

## Religious Rivalry in a Victorian Oxford Suburb and its Legacy

### 1. Introduction

Although Christianity was easily the dominant faith of Victorian Britain, it was also ‘much more disunited and quarrelsome than it is now’, according to Geoffrey Best in 1988.<sup>1</sup> This dissertation examines the religious life of a suburban Oxford parish in the second half of the 1800s. It contrasts the ministry of a well-resourced, visionary Church of England vicar with a mission supported largely by the ordinary, middling sort who were determined that their beliefs should be promulgated too. The latter mission left few lasting traces but this study reveals a more competitive Victorian religious world in Oxford than may have been supposed and that non-University educated people were heavily involved.

Stewart Brown described nineteenth-century Britain and its churches in more detail. The country was highly religious; ripples from the Evangelical revival of the eighteenth-century had spread over into the 1800s. Existing denominations were re-invigorated and new ones were born.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the very existence of so many denominations within the Evangelical fold points to numerous theological differences between them. David Bebbington acknowledged the variety of Evangelical expression but highlighted some core beliefs which united most of the denominations. Helpfully, the Evangelical Alliance, formed in 1846, set out those beliefs. Not all groups could sign up to clauses on such matters as church governance or the roles of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. However, agreement was found concerning the doctrines of the Trinity, the inspiration and authority of Scripture, human sinfulness and the justification of sinners by faith through the agency of the Holy Spirit, amongst other doctrines.<sup>3</sup> Thus, those holding to Evangelical theology could be found within the Church of England as well as many Dissenting or Nonconformist groups, including Baptists, Independents, Methodists and Congregationalists.<sup>4</sup> As the nineteenth-century progressed, the proportion of churchgoers who joined Dissenting congregations increased from about 10% in 1790 to almost 50% by 1851.<sup>5</sup> Often, though, different Evangelical groups could overcome their differences and work together, as will be illustrated later.<sup>6</sup> The Evangelical emphasis on the need for personal conversion led them to reach out with the gospel to others. Commonly adopted methods of outreach included home-visits for spiritual purposes, evangelistic work associated with meeting social needs, the dissemination of religious literature, establishment of Sunday Schools and revival meetings with strong, emotive preaching.<sup>7</sup> These will be considered in a local context below.

Evangelicals were not the only Christians practising in the 1800s. Peter Nockles re-examined the High Church wing of the Anglican Church as it existed in the early nineteenth-century. High Churchmen were Protestant but put greater importance on the sacraments as means of God’s grace than did Evangelicals. They also tended to uphold the doctrine of apostolic succession for bishops. Of course, the Anglican Church had a closer relationship with the State than did Dissenters, who often called for the disestablishment of the Church of England because it received preferential treatment.<sup>8</sup> In the 1830s, the Oxford Movement burst onto the religious scene via a series of tracts

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<sup>1</sup> Best, G., *Mid-Victorian Britain 1851 - 75*, (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), p. 192

<sup>2</sup> Brown, S., *Providence and Empire*, (Routledge, 2008), p. 2, accessed 2/8/21 at DOI: 10.4324/9781315841267

<sup>3</sup> Bebbington, D., *The Dominance of Evangelicalism*, (Inter-Varsity Press, 2005), pp. 19-20

<sup>4</sup> Bebbington, p. 51

<sup>5</sup> Brown, S., pp. 3-4

<sup>6</sup> Bebbington, pp. 60-61

<sup>7</sup> Bebbington, pp. 90-102

<sup>8</sup> Nockles, P. B., *The Oxford Movement in Context*, (Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 25-6

on theological matters written by a number of Oxford University academics, including John Henry Newman, Edward Bouverie Pusey and John Keble, also known as Tractarians. They shared much in common with the High Churchmen in regard to their Episcopalian opinions and high view of sacraments. Indeed, the term 'High Church' would later come to be applied to Tractarian followers although the Tractarians wanted to go further than most High Churchmen of the early 1800s. Tractarians endeavoured to restore the Catholic heritage of the Anglican Church, asserting that the nineteenth-century Anglican Church was still, essentially, Catholic.<sup>9</sup> In an age when Protestant distrust of Catholics still ran high, such a stance was predictably incendiary: the 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act had not been passed without heated argument. The early Tractarians maintained that they had no desire to return to the Roman Catholic Church and papal authority but many others did not believe them.<sup>10</sup> However, the Tractarians were not afraid of controversy. They were critical of Evangelicals and ungenerous to the High Churchmen who had preceded them.<sup>11</sup>

The Tractarians' goals and methods of ministry differed from Evangelicals' too. The former worked towards building a Eucharistic community, whilst the latter sought to build God's kingdom soul by soul. As W. E. Heygate asked in a clerical handbook, 'Will you be content before your people lead a Eucharistic life, and live for, and by a Eucharistic worship?' Tractarians considered that the reception of Communion and growth in personal holiness were linked.<sup>12</sup> Other sacraments were crucial in a Tractarian clergyman's efforts to build a Eucharistic community. Baptism was the initiation rite when a person would be united with Christ, the Holy Spirit would indwell them and sin would be forgiven. After a period of preparation, a person could be Confirmed and would then be able to receive Communion.<sup>13</sup> Tractarians understood the grace and salvation of God to be mediated through these sacraments and through Absolution after Confession. The role of Tractarian vicars became more akin to that of a priest, an intermediary between God and the flock. Naturally, pastoral care became increasingly significant too. Whilst sacraments were not unimportant for most Evangelicals, they considered that the Holy Spirit could move to effect conversion even if these sacraments had not been received. The individual sinner could approach God needing no priest but only Jesus as mediator. Alongside the Oxford Movement's emphasis on sacraments, the first Tractarians also sought personal holiness through ascetic living being much influenced by the early Church Fathers.<sup>14</sup> As the 1800s progressed, followers of the Oxford Movement often adopted more elaborate ceremonial ritual. This may have had precedent amongst older High Churchmen but some Victorian clergy took it much further.<sup>15</sup> Such ostentatious harking back to medieval Catholicism by the new Ritualists only provoked the ire of Protestants even more, especially when it coincided with the re-establishment of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England and Wales.<sup>16</sup>

Aside from disputes between different Christians, nineteenth-century Christianity itself faced intellectual attack from those who began to question the inspiration of the Scriptures or who, in the second half of the century, were influenced by Darwinism. Some sought common ground between

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<sup>9</sup> Herring, G., *The Oxford Movement in Practice*, (Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 4

<sup>10</sup> Herring, p. 10

<sup>11</sup> Herring, p. 10; Nockles, p. 4

<sup>12</sup> Herring, p. 128

<sup>13</sup> Herring, pp. 113-130

<sup>14</sup> Nockles, p. 184

<sup>15</sup> Yates, N., *Anglican Ritualism in Victorian Britain*, (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 39; Herring, p. 11

<sup>16</sup> Yates, p. 150

these intellectual developments and Christianity but such liberalism was seen as heretical by many other Christians of various hues.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, Victorian England was a place of much religious strife and it could spill over into other areas of life. Denominational divisions often paralleled social and political divisions. For example, Anglicans tended to be associated with traditional authority. Bebbington advised caution when trying to make generalisations about Nonconformists and political alliances as they could vary according to local circumstances.<sup>18</sup> Alliances existed though: Eugenio Biagini showed that during the nineteenth-century, as the franchise expanded to include more Dissenters, they became increasingly involved in politics. Indeed, Nonconformist R. W. Dale argued that it was the duty of Christian men to 'carry into municipal and political activity the law and the Spirit of Christ'.<sup>19</sup> Such words indicate a confident, almost combative attitude. Many Nonconformists had not been to University, unlike their Anglican counter-parts, but were willing to fight for their beliefs in such battlefields as education, licensing legislation and Trade Unionism.<sup>20</sup> To an extent, political division coinciding with religious division is evident in the local context discussed later and shows more assertiveness on the part of Oxford's Dissenters than may have been imagined.

### *The case study*

To understand the dynamics of religious rivalries of the late 1800s in Oxford, the focus of this study will be on two co-existing ministries in East Oxford: one Tractarian and the other Evangelical. Peter Toon has studied the Evangelical response to Tractarianism describing the perspective of Anglican Evangelicals and their theological arguments.<sup>21</sup> This paper highlights a grassroots, pan-Evangelical Oxford ministry which included many Nonconformists as well as Anglicans. It will be argued that the formation of Oxford City Mission (OCM) was a response to both spiritual deprivation amongst the poor and to Tractarianism in the city. Martin Wellings has argued that 'Nonconformity was a growing and vocal presence even in Oxford,' with its university and cathedral, as demonstrated by the 'passive resistance' to the 1902 Education Act.<sup>22</sup> This dissertation shows that, even during the 1880s, Oxford's Nonconformists were growing in strength and self-confidence.

The spotlight will be on the area which became the parish of Cowley St John, the land which runs from Magdalen Bridge to Boundary Brook incorporating Iffley Road and Cowley Road. (See map in Appendix, Figure 1). Before the Enclosure Awards of 1853 and 1856, this area was largely farmland owned by a combination of Oxford University colleges and private persons.<sup>23</sup> After Enclosure, much of the land was sold for housing development. Rows of cottages quickly proliferated; the majority

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<sup>17</sup> Brown, S., pp. 226-236

<sup>18</sup> Bebbington, pp. 62-68

<sup>19</sup> Biagini, E., 'Politics and Social Reform in Britain and Ireland' in Larsen, T. and Ledger-Lomas, M. (eds.), *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions, Volume III*, (Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 3-5, accessed 20/8/20 at DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780199683710.003.0018

<sup>20</sup> Biagini, pp. 8-10

<sup>21</sup> Toon, P., *Evangelical Theology 1833 - 1856: A Response to Tractarianism*, (Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1979)

<sup>22</sup> Wellings, M., "'The Day of Compromise is Past": The Oxford Free Churches and "Passive Resistance" to the 1902 Education Act', *Studies in Church History*, Vol. 56, (2020), p. 457, accessed 3/8/21 at DOI: 10.1017/stc.2019.25

<sup>23</sup> British History Online, Victoria County Histories, 'Parishes: Cowley', in *A History of the County of Oxford: Volume 5, Bullingdon Hundred*, accessed 18/6/21

<https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2344/vch/oxon/vol5/pp76-96>;

Oxfordshire History Centre, MS DD Par Oxford St Clem C12, *Part of Enclosure Award and Plan re St Clements*

went to thrifty artisans but some middle-class housing was erected along Iffley Road too.<sup>24</sup> James Nash examined the population of the new Oxford suburb before 1891 which he found to be mostly lower-middle class and artisan. The majority of people had craft-based occupations or served Oxford's economy, including as college servants. A small number of professionals lived in the parish, mostly along Iffley Road, but there were also pockets of poverty.<sup>25</sup>

Richard Meux Benson had been the vicar of Cowley St James, a village church on the outskirts of Oxford, since 1852.<sup>26</sup> At that date his parish was numerically small but geographically large as it included most of the land described above. His parochial responsibilities were about to expand dramatically with the imminent housing development. It is of little wonder that he sought to divide the old parish in two in the late 1860s. Benson went to become vicar of newly created Cowley St John in 1870.<sup>27</sup> Benson, known locally as Father Benson, achieved fame in the area as a particularly energetic and conscientious vicar but also amongst students of Church history. He was a second-generation Tractarian who, along with being a parish minister, founded the first successful Anglican religious community of men since the Reformation, the Society of St John the Evangelist (SSJE), alternatively called the Cowley Fathers.<sup>28</sup> Chapters 2 and 3 will outline Benson's local ministry and that of the Evangelical, inter-denominational OCM. The objectives and methods of outreach of each ministry will be considered alongside their relations with each other. It should be noted that several Evangelical churches were also established in Victorian East Oxford, including Primitive and Wesleyan Methodist, Congregationalist and Baptist chapels, though they are not closely studied here.<sup>29</sup> This dissertation will also examine supporters of the two ministries and the resources available to each, both financially and in terms of influence. Following examination of the fruits of each ministry, it will be shown that neither really met all the aims as originally envisaged but OCM had some success in encouraging Evangelical worship in East Oxford as an alternative to Tractarianism. Chapter 4 will consider twentieth-century changes which affected British religious practice and their effects on the two East Oxford ministries. In conclusion, it will be argued that, because the legacy of Benson's mission is far more tangible than OCM's, an imbalanced view of religious life in late Victorian East Oxford has emerged.

## 2. Father Richard Meux Benson's Ministry

A number of secondary sources are available on Richard Meux Benson, including a 1953 biography by Mildred Woodgate, *Father Benson: Founder of the Cowley Fathers*. For this dissertation, parish magazines, his edited *Spiritual Letters* and Clergy Answers to the Bishop's Pre-visitation Questions have also been studied for first-hand evidence of Benson's attitudes and activities and those of later Cowley Fathers.

### *Background*

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<sup>24</sup> Graham, M., *The Suburbs of Victorian Oxford: Growth in a Pre-Industrial City*, (University of Leicester, 1985), Oxfordshire History Centre, OXFO/944.34/(GRA), pp. 86-93

<sup>25</sup> Nash, J., 'The New People of East Oxford: The Suburbanisation of Cowley, 1851 - 91', *Oxoniensia*, Vol. 63 (1998), pp. 125-145, accessed 14/1/21 at <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1750854600>

<sup>26</sup> James, S., *The Cowley Fathers: A History of the English Congregation of the Society of St John the Evangelist*, (Canterbury Press, 2019), pp. 2-5

<sup>27</sup> British History Online, VCH, 'Parishes: Cowley'

<sup>28</sup> James, pp. 40-49

<sup>29</sup> British History Online, VCH, 'Parishes: Cowley'; Salmon, G. L., *Beyond Magdalen Bridge: The Growth of East Oxford*, (The East Oxford Archaeology & History Project, 2010), p. 41; SS Mary & John Churchyard: Other Churches, accessed 3/6/21 at [https://www.ssmjchurchyard.org.uk/other\\_churches.php](https://www.ssmjchurchyard.org.uk/other_churches.php)

Richard Meux Benson was born in 1824 into an Evangelical family. The family was wealthy, having made money in the brewing industry. He imbibed his mother's piety. She was raised in Clapham and her family had been much influenced by the Evangelical Clapham Sect.<sup>30</sup> Martin Smith has written that Benson never entirely abandoned Evangelicalism. He held to many aspects of Christian life emphasised by that tradition, such as devotion to Scripture and a zeal for the lost, for all his life.<sup>31</sup> However, he became an exemplary Tractarian parish priest too. When Benson joined Christ Church College in 1843, several founders of the Oxford Movement were still active within Oxford University, although Newman was about to abandon Anglicanism in favour of Roman Catholicism. Others followed him and the Oxford Movement struggled to come to terms with these departures in the 1840s. Nevertheless, Benson was not one to let outward success or failure determine his decisions. He was much influenced by the spirituality of men like Newman and Pusey. Pusey nominated Benson for a studentship of Christ Church, which involved taking Holy Orders and remaining unmarried. Benson was ordained in 1849. After a brief spell in Surbiton, Benson became vicar of Cowley which then had a population of around 600 people.<sup>32</sup>

As well as founding the SSJE, Benson is well-known for his encouragement of overseas mission but he was also involved in English mission.<sup>33</sup> For example, in 1869, Benson organised two conferences to discuss Anglican outreach to London parishes. During the November 1869 London event, Benson was amongst the Anglo-Catholic priests who went to several London parishes for 12-day missions. Rowan Strong has suggested that Benson may have been the first Anglo-Catholic theorist of mission.<sup>34</sup> Clearly, evangelism was vitally important to Benson. Here, the focus is on how Benson thought about and led mission in Cowley St John.

### *Objectives*

Like other Tractarian clergy, Benson aimed to establish a Eucharistic community of godly people, ever-increasing in spirituality, in his parish. Benson concurred with Tractarian theology which stated that baptism was the rite which initiated a person into holiness and receiving Communion was important for growth in holiness. Communion could be received after a period of preparation and learning, leading to Confirmation. Confession and Absolution also encouraged godliness. He wrote that the sacraments were a vital means for people to experience the presence of God and his grace.<sup>35</sup> It is unsurprising to read of Benson's grief, expressed in a letter written in January 1867 to his parishioners whilst still at Cowley St James, over how few Communicants there were. Others were missing out on this sacramental union with Christ that was needed for spiritual sustenance.<sup>36</sup>

The vast majority of Benson's parishioners would have been baptised as babies, thus his mission in Cowley would have been seen largely as re-capturing the lapsed rather than converting non-Christians. In earlier missions to London parishes, with which Benson had been involved,

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<sup>30</sup> James, p. 1

<sup>31</sup> Smith, M., 'Significance of Father Benson's Spirituality Today', in Smith, M. (ed.), *Benson of Cowley*, (Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 141

<sup>32</sup> James, pp. 2-5

<sup>33</sup> Jeffrey, R. M. C., 'When all are Christian, None are' in Smith, M. (ed.), *Benson of Cowley*, (Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 122

<sup>34</sup> Strong, R. 'Origins of Anglo-Catholic Missions: Fr Richard Benson and the Initial Missions of the Society of St John the Evangelist, 1869–1882', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 66(1), (2015), pp. 95-99, (Cambridge University Press), accessed 18/6/21 at DOI: 10.1017/S0022046913000626

<sup>35</sup> Longridge, W. H., (ed.) *Spiritual Letters of Richard Meux Benson*, (A. R. Mowbray & Co. Ltd., 1924), 22 April 1875, p. 11

<sup>36</sup> *Spiritual Letters of Richard Meux Benson*, January 1867, pp. 123-4

exhortations to renew baptismal vows, rather than simply to get baptised, were common.<sup>37</sup> As Benson saw it, the holy lives of Christians would be attractive to the unconverted and lapsed.<sup>38</sup> However, it was also a conviction of Benson's from his days as a student at Oxford University, that a religious community of celibate mission priests, living in poverty under a rule, could be a powerful witness to those around. He felt that the world needed to see lives characterised by renunciation of vain, temporal things if they were to be drawn to seeking God.<sup>39</sup> Possibly, Benson had been inspired by Pusey who had envisaged a staff of priests living communally and helping each other in pastoral work when he considered evangelisation of the urban, unchurched working-classes of industrial cities, like Leeds in the 1840s.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps most significantly, Benson was inspired by the early Church Fathers and their examples of asceticism.<sup>41</sup> Prayer was key too. Benson saw mission as being accomplished through obedience to Christ, a life of prayer and being a channel for the Holy Spirit.<sup>42</sup> He wrote to O'Neill, a Cowley Father in India, that the conversion of souls was wrought by 'the breath of the living God, touching upon hearts that are dead'. Mission work involved breathing God's breath through prayer.<sup>43</sup>

### *Mission in Practice*

Benson started to put into practice his ideas about mission around the time he became vicar of Cowley St James. By 1852, he had joined the Brotherhood of the Holy Trinity which also included a number of other second-generation Tractarian clergy and laity. Whilst not physically living in community, they desired to be bound by a set of rules. They resolved that they should rise early, eat moderately, devote time each day to serious reading, speak evil of no man, avoid dissipation and be committed to prayer.<sup>44</sup> He still hoped to set up a religious community but his initial plan was to establish a devotional college of men living in poverty as far as possible in India's North-West Provinces.<sup>45</sup> However, Benson was to be disappointed. Bishop Wilberforce, whilst initially supportive of the plan, decided just before Benson was to leave England that he was needed in Cowley. Increasing numbers of people were moving into the parish and Wilberforce deemed it more important that Benson stay and care for this burgeoning flock.<sup>46</sup> It seems that Benson abandoned the Indian vision, at least as regards personal involvement, and he devoted himself to Cowley but the desire to establish a religious community did not die.<sup>47</sup>

At first sight, the mid nineteenth-century does not appear to have been an auspicious time to found such a community. James described how the general public linked religious communities with Roman Catholicism; little distinction was made between Catholics and Anglican Ritualists who promoted monastic living. At best, religious communities were seen as Popish and foreign. People feared that they might be a first step in a return to the Roman Church.<sup>48</sup> At worst, monasteries and convents were sometimes pictured in popular imagination as concealing malevolent monks and

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<sup>37</sup> Strong, p. 91

<sup>38</sup> Strong, pp. 98-99

<sup>39</sup> Gore, C. in *Spiritual Letters of Richard Meux Benson*, pp. vii-xii

<sup>40</sup> Strong, p. 91

<sup>41</sup> Gore, C. in *Spiritual Letters of Richard Meux Benson*, p. xv

<sup>42</sup> Jeffrey, p. 120

<sup>43</sup> *Spiritual Letters of Richard Meux Benson*, 30 July 1880 pp. 56-58

<sup>44</sup> James, pp. 5-6

<sup>45</sup> Woodgate, M. V., *Father Benson: Founder of the Cowley Fathers*, (Geoffrey Bles, 1953), pp. 50-51

<sup>46</sup> James, p. 33

<sup>47</sup> Woodgate, p. 52

<sup>48</sup> James, p. 17

cruel abbesses thanks to a number of gothic novels, like 'The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk'.<sup>49</sup> There were other opponents, like Charles Kingsley, who considered Ritualism to be foppish and feared that celibacy risked leading men into deviant sexual relationships.<sup>50</sup> Attitudes began to shift regarding monastic living from the 1850s, at least in some quarters. A number of Anglican sisterhoods had already been established in the first half of the 1800s. Women's communities had also met with criticism but Owen Chadwick has suggested that the nursing work carried out by women during the Crimean War changed attitudes and led to a degree of public respect for sisters of religion engaged in such activity.<sup>51</sup> Thus, by the 1860s, with growing acceptance of Anglican sisterhoods, the possibility of brotherhoods was mooted. The question was discussed at the 1862 Church Congress and in the Convocations of the Church of England.<sup>52</sup> Gradually, others voiced their support for the idea, including Simeon Wilberforce O'Neill, then curate at Wantage, and an American, Charles Grafton, who travelled to England in 1865 with a desire to explore entering the religious life. A plan evolved for a new society to be established with a handful of men living under Benson's direction at his home on Iffley Road.<sup>53</sup> It was named 'The Society of St John the Evangelist'. In 1866, the first members of the SSJE, Benson, O'Neill and Grafton, took their vows 'to live in celibacy, poverty and obedience'. Benson was elected Superior-General.<sup>54</sup> By October 1868, a new Mission House on Marston Street was completed and the brothers moved in, soon to be joined by more. It was the same year in which the new parish of Cowley St John was established.

From its inception, the SSJE had a missionary focus, both domestic and foreign.<sup>55</sup> It was not an enclosed order; the brothers were to live a mixed religious life. According to Charles Gore, a later Bishop of Oxford, Benson believed that their lives of renunciation should be carried on 'visibly in the outward world'.<sup>56</sup> Benson may have used St Vincent de Paul's seventeenth-century Society of the Holy Cross as a model for the SSJE. Vincent de Paul had founded an order for young men who were sent in pairs on preaching missions to France's rural poor as part of their training for the priesthood. After arduous evangelism, retreats were organised for these men's spiritual refreshment.<sup>57</sup> Evangelism in pairs had been part of Benson's Indian vision and retreats were a feature of the Brotherhood of the Holy Trinity's activities. Benson was also acquainted with London 'slum priest', Charles Lowder, who had established a Society of the Holy Cross, modelled on Vincent de Paul's Order. Benson started a Guild of St Vincent in his parish; news concerning the Guild, and that of St Agnes, regularly featured in the *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*.<sup>58</sup>

The SSJE did not trumpet its presence when it moved into Marston Street but, with its unusual roof-top chapel, Benson hoped that parishioners would 'lift up their hearts unto the Lord' when they heard its bell ringing for the religious offices of the day.<sup>59</sup> Some parishioners were permitted to come as Communicants at the daily celebration of the Eucharist but only the male ones.<sup>60</sup> George Lane Fox described the daily routine of religious offices punctuated by meditation, learning, meals,

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<sup>49</sup> James, pp. 15-16

<sup>50</sup> James, pp. 22-23

<sup>51</sup> James, pp. 20-21

<sup>52</sup> James, p. 37

<sup>53</sup> James, pp. 37-41

<sup>54</sup> James, p. 49

<sup>55</sup> James, p. 40

<sup>56</sup> Gore, C. in *Spiritual Letters of Richard Meux Benson*, p. xii

<sup>57</sup> James, p. 58

<sup>58</sup> For example, Oxfordshire History Centre, OXFO/283/SMARF, *Cowley St John Parish Magazines 1875 - 89*, February 1881; Strong, p. 95; James, pp. 5, 57-58

<sup>59</sup> James, p. 54

<sup>60</sup> James, p. 53

visiting and 'work'.<sup>61</sup> There is also an indication from a Monthly Prayer Paper that visiting people in their homes for spiritual reasons took place. God's help was asked in relation to those in Robin Hood and Chester Street, both places in the parish. The people were identified by street or district which hints at visits having occurred in those areas.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, Newman had set an earlier example of visiting in his nearby parish of St Clement's and Evangelicals had established home-visiting as an important way of carrying out their parish work from the early 1800s.<sup>63</sup>

There is little mention of Oxford members of the SSJE in the numerous editions of the *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, though much about their work in foreign mission. However, from the earliest days, the brothers helped with services at the Iron Church, which Benson had built in 1859 in Stockmore Street for the growing population living too far from St James' Church in Cowley village.<sup>64</sup> When Benson answered the Bishop's pre-visitation questions concerning curates, it can be seen that Cowley Fathers, including Robert Page, George Congreve and Basil Maturin, acted as curates in the new parish.<sup>65</sup> Additionally, Charles Grafton had clearly won the hearts of many parishioners as he was 'cheered to the rafters' when he rose to speak at the gala concert arranged for the opening of a new local school in 1867.<sup>66</sup>

Benson put his beliefs about the sacraments into practice in his role as vicar. In 1872, he was holding six services on a Sunday, three of which included the Eucharist. He generally held two or three services on weekdays and the Eucharist was included at one or two these. He was assisted by curates but such frequent parochial provision of Divine Service and Eucharist was well above the norm for Oxfordshire.<sup>67</sup> Although, some followers of the Oxford Movement in the second half of the nineteenth-century incorporated much ritual in their services, this was less true of Benson's services in Cowley St John. It seems that Benson placed greater emphasis on the power of a life of poverty in attracting people to the gospel than ritual. At the SSJE Mission House, 'there was little or no glamour about the services...The *Day Hours of the Church of England* were recited with minimum ceremonial'.<sup>68</sup> Concerning ritual, he wrote 'I think one feels that the highest type of worship for us on earth is that plainness which St Bernard would have inculcated...The Religious ought to rise above the need for ritual beauty'. Nevertheless, he conceded that there was a duty to make the Lord's house beautiful although that was no substitute for true worship.<sup>69</sup> Benson does not seem to have merely tolerated various aspects of ritual: He could see that candles lit upon the altar added dignity to a service and could be valuable in illustrating the concept of Christ as 'the Light of the World'.<sup>70</sup> He also seemed to feel satisfaction as he described the sight of numerous clergy in surplices at the consecration of the new SS Mary and John Church in November 1883.<sup>71</sup>

Benson had written to O'Neill, evangelising unconverted Indians, that public preaching was of comparatively little value for converting people. Preaching to unbelievers was 'likely to draw

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<sup>61</sup> Woodgate, p. 72

<sup>62</sup> Oxfordshire History Centre, OXFO/283/SMARF, 'Association for Intercessory Prayer, Monthly Paper, December, 1882' in *Cowley St John Parish Magazines 1875 - 89*

<sup>63</sup> Woodgate, p. 4

<sup>64</sup> British History Online, VCH, 'Parishes: Cowley'

<sup>65</sup> Oxfordshire History Centre, DIOC/3/D, *Queries Preparatory to Visitation, to be answered by officiating Clergymen*, Cowley St John, 1872, 1875, 1878, 1881, 1884

<sup>66</sup> James, p. 51

<sup>67</sup> *Clergy Answers*, 1872

<sup>68</sup> Yates, p. 79

<sup>69</sup> *Spiritual Letters of Richard Meux Benson*, p. 137

<sup>70</sup> James, pp. 54-55

<sup>71</sup> *Cowley St John Parish Magazine* November 1883

scoffers'.<sup>72</sup> Whether this view was developed after years of preaching experience or was a view held from early days, is not entirely clear. Perhaps he had been influenced by Newman who had written that the early Church had taught people the Christian faith through rites and ceremonies more than sermons and that Christians should receive the gospel on their knees, not through critical evaluation of Scripture.<sup>73</sup> However, in regard to domestic mission, it seems that Benson believed he was mostly reaching out to lapsed Christians, as mentioned above. Perhaps he considered that public preaching was more useful in such a context. Benson and other mission priests had publicly preached in their mission to London in 1869; some, particularly Protestants, were reminded of Wesleyan revival addresses.<sup>74</sup> Certainly, Benson made use of opportunities to preach in Cowley St John. For example, in 1872, he typically gave three sermons on a Sunday.<sup>75</sup> Benson earned a reputation as a good preacher and received invitations to speak from local parishes and London churches.<sup>76</sup> His sermons could be lengthy; three hours was not unknown. They could also be complex. Yet, when a very poor woman in Cowley was asked if she was able to understand, she replied, 'That gentleman just opens up heaven to me and I can look right in.'<sup>77</sup>

As Cowley St John's vicar, Benson took on many local responsibilities, besides the provision of church services, which were important for teaching parishioners, caring for needs and building community. He was very active in the establishment of schools. The first inhabitants of the parish, according to Benson, were not the very poorest. Thus, the first schools he sought to establish were 'middle class schools'. St John's High School for Boys at Carlton Lodge, Iffley Road was soon followed by a middle-class girls' school nearby. However, as many poorer families were driven out of Oxford's centre to suburbs like Benson's to make way for improvements, it soon became evident that more affordable schools were needed too. By 1883, the parish boasted a National Boys' School, a National Girls' School, including an intermediate section, and two Infants' Schools, one on Cowley Road and the other on Magdalen Road.<sup>78</sup> These were voluntary denominational schools. Parents paid a small subscription and government grants were received but Benson also frequently asked wealthier parishioners to contribute to the schools' running costs.<sup>79</sup> His zeal for providing places of learning for parish children may have been encouraged by his knowledge that failure to ensure adequate parochial education could lead to the government ordering that a School Board be appointed under the 1870 Education Act. Then a rate would have been levied and a non-denominational school would have been built. The school would not have offered religious teaching in line with Tractarian theology but, instead, a far less contentious curriculum. To Benson it would have been inadequate at best.<sup>80</sup> With an ever-growing local population, this must have been an ongoing concern even though financially it would have been easier for Benson to have had a local Board School. In 1872, Benson informed the Bishop that he had no intention of making over any of the parish schools to the School Board.<sup>81</sup> In January 1883, he asserted that the aforementioned National Schools supplied all the area's needs regarding primary education.<sup>82</sup> However, by this date a non-denominational school

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<sup>72</sup> *Spiritual Letters of Richard Meux Benson*, 14 July 1882, p. 65

<sup>73</sup> Herring, pp. 75-76

<sup>74</sup> Strong, p. 97

<sup>75</sup> *Clergy Answers*, Cowley St John, 1872

<sup>76</sup> Woodgate, p. 53

<sup>77</sup> Woodgate, p. 54

<sup>78</sup> *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, January 1883

<sup>79</sup> For example, *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, January 1876, January 1883

<sup>80</sup> Brown, S., p. 260; Wellings, pp. 457-8

<sup>81</sup> *Clergy Answers*, Cowley St John, 1872

<sup>82</sup> *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, January 1883

had begun in the parish but under the aegis of the British and Foreign Schools Society.<sup>83</sup> As will be shown later, several of this school's committee were local Nonconformists.

Unsurprisingly, control of education had long been an area of conflict between different religious groups across the country and, with efforts to widen school provision from the 1860s, the tension only increased.<sup>84</sup> Teaching gave opportunity to instil values and beliefs in young minds. Wellings highlighted religious division over education in Oxford shortly after 1900.<sup>85</sup> It seems that educational competition existed in East Oxford in the 1880s. Benson's attitude to the East Oxford British School, seems to have been negative. In December 1880, he mentioned a loss in numbers at the National Girls' School and Infants' Schools, partly due to 'an inefficient opposition school in the neighbourhood'. He was probably referring to the recently-opened British school.<sup>86</sup> His 1884 response to the Bishop's questions suggests that he felt its establishment should not have been allowed.<sup>87</sup>

Undoubtedly, Benson's commitment to local education was deep. In addition to establishing schools, Cowley Fathers taught in them. Benson took close interest in their activities, as can be seen in his parish magazine descriptions of reports on schools, prize-givings and times of illness.<sup>88</sup> Further teaching occurred in adult evening school and Bible and Communicant classes as well as at children's catechism sessions on Sunday afternoons.<sup>89</sup> As noted, Benson set up Guilds of St Vincent and St Agnes for young people and their spiritual training. Reporting on the Guild of St Agnes, Benson hoped that members would grow in grace and love for one another through prayer and that they would learn about the nature of sacraments and importance of separation from the world.<sup>90</sup>

Benson was involved in many other initiatives in Cowley St John. By April 1881, the building of St John's National Hospital for Incurables was complete. Caring for people at this hospice brought the All Saints' Sisters of the Poor to the parish.<sup>91</sup> Smaller scale projects were mentioned in the *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*. To meet the needs of the poor, a soup kitchen was set up in January 1867.<sup>92</sup> There was also a Clothing and Coal Club and a Lying-in Club; Benson reported their accounts.<sup>93</sup> Alcohol abuse was a problem in the East Oxford which Benson tried to address through Church of England Temperance Societies for different age groups.<sup>94</sup> There were also lighter-hearted events which would have been important for creating a community around the parish church: Sunday School trips to places like Blenheim Palace attracted several hundred attendees.<sup>95</sup> Much cake must have been consumed at parochial teas.<sup>96</sup> He also presided over parish horticultural competitions.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Kaye, R., *An East Oxford Education*, (Shire Publications, 2016), p. 8

<sup>84</sup> Brown, S., pp. 258-62

<sup>85</sup> Wellings, pp. 455-70

<sup>86</sup> *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, December 1880

<sup>87</sup> *Clergy Answers*, Cowley St John, 1884

<sup>88</sup> For example, *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, August 1876, December 1876, February 1878, December 1880, January 1881, October 1881, January 1884, January 1885

<sup>89</sup> For example, *Clergy Answers*, Cowley St John, 1872, 1875

<sup>90</sup> *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, February 1881, February 1882

<sup>91</sup> *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, April 1881

<sup>92</sup> James, p. 51

<sup>93</sup> For example, *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, January 1876

<sup>94</sup> For example, *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, November 1875, February 1884

<sup>95</sup> For example, *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, September 1875, August 1876, September 1881

<sup>96</sup> For example, *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, March 1882

<sup>97</sup> For example, *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, September 1875

### *Prayer and relations with others*

Benson's drive to build a Eucharistic community in Cowley St John is evident in all the activities he undertook but when he discussed mission, he emphasised the importance of prayer. The aforementioned Monthly Prayer Paper for December 1882 sheds light on Benson's spiritual concerns for his flock although not all the subjects of prayer were necessarily Cowley St John parishioners. People, often denoted by initials, were listed as needing prayer according to various subheadings, such as 'Spiritual awakening and conviction of sin', 'Conversion from the seven capital sins' and 'For the due use of Sacraments'. Indications about his attitudes to those who held different religious views from his own can also be discerned. Benson had concern for the spiritual well-being of those outside the Anglican fold. Under 'Baptism', the children of a Baptist and Wesleyan were listed for prayer and the section entitled, 'Conversion from unbelief, heresy and schism' included prayer requests for Unitarians and 'Dissenters at W.'<sup>98</sup> Unitarians, who deny the Trinity and divinity of Jesus, would have been deemed heretical by both Tractarians and most Dissenters. Probably, Benson saw other Dissenters as schismatic. It seems that he desired Unitarians and Dissenters to return to the Anglican Church. Possibly, his feelings for them would have mirrored his attitude to missionaries encountered by Father O'Neill in India, who were not Anglo-Catholic. Benson told O'Neill, 'However much ill-regulated zeal there may be, yet as it comes from the Spirit of God it shall effect God's purpose in spite of all that Satan may do to mar its working'.<sup>99</sup>

### *Resources*

Benson hailed from a wealthy family. Whilst he did not have access to all its riches, he had been able to acquire large tracts of land in the Cowley St John area after Enclosure which were later used for various buildings to benefit the parish including the aforementioned schools, hospice and Mission House.<sup>100</sup> In the 1870s, he embarked upon another building project. In 1872, Cowley St John's population was recorded as 1,415. Ten years later, the population had almost reached 6,000. It was clear that another church was needed in the area.<sup>101</sup> Benson wished for it to be built on Cowley Road close to the Robin Hood district, 'where the presence of a church was greatly needed'.<sup>102</sup> He was tireless in seeking funds for the church to be built. Several issues of the *Cowley St John Parish Magazine* list subscribers to this project. Numerous smaller donations of sums under £1 were made. Some of these were from the Robin Hood district and were applied towards the cost of the pulpit.<sup>103</sup> However, Benson had wealthier supporters too, including Lady Maria Howard and Miss Anketell Jones, who gave £5 and £100 respectively.<sup>104</sup> Other clergymen, not all of them Oxford-based, contributed to the new church, like Reverend A. Legge of Reading.<sup>105</sup> The well-known Tractarian, Reverend Canon Liddon gave £50. Institutions, such as Cuddesdon College and, possibly, Christ Church College made substantial donations: 'Ch. Ch.' gave £500.<sup>106</sup> The largest recorded gift,

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<sup>98</sup> 'Association for Intercessory Prayer, Monthly Paper, December, 1882' in *Cowley St John Parish Magazines 1875 - 89*

<sup>99</sup> *Spiritual Letters of Richard Meux Benson*, 12 Feb 1875, p. 9

<sup>100</sup> Graham, p. 95

<sup>101</sup> *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, January 1883

<sup>102</sup> *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, November 1875

<sup>103</sup> *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, February 1884

<sup>104</sup> £100 equates to £6,600 in today's values. The National Archives, 'Currency Converter 1270-2017', (2017), accessed 30/7/21 at <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/#currency-result>; *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, February 1884

<sup>105</sup> *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, March 1884

<sup>106</sup> *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, February 1882, September 1883

£1,000, was from the wealthy local businessman and landowner, G. Herbert Morrell.<sup>107</sup> On 6 November 1883, the new church of SS Mary and John was consecrated whilst the Iron Church continued to serve the other end of the parish.<sup>108</sup>

In later years a 'legend of hardness, of almost frightening severity and ascetism' had developed concerning Benson.<sup>109</sup> His rigid self-discipline may have contributed to the gloominess of the Mission House, as described by another member of the SSJE, Father Maturin.<sup>110</sup> Eventually, Father Congreve suggested that Benson step down as Superior-General of the SSJE which he did in 1890. He had already resigned as parish vicar in 1886.<sup>111</sup>

### *Outcomes of Ministry*

Benson had sought to build a Eucharistic community in Cowley St John. It seems that, despite his undoubted commitment to the parish, vast numbers did not flock to the parish churches every Sunday in the late 1800s. Benson's early years in the parish appear to have been daunting. He wrote in his *Clergy Answers to the Bishop*, 'A large number of the population are quite godless and indifferent'. He was referring to the poorer sort re-located to his parish from the town centre. He continued, 'There are also a good many Dissenters'.<sup>112</sup> He was less worried about Dissenting numbers in 1878 but noted that 'a large number [of parishioners] are absent from church'. In 1884, near the end of Benson's term as vicar, around 400 would come to church at Christmas and Easter. Presumably, these people were spread across the two parish churches, the Iron Church and SS Mary and John Church. However, on other Sundays there were typically only about 92 congregants overall. It seems that the commitment of most was not strong and there are hints that Benson was disappointed with many parishioners' spirituality.<sup>113</sup> When Reverend William Scott succeeded Benson as vicar of the parish at SS Mary and John Church, but not the Iron Church, he said that attendance had increased by 1890 'but not as much as hoped' and in 1899 it had decreased, although the local population was still increasing and he had established a chapel of ease, St Alban's, in the Robin Hood district in 1889.<sup>114</sup> There were 807 Communicants in the parish in 1890 and its population was about 8500 but, as under Benson's ministry, they did not all come to church each week. In 1887, Scott recorded average Sunday attendance as 65 who may not have all been Communicants.<sup>115</sup> Attendance was lower than he would have liked. Scott's comments shed light on the challenges faced by a Tractarian vicar trying to build a Eucharistic community in Cowley St John at the end of the 1800s. Scott blamed 'his own want of preaching power, the attraction of a new church for the Cowley Fathers [from the mid-1890s], the tendency of Oxford people to wander [to different churches] and the actions of extreme Protestants.' Possibly, the two latter issues had been difficulties for Benson too.<sup>116</sup> Benson may have been philosophical about low numbers attending church regularly but Communicants of little commitment would have bothered him. In 1896, he counselled Father Page on the appropriate attitude in developing a Eucharistic community. His advice was to not worry about numbers but to focus upon the religious life.<sup>117</sup> After all, conversions

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<sup>107</sup> *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, February 1882

<sup>108</sup> *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, November 1883

<sup>109</sup> Woodgate, p. 77

<sup>110</sup> James, p. 85

<sup>111</sup> James, p. 88

<sup>112</sup> *Clergy Answers*, Cowley St John, 1872

<sup>113</sup> *Clergy Answers*, Cowley St John, 1875, 1878, 1884

<sup>114</sup> *Clergy Answers*, Cowley St John, 1890

<sup>115</sup> *Clergy Answers*, Cowley St John, 1887

<sup>116</sup> *Clergy Answers*, Cowley St John, 1890, 1899

<sup>117</sup> *Spiritual Letters of Richard Meux Benson*, 21 August 1896, p. 83

were a gift from God. Nevertheless, Benson had aimed to encourage greater spirituality amongst Communicants and the irregularity of attendance of many must have been a disappointment.<sup>118</sup>

Whilst the development of a Eucharistic community may have been discouraging, the work of the SSJE expanded around the turn of the century. After Benson's resignation as Superior-General of the SSJE in 1890, Robert Lay Page was chosen to be his successor.<sup>119</sup> Gradually, the austerity of the Cowley Fathers' lessened. Overseas' mission was a priority but, at home, twenty-three new SSJE members made their vows and a new Mission House and a place of retreat were opened elsewhere in Britain. There was much collaboration with Anglican women's communities too.<sup>120</sup> In Cowley St John, further significant building projects were undertaken. Benson had wanted a new church to replace the Iron Church since the 1870s but deemed the need for SS Mary and John Church to be more pressing. It fell to Benson's successor to oversee the erection of St John the Evangelist Church, Iffley Road. Whilst the church was to be for private services of the SSJE members, it would also be open to local parishioners, as the Iron Church had been. The first Mass was celebrated in the new church on 12 May 1896.<sup>121</sup> The SSJE had retained oversight of the parish schools and a large new Anglican school was built on Hertford Street in the Robin Hood area. It was officially opened in May 1899 and several Cowley Fathers attended the ceremony.<sup>122</sup>

Under Father Page, additions associated with Catholic Ritualism were made to services. Incense began to be used. Priests wore vestments designed by the church architect, George Bodley, and there were cassocks and surplices for choirboys and men.<sup>123</sup> Benson may not have had great success in establishing a Eucharistic community in Cowley St John but the religious order he founded, partly to help in the local community, quickly regained vigour in the 1890s.

### 3. Oxford City Mission

Far fewer resources exist today concerning OCM. The archives of London City Mission (LCM), the parent body, have been used here. Importantly, a handful of Annual Reports from OCM between 1881 and 1891 were found in the Bodleian library and have provided the basis for the comparison with Benson's ministry. Magdalen Road Church records have been particularly helpful in learning about the church which developed out of OCM.

#### *Background*

The preamble to OCM's Annual Report for 1886-7 states that the Mission began its labours in 1854 thanks to the bequest of clergyman's widow for the support of 'a Mission among the poorer and more ignorant of our citizens'. When that bequest was exhausted about three years later, a group of Christian ladies responded by gathering subscriptions to enable the Mission to continue. The 1886-7 preamble also stated that OCM was the Oxford Auxiliary to a wider organisation, the Country

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<sup>118</sup> *Spiritual Letters of Richard Meux Benson*, Good Friday 1876, p. 26

<sup>119</sup> James, pp. 89-91

<sup>120</sup> James, pp. 92-95

<sup>121</sup> Bodleian Library, Oxford, Soc. 1107 e.308, *The Cowley Evangelist*, 1891, pp. 126-7; James, pp. 96-103

<sup>122</sup> British Library Newspapers, *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 'SS Mary and John Schools', 27/5/1899, p. 5, accessed 11/9/21 at

[https://go.gale.com/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Newspapers&resultListType=RESULT\\_LIST&searchResultsType=SingleTab&hitCount=12&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&currentPosition=6&docId=GALE%7CBA3202718380&docType=Article&sort=Pub+Date+Forward+Chron&contentSegment=ZBLC-MOD1&prodId=BNCN&pageNum=1&contentSet=GALE%7CBA3202718380&searchId=R3&userGroupName=oxfshlib&inPS=true](https://go.gale.com/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Newspapers&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=SingleTab&hitCount=12&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&currentPosition=6&docId=GALE%7CBA3202718380&docType=Article&sort=Pub+Date+Forward+Chron&contentSegment=ZBLC-MOD1&prodId=BNCN&pageNum=1&contentSet=GALE%7CBA3202718380&searchId=R3&userGroupName=oxfshlib&inPS=true)

<sup>123</sup> James, p. 104

Towns Mission, an offshoot of LCM. LCM archival records provide considerable detail concerning expectations of missionaries and the beliefs which underpinned LCM's work. Much of what applied to London missionaries also appears to have applied to those who worked in the poorer parts of Victorian Oxford as the same preamble stated that OCM's Constitution was 'substantially the same as that of the London City Mission'.<sup>124</sup> Indeed, a close connection between the two Missions is evidenced by report of a London City missionary visiting the Oxford City missionary as the latter went about his work in 1888.<sup>125</sup>

### *LCM Objectives*

When David Naismith founded the LCM in the 1830s, there was much denominational rivalry in England. As well as having a focus upon the metropolis' poor, Naismith was keen for the Mission to be inter-denominational.<sup>126</sup> The LCM's Constitution, as it appeared in its 1880 Annual Report, stated that the object of the Institution was 'to extend the knowledge of the Gospel among the inhabitants of London and its vicinity (especially the poor) without any reference to denominational distinctions or the peculiarities of Church Government.'<sup>127</sup> The hope was that hearers would respond in repentance and faith in Jesus as their Saviour. The Constitution also laid out particular doctrines which missionaries were to teach. For example, they included, 'That all had sinned, and come short of the glory of God', 'Except that man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God', 'The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanseth from all sin', 'Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ', and 'Ye are sanctified... by the Spirit of God.'<sup>128</sup>

These doctrines align with Evangelical beliefs and most LCM supporters were Evangelical in their views, although not all. Despite the emphasis on inter-denominationalism, some supporters saw LCM as a vehicle for opposing the Oxford Movement and were happy to subscribe to it on that ground alone. The Bishop of Norwich, Edward Stanley, was not an Evangelical but supported the LCM largely because he was anti-Tractarian.<sup>129</sup> Whilst there was much opposition to the unsectarian stance of LCM, it did gather support from people of a range of religious groups, including Dissenters and Anglicans. Additionally, Donald Lewis noted that Tractarian clergy were often disdainful of City missionaries; the LCM commonly used laymen as missionaries.<sup>130</sup>

To bring about the object of the LCM, missionaries of approved character and qualifications were to visit people from house-to-house in assigned districts, 'read the Scriptures, engage in religious conversation, and urge those who [were] living in neglect of religion to observe the Sabbath and to attend public worship'. Tracts were also to be distributed and missionaries were to help children of the poor to receive 'Scriptural education'. 'Meetings for reading and expounding the Scriptures and prayer' were to be held. The LCM did not prescribe doctrines concerning baptism or communion. These were contentious subjects and the LCM warned their missionaries not to hold meetings in rooms where baptism or the Lord's Supper were commonly administered 'nor in any place which is not open to the attendance of Christians of all denominations'.<sup>131</sup> Controversy was to be avoided. Further instructions were given as to how visits and meetings were to be conducted and the nature

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<sup>124</sup> Bodleian Library, Oxford, Per. G.A. Oxon 8° 545, *Annual Reports of the Oxford Auxiliary to the Country Towns Mission 1886-7*

<sup>125</sup> *OCM Annual Report 1888*

<sup>126</sup> Lewis, D. M., *Lighten their Darkness*, (Paternoster Press, 2001), pp. 50-51

<sup>127</sup> London City Mission Archives, *London City Mission Annual Report 1880*

<sup>128</sup> *LCM Annual Report 1880, Constitution, section IV*; Rom. 3:23; John 3:3; 1 John 1:7; Rom. 5:1; 1 Cor 6:11

<sup>129</sup> Lewis, *Lighten their Darkness*, p. 51

<sup>130</sup> Lewis, *Lighten their Darkness*, p. 271

<sup>131</sup> *LCM Annual Report 1880, Constitution, Appendix, Rules and Regulations, V. Meetings*, p. 6

of tracts to be distributed. Missionaries were to keep journals recording their daily activities. They were to 'name churches and chapels in the neighbourhood where the gospel of Christ is faithfully preached'; the choice of which to attend was left up to the individual.<sup>132</sup> It was not a goal for new churches to be set up which might have been seen as competitors to existing Evangelical ones but OCM did become a church.

### *OCM Objectives*

From OCM reports extant for the 1880s and early 1890s, it appears that the Oxford City missionaries endeavoured to follow the same instructions as those for London missionaries. OCM emphasised its unsectarian nature. In the preamble to the 1888 Annual Report, it stated that, 'No denomination can say, "It is ours"'. It stressed that the Oxford 'agent' tried to avoid controversial subjects. OCM's efforts were directed 'principally to the poor, the destitute, the ignorant and the afflicted'. The 1888 Report described the Mission's agency as being 'rarely visible at a public meeting' but was to be found 'in the narrow lane and the crowded court, or in conversation with the diseased, both physically and spiritually, trying to direct their attention to the Bread of Life'.<sup>133</sup> Conversion of Oxford's poor was the professed goal. However, there appears to have been an unstated desire to counter Tractarianism, evidenced in some of the City missionaries' activities and by some OCM supporters.

### *Mission in Practice*

The main body of the Annual Reports recorded the activities of the missionaries and some of the results, especially the highlights. Many house visits were made: During the year preceding the end of March 1881, the City missionary, Ebenezer Kemp, made 1,940 house visits. The sick were attended, almost daily meetings were held indoors or outdoors and several thousand tracts were distributed each year.<sup>134</sup> The 1888 report indicates that the City missionary, Alfred Trotman, was working in several poorer parts of the City. Trotman records the words of a reformed alcoholic from St Thomas' district and another from Temple Cowley. He was also holding meetings in Jericho.<sup>135</sup>

It is clear that conversion was a primary goal of the Oxford City missionaries. Testimonies provide evidence of City missionaries teaching salvation through the blood of Jesus. For instance, one man who had attended one of Trotman's meetings said, 'I was pointed to the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. I can now sing: 'Happy day, when Jesus washed my sins away'. A woman was reported as saying, 'I look forward to the Cottage Meeting with delight. It was there I saw myself a sinner, and Jesus as my Saviour'.<sup>136</sup>

Besides direct efforts to save souls, Oxford City missionaries also engaged in social and educational work. One of Trotman's gatherings in Jericho was a Band of Hope meeting to help the young understand the dangers of drink; 'many of these little one are found in homes surrounded by influences most pernicious and evil.'<sup>137</sup> Trotman used the opportunity to undertake some children's religious education at the meetings and encourage scripture memorisation. A man 'who seldom entered a place of worship' was subsequently seen in a Sunday service. He reported that hearing his

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<sup>132</sup> *LCM Annual Report 1880, Constitution, Appendix, pp. 1-10,*

<sup>133</sup> Bodleian Library, Oxford, Per. G.A. Oxon 8° 545, *Annual Reports of the Oxford Auxiliary to the Country Towns Mission, 1888*

<sup>134</sup> *OCM Annual Reports 1881-91*

<sup>135</sup> *OCM Annual Report 1888, pp. 4-5*

<sup>136</sup> *OCM Annual Report 1886-7, pp. 4-5*

<sup>137</sup> *OCM Annual Report 1888, p. 5*

son reciting a Bible verse to be repeated at a Band of Hope meeting had induced him to go to church.<sup>138</sup> Once OCM gained regular use of a Workman's Hall on Magdalen Road in East Oxford, it planned Sunday School meetings for local children.<sup>139</sup>

It is clear from several of the testimonies recorded in the missionaries' reports that alcohol abuse was a great problem amongst the poor they were visiting and they tried to counter the addictive behaviour. The Jericho Band of Hope meeting was not the only one led by Trotman. He superintended three others each week in 1888 and a weekly adults' Temperance meeting as well as calling people to 'sign the pledge'. These promises of teetotalism could be beneficial for all the family of someone struggling with addiction. A boy, seen joyfully throwing his cap in the air, was especially happy about his father's abstinence because it meant that 'it ain't dry bread to-day, it's sheep's head and dumplings!'<sup>140</sup> Trotman's successor, Henry Clifford, also superintended three weekly Band of Hope meetings. Oxford's City missionary had some prominence in the Sons of Temperance Benefit Society: A newspaper article reported that Mr H. Clifford spoke at a meeting for the Society in 1887 which included delegates from London and Brighton.<sup>141</sup>

In addition to Benson's efforts to ameliorate poverty in Victorian Cowley St John, OCM's work also highlights poverty in the parish. Like Benson, City missionaries ran a soup kitchen in times of particular need. The winter of 1886-7 appears to have been an especially difficult period for the poor in East Oxford and Trotman tried to alleviate hunger with free or 1d meals.<sup>142</sup> It appears that dire need was not experienced by the poor every winter as OCM's accounts do not have an annual entry for the soup kitchen and the *Cowley St John Parish Magazine* did not mention one every year but the indication is that some people in the parish lived only marginally above destitution. OCM also arranged occasional free teas with meetings held afterwards. Clearly, this was to provide an opportunity to present the gospel in an attractive setting but it probably also encouraged a sense of community around the Mission.<sup>143</sup> Naturally, Trotman and Clifford recorded the highpoints of their ministries but there must have been much disappointment too. As Kemp acknowledged, 'The work is arduous, and is frequently trying to the spirit'.<sup>144</sup>

#### *Relations with other Churches*

As noted, London City missionaries were to inform interested people of local, gospel-preaching congregations. There is no record of which places of worship were recommended by Oxford City missionaries but East Oxford's Congregational Church and the Wesleyan Methodists may have been suggested. A Mr Radbone was listed in almost all the extant OCM reports' subscriber lists as contributing £1 1s, a more generous donation relative to others. Probably, this is the same person as Edward Radbone, a Cowley Road grocer who helped establish the nearby Congregational Church

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<sup>138</sup> *OCM Annual Report 1888*, p. 5

<sup>139</sup> Bodleian Library, Oxford, N. G.A. Oxon a.2, *The Oxford Chronicle and Berkshire and Buckinghamshire Gazette*, 19/4/1879, p. 6

<sup>140</sup> *OCM Annual Report 1888*, p. 4

<sup>141</sup> British Library Newspapers, *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 'Sons of Temperance Benefit Society', 3/9/1887, p. 6, accessed 11/9/21 at

<https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?st=Newspapers&searchResultsType=SingleTab&qt=RN~%22Y3202701982%22&sw=w&ty=as&it=search&sid=BNCN&p=BNCN&s=Pub+Date+Forward+Chron&u=oxfshlib&v=2.1&asid=df111b78>

<sup>142</sup> *OCM Annual Report 1886-7*

<sup>143</sup> *OCM Annual Report 1888*, p. 5

<sup>144</sup> *OCM Annual Report 1881*, p. 7

in 1868.<sup>145</sup> A Mr Slaughter also regularly gave money to OCM.<sup>146</sup> One of the still visible 1901 foundation stones of Magdalen Road Mission Hall was laid by Mr W. Slaughter; the former building had been used by OCM, as the 1901 one would be. Probably, this Mr Slaughter was the same one who was closely associated with the Wesleyan Methodists and was a master grocer at 96 St Clement's Street.<sup>147</sup> Walter Slaughter began the Methodist Sunday school in a stable in Chapel Street in 1872, from which a church developed and took over the Primitive Methodists' premises in Alma Place before moving to St Clement's Mission Chapel in 1883.<sup>148</sup> A close relationship between OCM and the Wesleyan Methodists is also shown by the Methodists' financial support of Mrs Trotman, former wife of City missionary, Alfred Trotman, when she was widowed.<sup>149</sup> Possibly, the Primitive Methodists were also suggested to local people. City missionary, Henry Clifford, was a Trustee of their Pembroke Street chapel in the late 1870s and the 1880s.<sup>150</sup>

### *Relations with Benson and the Local Anglican churches*

No evidence has been found to show that OCM recommended the Iron Church of the Cowley Fathers or the new SS Mary and John Church, after it began to be used in the 1880s. OCM reports make no mention of the Anglican churches in the Cowley St John parish but it seems that there was some animosity in late Victorian East Oxford towards certain aspects of the Cowley Fathers' ministry. The Oxford Chronicle printed a polemical sermon delivered in the Cowley Road Congregational Church in 1890 by Reverend J. Stroud Williams against priests calling for and listening to Confessions, a practice undertaken by Benson. Fear of Popery and where the SSJE's ministry might lead was evident in the parish.<sup>151</sup>

Time and space have not permitted an exhaustive comparison of known subscribers to OCM with those who gave donations to any of Benson's parish projects but brief work indicates a small amount of possible overlap. A few people associated with OCM may have taken a less aggressive approach to Tractarianism although, when only surnames are given it is impossible to be sure of their identity. A number of people with the same surname as OCM associates contributed towards some of Benson's projects. In 1876, a Mr Kemp subscribed to the National Schools established by Benson; this was before the East Oxford British School existed. A Mrs Kempson gave 6d towards the new pulpit of the SS Mary and John Church in 1884.<sup>152</sup> A Mr Kempson was a regular giver to OCM, possibly they were related.<sup>153</sup> Mr Radbone gave £1 1s towards the new church too in 1884.<sup>154</sup> No evidence has been found of Benson, other Cowley Fathers, or their subscribers also supporting OCM. If the people listed were also OCM supporters, the gifts to local Anglican projects could simply reflect

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<sup>145</sup> The National Archives, *Census Returns for England and Wales, 1881 - Oxford*, accessed May 2021 at [https://www.ancestrylibraryedition.co.uk/search/categories/ukicen/?event=1881&residence=oxford-oxfordshire-england-united+kingdom\\_86850](https://www.ancestrylibraryedition.co.uk/search/categories/ukicen/?event=1881&residence=oxford-oxfordshire-england-united+kingdom_86850); SS Mary & John Churchyard: Other Churches webpage

<sup>146</sup> *OCM Annual Reports 1881-91*

<sup>147</sup> The National Archives, *Census Returns for England and Wales, 1891 - Oxford*, accessed May 2021 at [https://www.ancestrylibraryedition.co.uk/search/categories/ukicen/?event=1891&residence=oxfordoxfordshire-england-united+kingdom\\_86850](https://www.ancestrylibraryedition.co.uk/search/categories/ukicen/?event=1891&residence=oxfordoxfordshire-england-united+kingdom_86850)

<sup>148</sup> Oxfordshire History Centre, NM5/32/N1/1, *Cowley Road Methodist Church Golden Jubilee Souvenir Booklet 1904 - 1954*, p. 5

<sup>149</sup> Oxfordshire History Centre, NM5/32/A2/1, *Cowley Road Methodist Chapel Leaders' Meeting Minute Book 1896-1905*

<sup>150</sup> Oxfordshire History Centre, NM5/30/A1/1, *Pembroke Street Primitive Methodists Chapel Trustee Minute Book from Jan 1878*

<sup>151</sup> *Oxford Chronicle*, 5/4/1890, p. 7

<sup>152</sup> *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, February 1876, April 1884

<sup>153</sup> For example, *OCM Annual Reports 1881, 1891*

<sup>154</sup> *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, November 1884

a generous attitude to any beneficial endeavour in the neighbourhood. Alternatively, the gifts could be examples of attempts to win over a rival by meeting opposition with kindness in line with Proverbs 25: 21-22.

The opening of the East Oxford British School has been mentioned above in the context of showing Benson's attitude to those of differing religious views. Of course, the establishment of a non-denominational school could also be evidence of people wanting an alternative to the parish Anglican schools and who were willing to go to the effort of starting another school. As noted, the Cowley Fathers taught in the Anglican schools and Benson's involvement was close. There is some lack of clarity about the starting date but around 1880 the East Oxford British School opened near Union Street '*for the Education of the Labouring and Manufacturing Classes of Society of Every Religious Persuasion*'. It adopted a far more liberal approach to religious education where no particular denominational stance was to be enforced but it was anticipated that the religious education would be Christian.<sup>155</sup> Several people associated with OCM and local Dissenting churches were on the East Oxford British School's Committee of Management, including Mr H. Clifford, the soon-to-be Oxford City missionary, the aforementioned Messrs Radbone and Slaughter and Mr W. Biggs and Mr J. Chillingworth, both also on OCM's Committee for 1881.<sup>156</sup> An early headmaster of the school, Mr Greening Lambourn, was a contributor to OCM.<sup>157</sup> Annie Skinner also wrote about a non-denominational school which opened in East Oxford in 1882 and grew from 52 to 278 within a year.<sup>158</sup> Probably, the East Oxford British School was the same as the non-denominational school mentioned by Skinner and the same as Benson's 'opposition school'. It seems that some of the school's growth was not simply due to hitherto uneducated children now finding space in a school but to parents moving children from nearby Anglican schools to the British School. Benson had commented that numbers at the Anglican Girls' and Infants' Schools had declined partly because of the new school opening.<sup>159</sup> Nor were the moves likely to have been for economic reasons. Like the Anglican schools, the British School charged a small fee until the 1890s when fee-paying was abolished for certain schools. It seems unlikely that the British School would have been set up and have increased in size if there had been complete satisfaction with Anglican education in the parish. As demonstrated, several people associated with the new school were also supporters of OCM. As will be shown later, almost all OCM supporters, whose religious affiliation can be identified, were Evangelical. Thus, the establishment of the East Oxford British School and its success in drawing pupils suggests Evangelical dissatisfaction with Benson's Anglican schools in Cowley St John.

#### *Supporters and Resources of OCM*

Like Benson and the SSJE, OCM endeavoured to meet spiritual, educational and humanitarian needs. The Oxford City missionaries did this through conversation and scriptural teaching, involvement in the East Oxford British School and with temperance meetings and occasional soup kitchens. However, OCM never made provision for the area on the same scale as that of Benson, the Cowley Fathers and their supporters. The individual subscriptions to OCM, as shown in the 1881-91 reports, were never greater than £2 2s.<sup>160</sup> Four people donated this amount in 1881 and these larger sums were collected by Mrs Cavell and Mrs Martin. In contrast, as noted, when Benson was fundraising to

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<sup>155</sup> Kaye, pp. 9-10

<sup>156</sup> Kaye, pp. 8, 11; *OCM Annual Report 1881*

<sup>157</sup> Kaye, p. 22; *OCM Annual Report 1881*

<sup>158</sup> Skinner, A., 'Unearthing the Past: An Exploration into the People behind the Development of a Victorian Suburb', *Family & Community History*, Vol. 12(2), (2009), p. 95

<sup>159</sup> *Cowley St John Parish Magazine*, December 1880

<sup>160</sup> Approximately £138 today, The National Archives, 'Currency Converter 1270-2017'

build the SS Mary and John Church, he received one gift of £1,000 and several gifts of £100 or more. In the 1890s, just after Benson resigned as Superior-General of the SSJE, the Cowley Fathers were able to enlist an aristocracy-studded fundraising committee for the construction of St John the Evangelist Church to replace the Iron Church.<sup>161</sup>

Nevertheless, those associated with OCM were not entirely without wealth or influence. A study of subscribers to the Mission from the extant Annual Reports reveals a number of Oxford people with not insignificant financial resources and leadership positions but most were not University-educated and their money had mostly been made in trade. Many contributed to the Mission over a number of years and some demonstrated additional commitment by taking on organisational or administrative responsibilities. The study mostly focused upon those who gave over £1. Many could not be securely identified but some tentative conclusions can still be drawn. Some were particularly successful in business, such as Mr C. Badcock, a draper on Queen Street in 1881 with a workforce of over 60 people. He also sat on OCM's committee during the 1880s and into the 1890s, at least.<sup>162</sup> The East Oxford grocers, Slaughter and Radbone, also gave to the Mission over the years; sometimes they gave £1 or a little over. Mr E. Radbone sat on OCM committee from about 1867/8.<sup>163</sup> Mr W. J. Biggs, another committee member for several years, was a draper and china dealer who lived on the more middle-class Iffley Road.<sup>164</sup>

Several of OCM's wealthier tradesmen supporters were also involved in local politics, usually on behalf of the Liberal party. They were not University-educated but were of sufficient standing and self-confidence to be elected to the Town Council. Analysis of OCM supporters reveals a plethora of inter-connected, assertive tradespeople. They were also active in their support of Evangelicalism. Two of the most generous givers to OCM of both money and time in the early 1880s, and possibly before, were Mr and Mrs John Caldecott Cavell. John Cavell was OCM's treasurer for a time. As mentioned, Mrs Cavell was active on OCM's Ladies' Association as a subscriptions collector. In 1835, John Cavell had gone into partnership with his brother-in-law, a draper on Magdalen Street in Oxford's town centre, to form what became, for a time, Oxford's largest department store, *Elliston and Cavell*. John Cavell became a Town Councillor in 1860, an Alderman in 1868 and was elected Mayor of Oxford three times. He was a Liberal in his politics.<sup>165</sup> Mr J. S. Lowe was on OCM's committee in 1881. James Stanley Lowe was Mayor for 1880-1 and the 1881 OCM Annual Report shows that the Right Worshipful Mayor made one of the most generous donations that year of £2 2s. Lowe was also an ironmonger with a shop at 31 Cornmarket in 1881. He lived in more affluent North Oxford and rented his property from grocer, Charles Underhill. This was probably the same C. Underhill, Esq., Justice of the Peace, who gave 10s to OCM in 1881 and who was also a Town Councillor.<sup>166</sup> Alderman James Hughes was a Liberal Councillor who was five times Mayor of Oxford. He and his wife subscribed generously to OCM. He co-founded a successful high-class grocery business at 56 Cornmarket Street in 1840 with Owen Grimby and a Mr Dewe became a business associate. The names Grimby and Dewe also appear in OCM Annual Reports as subscribers and/or committee members although it is difficult to positively identify them as the same people as those associated with Hughes. By 1871, Hughes was also living in North Oxford.<sup>167</sup> Robert James Grubb,

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<sup>161</sup> *Cowley Evangelist*, August 1891, pp. 126-7

<sup>162</sup> *Census Returns 1881; OCM Annual Reports 1881-91*

<sup>163</sup> *Census Returns 1881, 1891; OCM Annual Reports 1881-91*

<sup>164</sup> *Census Returns 1881; OCM Annual Reports 1881-91*

<sup>165</sup> *Census Returns 1881; OCM Annual Report 1881; Oxford History - Mayors of Oxford 1836 - 1962 - John Cavell*, accessed 8/5/21 at [https://oxfordhistory.org.uk/mayors/1836\\_1962/index.html](https://oxfordhistory.org.uk/mayors/1836_1962/index.html)

<sup>166</sup> *Census Returns 1881; OCM Annual Report 1881; oxfordhistory website - James Stanley Lowe*

<sup>167</sup> *Census Returns 1881; OCM Annual Reports 1881-91; oxfordhistory website - James Hughes*

nephew of the radical Town Councillor and Mayor from 1857-8, Isaac Grubb, was a friend of OCM. As well as making a donation of 10s in 1888, his name appears on one of the foundation stones of Magdalen Road Mission Hall when it was rebuilt in 1901. Like his uncle, Robert Grubb was a corn-dealer.<sup>168</sup> W. Ward Esq. JP was another local official who contributed significantly. Probably, he was the same person as William Ward JP, a coal merchant who lived at 41 St Giles in 1881.<sup>169</sup> Another surname that appears numerous times in OCM reports is that of Alden. It seems that several members of the family supported the Mission. A Mrs Alden sat on the Ladies' Association for a number of years. Mr Robert Alden, butcher at 246 Abingdon Road in 1881, subscribed. In the early 1890s, Mr W H Alden sat on OCM's committee. Indeed, the Annual Reports were all printed by E C Alden or Alden & Co.<sup>170</sup> A picture emerges of a set of OCM supporters who were tradesmen, some with particularly successful businesses, and some who rose to prominent positions within the town. They would have known each other from sitting on the Town Council and some were neighbouring shop-owners. Often their wives demonstrated strong commitment to OCM themselves. The Mission was supported by a number of ordinary but competent people.

There were a handful of supporters from higher class backgrounds; J. W. Chitty Esq. was a Liberal politician who gave £2 2s to OCM in 1881. He had been educated at Eton College and Balliol College and became a judge. He was returned to Parliament as MP for Oxford in April 1880.<sup>171</sup> A few others were associated with Oxford University, such as H. J. S. Smith, a Professor of Geology at Oxford University who gave £1 in 1881, and Reverend Professor Legge. Legge was Professor of Chinese in 1881.<sup>172</sup> It should be remembered that before 1871, an Oxford University education was largely unattainable for Dissenters.<sup>173</sup>

Where the affiliations to particular churches of OCM supporters can be discovered, they were almost always Evangelical. For example, Reverend Professor Legge was also a Nonconformist minister. The Cavells attended New Road Baptist Church in the town centre for many years.<sup>174</sup> As mentioned, Radbone and Slaughter were very much involved in their Congregational and Wesleyan Methodist chapels. However, not all subscribers to the Mission were Nonconformist. The Anglican Reverend A. M. W. Christopher, Rector of St Aldate's Church, had been President of OCM in 1874 and he continued to generously support the Mission in later years. Mrs Christopher was a member of OCM's Ladies' Association.<sup>175</sup> Reverend Christopher's one time curate at St Aldate's, Henry Bazely, died prematurely but left a legacy to OCM.<sup>176</sup>

Commitment to Evangelicalism united Nonconformists and Anglicans in their support of OCM and it was not just to join forces in preaching to the poor. For some, at least, their motives for supporting OCM included opposition to Tractarianism. Reverend Christopher was an Evangelical and explicit concerning his willingness to ally with Dissenters. He considered that he was a Christian first and a

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<sup>168</sup> *Census Returns 1881; OCM Annual Reports 1881-91*; oxfordhistory website - Isaac Grubb

<sup>169</sup> *Census Returns 1881; OCM Annual Report 1881*

<sup>170</sup> *Census Returns 1881; OCM Annual Reports 1881-91*

<sup>171</sup> *OCM Annual Report 1881*; Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 'Chitty, Joseph William', accessed 2/6/21 at <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2102/10.1093/ref:odnb/5337>

<sup>172</sup> *Census Returns 1881; OCM Annual Report 1881*

<sup>173</sup> Reynolds, J., *Canon Christopher 1820 - 1913 of St Aldate's, Oxford*, (Abbey Press, 1967), p. 79

<sup>174</sup> oxfordhistory website - John Cavell

<sup>175</sup> *LCM 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, 1874; Census Returns 1881; OCM Annual Reports 1881-91*

<sup>176</sup> *OCM Annual Reports 1886-7 - 91; The National Archives, England and Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858 - 1966, for Bazely, Henry C. B., accessed 17/9/21 at [https://www.ancestrylibraryedition.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/1904/images/31874\\_222514-00363?pld=4426958](https://www.ancestrylibraryedition.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/1904/images/31874_222514-00363?pld=4426958)*

Church of England Christian second and commented, 'How awful would be the state of Ritualistic parishes now if there were no Protestant Nonconformists preaching Christ in them'. Christopher was critical of the 'stiff' attitude taken by some Anglicans, especially High Churchmen and the later followers of Tractarianism, the Anglo-Catholics, towards Nonconformists.<sup>177</sup>

Nevertheless, a few may have supported OCM primarily because of its work with those in poverty and in spite of its Evangelical stance. Dr Henry Wentworth Acland, a close friend of Pusey and Newman, seems more likely to have been aligned with the Oxford Movement but still gave substantially to OCM. Possibly, Acland's work on Oxford's 1854 cholera epidemic had highlighted to him the plight of the city's poor and inclined him to be supportive, even of those of a different religious viewpoint, if they were willing to work to improve the lives of Oxford's poorest.<sup>178</sup>

OCM was never able to access funds on the same scale as the SSJE but it did gain regular use of a hall in East Oxford in about 1879. At first, paying the salary of a City missionary may have seemed sufficient for OCM's purposes, especially if those interested in Christianity could be directed to other local churches. However, by the late 1870s, need for a building which could be used for preaching and running a Sunday School by the City missionary was deemed pressing, especially by the East Oxford OCM supporters, according to Mr Kempson. Contributions were collected and the foundation stone for a Workman's Hall was laid by Alderman Galpin on Magdalen Road on Easter Monday in 1879. The Hall was to be used for non-denominational religious services, Sunday School, concerts, temperance, political and other meetings. It was hoped that a coffee and reading room could be built on adjacent land later. Several of those named at the event were contributors to OCM, including Messrs Goold, Grubb and Biggs.<sup>179</sup>

Despite the apparent success of the City missionaries' efforts, financial giving dropped from £68 18s 6d in 1881 to between £51 and £56 recorded in the 1888, 1890 and 1891 reports. There were also fewer significant givers in the latter years. This may be attributed to the death of Mrs Cavell in 1886. Of OCM's fundraising ladies, Mrs Cavell and Mrs Martin had gathered the greatest sums, including subscriptions from the most generous subscribers. Indeed, the Cavells themselves gave more than anyone else.<sup>180</sup> However, a more political factor may have affected giving to the Mission. As well as rivalry simmering between Evangelicals and Tractarians in late nineteenth-century Oxford, intense animosity existed between Liberals and Conservatives. As shown above, many supporters of OCM were also ardent supporters of the Liberal Party, including John Cavell. Cavell was treasurer for OCM and Chairman of the *Oxford Building and Investment Company*. In the early 1880s, the company was accused of improper, if not corrupt financial practice. The main brunt of the attack focused upon Alderman Galpin but, as Company Chairman, Cavell was implicated too. It has been suggested that the accusations were exaggerated or even fabricated as part of a political smear campaign. In any event, Galpin was bankrupted, the *Oxford Building and Investment Company* liquidated and Cavell died after falling from his second-floor bedroom-window. A verdict of accidental death was returned but some thought suicide more likely.<sup>181</sup> It is possible that a scandal surrounded Cavell which may have caused some to cease giving to another organisation of which he was treasurer, like OCM. Whatever the truth of the events concerning the *Oxford Building and Investment Company*, the man who mounted the accusations of malpractice, Walter Gray, started to contribute to OCM in

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<sup>177</sup> Reynolds, pp. 250-252

<sup>178</sup> *OCM Annual Reports 1881, 1886-7*; Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 'Acland, Henry Wentworth MD', accessed 2/6/21 at <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2102/10.1093/ref:odnb/62>

<sup>179</sup> *OCM Annual Report 1888*; *Oxford Chronicle*, 19/4/1879, p.6

<sup>180</sup> *OCM Annual Reports 1881-1891*

<sup>181</sup> oxfordhistory website - John Cavell; Fenby, C., *The Other Oxford*, (Lund Humphries, 1970), pp. 62-68

the year after Cavell's death. He gave £1 1s in 1888, when he was Conservative Mayor of Oxford, and £1 in 1891.<sup>182</sup>

In spite of the withdrawal of some significant subscribers, OCM was having an impact upon Cowley St John. By the turn of the century, the City missionary was preaching to a Sunday evening congregation of over 250 and there were 270 children in the Sunday School, according to the 1951 Golden Jubilee Souvenir booklet for Magdalen Road Mission Hall.<sup>183</sup> Magdalen Road Workman's Hall was increasingly being seen as a centre for OCM's ministry; the later OCM reports associate the City missionaries with the Magdalen Road Hall.<sup>184</sup> Whilst some political meetings were held in the Hall, mostly by Liberal politicians, it seems that the Hall was commonly used for religious purposes.<sup>185</sup> By 1890, the Workman's Hall was described as a Mission Hall in a newspaper notice concerning Trotman's death. Trotman was described as both City missionary and 'conductor of the Mission Chapel on Magdalen Road'.<sup>186</sup> Trotman's successor, Henry Clifford also worked as both a City missionary and conductor of the Mission Hall. Unsurprisingly, by the end of the 1800s, the Hall needed to be rebuilt; it was no longer large enough. A new Indenture was made shortly after the erection of the new building in 1901 when it was conveyed into the hands of new Trustees. In this 1904 document, the building is referred to as a Mission Hall, not a Workman's Hall as in the 1879 Indenture. The new Trustees were to hold the Mission Hall upon Trust 'to be used as a place of Public Worship according to Evangelical Principles free from any particular denomination and for the Instruction of Children and Adults and the promotion of such other religious and philanthropic purposes as the said Trustees shall... direct.' City missionary, Henry Clifford, was one of the new Trustees.<sup>187</sup> OCM was developing into a new East Oxford Free Church. A community of people regularly worshipped at Magdalen Road Mission Hall. Sunday services were being held. Photographs show them enjoying outings together.<sup>188</sup>

### *Outcomes of Ministry*

It had not been the goal of OCM to become another church. Its aim had been to convert Oxford's poorer folk and point them towards existing gospel-preaching churches but it is possible that Cowley St John's Evangelical Churches were becoming stretched. The local Wesleyan Methodists needed more space by the end of the century and laid the foundation stones for a larger church on Cowley Road in 1903.<sup>189</sup> The parish population was still growing in the later years of the nineteenth-century. Evidence from the Clergy Answers hint that there may have been more Dissenters in the parish than Benson liked to acknowledge. He wrote little about Dissenters in Cowley St John in the parish magazine and in 1878 he had informed the Bishop that Dissenters were not numerous. However, Benson's successor, Reverend Scott, partly blamed 'extreme Protestants' for falling church attendance in 1899.<sup>190</sup> Additionally, in 1883, a local, informal church attendance survey reported a higher attendance at Nonconformist establishments than Anglican. Even if the survey was not

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<sup>182</sup> *OCM Annual Reports 1881, 1891*

<sup>183</sup> Magdalen Road Church Archives, *The Golden Jubilee Souvenir Handbook 1901 - 1951*, (Magdalen Road Mission Hall, 1951), p. 7

<sup>184</sup> *OCM Annual Reports 1890, 1891*

<sup>185</sup> For example, *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 22/11/1890, p. 8

<sup>186</sup> *Oxford Chronicle*, 8/2/1890, p. 5

<sup>187</sup> Magdalen Road Church Archives, *Trust Deeds and other Documents*, Indentures dated 8 August 1879 and 9 March 1904

<sup>188</sup> Appendix, figures 4 and 10

<sup>189</sup> *Cowley Road Methodist Church Golden Jubilee Souvenir Booklet 1904 - 1954*, p. 6

<sup>190</sup> *Clergy Answers*, Cowley St John, 1899

completely accurate, their presence seems to have been significant in the 1880s.<sup>191</sup> Perhaps it was inevitable that a new church would be needed. OCM, with its missionary, Evangelical teaching and access to a hall from 1879, was well-placed to become that church. It appears that some in other local, Nonconformist churches did not see the establishment of a new, Evangelical church nearby as an unwanted rival. As noted, Methodist Mr W Slaughter had laid a foundation stone when the original Workman's Hall on Magdalen Road was rebuilt as a Mission Hall in 1901. When the 1904 Indenture was signed, transferring the new Magdalen Road Hall to new Trustees as a Mission Hall, one of the new Trustees was Edward Radbone. His commitment to the nearby Congregational Church did not stop him becoming a Trustee of another local place of Evangelical worship.<sup>192</sup>

250 adults regularly attending a Sunday service appears to be significant number but OCM had sought to convert all the working-classes of East Oxford, if not the whole city. Clearly, that was always a vast goal and 250 would have represented a tiny proportion of Oxford's working-classes. By that criterion, OCM was always going to fail. Furthermore, it is impossible to assess how many of the 250 were working-class or, of those that were, how many could be said to be amongst the poorest of the working-classes. Yet, if the numbers are reasonably accurate, they indicate that OCM had had a significant impact upon Cowley St John, especially when compared with the Anglican Church figures, albeit for the preceding decade. As noted, an additional aim of OCM was to encourage Evangelical alternatives to Tractarian worship. It can be argued that OCM was more successful in this. It became another Evangelical Free Church in Cowley St John and, as discussed, it seems likely that existing Evangelical, Nonconformist churches in the parish were growing too. Probably, the growth seen in other local Evangelical churches had been partially encouraged by OCM if its missionary had directed some people to those churches. As shown, OCM was supported by Evangelicals, many of them Nonconformist. A number of them had grown in prosperity and influence during the 1800s as their businesses enlarged and they became involved in local politics. They were a confident, competent group despite lacking some of the educational and financial resources of Benson's ministry.

East Oxford was a place of much Christian activity in the second half of the 1800s and some rivalry between Evangelicals and Benson's Anglo-Catholic mission. Graeme Salmon wrote that East Oxford was 'rich in Nonconformist churches and chapels'.<sup>193</sup> The Victorian religious landscape was to change dramatically during the twentieth-century.

#### **4. Twentieth-Century Cultural, Social and Political Changes and their effect on the Cowley St John Ministries**

Callum Brown and others have written about the demise of Christianity in Britain during the second half of the twentieth century and the rise of secularisation.<sup>194</sup> Hugh McLeod showed that decreasing religious practice was evident across the Western world with church attendance and membership dropping in both Protestant and Catholic churches.<sup>195</sup> However, in the years immediately following World War II, Brown pointed to considerable church growth in Britain. It was a time when many

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<sup>191</sup> Skinner, p. 93 quoting Graham, M.

<sup>192</sup> Magdalen Road Mission Hall Indenture 1904

<sup>193</sup> Salmon, G. L., *Beyond Magdalen Bridge: The Growth of East Oxford*, (The East Oxford Archaeology & History Project, 2010), p. 17

<sup>194</sup> Brown, C. G., *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800 - 2000*, (Taylor & Francis, 2009), accessed 30/9/20 at DOI: 10.4324/9780203879436, pp. 170 - 192

<sup>195</sup> McLeod, H., 'The Mechanism of Religious Growth in Urban Societies' in McLeod, H. (ed.), *European Religion in the Age of Great Cities*, (Routledge, 1995), p. 1, accessed 10/8/21 at DOI: 10.4324/9780203993088-18

sought to re-assert traditional values and roles, including those concerning piety.<sup>196</sup> The mid-century was also a time of mass-evangelistic campaigns organised by those eager to encourage personal conversions, Billy Graham being the best known of the preachers at such events.<sup>197</sup> Furthermore, whilst the big picture of the period from 1960 to 2000 was one of religious decline, not all British churches experienced reduction in numbers. Some grew and conservative Protestant churches were amongst those who generally fared better.<sup>198</sup>

Nevertheless, from around 1960 into the 1970s, large numbers ceased to attend church in Western Europe.<sup>199</sup> Brown described this loss from British churches as a 'remarkably sudden and culturally violent event'.<sup>200</sup> He attributed much of the decay to cultural change. Rock 'n' roll and youth culture contributed to post-war traditionalism losing its power. Additionally, the class system was being eroded and, with it, respect for those who had held social and moral authority in the preceding generation.<sup>201</sup> McLeod concluded that changes in attitudes to sexual behaviour also had an impact upon the recruitment and retention of Catholic clergy. Many wanted to marry.<sup>202</sup> McLeod commented that many of the same cultural changes described by Brown led to Protestant and Catholic clergy feeling irrelevant. Furthermore, whereas in the 1940s and 1950s, the church could count on media support in upholding Christian values, this was no longer true in the 1960s.<sup>203</sup>

Cultural change was not the only factor affecting churches in the second half of the twentieth-century. There were also major political and social upheavals, including Britain granting independence to many of her colonies and waves of immigration into Britain, especially from the West Indies, Africa and Asia.<sup>204</sup> The former affected overseas mission and the latter should, at least, have affected mission here.<sup>205</sup> Additionally, educational opportunities had been increasing from the late nineteenth-century. By the late 1900s, more young people were receiving a University education than ever before.

Despite the decline in church attendance from the 1960s, Simon Coleman noted that some 'vital and dynamic' Western churches still existed in the late twentieth-century and a common characteristic was that entry required a conscious decision to choose Christianity rather than mere birth into a church.<sup>206</sup> The missions considered here were also affected by some of the twentieth-century changes outlined above.

#### *Legacy of Benson and the Cowley Fathers*

During the 1920s and 1930s, the SSJE appeared to be thriving. By the end of its first 60 years, the SSJE had become known for several aspects of its work and life. Being the first Anglican men's religious community to be founded since the Reformation, had earned it some notoriety in the early

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<sup>196</sup> Brown, C. G., pp. 170-3

<sup>197</sup> Pilli, T., and Randall, I. M., 'Free Church Traditions in Twentieth-Century Europe' in Hanciles, J. (ed.), *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions, Volume IV*, (Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 265-267, accessed 30/9/20 at DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780199684045.003.0013

<sup>198</sup> Pilli and Randall, pp. 265-6; McLeod, p. 17

<sup>199</sup> McLeod, p. 8

<sup>200</sup> Brown, C. G., p. 176

<sup>201</sup> Brown, C. G., pp. 176-180

<sup>202</sup> McLeod, pp. 2-4

<sup>203</sup> McLeod, p. 7

<sup>204</sup> Pilli and Randall, p. 261

<sup>205</sup> Pilli and Randall, p. 287

<sup>206</sup> Pilli and Randall, p. 289, quoting Coleman, S.

days. However, by the 1920s, many more religious communities had been established and some Cowley Fathers were held to be masters in spiritual life. They were involved in other communities and gave spiritual direction.<sup>207</sup> Henry Bull, Superior-General from 1915, encouraged the SSJE to be vocal in the Anglo-Catholic movement. In the interwar years, there was much enthusiasm for Anglo-Catholicism and the SSJE was prominent within the movement.<sup>208</sup> The SSJE's work in overseas' mission was another well-known aspect of the Society. Closer to home, the SSJE had developed a reputation for producing scholarly theological writing.<sup>209</sup> It was also important as a provider of retreats and spiritual guidance.<sup>210</sup>

However, there were signs of stress and of future decline too. Serenhedd James has described some of the challenges faced by the SSJE in the 1900s and its responses. Bull could see that not enough young men were being drawn to the religious life in Britain to sustain the Society's mission activities or the communities.<sup>211</sup> Efforts were made to attract novices to the religious life from the mid twentieth-century but numbers did not significantly rise. Possibly, changes in thinking concerning sexuality and the effects on Catholic clergy described by McLeod, had a similar impact upon recruitment to the SSJE where celibacy was also expected. Indeed, the Anglo-Catholic movement, in general, lost much of its evangelistic drive in the post-WWII era.<sup>212</sup> Additionally, political change was making foreign ministry difficult. A few years after India had been granted Independence in 1947, the SSJE decided to work towards transferring its Indian activities into other hands.<sup>213</sup> Meanwhile, in South Africa in 1957, legislation to segregate churches along colour lines had been proposed. Apartheid in churches was intolerable to the SSJE who finally withdrew from South Africa.<sup>214</sup>

Despite modernising its attitudes and practice, the SSJE continued to shrink in size and scope of exterior work. The diminishing numbers of those interested in joining a monastic order and the retreat from activity on the foreign mission-field were serious blows to the identity of the SSJE and caused much questioning of God's plan for the Society.<sup>215</sup> For a time it tried to maintain its provision of retreats and spiritual direction. However, in the early twenty-first century the Society folded as a monastic institution in this country but it continues in the United States.<sup>216</sup>

Benson had founded the SSJE partly to assist with parish mission. The demise of the Society was felt in Cowley St John but a diminishment of its involvement in the parish had begun before the mid twentieth-century challenges. When Benson retired as vicar in 1886, the role of parish priest was no longer held by a Cowley Father, although the Fathers retained control over the Society schools. Reverend Scott felt that this hindered his mission work in the parish but it meant a continued presence of Cowley Fathers in local education.<sup>217</sup> Nevertheless, with growing demand for assistance elsewhere domestically in preaching and provision of spiritual direction, their responsibilities overseas, and with the presence of a local parish priest, the Cowley Fathers felt less of a burden for parish work than Benson had. In the early twentieth-century, it was decided that the SSJE should

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<sup>207</sup> James, pp. 228-9, 284-5, 375

<sup>208</sup> James, pp. 261, 281

<sup>209</sup> James, pp. 108, 269-71

<sup>210</sup> James, pp. 228-9

<sup>211</sup> James, pp. 276-80

<sup>212</sup> James, pp. 348-9

<sup>213</sup> James, p. 365 ; *Cowley Evangelist*, August 1955, p. 97

<sup>214</sup> James, p. 372 ; *Cowley Evangelist*, March 1966, pp. 41-42

<sup>215</sup> James, p. 395

<sup>216</sup> Society of St John the Evangelist, accessed 18/9/21 at <https://www.ssje.org/our-history/>

<sup>217</sup> *Clergy Answers*, Cowley St John, 1890

focus on the religious life more than parochial activity.<sup>218</sup> Even so, for several decades the Cowley Fathers led services at St John the Evangelist Church, taught in local schools and ran a social club for young people in the parish, the Gladiator Club.<sup>219</sup>

In the 1960s, the SSJE held a significant amount of property in East Oxford and Benson had been involved in the construction of other buildings no longer owned by the Society. Superior-General Gerald Triffitt, wondered whether the Society's buildings hindered its work by giving the Society an unwanted air of 'authority and perhaps solemnity'.<sup>220</sup> Gradually, the SSJE began to divest itself of the Cowley property. The SSJE retained a diminished presence in East Oxford with a handful of Fathers living at the Priory, Iffley Road from 1980. Other Cowley Fathers re-located to other Society properties, including St Edward's House, Westminster.<sup>221</sup> Nevertheless, many of the earlier buildings remain and are a reminder of the contribution of Benson and the Cowley Fathers to the parish during its first forty years. Additionally, education, care for the sick and spiritual training continues in many of the buildings but it is now directed by others.

In the late 1970s, St Stephen's House took over the SSJE land between Cowley Road and Iffley Road, including the Mission House and St John the Evangelist Church. The numbers attending the church had been decreasing since the 1950s. The church is no longer a parochial church but a chapel for St Stephen's House and a concert venue. However, St Stephen's House continues to train Anglican clergy in the Catholic tradition.<sup>222</sup> Just next to the church, the old Song School has become home to the Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies whose goal is to encourage open, academically rigorous dialogue between Christian and Muslim theologians.<sup>223</sup>

Benson had established several schools within the area. Some were consolidated before the turn of the nineteenth-century and government education policy affected them in later decades. SS Mary and John School, established in the 1890s with Cowley Fathers' involvement, is still a Church of England school and it educates primary-age children, although no longer on Hertford Street. The Victorian building remains and now belongs to Magdalen Road Church, the descendant of the church at Magdalen Road Mission Hall. Its purchase was aided by Father Philip Ritchie of SS Mary and John Church, a successor vicar of Benson. It is unlikely that such help would have been given 150 years before. Infants continue to be taught in a building next to the old schoolhouse which bears the name of Ninian Comper, an architect closely associated with the SSJE.<sup>224</sup> The Princes Street building which housed a boys' school established by Benson still exists but it is now the East Oxford Community Centre.

Whilst St John's Home for Incurables is no more, St John's Care Home provides care to the elderly on the same site and a chapel for reflection and prayer remains. Additionally, there is a hospice for children at Helen House close-by. Sadly, Douglas House, which provided care to terminally ill young people had to close in 2018 due to funding problems. Helen House was founded in 1982 by Sister Frances Dominica, an Anglican Sister with the religious order, All Saints Sisters of the Poor. This nursing order was linked with the SSJE in the 1870s when the Sisters moved to Cowley to help

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<sup>218</sup> James, p. 265

<sup>219</sup> The Gladiator Club, accessed 16/7/21 at <https://www.thegladiatorclub.co.uk/>

<sup>220</sup> James, p. 445

<sup>221</sup> James, pp. 428-9

<sup>222</sup> James, p. 427; St Stephen's House - An Anglican Theological Foundation, (2021), accessed 10/9/21 at <https://www.ssho.ox.ac.uk/>

<sup>223</sup> Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies, accessed 31/8/21 at <https://www.cmcsoxford.org.uk/>

<sup>224</sup> SS Mary and John C of E Primary School, accessed 21/7/21 at <https://ssmj.oxon.sch.uk/>

provide care at St John's Home for Incurables. Their convent is still in Cowley St John.<sup>225</sup> Benson's association with monastic living encouraged another Anglican religious order, the Sisters of the Love of God, to establish itself in Cowley St John and it remains at the Convent of the Incarnation.<sup>226</sup>

SS Mary and John Church, the church for which Benson was energetic in fundraising, continues to serve the community and its cemetery contains an impressive memorial to Father Benson. Its services are still in the Anglo-Catholic tradition.<sup>227</sup>

In addition to Cowley St John buildings, the ministry of SS Mary and John Church and the care provided at Helen House and St John's Home being reminders of Benson's parochial mission, Benson also left a considerable body of writing, including sermons, meditations, Bible teaching and letters. These have provided the foundation for several biographical works on him and/or the Cowley Fathers.<sup>228</sup> Less obviously, the establishment of the SSJE encouraged the founding of other religious communities and this has contributed to growth in the widespread popularity of spiritual retreats, for example, amongst people from a wide range of faiths or none.<sup>229</sup> Overall, a significant amount of tangible evidence remains attesting to Benson's ministry in Cowley St John alongside some less tangible evidence.

### *Legacy of OCM*

OCM developed into a church centred on Magdalen Road Mission Hall. It was less scathed by twentieth-century societal developments and it does not fit the pattern of significant decline from around 1960 but it experienced problems particular to itself. There was a haemorrhaging of numbers in the 1940s. Thereafter, however, the congregation grew steadily but undramatically.

Unlike, Benson and other Cowley Fathers, only a small amount of documentary evidence has been found concerning OCM and the people associated with it between 1900 and 1950. However, it is known that there were some difficult years in the late 1940s. A number of Trustees died during World War II and, perhaps for other reasons too, numbers attending services fell to around six by 1947. The story resumes in church meeting minutes and church magazines from around 1950 with the appointment of Gerald Henagulph, a local engineer, as Superintendent of Magdalen Road Mission Hall in 1948.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> St John's Home - Accurocare, accessed 21/7/21 at <https://www.accurocare.co.uk/st-johns-care-home/>; St John's Care Home, accessed 21/7/21 at <https://www.carehome.co.uk/carehome.cfm/searchazref/10001055JOHA>; All Saints Sisters of the Poor, (2017), accessed 16/7/21 at <http://www.allsaintssistersofthepoor.org.uk/>; Helen & Douglas House, (2021), accessed 16/7/21 at [https://www.helenanddouglas.org.uk/?gclid=CjwKCAjw3MShBhB3EiwAxcaEu\\_YfkQ4q4D4nVf6Z9WrYKeDpGui\\_p2cZKZMesm0ZtYzwEYMwKR8YvthoCGvcQAvD\\_BwE](https://www.helenanddouglas.org.uk/?gclid=CjwKCAjw3MShBhB3EiwAxcaEu_YfkQ4q4D4nVf6Z9WrYKeDpGui_p2cZKZMesm0ZtYzwEYMwKR8YvthoCGvcQAvD_BwE)

<sup>226</sup> Sisters of the Love of God, accessed 18/9/21 at <https://slg.org.uk/>

<sup>227</sup> SS Mary & John Church, accessed 18/9/21 at <http://cowleystjohn.co.uk/our-sites/st-mary-and-st-johns-church>

<sup>228</sup> For example, James, S., *The Cowley Fathers: A History of the English Congregation of the Society of St John the Evangelist*, (Canterbury Press, 2019); Smith, M. (ed.), *Benson of Cowley*, (Oxford University Press, 1980); Woodgate, M. V., *Father Benson: Founder of the Cowley Fathers*, (Geoffrey Bles, 1953)

<sup>229</sup> Smith, M., 'Significance of Father Benson's Spirituality Today', in Smith, M. (ed.), *Benson of Cowley*, (Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 139-40

<sup>230</sup> *The Golden Jubilee Souvenir Handbook 1901 - 1951*, (Magdalen Road Mission Hall, 1951), p. 12; Magdalen Road Church Archives, *Focus Magazine*, No. 22, March-April 1971, pp. 1-2; Magdalen Road Church - Who We Are - A Brief History (2020), accessed 4/2/20. Updated page at <https://www.mrc->

Over the next three decades, Gerald Henagulph, with a group of deacons, sought to build up the church. They made the most of various mass-evangelism opportunities in the mid twentieth-century. For example, Marshall Shallis, Secretary of The Evangelization Society and itinerant preacher, regularly visited Oxford in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. He often gave talks at Magdalen Road Mission Hall.<sup>231</sup> Some of these mission campaigns were particularly fruitful. In 1952, about twenty young people came to a 'saving knowledge' of Jesus Christ.<sup>232</sup> In March 1967, preaching from a Billy Graham rally was relayed to Oxford's Regal Cinema on Cowley Road. The deacons of Magdalen Road Mission Hall offered their premises to the Oxford Rally Committee and Gerald Henagulph subsequently visited all enquirers.<sup>233</sup> The church was involved in a number of other evangelistic endeavours over the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, including starting a Sunday School on the relatively new Donnington housing estate near Donnington Bridge. It was well attended and, over time, provided opportunities for conversation with parents who began to attend church meetings.<sup>234</sup> The church saw some solid growth after the bleak days of the late 1940s but not to the 1900 levels.

Pilli and Randall commented that some conservative Protestant churches fared better during the late twentieth-century. Magdalen Road Mission Hall deacons were conservative in their interpretation of Scripture. Partly, this is evidenced by the conservative Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC) taking over Trusteeship of the Mission Hall in 1962.<sup>235</sup> Additionally, the deacons took a strict stance on the question of re-marriage. When Mrs Bickerstaff, a divorcee, requested that she might be married in the Hall, her request was declined. The deacons considered that marriage was a life-time commitment and were worried lest other divorcees should wish to use the hall for re-marriage.<sup>236</sup> During the 1960s, as many churches sought godly responses to developing youth culture, the Mission Hall, or Magdalen Road Evangelical Free Church as it was re-named, encouraged its young folk to forego the temptations of the dance hall and the cinema. Articles in 'Focus' aimed at teenagers, encouraged them to choose a godly life, to be unafraid of ridicule or persecution and to resist temptation.<sup>237</sup> However, lest an overly dour image be given, church outings and social events took place and a sense of community is evidenced in photographs from the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>238</sup> Overall, the dedication of Gerald Henagulph, the deacons and many members of the mid twentieth-century congregation prevented the church of Magdalen Road Mission Hall from dying.

The deacons were aware of the church's need for deeper biblical teaching.<sup>239</sup> At length, Gerald Henagulph encouraged the church to seek a better-qualified full-time minister.<sup>240</sup> In 1977, agreement was reached over a minister, Reverend William Carter. Thereafter, the church employed a succession of theologically-trained ministers and the congregation continued to grow. New members were increasingly likely to have been University-educated. Whether this was because they

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[oxford.org/Articles/605660/Magdalen\\_Road\\_Church/NEW\\_WEB\\_2021/Just\\_Looking/Who\\_we\\_are/Brief\\_history\\_of.aspx](http://oxford.org/Articles/605660/Magdalen_Road_Church/NEW_WEB_2021/Just_Looking/Who_we_are/Brief_history_of.aspx)

<sup>231</sup> Magdalen Road Church Archives, *Deacons' Meeting Minutes*, 22/9/1969

<sup>232</sup> *Focus*, Nos. 22 and 24, March-April and June-September 1971

<sup>233</sup> *Deacons' Meeting Minutes*, 20/3/67 and 10/7/67

<sup>234</sup> *Focus*, No. 17, June-September 1970

<sup>235</sup> *Deacons' Meeting Minutes*, 15/4/59 and 27/1/60; Magdalen Road Church Archives, *Trust Deeds and other Documents*, Charity Commission scheme approval dated 17/9/62

<sup>236</sup> *Deacons' Meeting Minutes*, 18/11/59, accompanying letter dated 19/11/59

<sup>237</sup> *Focus*, No. 3, October-November 1968; No. 5, Christmas 1968 and No. 6, January-February 1969

<sup>238</sup> Appendix, figure 11

<sup>239</sup> *Deacons' Meeting Minutes*, 15/4/59 and 12/5/69

<sup>240</sup> *Deacons' Meeting Minutes*, 11/9/67; Magdalen Road Church Archives, *Church Meeting Minutes 1975 - 1991*, Annual General Meeting 16/1/69

were attracted to more scholarly sermons or simply reflected a better-educated population requires further study. Efforts had been made in the late twentieth-century to attract people who had moved into East Oxford from Africa, the West Indies or Asia but with limited success.<sup>241</sup> By 2001, Magdalen Road Church, as it became known, had a membership of 48 with an average Sunday attendance of 82.<sup>242</sup>

OCM's legacy in Cowley St John is far less concrete than Benson's. A small chapel remains on Magdalen Road although, as mentioned, the church has moved to the former SS Mary and John schoolhouse. No sermons, meditations or even missionaries' journals are known to exist from the 1800s, only a few Annual Reports. OCM's main legacy lies in the existence of the current Magdalen Road Church congregation.

## 5. Conclusion

Cowley St John was the parish of a prominent Anglo-Catholic vicar who laboured tirelessly to bring about his vision of a Eucharistic community but he was not without opposition. The cassocked Fathers, plainsong, Sunday School trips and horticultural competitions have now all gone but SS Mary and John Church still has open doors. However, pausing to look beyond today's supermarkets, restaurants and numerous houses at many of the larger nineteenth-century buildings in the parish provides evidence of the zeal of Cowley St John's first Tractarian vicar. Benson and the Cowley Fathers left far more impressive buildings and written records of their work in Cowley St John than OCM. Almost nothing remains to tell of City missionaries' visits to the poor, meetings held or the determination of OCM's supporters to ensure that Evangelicalism was promoted. Many supporters were of the middling sort. Few were connected with Oxford University but they were more confident and active than is easily discerned from the tangible evidence. It is easy for an imbalanced impression of East Oxford's religious life in the 1800s to be gained and for the vitality of the Evangelical contribution to be overlooked.

There was competition between Victorian Evangelicals and Tractarians in the parish. It led each side to make strenuous efforts to win the hearts of local people, particularly through spiritual and educational provision. Consequently, Cowley St John boasted two impressive Anglican churches and a range of Nonconformist chapels. A non-denominational school and several Anglican ones were established during the second half of the 1800s. Cowley St John was the scene of a considerable amount Christian activity. Although there was rivalry between Benson and the local Evangelicals, it was restrained. None of the violence over religion seen in earlier centuries was evident in Victorian East Oxford. Indeed, according to the Oxford Chronicle's report of Trotman's death, the City missionary was 'deeply respected even by those whose religious opinions were at variance with his.'<sup>243</sup> Maybe they included some Anglo-Catholics within the parish.

Despite the endeavours of Benson and OCM, it can be argued that neither achieved their goals. Benson had aimed to build up a Eucharistic community aided by the brothers of the SSJE. Even if he was philosophic about low numbers coming to church regularly, parishioners' spirituality was important to him. The low level of commitment of many parishioners suggests that most had a shallow faith by Benson's criteria.

OCM, as an offshoot of the LCM, had a goal of converting Oxford's working classes. This was probably always an impossible dream and OCM missionaries would have understood that the way to

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<sup>241</sup> *Deacons' Meeting Minutes, 27/9/61, Church Meeting Minutes, 3/5/1990*

<sup>242</sup> *Magdalen Road Church Archives, Church Meeting Minutes 1975 - 1991, Reports to FIEC*

<sup>243</sup> *Oxford Chronicle, 8/2/1890 p.8*

salvation was narrow and only a few were ever going to find it.<sup>244</sup> However, OCM's supporters had an additional aim, that of encouraging Evangelical alternatives to Tractarianism. That OCM developed into another Free Church in East Oxford should be seen as a creative response to the growing pastoral needs of an increasing population which could, perhaps, not be met by the existing Evangelical Churches. OCM has developed into a more middle-class church with a largely white congregation, despite changes in local demographics. Nevertheless, it has kept an Evangelical flame burning into the twenty-first century despite it almost having been extinguished in the late 1940s.

Perhaps most mission goals are unattainable but they can still be worth striving for. Every church or mission must respond to the challenges of its time. Whether Magdalen Road Church or SS Mary and John can reach all classes, races and creeds with the message of Christianity in today's parish, during an on-going pandemic and when many consider that any views which might cause offence should be silenced, is a study for a future historian. At least, co-operation between churches may be easier now than in the Victorian suburb.

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<sup>244</sup> Matt. 7:14

[82%22&sw=w&ty=as&it=search&sid=BNCN&p=BNCN&s=Pub+Date+Forward+Chron&u=oxfshlib&v=2.1&asid=df111b78](https://go.gale.com/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Newspapers&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=SingleTab&hitCount=12&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&currentPosition=6&docId=GALE%7CBA3202718380&docType=Article&sort=Pub+Date+Forward+Chron&contentSegment=ZBLC-MOD1&prodId=BNCN&pageNum=1&contentSet=GALE%7CBA3202718380&searchId=R3&userGroupName=oxfshlib&inPS=true)

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