A Protestant Contribution.' He reflected on the problems of leadership – did leaders lead or were they representatives? The *Irish Times* in its leading article next day took up the theme. It agreed with his argument that, in addition to their task of promoting theological understanding, the Churches had an obligation, 'To declare that their only political stance is a demand for social justice.'

TAKING RISKS FOR PEACE

During the autumn of 1974 the Rev Ralph Baxter and the Rev Bill Arlow, two representatives of the Irish Council of Churches (ICC), requested a 'very private' meeting with the Rev Eric Gallagher at his manse. It transpired that other contacts had been established with the leadership of the Provisional IRA who appeared to be anxious to see an end to killings and bombings and they wanted a meeting with a group of Protestant churchmen to consider the possibility of a ceasefire (at this time the Superintendent was unaware that another conference had already taken place earlier in the summer in County Donegal attended by about 150 people drawn from the Official and Provisional IRA's, the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and other groups). Aware of the Superintendent's previous contact with the IRA the ICC secretaries wanted to sound out his opinion about the proposed meeting.

This initiated weeks of secret conversations to assemble a team and finalise arrangements with the Provisionals. The question of a venue was also troublesome as security at ports and airports had been tightened and the IRA were concerned that they could be 'picked up' boarding flights or ferries. They preferred a venue in a remote part of Ireland and eventually Feakle in County Clare was agreed on. So secret were



At the barricades.

the arrangements that only car drivers were told of the location and then only at the last moment. The date was finally arranged for Monday 10 December 1974 and it was anticipated that the talks would conclude on Wednesday. On Sunday evening the Superintendent preached to the Grosvenor Hall congregation from the text 'Blessed are the peace makers' and said that anyone trying to make peace was likely to be misunderstood, misrepresented and criticised but that was a price which had to be paid. He advised his ministerial colleague, the Rev Joe McCrory, and the Mission's solicitor, Brian Rankin, that he would be away for a few days and that his absence could prove to be controversial.

Having missed a preparatory meeting the Rev Gallagher was unaware that he had been nominated to open the proceedings at the first formal session. Such was the secrecy surrounding the occasion, no one had been deputed to tell him. On Tuesday morning there was a quiet and courteous dialogue which continued until lunchtime and it was agreed that both sides would initially meet separately after lunch to take stock of what had been said. During lunch the IRA were advised that 'their man in Dublin Castle' had alerted them to the fact that Special Branch were on their way to raid the hotel and the non-political members of their delegation left immediately for another location. The raid took place, the clergy were questioned, and the senior officer from Special Branch wished the group well before leaving. A further meeting took place with the political representatives who had remained and a draft statement was agreed. It was to be put to the Provisional's Army Council and the British Government would also be briefed on the discussions.

When news of the meeting broke, it was headlined on both television and in

the papers but much of it was negative. The Superintendent received his share of abusive calls including at least one death threat. He wondered how the Grosvenor Hall congregation would react. He wrote about it in his book *At Points of Need*: 'The next Sunday morning the attendance was, to my surprise, somewhat larger than usual and far greater than I had expected. I reminded them what I had said the previous Sunday evening and told them of how we had reasoned with the Provisionals and had pleaded with them to call off their campaign. Then I said "I don't expect that all of you will agree with what I have done. I have valued and enjoyed your friendship for the last 16 and a half years and you have had mine. I sincerely hope that you are still my friends." At the end of the service on that Sunday morning every member most unusually went out by one door only. Without exception, each shook me by the hand and almost every one of them had a word of approval for what had been done. To serve such a people was the greatest honour the Church could bestow on any of its Ministers. That year the Christmas street collection reached an all-time high' (perhaps reflecting wider public support).

On Tuesday 17 December, the *Irish Times* reported that the IRA Army Council was to meet that day and the group were also advised that the Secretary of State, Merlyn Rees, would meet them at Westminster on Wednesday. They set out next morning having heard that the Provisionals had rejected the formula discussed at Feakle although it was believed they had spent 18 hours deliberating. The IRA paid tribute to the group and the manner of the presentation and intimated that there would be an 11 day ceasefire over Christmas which might be extended if the British Army avoided offensive action. A full report of the talks was given to Mr Rees and his advisors.

A direct appeal for a cessation of loyalist assassinations was also made to the then leader of the UDA, Andy Tyrrie. He denied that men under his command were engaged in such activity but he promised to do what he could (for the record no such attacks or assassinations took place during the period of the ceasefire).

When he was able to look back on the period from 1969 to 1974 Eric Gallagher could recall little else but one crisis following another and many of these impacted on the Mission. The property suffered repeated through damage from bomb blasts in the vicinity and there was always a possibility of personal injuries being sustained. On two occasions bombs exploded within 40 feet of the Superintendent himself. He often paid warm tribute to his colleagues at this difficult time – he regarded the unstinting service of the Mission staff (the Rev Joe McCrory, Sister Mary Gihon and Esther Fyffe his secretary) as outstanding. It was the same with the congregation and the Mission Committee. Again and again, after an explosion, many of them automatically made their way to the Hall to help clear up the debris and return the building to use (see Chapter 7).

MOVING ON

Although he had accepted an invitation to become Minister of Whitehead Church in 1975 circumstances prevailed to keep the Superintendent at Grosvenor Hall for another four years. During this period his aim was to hold the congregation together and at the same time to provide pastoral support for those who had been forced to move away. He had also to devote much time to the mentally, spiritually and physically demanding amalgamation of the Belfast Central Mission and Donegall Square circuits requested by the Methodist Church in Ireland (see Chapter 6). The Rev Gallagher's 22 years as Superintendent of the Belfast Central Mission came to an end in June 1979. History will come to recognise him as being one of the leading figures of Methodism in the British Isles during the 20th century and an architect of the peace process in Northern Ireland... and he was also much loved at the Grosvenor Hall.

CORNERSTONE, COLUMBANUS, CURRACH AND FORTHSRING

The Mission, at the height of the 'Troubles', became involved in a number of the cross-community outreach projects which included:

Cornerstone: In 1981 a 'Come Back to God' campaign on the Shankill Road ended with a number of people dedicating themselves to reconciliation across



the peace line.’ Some were members of a prayer group meeting at Clonard Monastery which came to believe that it was being called to set up a community of Christians. The Rev Sam Burch, who had grown up in the Grosvenor Hall congregation, was a member of the prayer group and then of the Cornerstone Community from its inception in 1982. Three years later he asked the Methodist Church for permission ‘to be without pastoral charge’ to become its leader.

Shortly after he had moved into the Community House on the Springfield Road, he was contacted by Father Gerry Reynolds from Clonard, who wished to visit a family on the Shankill, and wanted support to enable him to do so. The father of the household had been shot dead outside his home and Father Reynolds wanted to convey the shock and horror of the Clonard Community and to pray with the family for an end to such killings. Over the next ten years the two men visited more than 50 such homes, both Catholic and Protestant, on both the Shankill and the Falls Roads, bringing whatever comfort and support they could.

The Rev Burch was attached to the Belfast Central Mission circuit and received encouragement and support from successive Superintendents – the Rev Taggart and the Rev Kerr – and also from the congregation at Springfield Road Methodist Church. In partnership with

the Mission and Springfield Road Church, Cornerstone participated in the creation of both the ‘Currach Community’ and ‘Forthspring’.

Columbanus: This was set up by Father Michael Hurley, co-founder of the Irish School of Ecumenics in 1970, to be an inter-church residential community on the Antrim Road. During the 1981 hunger strike Father Hurley conceived the idea of a community where Protestants and Catholics could live together. The initial discussions which brought the Columbanus Community of Reconciliation into being were held in Grosvenor Hall in 1983. When eventually the Community closed the building was sold to the Irish School of Ecumenics as its Belfast base. The Management Committee became the Trustees of the Columbanus Trust Fund which continues to hold its meetings in Grosvenor House.

Currach: In the early 1990s a number of random shootings in West Belfast led to speculation that the security gates at Workman Avenue (in close proximity to Springfield Road Church) would be permanently closed. If this were to happen the majority of the congregation would have been unable to get to Church without a long detour. The Mission Executive therefore decided to purchase two unoccupied houses at the bottom of the Avenue to enable access to the Church grounds through their back gardens. Co-incidentally Sister Noreen Christian, a Roman Catholic nun, was hoping to find a base for an Inter-Church Community on the Protestant side of the peace wall. It was quickly agreed that BCM would refurbish both houses and rent them to this newly-formed ‘Currach’ Community.

Forthspring: Shortly after the Currach Community was established it was agreed to set up an Inter-Church Community outreach based on part of the Springfield Road Church premises. Springfield Road Church, Currach, Cornerstone and another Springfield Road cross-community group set up Forthspring as a separate company and the Rev Gary Mason, then second Minister on the Belfast Central Mission circuit, set about bringing it to fruition.

In 1974 one family astonished the commanding officer of a British army unit by looking after the children of Martin Meehan, a suspected Republican ‘on the run.’ The security forces had a tip off that his children were ‘in a house across the street’ and they raided it. The officer was told by the member of the Grosvenor Hall congregation who was caring for them that, whilst they didn’t approve of what the children’s father was doing, they were not to blame and deserved to be allowed to sleep at night. The Commanding Officer had little to say except that he did not understand their motivation but, if there were more people like them, his job would be made easier.



Dr Gallagher meeting Pope John Paul II.

At the end of September 1979 Pope John Paul II visited Ireland. Although delighted that he had come, it presented a major problem for the St Vincent de Paul Society in Belfast who had a street collection planned for the same day as their supporters would be travelling south to see him. Knowing that Grosvenor Hall had its own annual flag day they approached the Mission to enquire if its collectors would stand in for theirs on this occasion. It was a bold request to make during the ‘Troubles’ and the positive responses from members of the congregation were equally courageous. Ongoing co-operation has resulted with a shared annual Christmas ‘giving tree’ fundraising project being only one outcome from the relationships formed at that time.

The congregation showed its resilience by surviving the ‘Troubles’ despite collateral damage to its premises from 34 bomb blasts. Throughout, it had demonstrated unwavering support for successive Superintendents as each provided visionary leadership in the search for ecumenism and peace. Once calm had returned to the city, the Belfast Central Mission and its Grosvenor Hall congregation were ready to undertake new challenges and begin to write another chapter in their history.

Taggart, Norman Wilson, BA, BD, PhD



Born on 31 October 1935 at Belfast. Son of William Henry, aircraft fitter and Catherine (née Morris) stitcher.

• • •

- Organising Secretary of Irish Council of Churches 1968.
- Home Secretary – Methodist Church Overseas Division [MCOD] 1972-77.
- Chairman of Belfast District 1984-88.
- President of the Methodist Church in Ireland 1997.

1979 Belfast Central Mission

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CONGREGATIONAL INVOLVEMENT IN PEACEMAKING

Many members of the congregation also became individually involved in cross community activities and Sister Mary Gihon, Marjorie Gill and others were members of a Catholic/Protestant Bible study group which met regularly in the Clonard area. Most of their stories were not recorded but certainly contributed to the ultimate peace. There are, however, two which can be shared:



CHAPTER 7

Regeneration & Renewal

The first indications of spring are not always to be found in the most obvious locations and that certainly holds true with regard to the regeneration of the work and witness of the Belfast Central Mission (BCM). It had survived at the centre of the city during two World Wars, the poverty of the 1930s, the introduction of the Welfare State, the start of the 'Troubles' and a century of emigration. Towards the end of the 20th century was ready once again to accept new challenges.



CASTLE ROCKLANDS

From the outset of his Superintendency the Rev Eric Gallagher was looking for an opportunity to extend the work and witness of the Mission. It arrived in an unexpected manner during May 1960. A Mrs Boyd had bequeathed her home at Castle Rocklands, Carrickfergus, to another organisation for development into a home for the elderly but the named beneficiaries decided to waive their rights to the legacy. It was then offered to Carrickfergus Methodist Church where the Leaders also concluded that such a project was beyond their resources. The Minister, the Rev James Wisheart, contacted the Superintendent and the outcome was that the Mission accepted the property and with it the obligation to develop the residential home. This was the first major social work project undertaken in over 30 years (the previous one being Child Haven – see Chapter 4) and by now full compliance with the regulations of the welfare state was necessary. A Housing Association was constituted, plans were drawn up for a large extension costing over £60,000 and generous grants were made available from government. Building work commenced early in 1963 and the

Home was officially opened in June 1964.

Castle Rocklands quickly established itself and benefited from a very very positive relationship with the Northern Health and Social Services Board. From the outset however, there were warning signs of a disparity between running costs and weekly residency charges. Fortunately the Home benefited from 100% occupancy rates which mitigated the shortfall and kept it to a manageable level for almost 30 years. A bungalow colony, based on an idea from American Methodism, was added in the grounds. Here the elderly could still enjoy independent living but with the assurance that services would be available if required and that a place would be made available in the Home should that become necessary.

Unfortunately the financial situation deteriorated once more during the 1990s and at the beginning of 1997, the decision to close Castle Rocklands had to be taken. This was not well received by some residents and by members of the local community and the then Superintendent, the Rev David Kerr, had to face much unwarranted criticism. When the site was sold to another housing association, the surplus generated from the sale was ring-fenced for future residential care of the elderly and will be available for the new Copelands development at Millisle (see Chapter 8).

PROFESSIONALISATION

Social work: A very significant change had taken place at Child Haven during 1972. Miss Maud Coulter was appointed matron thereby introducing professional staffing to the Mission's children's work for the first time in its history. Coming from the statutory sector she possessed residential child-care qualifications and under her management a new training emphasis was created. Within seven years Child Haven had been accredited by the local Polytechnic as a suitable venue for training social workers. From this (seemingly insignificant) step has developed all the fully professional social work now offered in the name of BCM.

Throughout his period of Superintendency which began in 1979, the Rev Norman Taggart took a great interest in the work at Millisle and guided it through a difficult period for child care work in Northern Ireland following the

Kincora scandal¹. In 1985 the Mission Committee: 'Agreed that a scheme of co-operation with National Children's Homes (NCH) which did not threaten the nature of Child Haven as a project of the Belfast Central Mission, and which enabled Child Haven to benefit directly from the skill, experience and training facilities of NCH, constituted the best way forward as the Mission considered its continuing commitment to child and family care and the role of Child Haven as a vital part of that care.' This led to the appointment of a social worker, Terry McClatchey, who was seconded from NCH for a two year term which ended in September 1987.

Administration: It is difficult now to comprehend that part of an early Superintendent's remit in the Belfast Central Mission was to produce the annual accounts. The Rev Eric Gallagher recorded that it was also one of his initial tasks. In 1983, having repeatedly been advised by its auditors to appoint an administrator to oversee the financial aspects of the Mission's work, the Finance Committee accepted the recommendation. Alan Addy who had recently retired from a position in accountancy, took on the task early in 1984 and was succeeded by Neil Morris, a Chartered Accountant.

THE REV DAVID KERR

In 1986 the Rev Taggart informed the Mission Committee of his opinion that the Mission would benefit from new leadership upon his completion of an eight year term as Superintendent. In a changing and demanding situation it was essential, he believed, to ensure a flow of new ideas.

Within days of his appointment as the new Superintendent in July 1987, the Rev David Kerr was articulating a vision for the church at the heart of the city. He clearly believed that the congregation had a future and his links with the Grosvenor Hall were very personal: it was there that he made his first public commitment of faith at a Youth for Christ rally. Then, whilst still a schoolboy at Sullivan Upper School in Holywood, he received an invitation to meet the Rev R R Cunningham at his office in the Hall. The then Superintendent had received an anonymous letter from a teacher about a young Methodist in her class whom she believed may be thinking of entering the



Kerr, David James, MBE, BA, MMinTheol



Born 28 May 1937, son of William Kerr, shipwright, Belfast and Emily née Bowman.

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- Converted aged 14; Local preacher aged 18.
- Chairman of Belfast District 1992-97.
- BA (QUB) 1989; MMinTheol (Sheffield) 1994.
- President of the Methodist Church in Ireland 1998.
- MBE for services to the community 2008.

1987	Belfast Central Mission	16
2003	Belfast Central Mission	(Retired)

ministry. After pointing out the various steps which would be needed to begin the candidating process he suggested that, as Christmas Eve was approaching, a good place to test a call to ministry would be on the streets of Belfast collecting for the Mission. The Rev Kerr was ordained alongside the Revs Edmund Mawhinney and Robin Roddie in Grosvenor Hall (1964) and, for each, testifying to their call to ministry in front of 2,000 people was a daunting experience.

A DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL WORK



Bertie Sharpe.

That autumn the very significant decision was taken to advertise for a Senior Social Worker. Terry McClatchey's period of secondment from NCH was at an end and a replacement with similar attributes was

needed. The response was disappointing with only two applicants. Just when the whole idea was being reassessed however, the Superintendent received a phone call from Mr Bertie Sharpe, then Assistant Director of Social Services in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board. His important contribution to social work in Belfast during the 'Troubles' had already

been acknowledged by the award of an MBE in 1973. He was interested in the job but this presented the Mission Executive with a major problem – he was far too well qualified for the position. A get together was arranged which turned out to be a meeting of minds and the rest is now history. His subsequent appointment as Director of Social Work was probably the most important non-ministerial one during the 125 year life of BCM (see below).

A NEW CHURCH IN SANDY ROW

On Saturday 27 February 1988 a new Church building was opened at Sandy Row. It replaced both the original Sandy Row Church where the first meetings of the Mission had taken place in September 1889 (see Chapter 2) and Primitive Street Church (on the lower Donegall Road) which had been vested by government as part of the redevelopment of that area. The decision to rebuild had been taken by the Methodist Church in Ireland and even though available resources were very limited an appropriate multi-purpose building was constructed for continuing work in the locality. It provided the first sign of renewed hope on the Belfast Central Mission Circuit.

THE MISSION CENTENARY

At the beginning of 1988 the Rev David Kerr had shared something of his vision with the Grosvenor Hall congregation:

- To help people become aware of the reality of God in their lives.
- To create patterns of worship that has meaning for people living at the end of the 20th century.
- To translate faith in Jesus into real action in the world (both social and political).

During the course of that year a feasibility study was also commissioned



Sandy Row Church.

to consider the future of the second Grosvenor Hall. It led to the conclusion that a radical redevelopment would be required to provide the Mission with appropriate facilities for its existing work and to enable new developments to take place.

The Superintendent's first major task however, was to reflect on the past in order to be able to plan ahead for the Centenary of the Mission due in 1989. In September he wrote to the Rt Rev David Sheppard, Bishop of Liverpool, inviting him to speak at the celebrations and also shared with him the knowledge that he was taking soundings in the city about asking Derek Warlock, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Liverpool, to accompany him. This was an important early statement of intent to continue the ecumenical ethos of the Mission.

The initial event of the Centenary celebrations was the publication of *At Points of Need* written by Dr Gallagher, a former Superintendent (at the request of the Mission Committee). Dr Stanley Worrell, formerly headmaster of Methodist College and ex-Chairman of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland wrote in his foreword, 'It is what John Wesley would have called, 'A Plain Account' of the work of the Mission during its first century. It is a fascinating story of Christian enterprise and of devotion often bordering on the heroic.' The book launch was held in the Ulster Museum on 5 September 1989 to coincide with the opening of an exhibition composed of images taken by A R Hogg (one of the great photographers of Belfast in the early part of the 20th century) on behalf of the Belfast Central Mission.

The Centenary Weekend took place from 16-18 September in the Grosvenor Hall which had been 'spruced up' to allow it to be used for one last time on



David Sheppard, Derek Warlock, David Kerr and John Newton.



this special occasion (the structure of the building had been irreparably weakened by the cumulative effects of multiple bomb blasts in the surrounding area and without extensive refurbishment could not be brought back into regular usage). A Centenary choir composed of former members was trained by Trevor Neill (organist of Knock Methodist Church) who was also organist for the Weekend. On Sunday afternoon the music was augmented by the Grosvenor Hall Military Band. The special speaker on Saturday and Sunday was the Rev Brian Duckworth, General Secretary of the Division of Social Responsibility of the Methodist Church in Britain. On Monday evening the Anglican Bishop of Liverpool (David Sheppard), the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Liverpool (Derek Warlock) and the Methodist Chairman of the Liverpool District (John Newton) shared the platform and spoke of how they had been able to work together in their own city.

The Saturday evening event, which was preceded by a congregational reunion in the Ker Memorial Hall, brought many former members back to share in a closing service. It was chastening however that despite the many thousands which had had an affinity with the Grosvenor Hall, it was not even possible to fill the ground floor of the building on this occasion. Although there was considerable sadness that the second Grosvenor Hall had reached the end of its life, those who attended the final services were encouraged by the desire to replace it with the third Mission Centre on the site. By the end of November, Boyd Partnership, architects, had submitted their outline proposals.

'HOUSING WITH CARE' FOR THE ELDERLY

Bertie Sharpe's first contribution to the social outreach of BCM, was on a subject

close to his heart – the care of the elderly. In 1989 he set up a 'Care, Information and Counselling' facility (based at the Grosvenor Hall) for the elderly and their carers:

- To provide the best and most appropriate services for the elderly.
- To reassure carers regarding the future.
- To enable maximum use of available services (statutory, voluntary and private).

Earlier in the same year he had introduced the innovative concept of 'Housing with Care' (which encouraged independent living for the elderly within a residential environment but with 24 hour professional support available should it be required) to the BCM Executive. His belief was that a viable scheme could be located in a property on the King's Road, Belfast which was being offered to the Mission at a substantial discount to its market value. The Mission entered into a joint venture with Oaklee Housing Association (a requirement for government funding) and **Kirk House** was purchased in June 1989. Unfortunately it was unable to be adapted and had to be replaced by the present building which consists of 41 flatlets. It received its first residents in January 1993 and recently celebrated its 21st birthday. Independence, freedom of choice, self-esteem and dignity continue to be respected and promoted.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN WEST BELFAST

In 1989 the Mission set up **Grove Tree After-Schools Club** in the annexe of Grove Tree Old People's Home on the Grosvenor Road. Children were referred to it by health visitors, social workers and other professionals. It was operated on a cross-community basis despite being located in an exclusively Roman Catholic neighbourhood and did so with the

blessing of the local priest. In September 1992, because of vandalism, break-ins and fire damage, it moved into the Grosvenor Leisure Centre complex. There were 16 children registered of which around half attended regularly. It was a haven and for some it was the only place where they could experience a feeling of self-worth, secure in the knowledge that they would not be rejected.

1990 saw an eruption of sectarian violence in West Belfast which had a profound effect on the Springfield Road congregation. Until then there had been a thriving membership, lively Sunday School and a varied youth programme. The onset of violence however, changed everything. The life of one youth leader was lost, families on both sides were intimidated out of their homes and arson attacks on the Church became commonplace. The route of the 'Peace Line' separating Protestant and Roman Catholic areas ran directly through the site. BCM had to purchase two houses in Workman Avenue (which backed onto the Church premises) to enable the congregation to reach their place of worship whenever the security gates were closed. Led by the Rev Gary Mason the congregation however embarked on a journey from danger and despair towards peace and reconciliation. They made the courageous decision to allow much of the Church building to be transformed into a cross-community centre at a cost of almost £400,000 and **Forthspring** was created (see Chapter 6). The opening and dedication of the new premises took place on 18 October 1997.



Kirk House.

THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO TERRORISM

Grosvenor Hall suffered severe damage in the first of the major bomb attacks to hit Belfast early in December 1991 after which violence became an almost daily occurrence. The following is an extract from a letter written by a member of the congregation to a Christian friend in England during February 1992:

'Let me start with the bomb attack. We should be well used to this by now as it is the 31st occasion on which we have suffered damage. In property terms it was the worst to date (repairs are estimated at almost £200,000) and lives were put at risk. The Leaders were meeting in a room at the rear of the premises and only a



light left on by mistake at the front alerted the security forces to the possibility that people were in the building. Through the grace of God they were led to safety minutes before the bomb blew in the windows of the room in which they were meeting. The cars of two of the Leaders were destroyed and others were damaged.

How does one express one's Christianity in response to such terrorism? At first light next morning members of the congregation and many others arrived to start clearing up so that the work of the Mission would not be disrupted. It was Thursday and we had a Christmas Dinner for the elderly due to take place on Saturday. To fail to hold it would be to give in to the terrorist and I'm delighted to say that it was able to take place as did every other event in our busy Christmas programme. Our friends shared with us in our difficulties. The President and Secretary of the Methodist Church in Ireland were early visitors on Thursday morning. So was Father Gerry Reynolds from Clonard Monastery in West Belfast who came to say sorry on behalf of the Catholic community. In Christian Unity Week Clonard provided the flowers for our Communion Table and Father Gerry came to our morning service to express to the whole congregation their sorrow and love. Letters and calls flooded in from Ireland, England and as far away as Sri Lanka where over 100 Methodists sent a card to communicate their prayerful support for the Belfast Central Mission. Christian love expressed by the congregation and for the congregation is the right response to terrorism.

In recent days we have had an escalating level of violence which has brought great sorrow and left many people bewildered. On Monday evening of this week we were sitting at another meeting and the rattle of automatic gunfire broke into our discussions. The news later revealed that the gunman had ambushed the RUC from a building used by the Mission for an After Schools Club attended exclusively by children from West Belfast (Grove Tree). Thankfully no one was injured. The reason I mention this particular incident is that my immediate reaction to hearing the shooting was to say to myself: "If this is on the national news you will be thinking about us." We greatly value your thoughts and your prayers to help us continue to respond to whatever the future may hold...

'BUILDING ON THE PAST...'

The damage inflicted by so many bomb blasts left the Mission Executive with little choice as to the fate of the second

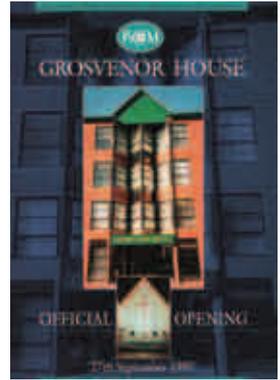
Grosvenor Hall. During the early summer of 1993 its demolition had become a matter of urgency and by the end of October the main part of the site was cleared leaving only the Ker Memorial building. At the same time however, the Superintendent the Rev David Kerr was talking about changing circumstances and congregational growth (rising from a low point of about 50 to almost 100). This was in part due to a Christian Stewardship campaign at the end of March which had produced a wide variety of positive results including new members. The Rev David Kerr identified it as one of the most significant of the events which finally led to the decision to build a third Grosvenor Hall.

The Executive now began to explore the possibility of developing a new Mission Centre without recourse to the involvement of a commercial partner (they were very conscious that, in the Rev Crawford Johnson's words, it was 'the pence of the poor' which had paid for the site and believed it should therefore continue in the full ownership of the Mission). A year later final plans were being drawn up and a redevelopment appeal was launched. It would be built on the ground bought exactly 100 years earlier and was to be:

'A multi-purpose venue which keeps the Mission's administration staff and congregation together on one site. This is fundamental to the Hall's function; to ensure that the Mission's 'professional' side never loses sight of its Christian heart. Part of the Mission's continuing success in today's society has been in keeping the balance between its spiritual, compassionate Christian stand-point and the practical approach to caring of professional social workers.'

The building of Grosvenor House (incorporating the third Grosvenor Hall)

was regarded as a huge step of faith. The Rev Kerr later wrote about the time of transition: 'The last service in the Ker Hall was a moving and symbolic occasion. It was Covenant Sunday 1996 (the first Sunday of the year when Methodists traditionally renew their Covenant with God) and for the last time we renewed our Covenant in the buildings which held so many memories for us all. We then marched to our temporary home in May Street Presbyterian Church Hall where we finished the Covenant Service with the celebration of Communion. Eighteen months later we returned by the 'traditional route' (as my son Angus called it) to our new home bringing with us a silver chalice, the gift of our friends in May Street. We owe them a great debt of gratitude for all their hospitality and kindness.'



Grosvenor House was opened and dedicated on 27 September 1997. It contains a multi-purpose 'Grosvenor Hall' with a seating capacity of 250 to be used for worship, social occasions, conferences, recitals and exhibitions. The Gallagher Chapel (named in honour of Dr and Mrs Eric Gallagher) is a quiet space for prayer and meditation during office hours on weekdays and a focus for Communion and prayer services at the heart of the city. In keeping with the traditions of the Mission, the Advice and Help Centre is directly opposite the Chapel keeping 'faith and works' together.



Leaving the second Grosvenor Hall and returning to the third.



Opening of third Grosvenor Hall.



Grosvenor Hall 1997.

THE FORERUNNER OF 'SOCIAL ENTERPRISE'

The third floor of the new Grosvenor House was designed as a modern conference venue which, along with the other rooms in the building (when available), could generate revenues for the Mission. **Grosvenor House Conference and Training Centre** was managed in-house and was their first attempt at social enterprise (a commercial enterprise which re-invests all profits made into the organisation's social mission). As part of this facility the **Scallop Shell Coffee Shop** was opened at the main entrance on the ground floor. In 2012 the Conference Centre was replaced by **Puddleducks**, a new venture providing nursery care for children at the heart of the city.

BCM also began to offer staff training services to other agencies – in 1999 it trained residential social work staff in Londonderry, Craigavon, Banbridge

and Omagh. During the same year BCM ran the first specialist training course for foster parents in Northern Ireland using a programme called 'Therapeutic Crisis Intervention' developed by Cornell University in New York.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF BCM'S SOCIAL WORK

The Superintendent quickly recognised the necessity for a restructured professional social work programme to meet changing needs and evolving government policies. He committed the Mission to further developing its range of personal social services within the community. The Director of Social Work, Bertie Sharpe, and his professional staff soon identified a number of areas of need (despite being hampered by the ongoing effects of terror campaigns and disruption caused by the rebuilding work):

- **Anderson House (Supported**

Housing for Young People): This project was motivated by BCM's growing concern over the problems faced by young people leaving care to live on their own. Anderson House which opened in Newtownards during December 1992 could accommodate up to four residents and provide them with training in self reliance. They received support in learning social skills such as money management, basic DIY, cooking and career advice. The project was named in honour of Frank and Margaret Anderson who over many years had expressed concern over the lack of support available to young people leaving Child Haven. BCM now has similar facilities in Belfast, Bangor, and Dungannon.

- **Marmion Adolescent Unit (Holywood):** As part of a strategy to reduce Children's Homes to smaller more specialised units, the North Down and Ards Community Health and Social Services Trust (the statutory agency responsible for children and their families) engaged with BCM in a joint review of residential child care provision in North Down and Ards. As a result, in 1996 BCM took over the management of Marmion in addition to Craigmore House at Millisle (formerly Child Haven). Each unit now provided up to ten long-term residential places for young people aged between 12 and 18. Eight years later the management of Marmion was transferred back to the Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust.

- **The Quayside Project:** This began as a response to the Children (NI) Order (1995) which recommended the development of more community-based facilities to help young people and their families. Quayside wanted to reach out to young people who were already living beyond parental control and the education system and it sought to enable them to remain with their families. The staff helped the young people with their emotional and behavioural problems, encouraged parents to examine their responsibilities and provided support for the families. Although this project closed after two years the quality of the work was such that the local Trust subsequently contracted with BCM to provide their Leaving Care and Aftercare service (1999-2008) followed by a Personal Advisor Service for young people about to leave care (2008-10).

TIME FOR REFLECTION AND PRESIDENTIAL DUTIES

After almost a decade in post the Superintendent, the Rev David Kerr, was in a very positive mood during an interview for the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church (*New World Outlook: March-April 1996*). 'I think



I was expected to close it' (Grosvenor Hall) he said 'but the church needs to be here at the heart of the city. The 'Troubles' had caused membership to dwindle from more than 2,000 to 60 – as violence disrupted the city people could not get to the Grosvenor Hall. Because of its location the Mission sustained damage from 34 nearby bomb blasts, the latest being in December 1993, but never once in the 25 years was a service cancelled. Membership is now 130 and we are inspired with a new hope. The city does not belong to the forces of evil. We are there as the people of God. Our goal is to develop a future free from sectarianism. We are developing a biblical response to the needs of the inner city.'

The Rev David Kerr was inducted as President of the Methodist Church in Ireland at the Conference of 1998. As he and his wife Eileen travelled to Portrush for one of his first official appointments he learned of the death of the three Quinn boys in an arson attack at Ballymoney. On his way home they went to see the family to convey their personal sympathy and that of the Methodist Church. He was later to describe it as the most difficult visit he has ever made. Worse was to come – he was in Ballycastle when his son Niall phoned to break the news of the Omagh bombing. As he and Eileen were driving to the scene fleets of ambulances, with sirens sounding, went past them en route to the major Belfast hospitals. Eileen Kerr used her professional skills as a social worker and counsellor to comfort those whose loved ones were missing. Later in the evening the relatives of those



Eileen Kerr at Merlewood Crèche (South Africa).

who had died were brought together and the Rev Kerr was asked to share in prayer with Bishop Hegarty (the Roman Catholic Bishop of Derry). 'We shared a common grief and so we turned to a common God' he said. During the next week he had to conduct funerals for two Methodists – a farmer's wife and a young student.

A Celtic cross, now in the Gallagher Chapel, bears the following inscription: 'Presented to the Rev David J Kerr, President of the Methodist Church in Ireland 1998-99, and his wife Eileen by the Leaders of Omagh and Fintona Circuit with great thanks for 'Sharing in our pain on 15 August 1998.'

During 1998 there was also a Presidential visit to the Methodist Conference of Southern Africa in Durban. Whilst there the Rev and Mrs Kerr visited the **Merlewood Crèche** (about 100 miles from Durban) and met Sister Kathy Marsden. She told him that their funding for routine costs had run out and they also had a need for further classrooms, stores, equipment and staff training. Although the Grosvenor Hall congregation had been actively fundraising for their new Mission Centre over a number of years, the Superintendent dared to suggest that they might be able to help. When he returned he told the Leaders what he had committed to in their name and they took up the challenge raising £26,500 during the next three years. A group from the congregation also went to visit Merlewood.

THE NEW MILLENNIUM

Conferences took place in Grosvenor Hall on 26 September and 3 October 1999 to help to renew the congregation 'as a people of faith prepared to be a welcoming community who could share their faith with any who sought to join

them.' The Rev Stewart Morris had already been appointed to BCM by the Irish Methodist Conference to make contact with the people who lived in and used the city centre. They decided to embark on the '**Emmaus Way**' programme of Bible study which was structured to help people understand and share their faith. Like the stewardship campaign (See above) this journey into faith brought many and sometimes unexpected blessings to the congregation in the new Millennium.

A ten week course '**The Search for Spirituality**' led by the Rev Dr Johnston McMaster⁵ took place at the Forthspring Centre from October 1999 until March 2000. It sought to explore different models and approaches to Spirituality; Political-Biblical, Charismatic, Feminist, trends in the 21st century and Celtic. The objective was to explore the meaning and experience of Spirituality and its connectedness to life issues. Participants were mainly Catholics and Methodists from the Springfield Road area but a welcome was extended to everyone interested in the subject matter.

The Revs David Kerr and Gary Mason initiated '**On the edge 2000**' in Grosvenor House. 'This Conference grew out of a friendship between two individuals, one of whom was labelled 'evangelical' and the other 'liberal' yet both struggled in ministry with the passion to proclaim God's grace and love to those who are at the margins and untouched by most of our Churches.'

How do you present the Gospel in the new Millennium? The conference sought to stimulate dialogue among Protestants to help them capture a common vision for proclaiming the Gospel to an increasingly secular society and for one which could express spirituality in non-Christian ways. The key speakers were:

Ker, Donald Paul, BA BD MTh



Born 19 June 1950, Belfast son of the Rev R E Ker and Mary née Kingston.

• • •

- Secretary of Belfast Synod 2003-05.
- Belfast District Superintendent 2006.
- President of the Methodist Church in Ireland 2009.

2003 BCM (Grosvenor Hall etc)

4



- Tony Campolo – Professor of Sociology at Eastern College, St David’s Philadelphia who was also an ordained minister and Executive Director of the Philadelphia Institute for Urban Studies and Founder/President of the Evangelical Association for the promotion of Education.

- Leslie Griffiths – Minister of Wesley’s Chapel in London and writer and broadcaster.

It was deemed to be a great success and created new networks among the differing strands of Christians in Belfast.

THE 21ST CENTURY GROSVENOR HALL CONGREGATION

In 2000 the Grosvenor Hall congregation was reported as being in good heart and engaged in ‘a variety of worship, witness and holistic activities.’ Outreach to the city was taking various forms:

- The Rev Stewart Morris, now on the staff of BCM, was working with the city centre clergy group on a proposal for creating church and community in a night club culture based on an existing scheme in Edinburgh). ECCO (Engagement with Club Culture Outreach) was born as was a website² designed to keep young people safe.

- A mail-shot was sent to the residents of three blocks in Dublin Road and Laganside (security access prevents door to door visitation). The response was limited but several couples sought and received pastoral support.

- Research continued into the idea of ‘chaplancy to the workplace’ and the Rev Morris was developing contacts with the welfare officers in some of the larger firms in the city.

In 2001 members visited Merlewood in South Africa and a church family weekend was organised at ‘An Creagan’ cottages in the Sperrins.

The life of the congregation was greatly enhanced when Mr Jaffey Chacko, a member of the Mar Thoma Church (India) joined and later brought his new wife Jolly. He encouraged other members of their community to worship in Grosvenor Hall and the first Malayalam service in Belfast took place there on Maundy Thursday 2002. Unfortunately work commitments necessitated the family’s move to Bristol. (The Mar Thoma community now meets at Drumbeg Parish Church.)

In June 2003 the Rev David Kerr retired and said of his time at the Mission: ‘It has been a great hour to be Superintendent... and to play some part in its ongoing development... For me the secret of BCM’s success has been the spirit of partnership which permeates all aspects of the work... It has been an exciting journey and a journey of exploration as to how God should be worshipped in a meaningful way at the beginning of the 21st century.’

In October 2004 the Grosvenor Hall Leaders produced a new Mission Statement. Their aim was to be: ‘a welcoming congregation, celebrating God’s love in worship, prayer and action, being open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit to love, serve and offer God’s healing to all, irrespective of need or creed.’

Fundraising also continued – this time for the Maya Childcare Trust, a project set up in Guatemala by Rachel Ker, a daughter of the Superintendent.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS IN BCM’S SOCIAL WORK

The Rev Donald Ker followed in the footsteps of his grandfather (see Chapter 3) when appointed as the new Superintendent but it was not the same BCM. He said: ‘We continue to have the

philosophy of caring and sharing through a widespread and diverse social work programme. However the needs of our community have greatly changed and so the services we offer are influenced by the changing environment that surrounds us.’

New ways of caring continued to be developed:

- **Autism Support Services:** Better known as ‘EAGLE’ (Embracing Autism through Guidance, Love and Education). Initiated early in 2000 when a young mother (Heather Taylor) sought to offer emotional and practical support to children diagnosed with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) and their parents, brothers and sisters and carers. She approached BCM and after discussions had taken place it agreed to become involved.

- **Young Parents Support:** Started in March 2002 and helps young mothers and fathers (aged 16-25 years) who are, or have been, in care in North Down and Ards. In some situations the staff team are the young parent’s only support mechanism and positive role model. Through emotional and practical support this project aims to enhance the life chances of young parents by improving their self-esteem, life skills and parenting skills. Despite many obstacles it is BCM’s experience that most young parents can demonstrate great resilience and determination and, with support, can themselves become successful, positive parents.

- **Therapeutic Counselling:** Started in 2003 having grown out of a need identified by staff working in the Leaving Care and Aftercare project. Provided by qualified therapists, this service is primarily for young people coming from a ‘care’ background. Many have unresolved personal issues and need the time and space to work through them in a welcoming, non-clinical, non-judgemental environment.

- **Housing Support for Young People:** Began in 2005 as a ‘floating support’ project. Services are currently provided in the North Down and Ards, Armagh and Dungannon areas. This is a community based project aimed at supporting young people aged 16 to 25 years as they deal with a range of issues (for a period of up to two years) – housing, homelessness, accessing education, training or employment, or any other issues – as they strive towards living independently.

- **Housing Support for Older People (HSOP):** Operating since 2007 in Belfast, and recently expanded into Armagh and Dungannon, HSOP provides support to help people aged 55+ who



The ‘Belfast’ tapestry.



The Queen and Prince Philip at BCM.



Visit of President Mary McAleese.

are in need of housing support. It works in partnership with older people to help them live independently in their own homes for as long as possible. The service is for a minimum of six weeks and a maximum of two years, in which time the service user can 'float in and out' as their needs change. HSOP includes:

- Help with maintenance, safety and security.
- Help with benefits.
- Help to access health services.
- Practical support eg with shopping or appointments.
- Advice.
- Someone to talk to.

In 2006 Bertie Sharpe retired as Director of Social Work and was replaced by the present Director, Brian Burns. Bertie Sharpe joined BCM in 1988 bringing with him professionalism, expertise and contacts with the statutory bodies which were so essential at a time of great change for the Mission. His successor, a senior member of the BCM staff since 1995, has maintained those high standards.

THE END OF RESIDENTIAL CARE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

At the start of the 21st century BCM was one of only two voluntary organisations in the province still providing residential care for young people. The demise was partly due to the inherent difficulties in trying to meet the needs of very troubled adolescents but was also impacted by government funding issues. The work finally came to an end in June 2006 when BCM said goodbye to the last of the young people for whom Craigmore (at Millisle) had been 'home'. The following was written by one of the last residents when she heard it was to close:

'Even though I tried not to let it happen, you've still managed to fill my heart with love. Even though I didn't want it, you've always helped me out. When I was down in the dumps even though it wasn't your fault you always took half the burden and the abuse. When I received

bad news nothing to do with you, you always managed to make me smile. When I thought there was no point in trying anymore, you always made me see that no matter how much you're knocked down, you can always get back up again and I should never give up. And the best thing you've probably taught me was that you'll always be there for me. So thank you... and smile.'

VOLUNTEERING

The Rev Crawford Johnson, in the early days of the Mission, praised its 'noble band of workers' who applied themselves willingly to every duty required of them. Volunteering has been constantly at the very heart of the Mission's life. A 'Grosvenor Hall Worker' badge was pinned on with a sense of pride and it imbued the wearer with a deep sense of responsibility for the task in hand. After Grosvenor House was built in 1997 volunteering took on a structured format under the leadership of Janet Sewell. Three years later a scheme was launched for the over 50s called Prime Movers. Areas of involvement included befriending and providing practical support for isolated older people along with befriending and mentoring young people who had recently left care. There are presently about 130 BCM volunteers actively involved in:

- Fundraising activities.
- The community service programme:
 - Holidays and short breaks for older people.
 - Weekly luncheon club.
 - Tea dances.
 - Befriending and mentoring schemes.
 - The Christmas food and toy programmes.
 - Working with young parents to help develop their literacy and numeracy skills, improve their practical skills around the home and encourage basic good parenting skills.

- A six week summer scheme for children with autism when volunteers provide much needed respite for the parents through facilitating outings and activities as well as working on a one-to-one basis with the children involved to help develop their social skills.

RECOGNITION FOR BCM

In June 2005 the very prestigious 'Queen's Golden Jubilee Award for voluntary service by groups in the community' was conferred on the BCM Volunteers. The citation stated that it was for 'helping those most in need in the local community through practical and emotional support.' This was followed by a visit later in the year by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth and His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh to BCM's annual coffee morning in Grosvenor House.

A year later, Mr Joe Culbert, a volunteer with BCM for over 50 years, was recognised for his dedication and enthusiasm when he was chosen **Volunteer Fundraiser of the Year** at the Annual Institute of Fundraising Convention. As a child he was cared for in the Children's Home at Millisle and he later became a member of the Grosvenor Hall congregation. His response to the award was to say: 'I can never repay BCM for the home they gave me at Child Haven. I've been a member of the congregation now for 52 years and as a volunteer in all aspects of the Mission's work I hope I have given something back for the loving care I received.'

BCM was also visited by the President of the Republic of Ireland, Mary McAleese, in February 2007. She had expressed an interest in the Mission's work with young people and so a warm welcome was extended to her. The President showed great concern for the difficulties faced by the young people she met and talked to them about how BCM's projects had helped them. In the visitor's book she wrote: '**Love works. I have seen it in action here and it is awesome.**'



Where to next?

The Rev Richard Johnston responds to the question...

... FOR THE CONGREGATION

Along with many of the other long-established congregations in the city centre the population shift towards communities away from the city centre has challenged the congregation. It still however, seeks to explore what it means to be a 'Mission' congregation in the heart of the city during the 21st century. The congregation's Church Council continues to debate questions such as:

- What should be distinctive about a 'City Mission' congregation?
- How do we minister to those who find themselves on the fringes of the Church?
- Who is our community in the Belfast of the 21st Century?
- How do we minister to those who are engaged in the business of the city, both by day and by night?

As a result, BCM is taking a leading role in a number of new initiatives including:

- Support for and leadership within **Belfast Street Pastors** – an inter-church initiative to care, listen to and help those involved with the night-time economy of the city. This involves well developed relationships with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, City Council and Belfast City Centre Management, along with commitment to the Friday and Saturday evening 'patrols' that take place throughout the city centre between the hours of 11.00pm and 3.00-4.00am.
- Ongoing exploration of the possibility of establishing an ecumenically supported **City Centre Chaplaincy**. It is hoped that this chaplaincy could focus on ministry to those working in the city centre, including retailers, staff and office workers.

... FOR SOCIAL CARE

In contrast to the early years of BCM's work, a sound financial base has been established, enabling BCM to ensure high quality professional delivery of care. The period 2003/07 has seen the consolidation of the professionalism of the social care work. Its reputation continues to grow, a reflection of the exemplary character, professional qualities and dedication of its staff. Services are now being provided across a number of communities in

Northern Ireland, including Armagh, Dungannon, Bangor and Newtownards, as well as throughout Belfast. Projects continue to strive for excellence in the care offered to each person who engages with them:

The latter part of 2013 saw significant expansion in our provision of **Housing Support for Older People** from South and East Belfast to encompass the whole of Belfast. At the same time a pilot project offering the same type of support was established in Dungannon and discussions are currently in process with another Social Care and Health Trust. Similarly, there has been expansion of the **Housing Support for Young People** in the Dungannon area as a response to increased need.

For many years a very successful and effective **Parent Support** programme has operated in Newtownards. The local Newtownards Churches have been instrumental in making this a very valuable and enriching support to parents, who themselves have been through the care system. Toward the end of 2013 a similar project was established in Dungannon.

Kirk House is in the process of having one wing remodelled to make it more suitable for the increasing number of its residents who are developing signs of dementia and also for those coming into the home already experiencing its effects.

... FOR BCM AND ITS STAFF

2013 was a year that encompassed a refocus on how to best resource and support BCM's staff tasked with the delivery of care throughout the projects. The three Assistant Directors of BCM had their roles reviewed and responsibilities revised in order to offer more focused support to the project staff. BCM's senior team, in conjunction with the Superintendent, now comprises the Director, Brian Burns, Head of Care, Cindy Scott, Head of Development, Nicky Conway and Head of Finance & Business Support, Gillian Murray. This new structure will allow them to take a more strategic approach to evaluating and responding to the calls upon us for care. Thanks are due to Mr Brian Burns for the dedicated, sensitive and effective manner

in which he led the organisation through this period of change.

Of some concern to BCM, as it is to the wider voluntary and charitable sector, is an imminent move by statutory bodies to a competitive tendering process. A major focus within BCM throughout 2014 will be to prepare, equip and build expertise to enable the organisation and its staff to respond effectively.

... IN CHANGING TIMES

During 2007/08 Belfast and much of the world was confronted with a global financial crisis. Many Voluntary and Charitable organisations found it very difficult to maintain their provision of service with some entering into mergers or ceasing their work. Although the economic pressures had a significant impact upon BCM, the sound financial position established over the previous 10/15 years has provided a stable base from which to continue the provision of care and even respond to increased requests for the expansion of some of its services.

Johnston, Richard Charles, MA, BTheol



Born on 23 February 1960 in Camperdown, Victoria, Australia – son of John Wesley Johnston (Cavan, Ireland) and Dorothea Estelle Gay (Yarram, Victoria, Australia).

- Seconded to the Methodist Church in Ireland, July 2002.
 - Chairperson of Forthspring Intercommunity Group 2007-13.
- 2007 Belfast Central Mission (to date)



Independently of the economic crisis I have encouraged discussion around two themes:

- An exploration of reasons for and ways of achieving a greater financial independence for BCM.
- The question of future major developments in BCM's ministry of care, particularly regarding the Millisle property on which Child Haven and Craigmore were previously located.

Hard decisions had to be made in relation to a number of projects:

Child Haven Conference Centre which had been operating as a small retreat/conference centre for many years was no longer able to adequately meet the needs of users. The modifications needed to bring it up to the new standards required were deemed to be too expensive and so with heavy hearts the decision was made to close the facility in August 2011.

This necessitated moving the ongoing holidays for isolated older people to a new venue. Despite many patrons finding the change difficult as so many warm memories had been forged over the years the holidays continue with a renewed interest being generated in recent years.

Craigmore Home having been used by the Health and Social Care Trust as a home for adolescents was also closed when the Trust transferred its care to a new purpose-built facility.

The **Conference Centre and Café** which had operated in Grosvenor House since 1997 was also finding it hard to compete in the difficult financial climate thus a decision was made to close in December 2011. These had provided an additional source of income to aid the Mission's work.

... FINANCIALLY

BCM's reputation for quality service delivery has continued to develop and contracts with the Housing Executive's Supporting People Programme and several Health and Social Care Trusts have increased. This has enabled BCM to continue to develop its support of young people who had been through the statutory care system and of vulnerable older people. It has meant however, that from a financial perspective BCM is relying increasingly upon statutory funding. At the beginning of the present decade, statutory funding accounted for 70-80% of total income.

A discussion around financial independence has taken place and several themes emerged:

- In order to protect BCM and its work from the vagaries of government

policy and economic decisions, increased independent income is now essential.

- Financial independence is needed to free the Mission to further develop some of its existing projects which address need in ways that go beyond what is commissioned by statutory agencies.

In other words, increased income is needed to free the Mission from constraints imposed by statutory funding sources.

As we reflect on the past ministry of the Mission, we are reminded of the frequency with which it undertook provision of care which went beyond what was deemed (by the relevant authorities) to be satisfactory for meeting the needs of people. We have a growing conviction that it is critical for BCM to reclaim its capacity to respond even when funders have not recognised the need. The Mission needs independent income in order to address problems that none of its funders are prepared to confront, or recognise as being of importance (such as starter packages for young people entering supported housing; camping breaks for young parents; caring for spiritual needs alongside people's physical, emotional and psychological needs).

Renewed emphasis has been placed on ensuring that BCM is accessing as many as possible of the funding streams available from across the spectrum of grant-making organisations. Investigations into current and future thinking around appropriate new ways of establishing financial security have been undertaken. Throughout these discussions BCM has sought to evaluate fresh ways of generating the financial support needed to continue the existing work and develop new responses to the needs evident in the community.

... UTILISING THE CONCEPT OF 'SOCIAL ECONOMY'

Across Northern Ireland and throughout the United Kingdom, the concept of Social Economy (or Social Enterprise) has been gaining strength as a means of addressing the funding requirements of the voluntary or charitable sector, now often being referred to as the 'third sector' (as distinct from the public and private sectors). Pressures upon the financial capacity of government to meet its recognised social responsibility are flowing through to charitable organisations such as BCM. This results in greater expectation in relation to their delivery of service, often on behalf of statutory bodies, whilst at the same time decreasing the available funding.

Social enterprise, or engaging in

some form of trading with a view to creating a surplus which would in turn be channelled back into the primary objects of an organisation, became a significant consideration as BCM explored future stability. The conviction emerged that this was needed in order to maintain its capacity to provide the care it believes it exists to deliver. A growing sense developed within the leadership of the organisation that, as far as is practically possible, any social enterprise BCM engaged upon should be in tune with the broader care provision at the core of its community work. Having evaluated the approach taken by other charities, the greatest merit seemed to lie in establishing social enterprise projects which built upon BCM's experience in care delivery, whilst remaining aware of the slight but significant difference in purpose.

Essentially, when BCM now engages in social enterprise, notwithstanding the fact that many of these undertakings will have a strong care element, the purpose will be primarily to generate income for the wider work of the Mission, thus establishing an even more rigorous financial foundation. The quality of the care provided will always remain paramount, but the ongoing viability of the project will be primarily be based upon its financial contribution.

Puddleducks: As a consequence of the closure of the Conference Centre operating in Grosvenor House, a wide range of options were considered as to how the resulting space could or should be used. Following extensive investigation of the need and viability of such a project, it was decided to convert the first floor of Grosvenor House into a day nursery, catering from birth through to school age. BCM became convinced that such a development had the potential to enhance and enrich the lives of parents





working within the city centre, whilst at the same time meeting the needs of the Mission.

Following the investment of £250,000 in the conversion of the first floor of Grosvenor House, Puddleducks opened its doors in July 2012. Thus far it is exceeding expectations from a business perspective whilst receiving glowing recommendations for the care provided. One parent noted: 'The team at Puddleducks have excelled that (previous care). Our son has progressed further in every possible way. He loves it and we love it. The girls are so warm and friendly and I go to work without a single concern for his well-being'.

The success of Puddleducks has led BCM to begin explorations into the development of further day nurseries based upon a similar rigorous evaluation of need and carefully developed business case.

Room Hire: Having decided upon a use for the first floor of Grosvenor House, a redeveloped 'room hire' was launched incorporating the third floor as well as space on the ground floor when it was available. Again this has proved to be a well-received and productive development due largely to the dedication and commitment of the team involved.

... DEMENTIA CARE AT 'COPELANDS'

The initial successes of Puddleducks and Room Hire have encouraged a new stream of thought within Belfast Central Mission. This has highlighted that there may well be other ways in which BCM can deliver its care services whilst generating surpluses to be directed to other areas of our work.

For some time consideration has been given to future uses of the site at Millisle. Its eventual closure in 2011 brought to the fore questions about its future relevance to the ongoing work of BCM. Nevertheless, having been of such significance over many years, there is a strong desire to maintain its place within the work of BCM. Following extensive thought, prayer and investigation an increasing awareness has developed regarding the lack of appropriate residential care for those experiencing dementia in Northern Ireland. Examples of quality provision of such care in Great Britain and Australia have strengthened the growing conviction that it could become the location for a development of facilities to meet this need. Dreams have emerged of a comprehensive development incorporating independent living apartments, dementia specific care

and nursing care.

The challenging financial climate in Northern Ireland has made the concept of independent living difficult to achieve. Investigations have continued however into the provision of dementia related care, with a particular focus on those who are still very physically active but need a secure environment. With advice from the Northern Ireland Dementia Centre, and as a result of visits to existing facilities in England and Australia, plans have begun to take shape around the development of a 64 bed facility. This would incorporate care for those experiencing this form of dementia alongside general and dementia nursing.

Following the development of a detailed and thorough business case, the Mission Committee has now given its support to the proposal being taken forward (in doing so it has emulated the innovative visions which resulted in Castle Rocklands and Kirk House both being built.) The goal is to incorporate the latest advances in care whilst ensuring a financially viable and sustainable project. This facility will not be primarily dependent on residents coming through the social care system although there is confidence that this will occur. Rather, it is based upon the expectation that the level and quality of care being offered is needed across the whole community, whether people have a capacity to pay for that care or not. The sustainability of this project does not rely solely upon statutory funding, but upon delivery of high quality cutting-edge models of care in a state-of-the-art purpose-built facility.

Subject to the effectiveness of the care provided through the developments on the Millisle site, ongoing thought is being given to how in future, similar quality care might also be provided at a location in the centre of Belfast. This would be through a model which is accessible to the whole community, perhaps even incorporating a level of independent living alongside the higher care provision.

The development at Millisle demonstrates a number of advancements in the thinking of BCM, including:

- A committed response to the increasing prevalence of dementia-related health issues.
- The determination to provide the very best dementia-related care possible.
- A desire to establish care that is not primarily reliant upon statutory funding.
- A willingness to risk pursuing models of care that have yet to become fully appreciated within the broader Northern Ireland delivery of care.
- Commitment to establishing a model of care that can subsequently become integrated into future dementia care provision.
- Expanding the breadth of BCM's care for older people, to the extent that it would then encompass the following:
 - supporting older people to stay in their own homes;
 - residential care in Kirk House;
 - provision for those still active but as a result of their dementia needing a secure environment;
 - general and dementia nursing.



Architect's impression of Copelands.



... FOR SPIRITUAL CARE

There are only two Objects stated in the Memorandum and Articles of Association of Belfast Central Mission. They are:

- The advancement of the Christian Religion in Ireland.
- The relief of poverty, sickness, infirmity or other necessitous circumstances through the provision of accommodation, care, counselling or education on a cross community basis for people in Northern Ireland who are in need of such provision.

BCM's provision of care throughout the 1990's was heavily influenced by the wider societal context; It sought to be a beacon of light across the breadth of society, both through its congregational life and its provision of care to all regardless of background or circumstances. Following the 'Troubles', as much of Northern Ireland committed to the sometimes torturous path toward lasting and deep-seated peace, a low-key approach to the religious identity behind the provision of care by BCM ensued. The Methodist ethos, which had always been identifiably guiding the work of the Mission, remained. The social context however, along with stringent governmental constraints, meant that overt expressions of faith within many of the projects became more difficult. The Mission's witness never-the-less continued as evident through the quality of its care and the high regard in which it was held, underlined by its standing within the statutory bodies with which it engaged.

For BCM, along with many other organisations, the 21st century has been a period of increasing complexity when addressing what is considered good governance and good organisational practice. As a result increasing emphasis had been placed on clearly documenting the goals and objectives it seeks to achieve. Within BCM's resultant 'Strategic Plan', clear reference is made to addressing the full needs of each person with whom we engage in our provision of care. BCM is, as it has always been, committed to caring for the whole person, physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual.

As peace became more deep-rooted as the 'normal' way of life in Northern Ireland the financial environment became increasingly difficult following the 2007 financial crisis. Statutory bodies began to respond more readily to the recognition that faith-based organisations had a greater role to play in delivery of care. This was evidenced by the first meeting of the Community Faiths' Forum in May

I HAVE A DREAM...

... I dream for BCM that we will move into a future that addresses the practical, though very real needs, of both young and old, and does so in ways that creatively and sensitively bring dignity and wholeness as we address the well-being of the whole person.

... I dream of an organisation that continues to respect each individual with whom we work, seeing in them the image of Creator God, and valuing each one as God values every human being.

... I dream of an organisation taking the risk of stepping out, in both large and small ways, in response to need even when the assurances that give us security are less clear, less obvious; when it costs us something to take those steps.

... I dream of an organisation integrating physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual care in respectful, empowering, life-giving ways.

... I look forward to the time when a new department of Ministry is added to the organisation and the senior team includes a Head of Ministry appointed to offer leadership alongside the Heads of Care, Development and Finance and

Business Support. Embedded within this dream lies an integrated approach to caring for the whole person, whatever their background, circumstances or beliefs.

Is this dream a wild, unfounded flight of fancy? I have no hesitation in, with assurance, declaring a resounding no! It is built upon the dedication, the example, the inspiration of all who have gone before. It is built upon the wisdom, discernment and financial acumen of not only previous generations through our 125 year history, but upon the dedication and expertise of the team who are BCM today. It is built upon the willingness of both past and present Mission Committees, members of the congregation, staff and volunteers who choose to respond in dedicated service. It is built upon the challenge that comes down to us through the generations who sacrificed themselves for the sake of others. It is built upon the conviction that, together, we are called, not only by the need evident around us, but by the God who will not fail us or forsake us.

It needs you to become a part of it... physically, financially and prayerfully.

Richard Johnston

2010 (established under the auspices of the Department for Social Development). I sit on this forum which is '... designed to be a forum for discussion of social and community issues and not primarily a forum for inter-faith dialogue, though five individuals from faiths other than Christian are members of the Forum'.

In response to this changing context, along with an ongoing engagement with the fundamental objects of BCM, I am committed to developing a spiritual expression through every single project that BCM operates. I recognise that this must be fulfilled in a way that is contextually sensitive and appropriate. It is a challenge to engage with the spiritual dimension in every person in such a way that they are enabled to take further steps in their own exploration of who they are and what this means to and for them. Integral to the envisioned model of care at Copelands is a creative and fresh approach to Pastoral Care of residents. Chaplaincy takes an important place as an essential and vital component of the model of care BCM plans to deliver at Millisle.

Well.com – Independently of the

Belfast Central Mission, around 2009 the Methodist Church established a Pioneer Mission Committee to help the church respond to a growing desire amongst its people to engage in new ways of being church; fresh expressions of church that stepped outside what was considered normal for church life, engaging with members of communities and whole communities with which the church had had little contact in the past. One of the projects approved by Conference was the establishment of Well.com, a pioneer ministry centred around Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Spirituality in the Carlisle Circus Interface area.

As an expression of the growing desire within the leadership of BCM, to take the initiative in supporting innovative work that otherwise might not proceed, the Mission Committee has agreed to five years of financial support for the project. In 2012 BCM became the major funder for this ground-breaking work within a community where people are fragmented within themselves and with each other; a community that experiences some of the poorest mental health in Northern Ireland.

Endnotes

C1: BEGINNINGS

1. David Bebbington, *Holiness in Nineteenth-Century England* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000).
2. Maldwyn Edwards, *Methodism and England* (London: The Epworth Press, 1944), pp 85-91.
3. John Petty, *The History of the Primitive Methodist Connexion from its origin to the Conference of 1860* (London: R Davies, Conference Offices, 1864).
4. J Scott Lidgett, *My Guided Life*, (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1939), pp 144-167
5. Maldwyn Edwards, *Methodism and England*, pp 147-156.
6. Andrew Mearns, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: An Inquiry into the Conditions of the Abject Poor* (London: James Clarke & Co, 1883).
7. The 1884 Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes.
8. The length of time Conference permitted a Minister to remain on a circuit.
9. J Gregory Mantle, *Hugh Price Hughes – A Strenuous Life*, (London: S W Partridge & Co, 1902), pp 95-106.
10. Started as the 'Belfast Town Mission' before 'Town' gave way to 'City'; It then became 'Belfast Methodist City Mission'; By 1895 it had become 'Belfast Central Mission' to avoid confusion with the Presbyterian 'Belfast City Mission'; More recently abbreviated to 'BCM'.

C2: CONVERSIONS

1. The Keswick Convention began in 1875 as a catalyst and focal point for the emerging Higher Life movement.
2. James Dixon, *With Christ at the Front*, (Belfast: John Adams, 1904).
3. Although the name of Billy Spence has been lost in the mists of time, both by the Grosvenor Hall congregation and by wider Methodism, he has not been totally forgotten in the city of Belfast and Robin Mark, a well known Christian singer/songwriter recently wrote a song about him (<http://robinmark.com/more-about-the-song-billy-spence>).
4. Janice Holmes, *Religious Revivals in Britain and Ireland 1859-1905*, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000)
5. Janice Holmes, *Religious Revivals in Britain and Ireland 1859-1905*, p 192.

C3: PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY

1. 'A raggedly dressed homeless child wandering the streets. (Oxford English Dictionary).
2. BCM archive (28 May 1902).
3. Brendan Fulton & Bob Webb, 'The Emergence of Probation Services in North-East Ireland', in *Irish Probation Journal*, vi (September 2009), pp 32-48.
4. Bell's Hill Cottage (now demolished) – identified as being on left-hand side of road leading down to Grey Point.
5. Ministry of Labour – Government of Northern Ireland: Unemployed Relief Fund – Scheme No 216.

6. Frederick Gilbert Watson, *Building over the centuries – A History of McLaughlin & Harvey*, (Belfast, 2010), pp 184-7.

C4: CHRISTIAN SOCIALISM

1. R Lee Cole, *History of Methodism in Ireland, 1860-1960* (Belfast: The Irish Methodist Publishing Co Ltd, 1960), pp 133-5 for information regarding the Forward Movement.
2. In 1932 unemployed workers dependant on the relief provided by the Poor Law formed an Outdoor Relief Workers' Committee with the aim of bringing Belfast outdoor relief rates into line with payments in Great Britain.
3. Angela Clifford, *Poor Law in Ireland* (Belfast: Athol Books, 1983).

C5: THE END OF THE BEGINNING

1. The late Mr John Beckett recounted how the Rev Wesley McKinney sat in his father's house (c 1937) and stated that Methodism was losing a great opportunity to set up an agricultural college at Craigmore. County Armagh's loss was to become County Tipperary's gain when Gurteen Agricultural College was founded at Ballingarry some ten years later.
2. *The Irish Christian Advocate*, 11 June 1954.

C6: ECUMENISM & PEACEMAKING

1. BCM Archive (July 1935).
2. Written by Dr Gallagher in 1990 at the request of the author – an incomplete copy is in the BCM Archive.
3. Minutes of Conference 1964: p 132.
4. The Four Freedoms were goals articulated by Franklin D Roosevelt US President, in a State of the Union Address on 6 January 1941 – Freedom of speech; Freedom of worship; Freedom from want; Freedom from fear.
5. Burntollet bridge (about five miles (8km) outside Londonderry).
6. This was the first official meeting between the Member Churches of the Irish Council of Churches and the Irish Episcopal Conference and was so called because it was held at the Ballymascanlon Hotel, Dundalk.

C7: REGENERATION & RENEWAL

1. The sexual abuse of young victims under the care and protection of Northern Ireland's Eastern Health and Social Services Board.
2. ethicalclubbing.com

BCM ARCHIVE

The source for much of the information contained in this booklet is the BCM Archive. It now comprises in excess of 25,000 items including Minute books, registers, correspondence, handbills, appeal leaflets and orders of service from throughout the 125 year history of the Mission. There is a nationally important collection of images by Alexander Hogg, one of the best known photographers of Belfast life, whom BCM employed to take publicity photographs as well as to record significant events. Pictures taken by members of the congregation also provide a comprehensive record

of events associated with Grosvenor Hall during the past century. Two of the more significant items in the collection are the hymn sheet for the Titanic memorial service (see page 33) and an autographed programme of the 1958 Paul Robeson concert in Grosvenor Hall.

During the past 25 years many researchers have become aware of this valuable resource and material has been used in books, television programmes and exhibitions. To coincide with the 125th Anniversary of BCM the Linen Hall library will be facilitating a display of material from the archive during October/November 2014.

Copelands, Dementia and Nursing Care



Looking to the future, BCM is keen to pave the way for the care of older people in Northern Ireland and is planning to construct and manage Copelands, a 64 bed dementia and nursing care home on our former Child Haven site close to Millisle, County Down. Copelands will be an exemplar model providing market leading care for Northern Ireland. It will be constructed according to the University of Stirling's Gold Standard in dementia design and will provide general nursing and dementia care. It will offer a 24-hour residential and nursing service in a comfortable and supported environment with 64 en-suite rooms, each one equipped to give residents maximum opportunity and independence.

Copelands will address the needs of people with dementia who are still physically active but require a protective and supportive environment. Features will include: a pod structure; dementia friendly lighting; a sensory garden; chapel; hair salon/nail bar; cinema room; café for residents and their friends and family; a library and internet room; and a social and leisure activities programme. Our care model will be based on the 'Household Model of Care', Norton & Shields (2006) and adapted to Northern Ireland family cultural norms. This approach is person-centred and creates a genuine home for the residents. The model involves breaking down the traditional care home facility into households of eight residents, each household having

their own front door, kitchen, dining room, living room and extra cosy spaces found in any home as well as patio, landings, front porch, etc. Residents should be able to expect as much personal freedom as they can manage, for example: being able to get up when they want, bathe how and when they want, go to bed when they want, eat when and what they want and decide how they will spend their day. Household life is normal and spontaneous.

The project will feature a new approach to staff roles whereby staff are allocated to a resident, not to a job. Together, the resident and assigned staff member work through the normal tasks of the day such as getting dressed, making the bed, making breakfast, setting tables, sorting laundry, washing dishes, gardening, cleaning and taking medication. This contrasts with more traditional care facilities where several different staff would be involved to enable this same day to happen.

Funding for Copelands will come from many different sources. Whilst we've already raised a significant amount of money towards the development, including a substantial legacy, we need to raise in the region of £1.5 million. Funding is being sought from government, grant-making trusts and a major fundraising campaign. It is envisaged that building work will commence in 2014 with the facilities being open to the first residents in 2015.



Internal aerial view (architect's impression)



Internal aerial view (architect's impression)



One of three enclosed sensory gardens (architect's impression)



En-suite room (architect's impression)

A Gift of Love

Once you have made provision in your will for your family & friends, please consider making a legacy to Belfast Central Mission (BCM).

At BCM we have been providing practical and emotional support to those in need within our community for 125 years. From children with autism to vulnerable young people and isolated older people, many have been helped. You too can be a part of that, now and in the future, by remembering BCM in your will.

Anyone can leave a legacy and no gift is too small. Legacies provide a vital source of income and even modest donations can make a great difference to someone's life. Thank you.



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Charity Number: XN 46001 Company Limited by Guarantee: NI 55693

Expressing Christian faith in action through service to others



Belfast Central Mission

BCM is an agency of the Methodist Church in Ireland.

Community Services - Belfast
 Befriending, Tea Dances, Christmas Support, Lunch Club, Short breaks.

Parents' Support - Newtownards, Armagh & Dungannon
 Emotional and practical support to help care experienced young parents develop their parenting skills.

Supported Housing - Belfast, Newtownards, Dungannon, Bangor
 For young people leaving care and wanting to move towards independent living.

Therapeutic Counselling - North Down & Ards, Belfast & Downpatrick
 Provided by accredited counsellors with experience of working with young people who have been in care.



EAGLE Project - Belfast
 Supporting children with autism and their families.

Housing Support
For older people - Belfast, Armagh & Dungannon.
 Supporting people aged 55+ to remain independent and continue to live in their own homes for as long as possible;

Kirk House - Belfast
 Residential care with privacy, independence and companionship, whilst acknowledging each resident's individuality.

For young people - Newtownards, Armagh & Dungannon.
 Helping with homelessness, maintaining a tenancy, housing issues and independent living skills. Aged 16-25 yrs.

Other - BCM Room Hire, Puddleducks Day Nursery, BCM Training Services.



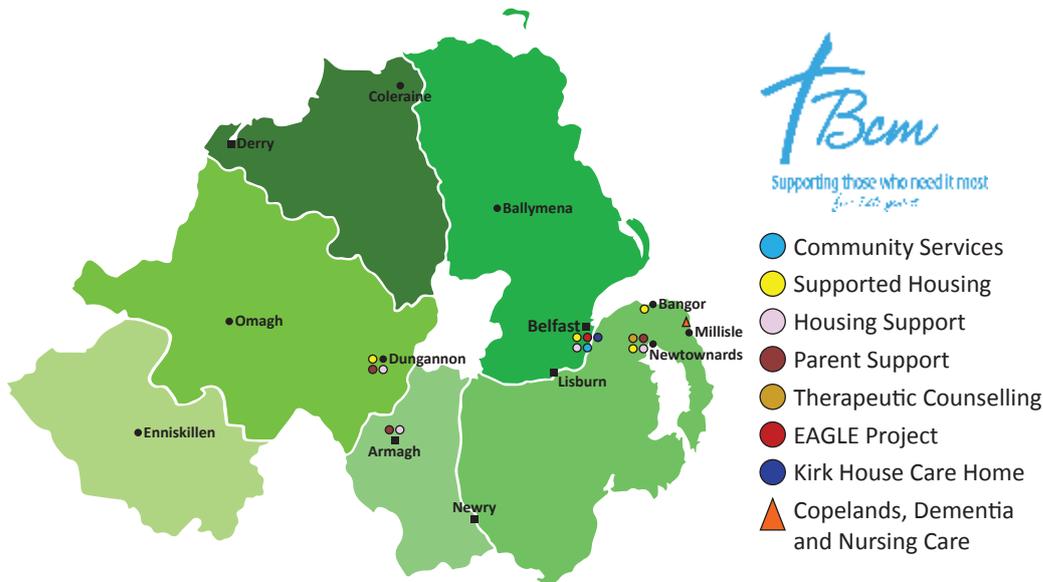
Grosvenor House, 5 Glengall Street, Belfast, BT12 5AD
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"I don't know where I would be now if I didn't have the support they provide me with."

BCM is a charity with Inland Revenue Number: XN46001. Company Limited by Guarantee NI55693

Location of BCM Projects



BCM is one of N Ireland's oldest charities. Founded in 1889 as part of the Methodist church's response to problems inherent in inner-city life, BCM is involved with all sectors of the community, irrespective of religious or political affiliation. Our aim is to support those most in need in our society and enable them to reach their full potential. We do this through our diverse social care projects, cross-community programme and our two congregations.

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