

Victoria Road Church, Leicester: A Victorian Experiment in Ecumenicity

By Gerald T. Rimmington

Victoria Road Church originated as an experiment by Baptists in non-denominational churchmanship. It was founded in mid-Victorian times in a growing middle-class suburb of Leicester, and aspired to be *the* Church for the area. It was soon beset by competition from other denominations. It also had to face a split in the congregation during the 1870s, when F. B. Meyer resigned as minister and founded his own free church.

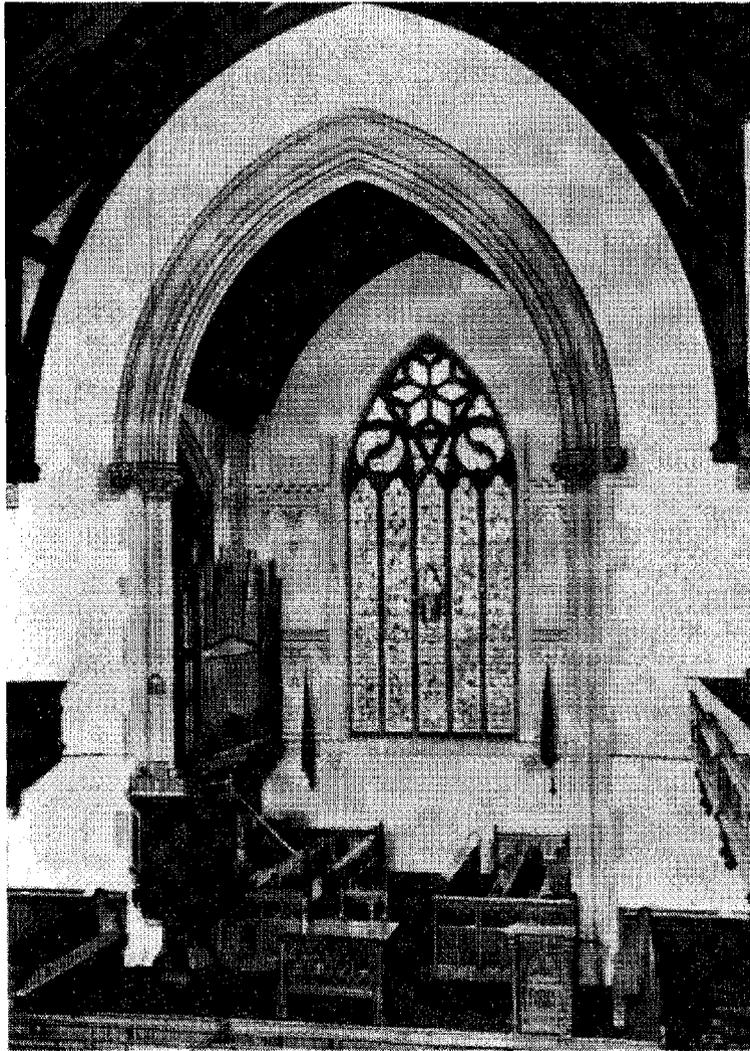
Ecumenical cooperation in mid-Victorian England was uncommon. There were bitter squabbles between Anglicans and nonconformists over church rates and elementary education, and there were many political battles fought between Conservatives deemed to be Church supporters and Liberals who included many nonconformists. It was hardly promising soil in which church unity could be expected to grow and flower. There were some Leicester Baptists in the 1860s, however, who espoused the cause of ecumenism, and who were responsible for the erection of a handsome neo-gothic place of worship designed by John Tarring of London at the corner of London Road and Victoria Road (now University Road) that was to house a congregation whose aim was to steer away from narrow denominationalism. It was a product of new prosperity and generosity of spirit.

The 1860s in England were prosperous. Exports worth £71 million in 1850 had become nearly £200 million by 1870. Deposits in savings banks rose over the same period from £30 million to £53 million. The Post Office Savings Bank, formed in 1861, was handling £18 million by the early 1870s.¹ Leicester shared in the general prosperity, to a great extent because of the rise of the boot and shoe manufacturing industry. Between 1861 and 1870 the number of wholesale manufacturers increased rapidly from 23 to 117.² Population grew from 68,056 in 1861 to 95,220 in 1871, and the number of houses increased from 14,595 to 19,800 over the same decade.³ The south side of Leicester was showing considerable development. In the early 1860s William Rushin bought allotments owned by the Corporation along the London Road, between Victoria Road (then Occupation Road) and what was to become De Montfort Street: and built most of the very substantial houses in

1 D. Thomson, *The Pelican history of England: 8. England in the nineteenth century, 1815-1914*, p. 138. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1950.

2 J. Simmons, *Leicester Past and Present*, 2, p. 3. London: Eyre Methuen, 1974.

3 *Census of England and Wales 1861*, 1, pp.506, 510. London: H.M.S.O., 1863, and *Census of England and Wales 1871*, 1, pp. xxv, 214. London: H.M.S.O., 1873. See also *Digest of the English Census 1871*, pp. 114, 116. London: H.M.S.O., 1873. A 40 per cent increase was achieved without major revision of the borough boundary. The Knighton chapelry, with a population of 122, was included in Blaby in 1861; by 1871 its 1020 acres and population of 928 people were enumerated as part of Leicester.



The Chancel, Victoria Road Church, Leicester
Victoria Road Church History and Manual, 1946, p.12

De Montfort Street, Belmont Villas, Prebend Terrace, and De Montfort Terrace.⁴ Further out of the town, in Stoneygate, there were 32 houses in 1863, but the area was beginning to develop. Knighton Park Road was laid out in 1867.⁵ The southern part of Highfields was also beginning to develop. A visitor to the town was pleased to see 'a number of new buildings of humble but comfortable aspect ... showing that dwelling places of the workmen were becoming more comfortable. It was exceedingly pleasing to see a number of villas and comfortable housing building on the outskirts of the town, manifesting that there was a great deal of prosperity'.⁶ By 1873 F.

4 *Leicester Chronicle and Leicester Mercury*, 13 Apr. 1887.

5 *VCH, Leics*, 4, p. 445.

6 *Leicester Chronicle and Mercury*, as n.4, 21 Jul. 1866.

B. Meyer noticed that London Road was crowded with operatives hurrying back to work after their brief dinner hour.⁷

It was this area of the town that seemed to be the most promising for a new church designed to attract people of a number of denominations. In writing to the Rev. Nathaniel Haycroft, Richard Harris stated that 'for some years the minds of several friends have been impressed with the importance of providing additional accommodation for the Nonconformist inhabitants of Leicester, many of whom are residing in the suburbs' and that, during 1865, 'finding the sittings in the two Baptist Chapels, Belvoir Street and Charles Street, were fully let ... the subject of building a new place of worship was broached and cordially responded to by members of both congregations'.⁸ The friends concerned had met formally on 31 March 1865 and committed themselves to the formation of a new Church whose congregation would meet for worship at the corner of the recently renamed Victoria Road and London Road. They were chaired initially by 53 year-old Richard Harris, son of a founder member of the Charles Street Chapel, built in 1830, and, after his father had become an M. P. in 1848, the head of the family hosiery business. He had been a member of the Borough Council since 1841, and was currently an Alderman and Magistrate. There was also John Baines, another former Mayor, a Magistrate, and a hosiery manufacturer, who became treasurer.⁹ The others consisted of T. W. Rust, who lived at Granby House, 88 London Road, George Viccars, a woolstapler, who lived at 98 New Walk, and who was to watch over the Church's 'foundation, growth and progress, with a loving anxiety' until his death in 1885, and A. J. Hamel, about whom little is known.¹⁰

At their initial meeting they invited to future meetings of the 'Church Committee' the ministers of the Charles Street and Belvoir Street Chapels, Thomas Lomas and James P. Mursell, stating in their invitation that 'we ... have for some time been deeply impressed with the desirableness of a new Baptist chapel in Leicester. With the most sincere good will to all existing Baptist churches, and respect for their several pastors and without the slightest antagonism to one or the other, we have thought it right to obtain a plot of ground for the erection of such an edifice.'¹¹ Mursell declined to accept the invitation; perhaps he was ambivalent about a project that would take away some of his more influential members. Lomas, however, accepted and continued to attend until the building was erected and a minister appointed.

The Committee decided very quickly that, when built, the property would be 'conveyed in trust to the Particular Baptist denomination', but that membership would be 'open for communion' and that there would be no bar to 'Christians of other Evangelical Denominations.'¹² Within a few more days the decision was made that 'the name of the building be The Victoria Road Church but that there be a preliminary use of the word nonconformist in all public announcements ... for the

7 M. Janine Street, *New Century Leaders. F. B. Meyer: his life and work*, p. 44. London: Partridge, 1902.

8 LRO, Victoria Road Church, N/B/179/57, Committee Minute Book, 1865-1873, s.v. 10 Feb. 1866.

9 *J. G. Harrod & Co's Postal and Commercial Directory of Leicestershire and Rutland*, pp.108, 502. London: J. G. Harrod, 1870; also M. Wade-Matthews, *Grave Matters*, p. 31. Wymeswold: Heart of Albion Press, 1992; also LRO, N/B/179/57, as n.8, 31 Mar. 1865.

10 LRO, Victoria Road Church, N/B/179/58, Minute Book of Christian Society, s.v. 1 Apr. 1885; also *Wright's Midland Directory: Leicestershire & Loughborough with Burton-on-Trent*, p.72. Nottingham, C. N. Wright, 1864; LRO, N/B/179/57, as n.8; *Harrod's Directory (1870)*, as n.9, p.464.

11 LRO, N/B/179/57, as n.8.

12 LRO, N/B/179/57, as n.8, 4 Apr. 1865.

sake of explicitness.¹³ 'Open membership' and 'open communion' were not unusual in Baptist chapels of the time. Robert Hall, senior (1728-1791), minister of the Particular Baptist Chapel in Arnesby from 1853 until his death, rebelled against the hyper-Calvinism of his youth, which had held that only the predetermined elect could achieve salvation, and that it was therefore useless to evangelise. He concluded that 'the way to Jesus is graciously laid open for everyone who chooses to come to him'. As he was the principal influence upon Andrew Fuller (1754-1815) of Kettering, who, with others, was the founder of the Baptist Missionary Society,¹⁴ it soon became generally accepted among Particular Baptists (other than those who were Strict) that all who professed themselves Christians should be accepted into membership and admitted to communion, whether baptised or not. Victoria Road Church was destined to follow this tradition.

What the Victoria Road progenitors did, however, was to go a stage beyond this, and avoid the Baptist appellation altogether. The Honourable and Rev. Baptist W. Noel, in preaching the first sermon, on Wednesday, 18th July 1866, said that 'it would be a Baptist Church, though it was not necessary to state it in that form, inasmuch as it would be a *Church* before it was *Baptist*.'¹⁵ The strength of the ecumenical spirit can be measured by a number of features. The use of the term 'nonconformist' was a temporary feature, destined to wither away. It was to be designated a 'Church' rather than a 'Chapel.' The style of architecture was 'of the pure English Decorated period', with impressive stained glass windows, and a 'finely-tuned organ ... built by Mr Nicholson, of Worcester, at a cost of £400.'¹⁶ A newspaper editorial commented favourably that 'being the first Nonconformist place of worship in this town erected in the gothic style, it has been the subject of much criticism ... with the commercial prosperity of the last quarter of a century, education has been extended, and taste has developed, and now the Nonconformists are able creditably to compare their chapels with those erected by members of the Establishment.'¹⁷

In an area where no new Anglican Church had yet been established it was important to attract people who otherwise might have been expected to attend their parish church. It was noted that 'the interest felt ... has increased from day to day, as its fine tower and spire, and elegant carvings, and traceried windows, have come forth from the hands of the workmen.'¹⁸ The choice of the preacher at the opening service was also significant. Baptist Noel (1798-1873), described as 'of tall, graceful mien',¹⁹ was the son of Sir Gerard Noel, Baronet, and Lady Noel, Baroness Barham. A Cambridge graduate, he was episcopally ordained and became minister of the proprietary St. John's Chapel in Bedford Row, London, where his evangelical preaching not only drew large congregations, but resulted in his appointment as a Queen's chaplain. His adoption of Baptist convictions, his public baptism in 1849, and his subsequent ministry at the John Street Baptist Chapel in Holborn, made him an obvious choice. He was naturally seen as a preacher who could lead others from Anglicanism to

13 LRO, N/B/179/57, as n.8, 11 Apr. 1865.

14 A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists*, pp. 160-164. London: Carey-Kingsgate Press, 1947.

15 Anon., *Victoria Road Church History and Manual*, 1946, p. 7.

16 Ibid., as n.15, p. 8.

17 *Leicester Chronicle and Mercury*, as n.6, s. v. 21 Jul. 1866.

18 *Leicester Chronicle and Mercury*, as n.6, s. v. 21 Jul. 1866.

19 Arthur Mursell, *Baptist Wriothesley Noel* in LRO, Pamphlet vol. 88.

Nonconformity.²⁰ No doubt too the attendance of Sir Morton Peto (1809-1889), who had also laid the foundation stone, was viewed in the same way.²¹ Peto, also a baronet, was partner in a building firm which built the Reform Club, the Nelson monument, the Houses of Parliament and the Lyceum theatre. He had become a Baptist after marrying his second wife, daughter of a leading Baptist layman in Lancashire.²²

The appointment of a minister was intended not only to confirm the intention but to take it a stage further. The unanimous choice of the Committee was the 45 year old Nathaniel Haycroft, a Glasgow graduate who was to be awarded a Doctor of Divinity degree, *honoris causa*, by his *alma mater* in 1869. Haycroft had been minister at the Broadmead Chapel in Bristol, where he had experienced 'nearly eighteen years of unbroken harmony.'²³ Although he made it clear that he disliked the system of pew rents, preferring 'direct subscriptions for the support of the pastor and either distinct subscription or weekly offering for incidentals', he was not prepared to make an issue of it. More important were the terms on which people were to be admitted to communion, and whether a more liturgical form of service than was usual in Baptist churches was acceptable.²⁴ On both matters Committee and minister were at one. It was agreed that 'all pious Persons nominated by the pastor and received by the Church [were] to be admitted to full membership and communion.' It was also agreed that the traditional nonconformist long prayer should be divided and that the 'chanting of the Psalms should be introduced in addition to the singing of the hymns.'²⁵ On-the day of his induction Haycroft found it necessary to counter the impression that had preceded him, that he intended to introduce the use of the *Book of Common Prayer*, stating that it was not his intention 'to use any liturgy of any kind whatever.'²⁶ Nevertheless, in line with his earlier comment that 'our Nonconformist services are capable of very great improvements',²⁷ he went on to say that 'in order to identify the congregation more closely with the services' it would be helpful if worshippers would 'repeat aloud the response "Amen" at the conclusion of every prayer, and to unite in the recital of the Lord's Prayer and the Confessions of Sin in the Prayer Book.' He also intended to use 'portions of Holy Writ suitable for divine worship.'²⁸

The subsequent 'Basis of Union', signed by Haycroft and 53 members of the congregation at the end of the morning service on 6th January 1867, and which marked the official forming of Victoria Road Church, emphasised 'unity on the basis of common hope in Christ' and the leaving to one another of 'freedom of judgment on the question of baptism every other matter not essential to salvation.' It followed that newcomers would be accepted into 'full and equal brotherhood without baptismal requirement, simply by being evangelical believers, as may seek fellowship with us', who were acceptable to a majority of church members at a meeting duly called.²⁹

20 Underwood, *History of English Baptists*, as n.14, p. 237.

21 LRO, N/B/179/57, as n.8, 19 Jun. 1865.

22 Underwood, *History of English Baptists*, as n.14, p. 239.

23 LRO, N/B/179/57, as n.8, 19 Feb. 1866.

24 LRO, N/B/179/57, as n. 8, 26 Feb. 1866.

25 LRO, N/B/179/57, as n.8.

26 *Leicester Chronicle and Mercury*, as n.6, 21 Jul. 1866.

27 LRO, N/B/179/57.

28 *Leicester Chronicle and Mercury*, as n.6, 21 Jul. 1866.

29 *Victoria Road Church History and Manual*, as n.15.

Haycroft and the Church Committee were also in agreement on the question of music in services, though the latter were never willing to pay the kind of salary that would retain the services of a first-class musician. The minister was 'in sympathy with the use of inspired hymns', and to that end was much involved in the appointment of organists who were skilled musicians. Before the completion of the building a Mr Rowlett was appointed as organist at £30 per annum, with the expectation that he would also be present at week-day services and instruct the choir for an additional £20. He was also to choose the hymns, though the psalms were to be selected by the minister.³⁰ Within a year of the Church's opening, however, it had become obvious that Rowlett lacked the requisite ability, the Committee resolving that 'it is important to have the services of a professional musician as organist ... and that the cordial thanks of the Committee be given to Mr Rowlett for his services and that he be regretfully informed that they will not be required after the present year.'³¹ Dr H. J. Leslie was then appointed as organist from Michaelmas onward at £30 per annum, for which he was expected 'to preside at the organ on Sundays, on Tuesday evenings and at such occasional services as may be held during the year, to conduct and train the choir and by singing classes and other expedients to promote the improvement of our congregational psalmody.' Since Haycroft and the Committee were anxious to pay off the debt on the building and the organ, there was a shortage of money, for not only was there no mention of the additional £20 that had been paid to Leslie's predecessor, but that 'after Xmas no singers except two leading female ones shall be paid for their services in the choir.'³²

It soon became obvious that Victoria Road Church could not long retain the services of a good professional organist unless the Committee were prepared to pay more than the niggardly amount that Leslie was being paid. Leslie applied for an increase after two years of service, and was turned down.³³ When he subsequently resigned Haycroft intimated that it would be necessary to improve the salary in order to attract a 'high-class professional musician.' Several applications had already been made by people not considered to be suitable, and eventually Mr E. S. Cross was appointed at a salary of forty guineas. He soon resigned, however, when the Committee restricted the use of the organ by his students. Despite Haycroft's explanation that it was normal for the organist's students to be able to practise on the organ the Committee refused to reconsider.³⁴ Thereafter a Mr Heighton was appointed at £35 per annum.³⁵

For the first few years of the life of Victoria Road Church there was steady rather than spectacular progress. Membership in August 1867 was 70. By May 1873 numbers had risen to 164. Many new members were, as expected, from other churches, but Haycroft's ministry brought in 89 new Christians.³⁶ Some new members were highly influential people in the community. Among them were Edward Wood and George Stevenson. Wood had already founded the business that was to become Freeman, Hardy and Willis in 1878. He was to be a Member of Parliament, Mayor of Leicester, and to achieve a knighthood.³⁷ Stevenson, a solicitor, became an Alderman

30 LRO, N/B/179/57, as n.8, 5 Mar. 1866.

31 LRO, N/B/179/57, as n.8, 13 Jul. 1867.

32 LRO, N/B/179/57, as n.8, 20 Aug. 1867.

33 LRO, N/B/179/57, as n.8, 10 May 1869.

34 LRO, N/B/179/57, as n.8, 21 Oct. 1871.

35 LRO, N/B/179/57, as n.8, 9 Dec. 1871.

36 LRO, N/B/179/73, Victoria Road Church, Change of Membership Book.

37 Wade-Matthews, *Grave Matters*, as n.9, p. 38.

in 1867 and Mayor in 1869. Originally associated with the Archdeacon Lane Chapel, where he founded the Sunday school, he became a Sunday school teacher at Victoria Road.³⁸

Haycroft himself was the greatest asset possessed by the Church. As a preacher he had few equals. It was said of him that his sermons 'were eminently evangelical, but they were pervaded with a most Catholic spirit ... He ever sought to present in unison God's word in scripture and God's word in nature.' It was also acknowledged that during Communion services and at the Tuesday evening services 'his heart seemed fully open, and his teaching had special value for the mature Christians of his flock,' who valued his 'logical power' and 'rhetorical finish'.³⁹ Haycroft was as well-known within the community as he was within the Church. He became a member of the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society, to whom he delivered a much praised presidential address in 1872-3. In it he explored 'The Limits of Scientific Enquiry', stating that 'though I do not covet the Simian origin which Mr Darwin is anxious to establish for me ... nothing that is true can be harmed by truth. If our prepossessions are contradicted by facts we should be thankful to be freed from delusion. ... The prejudices of popular opinion and professional training ... have no place in presence of the conclusions of science.' Nevertheless, he argued, 'science cannot explain history, cannot account for all the changes in human relations by physical laws, nor deduce from physical laws what those changes must have been in any given circumstances or period.'⁴⁰ He was also elected to membership of the first Leicester School Board,⁴¹ where, after his premature death, Canon William Fry, local secretary of the National Schools Society, stated that 'he had a great respect for Dr Haycroft ... there had been the most kindly feeling and honest intercourse between them; more so than with any other Dissenting minister.'⁴²

Any experiment in ecumenicity in the late nineteenth century was bound to have its limitations. It was true that some Baptists held advanced views on the subject,⁴³ but there were others who pulled in the opposite direction. Although the Baptist Union had existed since 1813 the fusion between Particular and General Baptists did not come about until 1891.⁴⁴ Tensions within the denomination were evident in the acceptance into membership at Victoria Road of Mrs Priscilla Bark, despite having been 'a member of a small Baptist Church in this town, which declines to dismiss members to us.'⁴⁵

If there was no unity among Baptists it was not likely that affinity would be evident between Nonconformist denominations, some of which were also divided among themselves, and for whom there was not yet any linking body. Despite the perceptive comment, regarding Nonconformists, that 'as one looks back to these years, one is struck by the liberality of view of some of the most prominent citizens, their even,

38 *Leicester Chronicle and Mercury*, 20 Jan. 1904.

39 *Leicester Chronicle and Mercury*, 22 Feb. 1873.

40 N. Haycroft, 'The Limits of Scientific Enquiry', Inaugural Address, Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society, 1872-3. LRO, Pamphlets Vol. 88.

41 *Leicester Journal*, 20 Jan. 1871.

42 *Leicester Chronicle and Mercury*, 22 Feb. 1883.

43 As early as 1806 William Carey wrote to Andrew Fuller, asking that, since the Cape of Good Hope was now in British hands, 'was it not possible to have a good association of all denominations of Christians from the four quarters of the world, kept there once in about ten years?' Quoted in *From Uniformity to Unity, 1662-1962*, ed. G. F. Nuttall and O. Chadwick, p. 355. London: S.P.C.K., 1962.

44 Underwood, *History of English Baptists*, as n.14, p. 201.

45 LRO, N/B/179/58, as n. 10, s.v. 27 Aug. 1867.

calm, judicious tone',⁴⁶ the other denominations were not prepared to allow Victoria Road Church to be the sole bastion of the free churches on the southern peripheries of the town. By 1867 the Congregational chapel down the road was being referred to as 'London Road Free Church'.⁴⁷ The same year saw the opening of another Congregational enterprise, the Collegiate Church, in part of the old Collegiate School, with accommodation for 600 worshippers.⁴⁸ Two years later the foundation stone of a new Presbyterian Church, to be built in Early English style, was laid adjacent to the Midland Railway station.⁴⁹ By 1873 the Saxe Coburg Street Wesleyan Chapel had appeared.⁵⁰ All of these places of worship were within a half mile radius of Victoria Road.

Nor did Victoria Road make any inroads into the Anglican revival, a national trend that was reflected in most large towns in process of rapid growth, as Leicester was. There was sympathy with church unity among Anglicans, but they tended to see it on their own terms. Eight years after Bishop Wilberforce's revival of the Canterbury Convocation in 1852 the Rev. F. C. Massingberd proposed that 'the faithful be urged to pray "for the reunion of the divided members of Christ's body"'. An incumbent, John Paul, wrote a little book called *Hints on Church Union*. Another, C. Robinson, followed it with *A Scheme for the Restoration of Dissenters to the Church*. The Church Congress, at its 1863 meetings, debated 'The Best Means of bringing Nonconformity into Union with the Church'. And at least one free churchman observed to W. E. Gladstone that 'many Dissenters would enter the Church whatever their theory about establishment, if such slight modifications were made as would allow them to do so conscientiously'.⁵¹ Nevertheless the Diocese of Peterborough, which at that time included Leicester, continued with its plans to build a new parish church in the midst of new housing developments in Highfields, only a few hundred yards from Victoria Road. St. Peter's parish was formed in 1874, with the Rev. F. W. Robinson as Vicar. The Church itself was completed in 1879, and was immediately popular.⁵²

One of the problems faced by Victoria Road Church was its middle-class character. Though there were working-class members, they were in a minority, and did not include people who were poverty stricken. From the beginning the collections taken at the conclusion of services of Holy Communion were intended for distribution to the poor within the Church. Yet the deacons had difficulty trying to disburse it. The Church meeting had to agree 'in the absence of needy persons of our own fellowship [that] the pastor and deacons have power to appropriate the Lord's Supper money to godly worshippers among us, or in any other way, that in their discretion may seem accordant with the general object for which it was subscribed'.⁵³ When the deacons were asked to consider establishing a benevolent society for the poor they had no hesitation in responding that it was 'inexpedient to attempt the organisation of such a society at present ... There are other methods of usefulness which have a prior claim and cannot yet be responded to'.⁵⁴ Yet members were more than generous in giving

46 J. Simmons, 'Mid-Victorian Leicester', *TLAHS*, 41 (1965-66), p. 53.

47 *Leicester Chronicle and Mercury*, 12 Jan. 1867.

48 *Leicester Chronicle and Mercury*, 16 Mar. 1867.

49 *Leicester Chronicle and Mercury*, 1 May 1869.

50 *Leicester Chronicle and Mercury*, 30 Aug. 1883.

51 From *Uniformity to Unity*, ed. Nuttall and Chadwick, as n. 43, pp. 329-33.

52 *VCH, Leics*, p. 359; Simmons, *Leicester Past and Present*, as n.2, p. 10.

53 LRO, N/B/179/58, as n. 10, s.v. 28 Dec. 1869.

54 LRO, N/B/179/58, as n. 10, s.v. 4 Aug. 1868 and 8 Sep. 1868.

assistance to other bodies which either had evangelical intent or were of assistance to the poor elsewhere. In 1875 more than £57 was disbursed to missions, including the Leicester Domestic Mission and the Leicester Town Mission, the Baptist Missionary Society, and Regent's Park College.⁵⁵ Assistance was also given at various times to the London Missionary Society, Emmanuel Chapel, Sanvey Gate Mission, Harvey Lane Chapel, and the Oxford Street Mission. From 1869 there was a pledge to raise £28 annually to assist the ministry at the Oadby Baptist Chapel.⁵⁶

The middle-class character of the Church was underlined by Haycroft's ministry. He spent many hours in the study, the result being that his preaching was distinguished by careful and conscientious preparation, considerable elaboration and beauty of style and unswerving fidelity to revealed truth'.⁵⁷ But when he died suddenly, after a brief illness, at the age of 52 years, the deacons' mourning was tempered by the realisation that 'while we shall always value careful preparation for the pulpit, it is felt that we need more pastoral visitation, and intercourse with the people than we have hitherto enjoyed'. There were particular concerns about attention being paid to people on the fringes of church membership and work with young people.⁵⁸ It was ironic that Haycroft's successor, Frederick Brotherton Meyer, a young man of 27 years, though much less polemical in his style of preaching, was to be the cause of much controversy in the Church. He had previously been assistant minister to the Rev. Charles Birrell in York, subsequent to his graduation from Regent's Park College with a B. A. (London) degree.⁵⁹ Birrell had taught him sermon preparation; 'every sentence was polished and balanced ... the written discourse was committed to memory and recited in the pulpit'.⁶⁰ Birrell also introduced him to D. L. Moody, as result of which he formed the conviction 'that the majority of non-churchgoers are prejudiced rather against the arrangements of the ordinary place of worship than against Christianity'.⁶¹

Though Meyer had had a premonition that he would succeed Haycroft at Victoria Road, it was soon obvious that, despite his undoubted gifts he was in the wrong place. Although he emphasised that baptism was not essential to salvation, he nevertheless believed that it was binding upon Christians because Jesus had commanded it, and because the apostles practised it. He made the point that believer's baptism marks a break with the old life, and a start for a new and better life. It was a badge of discipleship, a beautiful symbol of the forgiveness of sins, and the profession of a creed.⁶² Since Haycroft had played down the act of baptism to the extent that there had been only two baptisms in his time, it must have seemed as if he was being adversely critical of his predecessor, and offensive to a large body of the church membership who had neither experienced believer's baptism nor regarded it as necessary.

There was dismay at Meyer's active rather than passive concern for the 'underdogs' of society, to the extent that he identified himself with them. Where Haycroft had been a freemason, Meyer was a member of a working-class equivalent, the Oddfellows. One account has him lecturing to the St. Andrew's Lodge on 'Thrift', bemoaning in

55 LRO, N/B/179/58, as n. 10, s.v. 2 Mar. 1975.

56 *Church History and Manual*, as n. 15.

57 Note on death of Dr. N. Haycroft in LRO, N/B/179/58, as n. 10, after 14 Jan. 1873.

58 LRO, N/B/179/58, as n. 10, George Viccars to F. B. Meyer, 10 Jun. 1874.

59 *Dictionary of National Biography [Fourth supplement], 1922-1930*, pp. 582-583. London: Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1937.

60 W. Y. Fullerton, *F. B. Meyer: a biography*, pp.15, 20. London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, n.d.

61 Street, *New Century Leaders*, as n. 7, p. 44.

62 F. B. Meyer, *Seven Reasons for Believer's Baptism*. London: Baptist Union, n.d.

particular 'the enormous sums of money wasted in maintaining the present gigantic bodies of armed men'. He also condemned 'the extravagant expenditure of the populace ... in intoxicating drinks; and the various other unproductive channels into which the hard-earned wages of men were too often recklessly and thoughtlessly thrown'.⁶³ Where Haycroft had been a member of the elected School Board and of the Literary and Philosophical Society, Meyer was entirely pre-occupied with the saving of the souls of the downtrodden people in society. To this end he established the Oxford Street Mission in 1875 with seven teachers and 30 children, and developed it to the point where three years later there were 22 teachers and 345 children.⁶⁴ When there was a national appeal for Indian Family Relief he took an active part as the local secretary.⁶⁵ He was also known to meet men being released from the Welford Road prison and take them to the Welford Coffee House for breakfast, a talk and practical help in starting a new life.⁶⁶

All of this indicated that that Meyer was a most remarkable individual, but there can be little doubt that at least some of the deacons were less than supportive because the minister wanted to change the character of the Church. He was spending so much time on mission work outside the immediate area that it detracted from the building up of the Church in the way that they had envisaged. As the brother-in-law of one of the deacons was to say later: 'the deacons agreed to the establishment of a mission station down-town, but strongly objected to anything but the accustomed routine at the Church'.⁶⁷ Moody and Sankey choruses and simple gospel services were not to their taste. And this was not merely a question of middle-class predilections; it would have destroyed completely their concept of a Church that would be a bridge between denominations within a particular developing area.

Meyer's resignation in 1878 was, however, precipitated by his realisation that a substantial proportion of the congregation did not like his 'mode of viewing and of presenting truth'. Members present at a Church meeting on the day of his resignation recognised with appreciation his past services, and especially his 'zeal, earnestness and efficiency in dealing with the younger members of the congregation', but agreed that it was their duty to accept his resignation.⁶⁸ To the dismay of the Victoria Road deacons, however, Meyer, after having intimated that he would be accepting the pastorate at the Glossop Road Baptist Church in Sheffield, was persuaded to remain in Leicester by dissident members of the congregation.⁶⁹ He wrote, somewhat defiantly, to the deacons, stating that there were 'several friends most unwilling to lose my services either for themselves or their families and have made it possible for me to remain. I feel that Victoria Road Church has no further claim on me as my work has been clearly distasteful to many of the more thoughtful of its adherents'.⁷⁰ There were some efforts to try to avoid a split in the Church. A letter to the deacons from Meyer's erstwhile colleague, the Rev. C. M. Birrell, advised a conference that might result in the pastor's reinstatement. Fred Rust, the secretary of the dissident group, also put the case for such a conference, the deacons, however, deciding that that particular course

63 *Leicester Journal*, 25 Oct. 1878.

64 LRO, Victoria Road Church, N/B/179/189, Letter Book 1889-1898, Copy of Programme, Oxford Street Mission Schools.

65 *Leicester Journal*, 12 Apr. 1878.

66 Fullerton, *F. B. Meyer*, as n. 60, p. 53.

67 Fullerton, *F. B. Meyer*, as n. 60, p. 47.

68 LRO, N/B/179/58, as n. 10, s.v. 9 Apr. 1878.

69 LRO, N/B/179/58, as n. 10, s.v. 21 May 1878.

70 LRO, Victoria Road Church, N/B/179/181, Deacon's Minutes, 13 Apr. 1878.

was inexpedient, but that they would 'be happy to meet any deputation from Mr Meyer's friends and supporters with a view to a friendly and amicable arrangement as to further action'.⁷¹ Arthur Rust, a deacon whose family was much involved in supporting Meyer, wrote three frantic letters from the Bedford Hotel in Glasgow, where he was detained on business, stating that 'in 3 days, a fund between £4 to 500 p.a. has already been guaranteed and it may be £600 before the end of this week'. He believed that Meyer needed a holiday, and stressed the need for 'calming things down'. He hoped that a split could be avoided.⁷² It was indeed Rust who had dissuaded the minister from accepting the pastorate in Sheffield, presumably in the hope that he would be reinstated at Victoria Road.⁷³

It was immediately obvious that matters had advanced too far for any reconciliation to be possible. Meyer stated that his decision was irrevocable, that he had 'long wanted to be a little more free from the necessary restrictions of church life to try to reach the unevangelised masses. I am sure that they can be touched by other means than those adopted by the Salvation Warehouse.'⁷⁴ In a further letter he explained that 'we do not wish to imitate the style of service or the class of work which Victoria is well-fitted to do amongst a certain class - *Still* we shall have to form a church ... I should minister to that little body, preaching to them regularly ... but still the main aim of our existence would be to do a work in the town for the unevangelised masses'.⁷⁵ The secession of some members and formation of a new church proceeded forthwith. Meyer commenced taking services at the Museum in New Walk.⁷⁶ At a Victoria Road Church meeting information was given that 46 members 'wishing to continue under the pastoral care of the Rev. F. B. Meyer, B. A., hereby signify to you our withdrawal from Church fellowship, with the intention of constituting the nucleus of a Church over which he shall preside'.⁷⁷ The Oxford Street Mission also went with them, 'the teachers, having received an intimation from the Committee of the Rev. F. B. Meyer, B. A., of their willingness to have the Schools connected with his Ministry and Mission Work, unanimously resolved to carry them on in connection therewith'.⁷⁸ Two years later the foundation stone of the red-brick Melbourne Hall was laid, and the place of worship opened in 1881.⁷⁹

The disagreement between Meyer and his friends and Victoria Road Church was really about different perceptions of church membership and ecumenicity. With the intensity and energy of youth Meyer and his adherents 'determined that every member, as far possible, should be a worker'.⁸⁰ Haycroft would not have disagreed, but he was tolerant of a situation in which most of his congregation consisted of people who were not yet church members, some of whom insisted on remaining on the fringes of church membership. When some of the latter put on concerts in the church to help in the raising of money for the settling of the debt on the organ, there were complaints from some of the more overtly evangelical supporters of Meyer, that, while they 'would not undervalue the efforts of the well and kindly intentioned who feel not the

71 *Ibid.*

72 LRO, N/B/179/189, as n. 64, Arthur Rust to Edward Wood, 12 and 13 Apr. 1878.

73 Fullerton, *F. B. Meyer*, as n. 60, p. 49.

74 LRO, N/B/179/189, as n. 64, F. B. Meyer to Edward Wood, 12 Apr. 1878.

75 LRO, N/B/179/189, as n. 64, F. B. Meyer to Edward Wood, 15 Apr. 1878.

76 Fullerton, *F. B. Meyer*, as n. 60, p. 50.

77 LRO, N/B/179/58, as n. 10, 1 Oct. 1878.

78 LRO, N/B/179/189, as n. 64, 12 May 1878.

79 Simmons, 'Mid-Victorian Leicester', as n. 46, p. 52.

80 Fullerton, *F. B. Meyer*, as n. 60, p. 51.

responsibility of church membership', they would prefer 'something less in uniformity with the world's usages in a place set apart for the Lord'.⁸¹

Meyer was basically uninterested in denomination as such, though he was a Baptist by conviction and destined to be President of the Baptist Union, and was passionate about the value of baptism. He was an evangelist who would join with anyone who also believed that the prime duty of a Christian was to bring salvation to the poor and dispossessed. Hence the rise of Melbourne Hall as a free evangelical establishment eschewing the name of 'church' and with forms of service that were designed to avoid turning away those who were entirely unchurched. The remaining members of Victoria Road Church, on the other hand, though also evangelistic in the sense of wanting to bring the gospel to those who had not been confronted by it, felt that it was important to have the designation 'church', and to provide forms of service that people originating in a number of denominations could participate in. The cultural ethos was important, the appreciation of music, of different liturgical forms, of the toleration of different viewpoints.

The splitting of the Church brought about by Meyer resolved the immediate problems, but at the cost of losing some of the most energetic members. It was left to the new minister, John Gershom Greenhough, M.A., and the remaining church members to chart a new course in the future from the one that was originally envisaged. Like Haycroft had been, Greenhough was also called from Bristol, where he had been minister of Cotham Green Baptist Chapel as well as being tutor and secretary of the Bristol Baptist College. He was described by his former tutor at Rawdon College, Dr Green, as one 'whose hold upon evangelical truth is intelligent and strong; one who can defend the faith which he holds, alike from the assaults of scepticism and from the perversions of ignorance who can expound the truth in its manifold relations to human thoughts and life, on the basis of a large deep and ever growing acquaintance with the word of God'. An energetic man of 36 years, he was noted for 'the devoutness of his spirit and the earnest seriousness of his life'.⁸² Quite unlike the restive Meyer, he had not really wanted to leave Bristol; once settled at Victoria Road he was content to remain there and build up the Church over the next 25 years.

Greenhough decided that he would counter the Church's problems in a number of ways. Despite Arthur Rust's view that his preaching was unlikely to result in sudden conversions, Greenhough saw himself primarily as a preacher who steered a middle course between biblical conservatism and liberalism.⁸³ He was pleased to be able to be among those who were able to bring about 'a happy union of those who were supposed to be of the advance party and those who cling tenaciously to the old lines'. He was careful to note, however, that most intelligent men had 'accepted some of the best established positions of the higher Bible critics'.⁸⁴ The content of his preaching was, however, anything but an exercise in 'fence-sitting'. In at least one of his sermons, preached to his middle-class congregation, among whom were some very wealthy individuals, he declared that 'the pomp of wealth drags behind it a long slimy trail of sickening degradation. The millionaire, and the bundle of loathsome rags and sores which hardly retains the human form, are inevitable concomitants'. He urged them to

81 LRO, N/B/179/189, as n. 64, Alicia Cooper to Minister and Deacons, 18 Feb. 1878, and Samuel and Florence Mason to Deacons, 13 Feb. 1878.

82 LRO, N/B/179/58, as n. 10, 25 Mar. 1879.

83 LRO, N/B/179/189, as n. 64, 12 Nov. 1878.

84 J. G. Greenhough, *Towards the Sunrising*, p. 154. London: Arthur Stockwell, 1902.

make Leicester a place 'where the rich men help the poor and the poor love the great - a city where love, charity and brotherhood rule supreme'.⁸⁵ On another occasion he stated that all the real giants of the Church had been drawn into their work without regard to material reward.⁸⁶

There can be no doubt that Greenhough was much in agreement with Meyer on most of the central issues in society, but he was less acerbic, more sympathetic, often hastening to help rather than to reprove. On the question of church member involvement he declared that 'God does not make nominal Christians. You tell me there are five hundred members in a certain Christian Church or community, and I know nothing at all when you have told me that. These five hundred may be winning to themselves the curse of Meroz by taking no part in the Lord's battle. They may be gathering round an empty candlestick from which the Christ-light has gone out ... In your five hundred there may be some that merely smoke and hardly show a spark of the Divine fire, and others that burn and glow like the oxy-hydrogen light ... You cannot measure that'.⁸⁷ Along with his strengths as a preacher Greenhough had a concern for the development of liturgy, begun in Haycroft's time, neglected by Meyer. It is significant that a book of his sermons concludes with liturgical suggestions, with prayers for use at services. Each service was balanced, with an introductory prayer, a thanksgiving, and a prayer of intercession.⁸⁸ More still was needed if the tensions within the Church were to be dissipated. Greenhough committed himself to visiting church members during his ministry.⁸⁹ At the end of his ministry, 25 years later, he was able to say that 'by the mercy of God the Church had since been kept together in unity and peace. Diverse elements had been consolidated, its high reputation maintained and increased'.⁹⁰ Moreover, although it was obvious that Victoria Road Church could no longer live up to the original dream of being *the* Church on the southern outskirts of Leicester, or even *the* Nonconformist Church, after the opening of Meyer's Melbourne Hall in the heart of developing Highfields, it could at least forge relationships with other places of worship as they grew. At Greenhough's recognition services the Rev. James Thew, minister of Belvoir Street Baptist Chapel, expressed the hope that he (Greenhough) 'would be able to work with all Christians in the town'.⁹¹ It is perhaps significant that Meyer had not only been invited to the recognition services, but had accepted.⁹²

There is no evidence that Greenhough gave this aspect priority over other aspects of his work; he became a national figure as much as a local celebrity, as he was, successively, president of the Baptist Missionary Society, the Baptist Union, and the newly formed National Free Church Council. Nevertheless, he was happy, at the end of his ministry, that the ill-feeling which had existed between Melbourne Hall and Victoria Road Church had given way to mutual respect and concern.⁹³ At the close of the Victorian era it cannot be said that the role of Victoria Road Church as an ecumenical experiment was entirely successful. Yet it survived its turbulent years, and

85 J. G. Greenhough, *The Cross in Modern Life*, pp. 46-53. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1896.

86 *Ibid.*, pp. 144-45.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 159.

88 *Ibid.*, pp. 160ff.

89 LRO, N/B/179/58, as n. 10, s.v. 25 Mar. 1879.

90 Cutting from church magazine in LRO, Victoria Road Church, N/B/179/59, Minute Book, Christian Society, 1888-1904.

91 LRO, N/B/179/58, *passim*.

92 LRO, N/B/179/189, 17 Mar. 1879.

93 LRO, N/B/179/59, *passim*.

proved an interesting and useful addition to the churches in Leicester, and was the inspiration for many other places of worship which avoided denominational labels.

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