

INCARNATING THE GOSPEL Melbourne Hall, Leicester in the 1880s as a model for holistic ministry

On 1 July 1880 about three hundred people met to dedicate ground which had been bought on the edge of Leicester and to lay the foundation stone for a new church building. The positioning of the church was strategic, since industrial development meant that Leicester was a rapidly expanding community. A year later the building, called simply Melbourne Hall (by virtue of being in Melbourne Road) was completed and national Nonconformist leaders, such as Baldwin Brown, John Clifford, Newman Hall and Guinness Rogers, came to speak at the opening service.¹ Such repute represented an unexpected turn of events since the Baptist congregation which Melbourne Hall housed had begun in an inauspicious way in 1878 with seventy-seven members who met initially in part of the museum buildings. F. B. Meyer (1847-1929), their leader, had been the minister of the highly respectable Victoria Road Nonconformist Church, an open-membership Baptist church in Leicester, but disputes with the church leadership over evangelistic methods led to Meyer's resignation and the formation of a new cause, with the members (of whom forty-six had resigned from Victoria Road) signing on 23 September 1878 a declaration that their main object was to be the evangelization of 'the great masses of our population, which lie outside the ordinary Christian agencies'.² This was the concept of the church to which Meyer had become committed.

It was in 1902 that Meyer spoke of the need for the gospel to be 'incarnated again' in the community.³ By this time Meyer was beginning to be known at national level for his social and political activities and *The Christian World* in 1906 described what it saw as Meyer's move from 'almost morbid spirituality' - that of the Keswick Convention holiness movement, with which Meyer was associated from the mid-1880s - to an enthusiasm for social issues as 'one of the most striking psychological phenomena of our time'.⁴ In the early years of the twentieth century Meyer was regarded as the personification of the socially aware 'Nonconformist Conscience'.⁵ The change in Meyer was not, however, as dramatic as it sometimes appeared. Meyer's understanding of the place of both evangelism and social action in Christian ministry can be traced back to the 1860s. His ideas began to crystallize in the 1870s in Leicester, though it was not until his Melbourne Hall period in the 1880s that Meyer was able to put his thinking about holistic ministry into operation. It was the Melbourne Hall experience of the incarnation of the gospel which shaped Meyer's subsequent wide-ranging involvement in socio-political affairs.

MEYER THE EVANGELIST

Bloomsbury Chapel's mission in Seven Dials, where G. W. M'Cree worked so tirelessly among many of London's poor and destitute, was known to Meyer - he

was assessed for Baptist ministry there in 1866 - and may well have provided Meyer with his first insight into the kind of church life which was to attract him.⁶ Following training at Regent's Park College in London, Meyer joined C. M. Birrell at Pembroke Chapel, Liverpool, in 1870, and during his two years there he encouraged a group of young men, some of whom formed the church's future leadership, to begin outdoor evangelism.⁷ The farewell letter when Meyer left Pembroke spoke about his 'earnest endeavours for the salvation of the unconverted in the congregation and neighbourhood'. Birrell supported his cousin, Josephine Butler, in her campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts, with their attempt to control prostitutes while turning a blind eye to sexual immorality by men - the 'double standard' - and this crusade on behalf of social purity was a cause which Meyer was later to espouse. While he was at Pembroke, however, Meyer's greatest concern was probably to become a cultured preacher in the mould of Birrell, whose sermons, which he wrote out in full and memorized, were polished and classically phrased. It was a style which was hardly designed to excite the ordinary citizens of Liverpool. Although Meyer always expressed his indebtedness to Birrell, especially for teaching him the value of expository preaching, Meyer subsequently felt the need to escape from what he had come to regard as the chains of conventionalism.⁸ Evangelists had to be free from such constraints.

In 1872 Meyer took up the pastorate of the Baptist church in Priory Street, York. In his first year there fifteen baptisms took place and Meyer appears to have attracted in some of the local élite, including George Leeman, who was York's Lord Mayor and Liberal MP, and Chairman of the North Eastern Railway.⁹ Meyer could observe with satisfaction that 'the sittings continue to be let'. The generation of income for churches through the charging of 'rent' for a 'sitting' or a pew, was normal, though beginning to be questioned in this period.¹⁰ It was with the visit to York of D. L. Moody, the American evangelist, in June 1873, that Meyer's views about pew-rents, and more broadly about the relative importance of outreach compared to the maintenance of the congregation, began to undergo significant change. George Bennett, the founder-secretary of the York YMCA, had written to Moody but was aghast when, with virtually no warning, Moody and his co-evangelist/singer Ira Sankey arrived in England heading for York.¹¹ After a fairly uneventful first week of meetings, the Americans moved to Priory Street and Moody's massive British campaign of 1873-5 began to take off. Meetings over the next five weeks drew in hundreds of people and Meyer was fascinated to discover a new, expansive approach to evangelism which contrasted sharply with the formal and restrictive nature of many services in Nonconformist chapels.

It is sometimes thought that Meyer's evangelistic motivation was brought to birth through his encounter with Moody, but Meyer's own assessment was that Moody deepened, rather than created, his passion for outreach.¹² Meyer's ambition became to build up churches from those who had 'revolted' from Christianity as seen in 'ecclesiastical organizations'. Having seen his own chapel crowded with

people, he became convinced that those outside the church were not intrinsically antagonistic to the gospel. Following Moody's campaign, Priory Street's membership increased dramatically, from 114 in 1873 to 166 in 1874, with an upsurge of baptisms, but disagreements between the deacons were also beginning to surface and these probably contributed to Meyer's decision to accept a call to Leicester.¹³ The official reason given was Mrs Meyer's health, but much more fundamental was Meyer's sense of destiny. When he heard of the death of Nathaniel Haycroft, Victoria Road's first minister, Meyer immediately felt that he would be Haycroft's successor as minister of a church which, in line with the undenominational ethos Meyer had admired in Moody, was officially open to 'Christians of all evangelical denominations'.¹⁴ An opportunity for a fresh portrayal of the gospel appeared to be presenting itself.

TOWARDS THE 'INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH'

Victoria Road turned out to be a great disappointment to Meyer. He attempted at an early stage to put into practice some of the evangelistic methods he had learned from Moody. During his first month he ended a service with an invitation to those who wished to 'give themselves to Christ' to meet him in 'the chancel'. More than eighty people responded to the unexpected appeal, to the consternation of one of the deacons, who ran into the group shouting: 'We cannot have this sort of thing; this is not a Gospel shop'.¹⁵ Meyer succumbed to the pressure of tradition and outwardly conformed. Inwardly he was far from happy. The church membership grew from 164 to 259 during the period 1875-7 but the 1876 annual report spoke about the 'ordinary routine' having been 'almost unbroken'.¹⁶ Such a situation was intolerable for Meyer. He was probably bored and certainly frustrated. Yet he did not lay the blame at the door of his church for his failure to fulfil his ideals. He was coming to the conclusion that the problem lay in his 'idea of the dignity of the ministerial office' which prevented him from sharing himself with ordinary people and, even more crucially, he came to believe that it was wrong for a minister to be confined to his flock.¹⁷ Gradually Meyer began to evolve a strategy for turning the local church into an agency for actively reaching the working classes. The tension between Meyer as Baptist pastor and as evangelist was approaching breaking point.

The break itself came with Meyer's resignation and the preaching of his last sermon at Victoria Road on 5 May 1878. He was about to accept a call to Glossop Road Baptist Church, Sheffield, when he was persuaded to stay in Leicester and begin a new work. His ideas about basing church structures on the principle of the priority of mission, which would include the abolition of pew rents with their class and money distinctions, had inspired some younger men who, with other ex-members of Victoria Road, formed the core of what became a new congregation. The beginning was unpromising, with Sunday services being held in the lecture hall in the museum buildings, and at first Meyer was unsure whether his venture was on the right track.¹⁸ The venue was in stark contrast to the stately Victoria Road

building. Nude statues were covered up during the meetings, presumably in case of distraction. When the opposition of several other ministers in Leicester is also taken into account, it is little wonder that Meyer remembered his first Sunday with his new congregation as desolate.¹⁹ Numbers attending actually declined after the initial enthusiasm, but over the course of the next two years Meyer could report 'large numbers' of conversions and when Melbourne hall, which seated up to 1,400 people, was opened in 1881 it was immediately filled on Sunday evenings.²⁰ With its deliberately 'public hall' name and architectural style - including an unecclesiastical (for its time) plain brick interior - Melbourne Hall exhibited Meyer's concept of what a church designed to attract those outside normal religious life should be like. It would, said the publicity, be a home for 'all classes'.²¹ Meyer's attention to architectural detail as part of his evangelistic strategy is illustrated by his insistence on plain glass outer doors for Melbourne Hall so that working people who did not attend church could first look inside and overcome some of their fear about entering an unfamiliar building.

Melbourne Hall's mission statement reflected Meyer's vision of an effective church. It said that all seats were to be free, that unnecessary conventionalism was to be avoided and that efforts would be made to cultivate social, intellectual and moral improvement, Meyer's expectation being that many previously non-churchgoing, working-class people would begin to attend.²² It was not possible, he argued, to reclaim working men if they were cared for during only two or three hours on Sunday. A coffee room was therefore opened each evening, and other facilities were used extensively - the building was 'always open' - as classrooms for temperance, social purity and evangelistic agencies. The concept of a partnership between organized evangelism and social service, with the church as the hub of all the activities, was creative. It was an 'open secret', according to W. Y. Fullerton, Meyer's biographer, that the principles which Meyer developed in the 1880s influenced the first Methodist Central Halls.²³ This era saw the rise of institutional churches, providing or hosting an enormous range of activities, often through clubs (the institutions) or even, in the case of Carr's Lane, Birmingham, a cinema, and roughly equivalent, James Munson suggests, to modern leisure centres.²⁴ Melbourne Hall was a significant institutional church but was by no means the earliest. The work of Bloomsbury was a pioneering model and John Clifford was talking in 1859 about his Praed Street Baptist Church in London as existing to 'save souls and bodies' and increase 'social good'.²⁵ The distinctive feature of Meyer's work, both in Leicester and later in London, was that his concern for the poor led him to combine evangelism and social endeavour, but with his holistic approach being essentially evangelistically driven.²⁶ In this sense, Meyer's gospel was a social one which had to be incarnated.

STRUGGLES FOR HUMAN DIGNITY

Meyer found that despite his efforts to provide a full range of facilities at Melbourne

Hall social work could not be confined to the building. His 'prison-gate' ministry began when he discovered that men coming out of Leicester prison tended to gravitate to the nearest pub, where they joined their old companions who often drew them straight back into crime. Meyer decided to do something. With the co-operation of the governor, Meyer visited the prison each morning, taking discharged prisoners to a 'first-rate' coffee-house for a 'plate of ham', and he estimated that he had provided breakfasts for between 4,500 and 5,000 men and women by the time he left Leicester in 1888.²⁷ The example from Leicester was taken up elsewhere and subsequently this activity became part of the Discharged Prisoner's Aid Society. One of the many organizations which met at Melbourne Hall was a branch of the Christian Policemen's Association and Meyer ensured that this movement was also utilized to help ex-prisoners. Evangelistic aims were always to the fore and one discharged prisoner was amazed to find that for the first time in 'all his experience of prisons and police courts' a policeman talked to him about Christianity. Surprise led on to conversion.²⁸

Having established contacts with the ex-prisoners, Meyer's next objective was to help them find employment. When he encountered considerable reluctance on the part of manufacturers to employ men with prison records, Meyer launched out in business himself as 'F. B. Meyer, Firewood Merchant'. In 1885 he was employing twenty men who were producing and selling 25,000 bundles of firewood each week.²⁹ Another rehabilitation venture was a window cleaning 'Brigade'. Meyer was at pains to stress - in the face of criticism - that such entrepreneurial efforts were subordinate to his aim of producing in the men 'devotion to Christ'. He also set up accommodation and a workshop, with a manager, in premises which he named Providence House. Although the neighbours did not see a settlement of criminals as particularly providential, Meyer persevered and the annual turnover of the project reached £2,000.³⁰ Meyer admitted that a minority of men did not turn out well, but claimed that many were converted and that the prison population of Leicester was reduced. One example quoted was of a man who had been in prison one hundred times but who was now a Christian and, of course, a total abstainer. Certainly the fact that Meyer made a contribution to the wellbeing of the community is indicated by the gift of four hundred guineas which he received from Leicester's business representatives.

The Leicester experiences of the 1880s were used by Meyer in the following decade when he turned Christ Church, in Lambeth, into an institutional church, operating on an even grander scale than Melbourne Hall. Again, human dignity was of central concern, with Meyer's showpiece being a Sunday afternoon congregation for eight hundred working-class men - the 'Brotherhood' - out of which came a variety of social initiatives. During the early years of the twentieth century Meyer's interests, which were already international, continued to broaden, and in 1901 he visited the southern part of the USA for the first time, observing at first hand the treatment of black people.³¹ South Africa gave Meyer the opportunity to fight for

dignity for non-whites, beginning with the Chinese. South African mine-owners, who badly needed labour, were importing thousands of Chinese in conditions of virtual slavery and feelings were running high over the issue in 1904.³² Some British workers felt cheated of their jobs, but Meyer and other Nonconformists saw the treatment of the Chinese as a moral wrong. England, Meyer trumpeted, was 'in danger of selling her birthright', but the Labour Party and the Free Churches would, he promised, save the nation. His Free Church audience, inspired by Meyer's crusading zeal on behalf of what was morally and thus politically right, gave a 'great Amen'.³³

FIGHTING THE DRINK TRADE

The temperance campaign which was waged from Melbourne Hall had two main aspects. The first was the rescue of the victims of drink. Public houses were open until as late as midnight, and from nine o'clock on Saturday evening Melbourne Hall 'rescue squads', led by Meyer, went round the streets attempting to prevent fights and also giving a home for the night to those rendered incapable through drink.³⁴ Meyer reflected the trend among Nonconformists of the later nineteenth century towards an increasing stress on the virtues of total abstinence. Throughout his student days at Regent's Park College in the 1860s, he thought it impossible to get through a Sunday without a glass of sherry and on one occasion, when staying with hosts who were abstainers, he suffered the embarrassment of a bottle of sherry falling out of his coat as he put it on to go to church.³⁵ Meyer attempted, after he had become teetotal through the influence of W. P. Lockhart of Liverpool, to entertain a temperance audience with this story. It fell rather flat. During his Leicester period Meyer emerged as a fervent upholder of the temperance movement. The Blue Ribbon or Gospel Temperance strand of the movement began in the 1870s and its revivalist fervour had an overwhelming appeal for the evangelistically minded.³⁶ Temperance leaders like R. T. Booth used techniques from Moody to promote their message, and Leicester viewed Meyer as following the example of Booth.³⁷

In addition to temperance crusades, which in Leicester resulted in tens of thousands signing the pledge, Meyer adopted more militant tactics. Following a campaign directed against grocers' liquor licences, the grocers, in retaliation, tried to secure a boycott of Meyer's firewood business. The boycott failed - the customers, it was alleged, knew good value when they saw it - but at one point Meyer received threats which meant he had to have personal protection.³⁸ The agitation, typical of Nonconformist techniques of the period, probably reached its peak when Meyer made a defiant appearance at the Leicester races to protest against the gambling and drinking. There was an fracas and a badly shaken Meyer escaped from the consequences of his dramatic gesture only because a shopkeeper explained that he helped those in trouble in prison. Meyer's commitment to this cause did not decline when he left Leicester and his denunciations of both the government and the

drink trade were fierce. In 1909 Meyer admitted that his perspective had altered from that of the 1880s. Using the story of the Good Samaritan, Meyer said that whereas he used to pick up mauled travellers (victims of drink) between Jerusalem and Jericho, he now demanded that Pilate - the state - 'blow up with dynamite the caves in which the bandits hide'.³⁹ The strategy might have altered, but the sanguine spirit of Melbourne Hall remained.

SEEKING SOCIAL PURITY

The 1880s saw the social purity movement, as it came to be called, becoming increasingly influential in matters of sexual morality.⁴⁰ Meyer began the Leicester Gospel Purity Association, based at Melbourne Hall, with the purpose of providing legal aid for 'defenceless women and girls' caught up in prostitution.⁴¹ The system Meyer developed, particularly when he moved to Lambeth, an area notorious for its brothels, was to bring legal action against brothel-owners. His team of vigilantes from Christ Church systematically watched suspicious premises, collected facts, applied for summonses and gave evidence at trials when brothel-owners were prosecuted.⁴² Using his Leicester experience of fostering relationships with the police, Meyer noted the constables who rendered him 'efficient service' in his fight against prostitution and recommended them - with what success we do not know - to Scotland Yard for promotion.⁴³ Meyer also worked towards securing sympathetic local council members in Lambeth and Southwark and attempted to mobilize the population at large, exhorting residents to 'make it hot for the houses of ill-fame' and to boycott shops with indecent displays.⁴⁴ Finally, as in Leicester, Meyer encouraged rescue work. Through members of his Christ Church staff, like Sister Margaret who opened her home for prostitutes each night, Meyer, with his slogan 'Sobriety, Purity and Uplift', tried to bring spiritual help to women on the streets, and in 1907 Randall Davidson, the Archbishop of Canterbury, spoke about 'the sense which we entertain of the value of Mr Meyer's efforts in the cause of what is pure and true'.⁴⁵ Evangelism and social action were inextricably intertwined.

THE NONCONFORMIST AGENDA

Leicester was known as a 'metropolis of Dissent' and Meyer spoke of it as the place 'where I learnt to breathe the rare air of Nonconformity'.⁴⁶ Meyer's main support in the founding of Melbourne Hall came from the solid Nonconformist middle classes. The signatories to the trust deeds were, by occupation, sixteen book manufacturers, six manufacturers, four worsted spinners, two booksellers, a manufacturing chemist, a dentist, and a gentleman.⁴⁷ Nine men with a good reputation in the commercial life of Leicester guaranteed Meyer's stipend for three years from 1878, an indication of the new Nonconformist wealth of the period. Although it was after the turn of the century that Meyer began to become associated in the national consciousness with the Nonconformist Conscience, his temperance

work in the 1880s was already heading in that direction. During the 1890s Meyer had increasing involvement in the work of the Free Church Council and the government's Education Bill of 1902 - which was seen by Nonconformists as giving privileges to Anglican schooling - drew him into a bitter struggle in which he pictured the Free Churches as having 'to suffer, to refuse, to resist to the uttermost'.⁴⁸

Throughout the period 1902 to 1907 Meyer actively promoted the Free Church cause through his letters to *The Times*, by his refusal to pay rates designated for Church schools, through mass campaigning and by taking to the hustings on behalf of the Liberal Party. Tensions arose within Meyer's Keswick constituency, which was predominantly Anglican and Tory, over Meyer's full frontal attacks on Tory supporters.⁴⁹ In 1884, while at Melbourne Hall, Meyer had an experience of consecration which led him, from 1887, to become a major speaker on the Keswick platform and the leading international Keswick representative. His interdenominational sympathies were also to be seen in the Leicester Union of Evangelical Christians, which he began, and in his involvement, while at Melbourne Hall, with Hudson Taylor and with the Regions Beyond Missionary Union.⁵⁰ But Meyer believed that the Free Churches had a unique role in keeping moral and spiritual issues on the political agenda. *The Christian World* in 1906 recognized Meyer's influence, which it claimed was as great as John Clifford's, in countering the 'Plymouth Brethren limitation of religion to purely spiritual exercises'.⁵¹ From 1907 to 1909 Meyer exercised a travelling ministry on behalf of the Free Churches. Although he called for the Free Churches not to be concerned simply with soup-tickets and blankets but also with justice, nevertheless when he became the Honorary Secretary of the National Free Church Council in 1910 it was generally, and rightly, accepted that he would put the 'religious side' first.⁵² As at Melbourne Hall, social repercussions were seen by Meyer as consequent upon spiritual ministry.

A GOSPEL FOR SOCIETY

For evangelicals like Meyer, the social gospel was the application of the gospel to society. In 1886 an industrial dispute broke out in Leicester between some of the hosiery factory workers and their employers. Mobs took to the streets and property was damaged. Meyer, always likely to be in the thick of it, met some of the crowds and also a hail of stones.⁵³ A sermon by Meyer to a packed congregation at Melbourne Hall tried, in what seems to have been rather pietistic terms, to address the issue through the text 'Father, forgive them, they know not what they do'; in succeeding years Meyer continued to seek ways of bringing spiritual emphases to bear on industrial problems. In 1889 he spoke to striking London dockers, receiving unexpected calls for an encore: 'Won't the Reverend do another turn?'⁵⁴ Again in 1911 Meyer was calling for the payment of decent wages, especially for women.⁵⁵ Much of this activity was, of course, rather general, with specific solutions being rare and expressions of desire for reconciliation much more common. Nevertheless,

it sprang from Meyer's concern for the rights of working people. It is perhaps significant that at Melbourne Hall Meyer met informally with previously unchurched 'working men' on Sunday mornings before the service.⁵⁶ The priority was one which remained.

In today's terms, it would be reasonable to see Meyer's gospel as having a bias to the poor and underprivileged. For him the gospel, rightly applied, changed the situation of such people. Following a winter in South Africa in 1908, Meyer concluded, in language which to us may seem patronizing but must be seen in its context, that when comparison was made between whites and their black counterparts ('Christianized and educated'), the verdict was wholly in favour of the latter.⁵⁷ His concern for those at the margins of society makes it unlikely that he would have supported racism. He managed to stop a prize fight for the world boxing title in 1911 between a black American, Jack Johnson, and Bombardier Wells and, although J. P. Green in 1988 described this as a victory for racial prejudice, most of those who opposed Meyer at the time (including the 10,000 who had booked for the contest and the angry mob which surrounded Regent's Park Chapel) saw him not as racist but as a meddler and a kill-joy. Meyer's objections to the fight were that it would be a degrading spectacle, it was uncivilized, and it was being regarded as a 'test of racial superiority'. Evidence was produced by Meyer showing that in a previous match which Johnson won black people in New York were 'brutally treated by infuriated whites'.⁵⁸ When the event was stopped by Winston Churchill, then Home Secretary, Meyer was jubilant, convinced that God had been in his endeavours. North Glamorgan's Welsh Congregationalists, however, severely criticized Meyer for referring to some prize fights as 'good sport'.⁵⁹ His social values could not please everyone.

THE CHALLENGE OF WAR

Each of the aspects of Meyer's evangelistic and social ministries which flowed from the Melbourne Hall period came together in the years of the First World War. Although Meyer's instincts prior to 1914 were towards peace - he had produced a peace manifesto which attempted to express a consensus in response to Free Church division of opinion over the Boer War and had made a presentation to President Taft on behalf of the Free Churches and the peace societies⁶⁰ - he was one of those who swung with the pendulum when war commenced and by 1 October 1915 he was openly supporting the government.⁶¹ In the following month, at an influential Free Church meeting at the City Temple, Meyer spoke in favour of committing Nonconformity to the fight.⁶² Soon the matter had become, in Meyer's mind, distinctly religious. The hearts of the Germans were 'so full of hatred' that their prayers - and by implication their military power - could not prevail. This war was the 'clearest, cleanest and most Christian war' Britain had fought and Meyer perceived it as a clash of spiritual forces. Britain, therefore, had no option but to fight 'in the cause of humanity' and, Meyer intoned, 'of God'.⁶³

Meyer's personal contribution to the war concentrated on the issues of temperance, sexual behaviour, evangelism and freedom of conscience. He was shocked by a report about the 'drunkenness, debauchery and indecency' of soldiers and sailors in London and complained to *The Times* in January 1915 that the police and military authorities, though aware of it, were apparently taking no action. A patriotic correspondent described Meyer's charges as scandalous and challenged him to prove them.⁶⁴ Typically, Meyer's dual response was to raise the temperature of the debate and initiate practical moves. First, he increased pressure over the temperance issue by suggesting a 'King's Pledge Sunday' when the King's abstinence could be held up as an example to be followed 'from a patriotic point of view'.⁶⁵ Second, Meyer managed to make the YMCA in Waterloo Road available as accommodation for soldiers visiting London who might be exposed to 'serious moral dangers', and in November 1915 he successfully appealed to the public for funds to extend the premises since the demand was so great.⁶⁶ Throughout the war Meyer, true to his long-held convictions, continued to monitor the moral state of soldiers, many of whom, he asserted in 1917, hardly dared to go into parts of London because of the allurements of prostitutes.⁶⁷ He suggested a possible solution: prostitutes could be arrested and sent to work in munitions factories.

As well as concentrating on traditional areas of social concern, Meyer, again predictably, looked for direct evangelistic opportunities. He began production of the *Service Messenger* which, he claimed in 1917, was the only Christian paper for servicemen and gave them the gospel in readable form.⁶⁸ The financing of the paper proved to be a headache for Meyer and the need to attract support may have forced him to dilute the paper's content to 'love and comfort and Christian cheer', and finally to a message which would keep the soldiers smiling.⁶⁹ Meyer could not help being in touch with the feelings and needs of the troops and their families since 760 men from Christ Church's congregation were on active service, and Meyer became involved in cases such as the mother whose son had been called up and who, like many others, was experiencing delays in receiving any allowance.⁷⁰ Meyer announced, with no trace of false modesty, that he had paid her himself. The institutional church, as represented by its minister, was present, and publicly so, to help the poor.

While personally supporting the war effort, Meyer was also aware of those whose conscience would not allow them to fight. They too, he argued, should be treated with dignity. The gospel was for the whole of society, including the conscientious objectors. Following the introduction of conscription in 1916, tribunals began to consider the cases of nearly 14,000 COs. Meyer soon became uneasy about the unsympathetic way in which the tribunals conducted their business.⁷¹ On 5 May 1916 he addressed the Quaker Meeting for Sufferings on the issue as part of an attempt to mobilize the churches and influence the government.⁷² By June 1916 1,200 non-combatant men were in custody and thirty-four out of a group sent to France had been sentenced to death for resisting military

orders. For Meyer, a new campaign on behalf of the disadvantaged and marginalized was under way. J. H. Shakespeare, as President of the Free Church Council, and Scott Lidgett and Meyer, as Joint Secretaries, wrote a letter of protest to the government, condemning the harsh policies being pursued. Given his background of work with ex-prisoners and his standing in the Free Church and wider Christian community, Meyer was in an ideal position to take on the case of the COs in France and it is not surprising that he was approached by the Non-Conscription Fellowship (NCF) and its allies with the request that he visit these prisoners.⁷³

With the support of Lord Kitchener, Meyer made what appears to have been a successful trip. One prisoner, H. C. Marten, wrote of being 'greatly cheered by Meyer's visit'. Afterwards he reported back to Asquith and Kitchener on Nonconformist concern about what was seen as government persecution.⁷⁴ Kitchener promised Meyer that no CO would be ill-treated. Meyer was now warming to his theme and proclaiming Britain's past indebtedness to those who had 'steered by the pole star of conscience against adverse currents', advocating 'absolute exemption' from civilian as well as military service, an option which was available but granted by tribunals in only 350 cases.⁷⁵ A scheme was proposed to the NCF by Meyer, with the backing of Catherine Marshall the General Secretary, to help both 'absolutists', who demanded total exemption, and 'alternativists', who would accept non-combatant work. Marshall kept in touch with Meyer, shrewdly urging the necessity of help from Nonconformists over 'the principle of respect for freedom of conscience'. Meyer could not resist such an appeal and apparently professed himself 'willing to act in any way', although he seems to have been coming under other political pressures which meant that the NCF had to keep up the level of persuasion so that Meyer's resolve did not waver.⁷⁶ The climax of Meyer's own work on behalf of the COs was his booklet, *The Majesty of Conscience*, in which he incorporated case histories and legal background, probably supplied to him by Bertrand Russell. In letters to Lady Constance Malleison, Russell refers to preparing a 'long memoir for F. B. Meyer' and polishing up material for Meyer.⁷⁷ The religious thrust of the booklet, which shapes it, is clearly Meyer's own. Although NCF leaders had doubts about Meyer - Russell called him a worm - they regarded the booklet as so strategic that they were prepared to encourage him to highlight the religious convictions held by many COs.⁷⁸ When the war was over, Meyer addressed in 1920 the NCF convention, urging that COs should use their experience of prison to agitate for a change in the prison system to make it 'regenerative' rather than 'punitive'.⁷⁹ A full cycle, from the evangelistic ministry at Leicester's prison gate, had been completed.

CONCLUSION

Meyer always looked back to his Melbourne Hall ministry as his 'golden days', often returned to Leicester for spiritual refreshment, and, according to E. E.

Kendall, expressed the wish in 1912 that he could re-live his days there.⁸⁰ Although part of this would have been nostalgia, Meyer's activist and achievement-orientated nature, attracted as it was by opportunities for success (especially against the odds), must have seen Melbourne Hall as a notable high point. In terms of growth, Meyer brought the church from 77 to 856 members in under ten years, making it in 1888 the largest English Baptist church outside London or Bristol. Jennie Street, writing in 1902, refers to the whole Melbourne Hall project, under Meyer's leadership, as one of the most remarkable religious movements of its time.⁸¹ It is not surprising, therefore, that Meyer's approach to the question of the relationship of evangelism to social action was moulded so decisively by the way in which he saw the gospel incarnated through Melbourne Hall. This is not to say that Meyer did not change his mind and gain new insights. Indeed, his personality was such that new challenges and new responses were essential. Nevertheless, when Meyer summed up his aims in 1907 by saying that he wished to quicken religious life and show that this life could be applied to the social problems of the day, and when in 1922 he asked if Christian ministers lacked sympathy in their preaching with the struggles of the mass of the people, he was making statements which were resonant with the ethos of Melbourne Hall.⁸² A vibrant local church can, and perhaps should, be both the hub of and the springboard for a holistic ministry.

NOTES

- 1 F. B. Meyer, *The Bells of Is: Or Voices of Human Need and Sorrow*, 1894, p.21; E. E. Kendall, *Doing and Daring*, Rushden, Northants., 1955, pp.31-2.
- 2 Kendall, *op.cit.*, pp.18-19; W. Y. Fullerton, *F. B. Meyer: A Biography*, 1929, pp.46-51; Minutes of the Victoria Road Church Meeting of 1 October 1878 for the resignations.
- 3 An address by Meyer on 'Twentieth Century Evangelism' in *Free Church Year Book*, 1902, p.94.
- 4 *The Christian World*, 26 April 1906, p.11.
- 5 E. H. Jeffs, *Princes of the Modern Pulpit*, 1931, p.120. For the Nonconformist Conscience, see D. W. Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience: Chapel and Politics, 1870-1914*, 1982.
- 6 See Faith Bowers, 'Religion amongst the Proprieties of Life: George M'Cree and the Bloomsbury Domestic Mission', *BQ* 33, 1989, pp.29-37, and 'Opting out in Victorian London: A school for the respectable poor, 1849-1870', *BQ* 34, 1992, pp.240-8.
- 7 I. Sellers, *Salute to Pembroke*, Alsager, Cheshire, 1960, p.8.
- 8 Meyer, *Bells of Is*, p.16; A. Chester Mann, *F. B. Meyer: Preacher, Teacher, Man of God*, 1929, p.116.
- 9 *Annual Report of the Yorkshire Association of Baptist Churches*, Bradford 1873, p.31; J. H. Shakespeare in *Baptist Times*, 4 January 1907, supplement p.IV; R. R. Darsley, *A Short History of Baptists in York, 1646-1987*, York 1987, pp.9, 17, 18.
- 10 Cf. C. G. Brown, 'The Costs of Pew-Renting: Church management, church-giving and social class in nineteenth-century Glasgow', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 38, 1987, pp.347f.
- 11 J. C. Pollock, *Moody without Sankey*, 1963, pp.97-8.
- 12 Meyer, *Bells of Is*, p.18. Compare Pollock, *op.cit.*, pp.101-2.
- 13 Minutes of church meetings, 4 August and 24 September 1873 (for new members) and 18 and 25 June 1874 (for problems and resignation).
- 14 Fullerton, *op.cit.*, p.46. I am grateful to Tom Budge of Leicester for a copy of the statement made at the laying of the Victoria Road foundation stone in 1865.
- 15 Shakespeare, *op.cit.*
- 16 *Victoria Road Church Manual*, Leicester 1876, p.6. In the year to 30 April 1875, membership

- rose from 164 to 200: *Report of the Leicestershire Association of Baptist Churches, Leicester 1875*. The 1877 *Report* records 259 members. There were 55 baptisms in this period.
- 17 Meyer, *Bells of Is*, p.28; *The Christian*, 5 February 1925, p.6.
 - 18 Meyer, *Bells of Is*, p.19; M. J. Street, *F. B. Meyer: His life and work*, 1902, p.46.
 - 19 Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, p.IV.
 - 20 Kendall, *op. cit.*, p.17; Fullerton, *op. cit.*, p.53.
 - 21 *Leicester Chronicle and Leicestershire Mercury*, 2 July 1881, p.5.
 - 22 Kendall, *op. cit.*, p.31.
 - 23 *The Life of Faith*, 7 February 1912, p.141.
 - 24 J. Munson, *The Nonconformists: In Search of a Lost Culture*, 1991, pp.53, 56-7, 103.
 - 25 D. Thompson, 'John Clifford's Social Gospel', *BQ* 31, 1986, pp.202-3.
 - 26 D. J. Tidball, 'Evangelical Nonconformist Home Missions, 1796-1901', Keele PhD 1981, pp.168, 309.
 - 27 Meyer, *Bells of Is*, pp.33-8; Street, *op. cit.*, pp.59-61.
 - 28 Kendall, *op. cit.*, p.48.
 - 29 *Worship and Work*, October 1885, p.13.
 - 30 Meyer, *Bells of Is*, pp.86, 102; *Worship and Work*, October 1885, p.16.
 - 31 See I. M. Randall, 'F. B. Meyer in Britain and America', in G. Rawlyk, ed., *Amazing Grace*, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1994.
 - 32 H. Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections, 1885-1910*, 1967, p.20; Bebbington, *op. cit.*, p.111.
 - 33 *British Weekly* 25 February 1904, p.529.
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 - 35 A. Porritt, *The Best I Remember*, 1922, p.211.
 - 36 L. L. Shiman, *The Crusade Against Drink in Victorian England*, 1986, p.96.
 - 37 J. H. Clarke, *Catalogue of the Leicester Jubilee Exhibition, Leicester 1887*, p.121.
 - 38 Meyer, *Bells of Is*, pp.75-6, 90-3.
 - 39 *Free Church Year Book*, 1909, pp.29-30.
 - 40 For background see Bebbington, *op. cit.*, pp.38-42; P. McHugh, *Prostitution and Victorian Social Reform*, 1980, pp.28-9.
 - 41 Kendal, *op. cit.*, p.48.
 - 42 *Free Church Year Book*, 1908, p.179.
 - 43 *The Times*, 11 May 1907, p.6. Meyer was giving evidence to a Royal Commission on the Metropolitan Police.
 - 44 E. J. Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance: Purity Movements in Britain since 1700*, Dublin 1977, p.167; J. Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth 1870-1930*, Oxford 1982, p.153.
 - 45 J. W. Read, ed., *Christ Church Souvenir Jubilee Year Book*, 1926, p.30; *The Times*, 22 June 1907, p.12.
 - 46 A. T. Patterson, *Radical Leicester*, Leicester 1954, p.247; F. B. Meyer, 'The Fellowship of the Free Churches', *Free Church Year Book* 1920, p.6.
 - 47 Kendall, *op. cit.*, p.31.
 - 48 *British Weekly* 23 April 1903, p.32.
 - 49 I. M. Randall, 'Spiritual Renewal and Social Reform: Attempts to develop Social Awareness in the early Keawick Movement', *Vox Evangelica*, 23, 1993, pp.74-5.
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 - 53 Kendall, *op. cit.*, p.49.
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 - 59 *The Times*, 20 October 1911, p.10.
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- 77 Letters dated 4 and 10 July 1917.
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ABSTRACT: Torsten Bergsten, *Frikyrkor i samverkan. Den svenska frikyrk-oekumenikens historia (Free Churches in Cooperation. The History of Ecumenical Cooperation among the Swedish Free Churches) 1905-1993*, Stockholm 1995.

This study describes the ecumenical development of the Swedish Protestant free churches (i.e. not State-Church Lutheran) from their first general assembly in 1905 to 1993. In 1918 the Free Church Council of Sweden was founded by the Methodist Church, the Baptist Union and the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden. After World War II the number of member churches increased to eight and finally eleven. The study, initiated and supported by the Council and its research board, commemorates 75 years of activity, before reconstitution in 1993 into the Free Church Cooperative Council. From the beginning, the Council tried to create a united free church or at least a federation of the free churches. This was never accomplished, but wider and deeper cooperation has continued to be a central topic. Two other essential issues are the free churches' struggle for freedom of religion and their opposition to the close connection between the Swedish State and the Church of Sweden. Baptism, holy communion, ministry, church order, the Bible, charismatic gifts, relationship to the international ecumenical movement, responsibility for Swedish society, immigrant churches, foreign missions and development in the Third World have all been integral activities of the Swedish free churches. The book will be published in February 1995.