

- 22 C. Stovel, *The Dreadful Requisition, or a Treatise on the Righteousness of God in Punishing the Neglect of Souls*, 1837, p.39.
- 23 Cited from a printed report of the funeral service, inserted in Church Book No.7.
- 24 Cited from report of Stone Laying Ceremony.
- 25 George E. Page, A.G.B., *The Story of the Life and Work of Archibald Geikie Brown*, 1944, p.27.
- 26 Church Book No.7, Meeting 12th December 1883, Minute 2120.

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RELIGION AMONGST THE PROPRIETIES OF LIFE

George M'Cree and the Bloomsbury Domestic Mission

Reporting on the religious section of the 1851 Census(1), Horace Mann expressed concern at 'the destitute condition of our great town population'. The urban labouring classes, 'vast, intelligent and growingly important', were estranged from the churches and did not recognise religion as amongst 'the proprieties of life'. New and energetic missionary enterprises were needed to mitigate spiritual destitution. Mann noted with approval that some dissenters, attaching 'no peculiar sanctity to buildings', were holding services in secular halls, bringing the Gospel to the people's 'own haunts'. Among such dissenters were the Baptists of Bloomsbury Chapel, with their Domestic Mission.

Gathered churches, Mann noted, dependent on members' giving, were already following those members out to the suburbs, deserting the poor of the deteriorating inner cities. By contrast, Bloomsbury Chapel was planted strategically in 1848, intended by Morton Peto to serve the well-to-do trades folk of Bloomsbury to the north and tap their resources for ministry in the wretched slums to the south. Some of the notorious St Giles' 'rookeries' had been eliminated by new roads, but displaced residents stayed in the area, packed ever more densely into decaying tenements. Whole families lived in each room, without furniture or sanitation. Disease was rife, crime rampant. Interconnections between tenements and yards made pursuit of criminals almost impossible. Money, whether acquired by theft or street trading, mostly went on drink. It was a grim, sordid, violent district, avoided by respectable people. The parish churches did their best: the St Giles' District Visiting Association provided a savings fund, lending library and lying-in assistance. St Giles' and St George's jointly ran the Bloomsbury Dispensary for the sick poor. Already the urgency of inner city mission proved a 'motivating ecumenical feature'(2) and the Baptists were welcome as extra labourers in the field. They gladly supported the Dispensary and the local Ragged Schools.

William Brock, minister at the new chapel, brought with him from Norwich a temperance missionary, George Wilson M'Cree (1822-1892). The young man might not appear an obvious choice: a northerner, in poor health, with minimal training and limited experience, and a General Baptist, whereas Brock was a Fullerite Calvinist. Brock knew his man.

To the district where vice was most rampant, Bloomsbury sent its representative, Mr G. W. M'Cree, a man of consecrated commonsense and great boldness in the service of Christ. He was indetified with every good work, and was as popular in the thieves' kitchen of the penny lodging-house as upon the platform of a temperance meeting.(3)

The son of a Tyneside grocer, M'Cree began as a Primitive Methodist, preaching in the open air around the Lake District. He became a Baptist when eighteen, had short pastorates, interrupted by illness, near Ripon and Sunderland, and then spent a few months as a temperance missionary in Nottingham and Norwich. He was married, with two sons; the elder later wrote his father's biography, quoting extensively from George M'Cree's own diaries.(4)

M'Cree was engaged late in 1848 as Domestic Missionary of Bloomsbury Chapel, to visit, preach and lead worship among the poor.

As soon as possible, I took my first walk into St Giles. I walked into it alone; and yet I was not alone, because the Father was with me. I remember passing to and fro, a stranger, unknown to any, exploring my way, as best I could.... I was induced to enter a barber's shop... and there I began... to testify...

I went into every attic and cellar and lodging-house, and every place in which I could find a human being. I visited these for six months, and although it was thought one of the worst parts of St Giles... except on one occasion, I never received an insult.(5)

When the Bloomsbury church was formed in July 1849, it set up the Domestic Mission Committee to support M'Cree, and took a large room in King Street as a Mission Hall. Within four years M'Cree was visiting four hundred families each month, 'as meticulous as a rent collector', and preaching to 150-200 on Sunday evenings. Volunteer Sabbath Visitors covered an adjacent district on Sunday afternoons: they encountered 'drunken and depraved classes' but were well received and felt useful.(6) The people proved 'accessible to kindness'. Visitors distributed 20,000 tracts a year, plus Scriptures.

Many of the poor could read and welcomed free literature, as M'Cree observed: 'Conversed with a number of men - most of them thieves - in Neal's Yard. They took my tracts, and sat down on the ground and round the gin shop door to read them'. In 1853 M'Cree, aided by a generous Quaker, opened a lending library at the Mission, with 450 books and 130 readers. He believed this the best way to counter pornography. Books were exchanged before the Tuesday evening service. A Bible and Book Society enabled people to save up for copies of their own.

A whole range of evangelical and welfare work was quickly established. The two went hand in hand. John Clifford judged M'Cree

'one of the earliest to face the imperative urgency of the Social Gospel'.(7) Each week there were Sunday and Tuesday evening services, Sunday Schools, prayer meetings, open-air preaching (in summer), and a meeting for very poor children. Visitors did not go armed with material aid but referred cases of acute need to various aid societies, chiefly the Bloomsbury Chapel's own Sick Poor Relief Society, Cheap Clothing Society for the Industrious Poor, and Ladies Charity for Assisting Poor Married Women (renamed the Maternal Society in 1854, this supplied confinement linen and baby clothes). Sick Poor Relief provided money, food, fuel, clothing and free medical advice and medicines, thanks to church-members, Dr Carlill and Messrs Burden and Linder, pharmacists. 'No relief is given without personal visitation; and the visitors take care at all times to combine Christian counsel with the temporary relief afforded'.(8) Members at the Chapel subscribed to and staffed these and other aid societies, all carefully recorded in the published Year Books. In 1852 Cheap Clothing sold 928 items, sewn by Bloomsbury ladies, whose object was:

To induce economical habits, with a view to such savings of money as may be advantageously expended in procuring at half price blankets, material for garments, and garments ready-made. Great care is taken to render this assistance only to such persons as are known to be deserving, morally and otherwise.(9)

In 1854 Sick Poor Relief included gifts of 832 quartern (4 lb) loaves, 1271 lbs of meat and 11 tons 5cwt of coal. With limited resources and great need, there was unashamed discrimination in favour of the 'deserving' poor (there was always workhouse provision for the destitute), but assistance was not confined to mission adherents. M'Cree would refer anyone in dire need, including Roman Catholics. In giving relief, the constant aim was 'to avoid pauperizing the recipients, but to enable the poor, as far as possible, to help themselves'. If a man was ill, his tools might be pawned to feed his family, and relief often included redeeming the tools so that, when recovered, he could return to work.

Charles McCree thought his father shrewd in distinguishing practised cadgers from people who had 'gone off the rails' and needed a hand back. Often M'Cree took starving boys into his home (in Bloomsbury - he never actually lived in his district); 'where I can best supply them with food, warmth, clothing, and kind words about the Gospel, and not a few ... prove themselves clean, honest, worthy fellows'. His son met some in good positions in later years.

Other activities at the Mission Hall included a Mothers' Meeting, Singing Class, Writing Class, and temperance meetings. The Coal Club and Penny Bank encouraged thrift. Before and after the Tuesday evening service, M'Cree held a Counsel Chamber where people brought all manner of concerns. There was a strong educational element in the activities: education helped people to help themselves. The Mothers' Meeting offered fellowship, Christian teaching and instruction in needlework, with a cheap supply of materials:

The presence of two or three Christian ladies in a company of sixty or seventy mothers, in order to superintend their needlework, to advise them under their various circumstances, to take kindly notice of their infant children, to read to them at intervals from some interesting volume, and to induce the

feeling of general friendliness among different classes, can hardly be over-estimated.(10)

M'Cree noted that he had to persuade parents to give their children toys, rare in St Giles'. He loved to brighten children's lives and took special delight in his dinners for those who rarely got more than a crust flavoured with fish.

Knowing how much sickness was induced by starvation, I resolved to supply one dinner per week for from 25 to 50 children. This would not be much, but it would have, I knew, a great effect upon their physical health...

[He arranged for a cookshop to supply]

Clean white tablecloths, plates for two covers [courses], knives and forks, plenty of bread, good water, pepper and salt, and mustard, beef or mutton, vegetables, hot gravy and smoking [hot] plum pudding.

He invited children over ten, 'wan, hungry and neglected', and was touched to see how many tried to tidy themselves up. Eventually 120 were served each week. Most had to be taught how to use cutlery. Cheap, or sometimes free, teas were provided for other groups, poor needlewomen, sandwich-men, etc.

Such activities all brought people within range of the Gospel, for social gatherings always included a short evangelistic message. The mandate to convert sinners motivated this work, but so too did compassion and obedience to Christ's directives to care for the poor and distressed. These are sometimes seen as alternatives in motivation, but here they walk hand-in-hand as twin imperatives for the Mission. Welfare work opened the way for preaching the Gospel, but that Gospel made demands on church-members' compassion and offered the poor prospects of a better life on this earth as well as bright hope for the next.

Conversion for these people meant material as well as spiritual transformation. With faith came self-respect and the will to change. They were helped to use their limited means more wisely and soon had more nourishing meals, better clothes and even furniture. The improvement in their appearance was so marked that the Mission had to be vigilant or shabby newcomers were put off by the 'respectable' congregation. Before long they could move away to better areas, but more poor would take their place, and the process of evangelism had constantly to be repeated. It was years before demands on the Mission began to ease.

The 1867 Year Book describes a typical mission congregation:

Sober, well-dressed mechanics, tradesmen, street-hawkers, thieves, temperance lecturers, costermongers, fallen women, men fresh from prison, begging letter writers, readers for the press, porters, happy mothers with their children, young men of good position, shoe-blacks, milliners' assistants, and not a few... who keep themselves wrapped in mystery... It is probably as thoughtful and still a congregation as there is in London.

Some, especially those young men, would be members of Bloomsbury

deliberately supporting the Mission. The porters worked in nearby Covent Garden market. M'Cree's diaries frequently mention occupations, showing a range of street trades and unskilled workers, with the occasional professional man reduced 'through indulgence in bad habits'. Often men are defined simply as 'drunkards'. Children are mentioned as ballad-singers, beggars and pickpockets.

In 1852 the Mission Committee considered, but could not afford, a second missionary. (M'Cree was paid £104 p.a., rising to £200, a good stipend for the times). From 1861-7 a Female Missionary, Mrs Symons, widow of a Primitive Methodist minister, worked mainly with sick-poor women. She proved better than M'Cree at rescuing fallen women, but he often persuaded couples living together to marry. In later years lay 'Prayer Leaders' or a Mission Nurse were used. M'Cree led the Mission for twenty-five years, leaving soon after Brock retired, to become minister of Borough Road General Baptist Church, Southwark. William Harrison, from Surrey Chapel, served from 1874-95. Mission Sisters (deaconesses) led the work in its final decade.

An army of volunteers from the Chapel supported these staff. The Mission Committee involved *all* the deacons, plus other churchmembers. Bloomsbury's ministers preached at the Mission Hall once a quarter. The number of District Visitors varied (25 in 1855, 40 1860, 30 1865, 22 1874), often supplemented by Regent's Park and New College students. Numbers determined the area covered, but at any one time certain streets were visited regularly. Visitors offered tracts and invitations, encouraged cleanliness and education, channelled relief, ran branch Sunday Schools, and held services in the common lodging-houses. In 1861 the Church was asked for some lady visitors, 'circumstances frequently occurring which required the womanly attention of Christian friends'. The men must by then have felt confident of their welcome. Visitors were pleasantly surprised at their resistance to the pervading infections: 'God usually protects the visitors'. Doubtless better diet and general health helped too.

Bloomsbury paid the staff and hired the Mission Halls. King St was outgrown by 1855 and the work moved to better premises in Moor St, Five Dials. The congregation then was normally three to four hundred. Redevelopment forced a move to Meard St, Soho, in 1886. Mission converts joined the mother church, enjoying 'full church privileges', though few were as comfortable in the wealthy chapel as at their hall. By 1865 there were sixty such members, 'an amount of spiritual fruit certainly not anticipated a few years ago'. In January 1867 the work at Moor Street was organised as a separate Mission Church, though still financially dependent. M'Cree and his two deacons attended Bloomsbury Church Meetings. When M'Cree left, the Mission, with 111 members, was formally re-absorbed into Bloomsbury, but still had its own deacons and church meetings, with decisions subject to Bloomsbury confirmation. Bloomsbury deacons arranged annual Public Meetings on behalf of the Mission. C. H. Spurgeon was the preacher in 1876, and Lord Shaftesbury presided in 1878.

Two other missions had their origins in that of Bloomsbury: the St Giles' Christian Mission and Mrs Ranyard's Bible and Domestic Female Mission.

Ellen Ranyard (1810-79) had worked as a Bible Society agent in London long before moving to Bloomsbury. Escorted around St Giles', she realised that no *lady*, however brave, could hope to sell Bibles there. She conceived the idea of *Biblewomen*, 'native agents' who

would 'intimately know the habits of the people'. Consulting the Rector of St Giles' and William Brock, she was directed to M'Cree for a 'good, poor woman who would venture with a bag of Bibles into every room, as a paid agent of the Bible Society'. M'Cree suggested Marian Bowers(11), the first to use his library. A poor, married woman, native to St Giles', she could read and write but earned a meagre living making wax flowers, firepapers and silversmiths' bags. In twenty weeks she sold on subscription 130 Bibles and 120 New Testaments. As few women could read, she held tea parties in her one room and read Scriptures to them. She advised on hygiene and housekeeping, reporting the women were ready to learn but 'they do not think much'. Before her health broke down, she had both proved and extended Mrs Ranyard's original idea. By 1860 London had 134 Biblewomen and the work was spreading elsewhere. Some trained as Biblewomen-Nurses, one of the precursors of the District Nurse.

The St Giles' Christian Mission began with a group of young Bloomsbury district visitors in 1860, who opened a branch mission in Queen St. In 1866 they chose to go independent, with the reluctant blessing of the church. By the turn of the century, Charles Booth found this a huge organisation, based at Little Wild Street, with five stations in the area.(12) This mission, which broke its Baptist connections in 1903, is still active in Islington.(13)

Booth found the Bloomsbury Mission 'a rather hopeless picture of work amongst the poor'. The capable deaconess in charge found the people lacking in energy, although 'more is done for them in the way of charitable relief than she has ever known elsewhere'. It was by then a changed Mission in a changed district. Already in 1868 the Mission reported less 'extreme destitution', only 'pinching poverty', though in 1873 visitors still found some families without clothing or any furniture. In 1878 St Giles' still held 219 per acre, where the London average was 42. Booth compared conditions thirty years on with 'the squalor, misery and neglect' of 1866 - by which date M'Cree judged the area already greatly improved!

'It was the glory of Bloomsbury to possess and effectually work a slum mission before slumming became a fashionable craze.'(14) The area covered by the Domestic Mission was not extensive but the population was dense and mobile. Hundreds of lives were touched by the Mission each year. A good number of Bloomsbury's members were directly involved in one way or another. Wealthy businessmen spent many hours alongside the poor in St Giles'. Charitable work may have been 'part of the nineteenth-century way of life',(15) but the work undertaken by respectable Bloomsbury members in their leisure hours throughout the 1850s and 1860s was often difficult, sometimes unpleasant, and at times potentially dangerous. Taking a year at random, in 1857 the Domestic Mission Committee comprised William Brock, the seven deacons, and nine other men, with 21 visitors and 121 subscribers contributing a total of £359-18-1. Sick Poor Relief was run by Brock, the deacons and six others; it had 14 visitors, plus the doctor, and was financed by 91 subscribers (£91-11-0). The Cheap Clothing Society was directed by 18 ladies, and 73 subscribed (£44-10-6) and presumably sewed garments. Eight women ran the Maternal Society, with 36 subscribers (£21-16-0). 48 churchmembers subscribed to the Ragged Schools Auxiliary (£65-12-6). Others taught in the Mission Sunday Schools. Supporters of the various bodies overlapped, but a good proportion of the 500 members took an interest

in work for the poor of the neighbourhood. It was a considerable achievement for the church to keep so many so motivated for so long.

Sometimes the criticism is levelled at such evangelical, philanthropic activity that it scratches surface problems locally without tackling underlying causes. This would be an unfair judgement here, for Brock, M'Cree and others at Bloomsbury were aware of the causes and active in bodies seeking reforms, but they did not see such social and political pressure as an alternative to direct action to improve life on their doorstep.

M'Cree, who gave himself freely to the poor of St Giles' and knew they needed pure water, honest work and wholesome entertainment as well as food for their souls, did his best to make others aware of their state. He was in demand as a lecturer nationwide. The favourite, *Day and Night in St Giles'*, was delivered over three hundred times, resulting in many gifts of money for relief. A leading figure in the temperance movement, M'Cree served the Band of Hope as editor from 1857 and Stipendiary Secretary 1865-75, and was on the committees of the United Kingdom Alliance and National Temperance League. He wrote some sixty pamphlets and tracts. He was active in the Liberation Society and the Peace Society, and served on the Mansion House Committee on the Dwellings of the Poor (sitting next to Cardinal Manning). Lord Shaftesbury once dubbed M'Cree 'The Bishop of St Giles' and the honorary title was taken up far and wide.(16)

George M'Cree, that 'man of consecrated commonsense', was one of the early exponents of slum mission, before the better known work of the Salvation Army (founded 1865), Dr Barnardo's (1867), or the Church Army (1882), and before *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883) alerted Christians at large to the city's needs.(16) He was at work in St Giles' twelve years before Henry Mayhew published *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861), or James Greenwood wrote his investigative pieces, beginning with *A Night in the Workhouse* (1866):

His was the whole Gospel for the whole man, woman and child, as revealed in extracts from his diary. There are many accounts of the wretched 'homes', of pathetic children, violent men and drunken women. Often M'Cree intervened in fights. He tells us how he would: 'leave my house at 9 in the morning and return at 11 at night, having been all that time going from door to door, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and binding broken hearts.'(17) He knew and loved his people and earned the right to preach to them. So did his lay colleagues. Preaching in the open elsewhere, M'Cree had experienced verbal and physical abuse. His diary reveals him constantly amazed at the reception in St Giles': 'How is it two other open-air preachers are laughed at and disturbed? Thomas Pavitt [a Bloomsbury layman] is not. I am not. There must be some simple reason for this... Can you enchain the people on Seven Dials with a simple sermon on Christ? Yes, and with nothing else.' 'Is there any novelty in the service? Is there any excitement? Is there any noise? No, all is solemn, quiet, orderly and devout.' Those people knew that M'Cree and his friends put the Gospel they preached into practice, so that Christ's presence was felt in their sordid alleys and filthy hovels. 'Mrs C and her son I found in deep distress. Through want of clothing the lad has not been out of the house for four months...' M'Cree clothed the boy and found him a job. 'His mother is much pleased with the change'.

M'Cree nearly died of cholera when first in London and could identify with wretched sufferers. Two accounts must suffice:

I found him in a kind of closet at the far end of a room in which were five beds. The stench of the den in which he lay was sickening and enough to make one less prepared for such a scene turn away in disgust... The poor man seemed very thankful for my visit...

I found him on a bed far from clean. The smell of such visits is often very repulsive, and when two or three such examples of poverty come in a morning I am not very fit for dinner. I sat a long time with him.

M'Cree loved to give his people 'a lift', brightening this life as well as promising something better in the next. He understood the attraction of the warm, bright public-house and music-hall, and offered at the Mission an alternative social venue, with tea and a Gospel message rather than alcohol and vice. Concerts and lectures were popular. M'Cree himself sang solos and gave many general interest lectures. That on 'The Stomach' was particularly relished. He describes his people with affection, thieves and all, and could never have summarised them, as did the 1902 Year Book, as 'the thrifty, the shiftless, and the lonely woman'.

It is the little extra touches that distinguish M'Cree's approach from what came later. The clean white tablecloths for those street children, and plum pudding because he knew it was 'Their climax of human happiness'. In later years children just received Irish Stew, nutritionally adequate but not thrilling. Again, on Christmas Eve needy families received 'A piece of beef, two loaves, flour, raisins, etc., and a bran [sic] new shilling from the Mint for coals and vegetables'. That newly minted coin is pure M'Cree - not necessary, but special. How different in spirit is the smug philanthropy of the 1900 *Bloomsbury Magazine* entry: 'Our own Christmas gatherings will be all the brighter if we have done something to provide for our poorer friends and neighbours. The distributions will be at 5 o'clock on Christmas Eve, and tickets to witness the interesting sight can be obtained in the vestry'.

If religion came to be amongst 'the proprieties of life' for many of the poor of St Giles', it was not just for the material benefits. People were drawn to Christ by one whose love for them reflected his Lord's. M'Cree, ministering to the poor of a few London streets, commanded wide respect. In 1892, when dying of cancer, he wrote to the *Daily News*, contending that London had improved considerably. This drew an acknowledgement from an unlikely source: 'Yes, brave M'Cree, *Punch* reads your record o'er with acquiescence and with admiration, and again, forty years toil in London gives a claim, my good M'Cree, to reverent attention.(18) A few weeks later the *Church Times* (19) offered a rare epitaph: 'Few men ever laboured with more zeal and less fuss'.

NOTES

- 1 Horace Mann, *Religious Worship in England and Wales*, 1854, pp.65,85,93-7.
- 2 See W. E. Whalley elsewhere in this issue.
- 3 J. C. Carlile, *The Story of the English Baptists*, 1905, p.255.

- 4 Charles Wilson McCree, *George Wilson McCree: his life and work with extracts from his journals*, 1893 [hereafter CWM]. Passages quoted are on pages 31, 50, 62, 79, 83, 88, 95, 99, 103f, 131, 154f. His father preferred the spelling M'Cree.
- 5 G. W. M'Cree, *Twenty Years in St Giles*, (a sermon), 1868.
- 6 See their annual reports in Bloomsbury Chapel Year Books.
- 7 John Clifford, 'The Bishop of St Giles', *Bloomsbury Chapel Sunday School Magazine*, January 1893.
- 8 *Bloomsbury Chapel Year Book*, 1854.
- 9 Year Book 1865, pastoral letter. 10 Ibid.
- 11 No relation: author. For Mrs Ranyard's work see LNR [Ellen Ranyard], *The Missing Link*, 1859, and *London and Ten Years Work in it*, 1868.
- 12 Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, 2nd series, *Religious Influences*, vol.2, 1892, pp.169-205, esp.188-9.
- 13 I am indebted to the Pastor, J. B. Jones, for drawing my attention to - and lending me - C. W. McCree's book.
- 14 Carlile, op.cit., p.255, quoted in A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists*, 1947, p.240.
- 15 D. W. Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience*, 1982, p.37.
- 16 *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: an inquiry into the condition of the abject poor*, 1883, was taken up by W. T. Stead in the *Pall Mall Gazette* and became the symbol of concern about the poor.
- 17 G. W. M'Cree, *Twenty Years in St Giles*.
- 18 Quoted in CWM p.203. 19 *Church Times* 23.12.1892.

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COMPLETING THE CIRCLE

This is a sketch of some aspects of a Christian response within an inner city outside traditional church structures and without a church building. Salford Urban Mission (SUM) was set in inner Salford to discover in personal and corporate pilgrimage how God is at work to redeem and transform its communities, and what shape the Body of Christ should have in the midst of life in Salford. This interim review will try to show how we are learning from the inadequacy of initial answers to initial questions, and asking new questions which require new experimental responses.

Salford's boundaries penetrate to the very centre of the Greater Manchester conurbation and so contain a slice of the inner city that encircles its commercial core. It is mainly a poor white area in contrast to its bigger neighbour. Organised Christianity is on the defensive. With a large Irish population the Catholic Church is strongest but weaker than it was, the Anglicans are hanging on with many of their leaders living in the better-off parts and travelling back to their old parishes on Sundays. Nonconformists are in the worst state, and the last Baptist church closed thirty years ago. This explains why Salford Urban Mission was initially a Free Church initiative.

I am convinced that action and reflection, praying and living should be two sides of the same coin. This dynamic is often conceived as circular; but not many Christians are consciously trying to