Bishop W. C. Magee, The Reverend F. W. Robinson and a New Late Victorian Parish in Leicester
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This is a study of an important aspect of the episcopate of W. C. Magee, Bishop of Peterborough from 1868 to 1891. At this time the Archdeaconry of Leicester lay within the jurisdiction of Peterborough: the town of Leicester was the largest and fastest-growing urban area in the diocese; and the problems of the Church in Leicester necessarily occupied much of Magee’s attention. Within the town he was especially concerned with the growing-pains of St. Peter’s parish which had recently been established in the populous, working-class district of Highfields. This paper traces the relationship between the Bishop and the Revd. F. W. Robinson, whom he had chosen to inaugurate the parish; and in the course of it light is thrown on the manifold problems of a working-class parish in the Late Victorian period and on the views of a bishop whose standing in the church was so high that in 1891 he was advanced to the Archbishopric of York.

Dr. William Connor Magee became the Bishop of Peterborough at a critical time in the life of the Church of England. Born in 1821, the grandson of an Archbishop of Dublin, he graduated at Trinity College. Consecrated and enthroned in 1868, he exchanged the Deanship of Cork for a diocese that his predecessor Francis Jeune regarded as being shaped like a pear with the Bishop’s Palace on the end of the stalk, and which was divided into the two large archdeaconries of Leicester and Northampton, neither of which sat comfortably with the other.

Foremost in Magee’s mind was the condition of the Church in the cities and large towns of England. Only seventeen years had passed since Horace Mann’s religious census of 1851, which showed that more than half of the population of the country had not attended a place of worship on 30th March, and that only twenty per cent had attended an Anglican church. There were people in the working-class districts of large urban centres who were hardly touched by the Church at all. Even if they had wanted to attend there was not enough accommodation for them anyway. Fewer than one in ten attended any place of worship in Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield and Newcastle, and there were signs that small minorities of ‘militant secularist working men’ would grow in size and influence if counter measures were not adopted by the Churches.

He would have been aware too of the publication of the Communist Manifesto in 1848, perhaps even of Marx’s Zur Kritik der Politischen Oekonomie in 1859. He would

Dr W. C. Magee, Bishop of Peterborough 1868-1891.
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certainly have shared in the sense of unease experienced by upper and middle-class people that these had produced, and the fear that there would be a revolution.\textsuperscript{4} Magee was certainly conscious that England was rapidly becoming urbanised. Between 1871 and 1901 Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham were each to grow to more than half a million people. The number of towns with more than 50,000 increased from 37 to 75. Leicester, Nottingham, Hull and Bradford had the fastest rates of growth.\textsuperscript{5} Leicester, with a population of 95,220 in 1871, was not only growing rapidly as the footwear industry gained a hold and hosiery began a new period of prosperity as a factory industry, but it experienced all the religious problems of the big cities. By 1870 five new Anglican parish churches, of substantial proportions, had been erected during the century. Five more were to be completed by 1880.\textsuperscript{6} In 1872, in his initial Charge, Magee stated that within the last ten years, during which the population of Leicester has increased from 69,000 to nearly 100,000, four new Churches have been built and districts attached to them ... The population of the new Parishes ... numbers 32,000'.\textsuperscript{7} Though the Nonconformists were still dominant - the new Victoria Road Church, a Baptist foundation, had been built only the year previous to the bishop's appointment - it was notable that a number of Baptist and Wesleyan chapels had fallen into disuse, and 'the hold of Dissent was already beginning to weaken'.\textsuperscript{8} It is true that Nonconformist accommodation for worship was still increasing. Andrew Mearns, in his The Statistics of Attendance at Public Worship 1882, indicated that out of 85 places of worship 61 were non-Anglican, with a total of 33,392 sittings out of a total of 49,800.\textsuperscript{9} It was well-known, however, that about two-fifths of the seats remained unfilled in Nonconformist chapels compared with about one-fifth in parish churches.\textsuperscript{10} Magee himself commented that 'it was ... fallacious to assume, with respect to Dissenting chapels, that an increase in sittings represented a corresponding number of Dissenters ... Dissent very largely increases by schism. It was important to ask the right question, which was not to ask how many sittings the Church of England had provided within the last ten years', but 'how many endowed and settled ministers she had provided', and then 'they would have an entirely different answer'.\textsuperscript{11} Magee was, of course, not only concerned with Leicester. He took his membership of the House of Lords seriously; he campaigned vigorously against the passing of the Education Bill in 1870, and attempted to have legislation passed that would have reduced 'trafficking' in patronage.\textsuperscript{12} He spent much time and energy in enabling his diocese to emulate the neighbouring dioceses of Ely and Lichfield in developing archidiaconal and diocesan conferences in which both clergy and laity worked together in decision-making.\textsuperscript{13} He also concentrated much of his effort into acquiring wherever

\textsuperscript{5} J. F. C. Harrison, \textit{Late Victorian Britain 1875-1901} (London: Fontana, 1990), p.15.
\textsuperscript{6} C. D. B. Ellis, \textit{History in Leicester} (Leicester: City Publicity Department, 1948), p.115-116.
\textsuperscript{7} W. C. Magee, \textit{A Charge Delivered to the Clergy and Churchwardens of the Diocese of Peterborough at his Primary Visitation, October 1872} (1872), p.8.
\textsuperscript{8} J. Simmons, 'Mid-Victorian Leicester', \textit{TLAHS}, 41 (1965-6), p.52.
\textsuperscript{10} J. Simmons, \textit{Leicester Past and Present} (London: Eyre Methuen, 1974), I, p.168.
\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Leicester Journal}, 22.11.1872.
possible, like many other bishops before him, the advowson or right to present incumbents to a living, so that he was able to develop a staffing policy, encouraging young able clergymen to take on the challenge of difficult town parishes, and transferring them in middle-age to less strenuous rural livings in which the emoluments were more substantial and secure.

It was Leicester, however, that was to be the ‘most satisfying setting for Magee to demonstrate his powers of leadership’. There were two main reasons for this. The first was his conviction that it was absolutely vital to evangelise the new urban areas without delay, lest Nonconformity and secularism gain a hold. He stated that ‘the population of the country was migrating into the towns, and ... more and more, politically, socially and ecclesiastically we are being governed by the great towns. It was, therefore, of vital importance that the Church should make good her footing in the towns’. The second reason was the existence of a vigorous Leicester Archidiaconal Church Extension Association, founded by his predecessor in 1865, which was already giving priority to the opening of new churches in Leicester. Not only were a number of clergy involved, but also wealthy men like W. Perry Herrick, Esq., of Beaumanor Hall, Sir Arthur Hazlerigg, Bt., the Duke of Rutland and Earl Howe, who were major contributors to the cause.

Magee was in time to help in planning for the laying of the foundation stones for St. Mark’s and St. Paul’s on 18th May 1870. It was St. Peter’s though, where the stone was laid on 14th November 1872, which was to involve the bishop at all stages, and where the appointment of the incumbent most exemplified his aims in church development.

One of Magee’s strongest convictions was that the Church was not well-served by the practice of building a place of worship before there was a worshipping congregation, as had happened because of the way in which church extension had been organised. The bishop worked hard to persuade the aristocrats and businessmen who contributed their wealth that the human element was really more important than architectural creations. Thinking particularly of the future St. Peter’s he declared that it was appropriate to ‘first set a minister to work, it might be in a small schoolroom, and afterwards, when he had gathered a congregation, think of building a church’.

In practice, because of the way in which the Church of England was organised, this was not easy to do. Many new churches were built and consecrated before the district that was to become the parish was formally set up. The Ecclesiastical Commissioners, where they had been persuaded to award endowments for the payment of an incumbent, insisted upon making payments from the time of the latter. Francis Robinson, appointed vicar at the beginning of 1874, had expected to subsist initially on the salary paid to him as chaplain of the Union workhouse, located within the area that was to become the new parish. It had been expected, however, that the Commissioners would commence paying him from 16th April, the date of the consecration of the church. In the event this was denied because the district had not been formalised at the time, and he lost £50 out of £165 in his first year, despite his complaints and the support of the bishop.

Nevertheless Robinson’s monetary loss was the parish’s gain; by the time of the consecration there was an active and vigorous congregation based upon the already

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15 *Leicester Journal*, passim.
16 LLRO DE 1919/1 (Leicester Archdeaconry Church Extension Association Minutes), 13.6.1873.
17 *Leicester Journal*, passim.
18 Thompson, p.272.
The Revd F. W. Robinson, M.A., Vicar of St Peter's, Leicester, 1874-1893.
existing Upper Conduit Street school. He had also appointed an assistant curate and had a lay reader licensed; in addition there were two able churchwardens.

The new parish of St. Peter’s lay to the east of the London Road, which led southward from the Midland railway station. The Highfields stretched from the railway line to the north to the track marking the ancient southern boundary of the town that was to become Mere Road. A public recreation ground, soon to be inundated by housing, separated it in the east from the area that was to become St. Saviour’s parish, an area that was initially allocated to St. Peter’s. The 1875 street map shows the beginning of a network of streets around the Union workhouse and the Collegiate school and church. By 1885 construction had expanded so rapidly that the pattern was established almost as it would be until 1940. The population in 1872 had been about 4,000. Two years later there were 10,000 people, continuing to accumulate annually by between one and two thousand. Despite the assignment of a considerable area to St. Saviour’s in 1877, numbers continued to grow to around 20,000 people, housed in seventy-eight streets, within which, Robinson complained, there was a ‘continual shifting from house to house and street to street’ which made it impossible for him to keep accurate records of parishioners’ addresses.

Eschewing the newer fashion of appointing more incumbents from the ranks of those who had attended training institutions set up by bishops (like Chichester (1839), Wells (1840), Lichfield (1857), Salisbury (1861), Exeter (1861) and Gloucester (1868)), Magee preferred those who were trained ‘in broad daylight, and under the influence of the broad free thought and life of a great university’. He omitted to say that the Oxbridge men were also more likely to be the sons of gentlemen and recipients of a private income. Consequently, of seventeen incumbents in Leicester in 1880, eleven were Cambridge graduates and six were Oxford graduates. Alongside men like David Vaughan, a Cambridge classicist and prizewinner, and James Faithfull, a first class honours Oxford graduate in theology, Francis Watson Robinson was, academically speaking, at a lower level, having graduated third class in law at Oxford in 1868. He obviously had other gifts.

At the age of twenty-eight years, and just married, Robinson had been ordained priest in 1870. He served curacies at Alton (1869-71) and Wellingborough (1871-3). He was the son of a gentleman, Francis Kildale Robinson of Whitby, but appears to have had no private means, and described himself as a ‘poor man’. The 1881 Census Returns show him as a man of 35 years, with a wife of the same age, and four young children.

The groundwork had already been prepared for Robinson. Canon William Fry, Honorary Secretary of the Leicester Archidiaconal Board of Education until his death at the age of 87 years in 1877, had built the school as an extension project, intended not only to provide elementary education but also to serve as a venue for a new congregation of worshippers ... see Leicester Journal, 22.6.1877. On Sunday 17th July, 1869, services were commenced there ‘by desire of the Lord Bishop of the Diocese’ with the Reverend William Targett Fry, son of Canon Fry, licensed to an assistant curacy at St. George’s and charged with the specific task of preparing the way for a new parish ... Peterborough Diocesan Calendar (1871), p.197. No doubt the younger Fry hoped to be appointed as the new vicar of St. Peter’s, but did not measure up to Magee’s expectations.

W. C. Magee, A Charge Delivered to the Clergy and Churchwardens of the Diocese of Peterborough at his Second Visitation, October 1875 (1875), p.7.

St. Peter’s Parish Magazine, January 1882, February & April 1883.

27.3 per cent of ordinands were trained outside the universities between 1864 and 1873 ... See A. Haig, The Victorian Clergy (London & Sydney: Croom Helm, 1984), p.32.

Quoted in Carnell, p.71.

employed three domestic servants obtained from the Union workhouse.

What influenced Magee to make the appointment? We can make some informed guesses; Cambridge graduation, the son of a gentleman, and youthful energy must have been important. More important, however, was Robinson’s ability to preach, important both to the local people and to the bishop. The rural deanery, consisting of clergy and laymen, had discussed the question of preaching within the context of a debate on how to increase attendance at services, and recommended ‘that the sermons should be short, concise and practical’. They also expressed a preference for ‘extempore preaching where practicable as more intelligible especially to the poor and far more impressive’.\(^ {25}\) Magee himself, one of the best extempore preachers in the country, insisted that the power of preaching depended on making points, and wished his clergy to give this aspect of ministry the same priority that he did, hoping that they would become like ‘the preacher you can’t help listening to’.\(^ {26}\)

The indications are that Robinson was an ‘eloquent and impressive preacher’.\(^ {27}\) His

\(^ {25}\) LLRRO DE 1919/3 (Rural Deanery of Leicester Minutes), 5.5.1870.
\(^ {26}\) Carnell, 74.
\(^ {27}\) *St. Peter’s Parish Magazine*, January 1893.
only published sermon was an attempt to bring about an understanding between the different strands of churchmanship within the Church of England, important in a town where the extremes were very evident, and puzzling to his own parishioners. Using a text from Romans, viii, 28 - ‘We know that all things work together for good to them that love God’ - he maintained that parties ‘have always existed in the Christian Church’ and argued that each - High, Low and Broad - ‘contributes an important element of truth’. They were not ‘exponents of rival theories of Christianity ... but instruments in the hands of Providence for teaching different sides of one great truth’, each holding ‘a separate element of truth, which needs to be combined with the other elements, in order that “the great whole of truth” may be seen in its completeness’. He hoped that in the future ‘their only rivalry will be the holy rivalry of love and good works’. As a sermon it was well constructed, ingeniously linking the three parties with the Holy Trinity, so that, since it was preached on Trinity Sunday, it had seasonal significance, as well as speaking to the condition of the Established Church.

At the St. Peter’s consecration Bishop Magee emphasised that Robinson had been ‘sent to preach the Word ... in a place which had been partly cultivated, and in which, if not supplied with the ministrations of religious worship [it] would, though it might be a wealthy place ... where they saw indications of the growing prosperity of Leicester ... prove merely a barren wilderness’. Bishop and vicar were at one in viewing the sermon as a means of evangelising the masses as well as ‘feeding the flock’.

It was evident too that the area of agreement was wider than this, which became obvious as the work of the parish proceeded. They were both living at a time when the idea of mission was strong, when General Booth was developing the Salvation Army, and Wilson Carlile the Church Army. In Leicester Robinson’s Baptist contemporary, F. B. Meyer, who became the minister of Victoria Road Church in the same year as the opening of St. Peter’s, began almost immediately to develop the Oxford Street Mission among some of the poorest people of the town. Magee, very conscious of the situation in which he wanted Robinson to work, was very much aware that, even with two or three assistant curates and a number of lay readers, the work would be arduous, and help would be needed in the process of evangelism. For, although he was constantly saying that if the minister ‘is to win his people ... he must seek them diligently in their homes, and teach them to know and love him there that he might draw them with him to the House of God’, he nevertheless sympathised with the ‘town pastor ... who sees his parish suddenly covered with that network of little streets and squares ... where the newly congregated masses of the people are to be speedily won or altogether lost to the Church, and where the pastor, utterly worn out and borne down as he is with the effort to minister to a population that already overtaxes his energies, stands aghast at this new demand upon his energies’. Robinson was indeed to cry out in despair that ‘in the

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28 F. W. Robinson, *How the Three Schools of Thought in the Church “work together for good”*. (Sermon preached at St. Peter’s Church, Leicester, on Trinity Sunday, 12.6.1881.) The idea for Robinson’s sermon probably came from a lecture by J. B. Lightfoot (Bishop of Durham 1879-1889) on internal unity in the Church, at the Leicester Church Congress, 1880, in which he identified Evangelicals with Paul and the concern for the individual soul, Tractarians with Peter and concern for the visible Church and its traditions, and Broad Churchmen with Apollos and the relation of the gospel to all that lies outside the Church. See G. T. Rimmington, ‘Leicester Church Congress 1880’, *Leicestershire Historian*, 34 (1998), p.9.
29 *Leicester Chronicle*, 18.4.1874.
30 Chadwick, II, 294-299.
32 Magee (1875), p.5.
largest parish in the diocese ... three [ordained men] cannot do the work which really calls for ten" and that "the clergy cannot hold themselves responsible for attention to cases of sickness or other need which are reported to them".  

To this situation Magee had at least a partial answer, with which Robinson seems readily to have agreed, and which was reached after floating an idea for a staff of diocesan clergy at his disposal to be sent anywhere, any time, to deal with emergencies, like the early Jesuits in relation to the Pope. Accepting financial stringency the bishop sponsored a Society of Mission Clergy for his diocese, consisting of clergy "willing and ready, at the request of their warden, and on the invitation of the parish priest, to hold a mission at least once a year in some parish in the Diocese". No doubt Robinson's willingness to be involved was appealing to Magee; the younger man both contributed to missions elsewhere and benefitted from them.

The first mission at St. Peter's was in fact in February 1882. A month earlier, S. Reynolds Hole, a Canon of Lincoln (on behalf of a team of four) announced to parishioners that "we are to hold a Mission in your parish, with the approval of your Bishop, and at the request of your Vicar, from the 5th to the 13th February ... a special effort to promote God's glory in the salvation of souls". Robinson declared himself "thankful to have secured ... the services of four earnest, able and experienced Missioners, who ... will give themselves up to the work of exhorting and instructing, of warning and entreating, in our midst". He was so keen that, after Sunday evensong each week during the Epiphany season, he had congregational practices of the hymns to be sung, and spent four weekday evening services with relevant addresses and intercession petitioning God's blessing on the enterprise in preparation.

The mission services were held at St. Peter's, St. James' (a temporary church on London Road, constructed from the materials used for the specially built Church Congress hall in 1880) and the Upper Conduit Street school. At the latter "the room was filled to overflowing, and many happy results will we hope flow from the admirable work done in a part of the parish where it is much needed". At St. Peter's itself the congregation grew each day, and as a result "our ordinary number of candidates for Confirmation has been almost doubled". At the following Easter services communicants numbered a record 597 at St. Peter's and 102 at St. James'. Also Sunday evening mission services at the school became a regular feature of the pattern of worship in the parish.

Both Magee and Robinson had similar views also on Nonconformity. Magee lamented "the waste of power caused by the needless and endless multiplication of small rural communities", but acknowledged that Nonconformists "believe that the Church of Christ was intended by Him to have an inward and visible unity of the Spirit, not to be manifested by one visible society, but by the existence of a number of separate and independent and self-originating societies with widely differing order, polity and creed, which nevertheless display the unity of the Spirit by the mutual interchange of good offices, and the exhibition of brotherly kindness and charity to each other". He became mindful also of the warmth toward him and his colleagues of some Nonconformists, expressed especially during the Leicester Church Congress in 1880; a deputation of ministers stated their hope "that your labours here will have for their result an increase of 34

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St. Peter's Parish Magazine, January 1889
Ibid., January 1881.
Peterborough Diocesan Kalendar (1891), p.66.
St. Peter's Parish Magazine, January 1882
Ibid., February, March, April 1882.
Magee (1875), pp.15-16.
spiritual power, such as shall be felt throughout the country as a whole'. Magee had welcomed a rapprochement between Nonconformists and Churchmen. He advised Anglican priests, therefore, not to resort to denunciation, but to 'teach your own people quietly and carefully the distinctive features of your own Church; aim at making them loyal, intelligent, attached members of her communion'.

Far more dangerous for both Church and Nonconformity was, Magee felt, his perception that 'speculative infidelity is undoubtedly spreading from our universities down through a thousand channels into our remotest country parishes'. He was aware of the considerable support for Charles Bradlaugh, an avowed atheist, who was elected to represent Northampton in parliament in 1880, and of the growth and activities of the Leicester Secular Society, which built the Secular Hall, with its terra cotta busts of Socrates, Jesus, Voltaire, Tom Paine and Robert Owen, in the centre of the town in 1881.

Robinson was not entirely an echo of his bishop. He was soon to face the fact, from 1881 onward, that his parish church was sandwiched between the largest and most modern Baptist churches in the town, each with seating accommodation for more than a thousand worshippers. Victoria Road Church, built in 1867, on the edge of what was to become St. Peter's parish, was intended by its founders to be the Church for a rapidly growing area; it was an interesting ecumenical venture, but its members soon had to face the fact that other churches were developing in the area. In 1874 F. B. Meyer had become its minister, but after four years resigned to form his own congregation, to be housed in the new Melbourne Hall from 1881 onward, only a few hundred yards from St. Peter's Church. The strength of Robinson's concern can be seen by his response when a handbill came through his letterbox, advertising two sermons to be preached in Leicester by the Reverend F. Winslow, vicar of St. Leonard's-on-sea, one of which was to be delivered at Melbourne Hall. A letter of complaint was immediately sent to Magee, who responded by refusing to allow Winslow to continue.

In general, however, when he did not feel threatened, Robinson adopted a similar stance to that of his bishop. He even asked his parishioners to rejoice that in Leicester there were not less than forty Nonconformist chapels, and that 'between the Established Church and those who differed from it, there was an enormous neutral ground, occupied by infidelity and thinkers little disposed to favour Christianity'. He believed that 'union, exertion and perseverance on the part of Christians would go far towards reclaiming the erring ones'. Also, in the second issue of the parish magazine, he was careful to state that he 'was anxious that a spirit of union and good fellowship should spread and strengthen among us who live in this parish - that we should have a care for one another - that we should feel that we have many interests in common - and that there is some work for the Great and Gracious Master in which we may all engage.'

One problem that Magee and Robinson had to face was the way in which a new

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41 Magee (1875), p.17.
42 Ibid., p.15.
43 Hatley (ed.), xvi.
46 MacDonnell, I, p.178.
47 *Leicester Chronicle and Leicestershire Mercury*, 16.10.1880.
48 *St. Peter's Parish Magazine*, February 1879.
parish was to be financed. The financing of livings in the cities and large towns was a great problem in the late nineteenth century. In the villages, despite the passing of the Church Rates Act in 1869, which abolished compulsory payments but left the option of voluntary rating, payments often continued much as before; even taking into consideration the depression in agriculture from 1873 onward, which certainly reduced clerical incomes, the problems were not usually very great. In urban centres, however, determined Nonconformist resistance effectively ended church rating by mid-century. In Leicester it was noted that in 1849 'there is no such thing as a church rate'.

This left some incumbents in penurious circumstances. Samuel Flood, at the new St. Luke's Church, in 1868, received £150 a year and there was no parsonage. Samuel French at St. Leonard's had a net income of £167. Charles Baker at St. John's had a very uncertain income from pew rents, together with freehold letting at £28 and endowment payments by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners of £75. Thomas William Owen at St. Nicholas had a net income of £230. George Ray, after being assistant curate to an absentee vicar for seven years, was appointed vicar of All Saints' in 1874, with a gross income of £145. Fortunately the majority of them were bachelors with private incomes.

It was understandable, therefore, that churchwardens should attempt to make up the shortfall with pew rents. With a 'well-to-do' congregation like that at Holy Trinity the system worked well in the financial sense; James Faithfull, the vicar in 1880, received a net income of £500. The incumbent of St. John's, in a much poorer area, was less fortunate. His churchwardens tried hard to raise the pew rents to secure a better income, but had to admit, with their eyes on Victoria Road Church, where the recently deceased Dr. Nathaniel Haycroft had been receiving £500, that 'many Nonconformist ministers, without the aid of endowment, receive larger incomes than their own incumbents'.

Pew rents were not regarded as satisfactory. It had been reasoned earlier in the century that there was a need for more churches with free seats, so that working people would learn to be moral by sitting in them. Many town churches had insufficient free seats for people who wished to attend. The Leicester rural deanery whole-heartedly condemned this form of money-raising 'as amongst the chief causes, which have exiled our working population from their parish church: that under the present system the poor as a rule are placed in the most cheerless, the most remote, and the coldest parts of the church, where generally they can neither hear nor see the officiating clergyman'. Magee, anxious to dispel the idea that church attendance was just for 'gentlefolk', described the system as 'that most ingenious and successful of devices for keeping worshippers out of church, and quenching all spirit of devotion within it ... by permanently appropriating to a few families the area that might otherwise be used in succession by more than one body of worshippers'.

Much more favoured was the tapping of the resources of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners - Magee was able to raise most stipends to £300 by this means - and the
use of the weekly offertory. The bishop felt initially, when faced by the question, that
offertories, as tradition dictated, should be only for the 'collecting of the alms of the
people for charitable purposes', 56 but soon changed his mind when the clergy were
unanimous in offering an opposite opinion, and came to the conclusion that it was the
'most scriptural mode of collecting the contributions both of poor and rich'. 57

Robinson, faced by this climate of opinion, in which he shared, forestalled any
possibility of pew rents being charged at St. Peter’s, by insisting on the use of chairs
rather than pews, all of which were available from the beginning to all comers. Apart
from Robinson’s eventual stipend of £300 from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners and
the income he received from the Union workhouse, the main sources of income for the
parish were from collections at services and bazaars.

As Bishop Magee knew he would be, Robinson was an adept fund-raiser. He had to
face the facts not only of phenomenal growth in the size of the parish, but also of the
need to complete the building of St. Peter’s and other facilities, which included a second
parish school, the temporary church of St. James, and eventually, the building of the
daughter church of St. Hilda.

There was a particular problem with St. Peter’s. It had originally been intended by
the Leicester Church Extension Association as the Earl Howe Memorial Church,
‘marking the Society’s grateful appreciation of the influence of the late Earl Howe, who
was for more than thirty years a liberal contributor to its funds’. 58 By 1871 a local
committee had raised £2,740 and acquired the gift of an impressive site from Joseph
Harris. A further grant of £1,500 from the Association encouraged the committee to
proceed with the erection of the body of the church designed by G. E. Street, R.A., of
London, and to hope that memorial contributions would continue to flow in so that the
tower and spire and some interior works could be completed late. The latter, however,
was a vain hope, and it soon became obvious that as a memorial project it was a
failure. 59

An attempt was made while the spire was in process to raise £1,600 (£700 of which
was needed to pay off the residual debt on the newly completed vicarage) through a very
ambitious bazaar, located in Thomas Cook’s Temperance Hall near the town centre; it
remained open for three days. 60 Another similar bazaar was needed in 1880 to pay off
the remaining £500 of the building expenses and to add ‘a respectable residue to the
funds of the parish’. 61

Most of the fund-raising, however, was through collections, which did not always
keep pace with the rising needs. There were times when assistant curates had to be
dispensed with because of ‘our large and increasing debt’, 62 and an exasperated
Robinson complained that ‘if the Laity were as keenly alive as they should be to the
pressing needs and the serious interests of the Church ... instead of waiting to be urged
[they would] give their help’. 63 On the whole though the vicar managed remarkably
well. Over nineteen years £44,754 was raised for the building of churches and the work
of the parish. A further £22,380 was raised for the schools. He always emphasised that
the day-to-day administration of the parish depended upon prayerful giving by people

56 LLRRO DE 1919/3, 7.7.1869.
57 Magee (1872), p.9.
58 Leicester Chronicle and Leicestershire Mercury, 3.9.1870.
59 Leicester Journal, 15.11.1872
60 Leicester Chronicle and Leicestershire Mercury, 4.5.1878.
61 Ibid., 16.10.1880.
62 St. Peter’s Parish Magazine, September 1884.
63 Ibid., January 1883.
who were urged to be ‘not merely respectable men and women’ but ‘living “evidences of Christianity” – earnestly devoted workers for Christ’. In telling parishioners that it was necessary to raise an additional sum of £1,500 annually for additional clergy, he put it into practical terms, stating that ‘if one thousand ... gave only one penny a week, this would mean a sum of £216 -13s -4d’. Later he was able to say that ‘the manner in which many of the domestic servants and poorer members ... have come forward to give is most encouraging’.

Robinson continued with the work of the parish, fulfilling the promise that Magee had seen in him, until tragedy struck in 1888. His wife Mary, ‘who had been suffering for some time from a very painful affliction, which baffled all medical skill’, died at the age of forty-two years, leaving him with five children ranging from nineteen to six years. Even with a governess, a cook and a maid, he was too distraught to be able to function properly, and was brought to the verge of a nervous breakdown. Such was his organisational ability and the faithfulness of his assistant curates, however, that he was able to say that ‘probably the actual work of the parish ... would not of itself have produced my present condition, had there not come that prolonged season of domestic anxiety and trouble’. He admitted that ‘to keep up the regular services and ministrations of the Church, and at the same time, to attempt to meet the ever-increasing demands for more buildings, more Clergy, more Layworkers, new and larger organisations, has imposed continuous mental and often much physical strain ... I have not been able to cope satisfactorily’. Nevertheless, despite Magee’s urging, he did not want to leave, and hung on until after the bishop had departed from the scene (Magee was enthroned as Archbishop of York on 17th March, 1891, but died during an influenza epidemic on 5th May) and he had remarried (to Kate Vipan, a former parishioner on 25th August, 1891, in the parish church at Whitby). During 1893 the new bishop, Dr. Mandell Creighton, arranged for him to exchange livings with a younger man, W. P. Holmes, the talented rector of Paston. Robinson served loyally in his new parish of 810 people, but missed St. Peter’s, ‘with its hearty services, with its thronging congregations’ and regretted that there were ‘plans and purposes unfilled, which years ago I set before myself as an aim’.

Toward the end of Magee’s episcopacy and Robinson’s incumbency the Anglican revival of which they were vigorous protagonists was slowing down. By the 1880s it was secularism that was gaining more ground at the expense of both Church and Dissent. Nationally overall attendances at services continued to increase in proportion to population up to 1886, but thereafter there was a relative decline. An intelligent and observant Churchman asked in 1885: ‘Is the Church really making the progress in Leicester that it should be making? Our churches certainly are much better attended now than they were 25 years ago. So far, so good. But from the recent confirmation statistics, it seems to me doubtful whether the Church really is keeping pace with the population’. Robinson at least cannot be blamed for the slowing down, for in the parish he left behind there were 4,000 people attending services in three churches each
Sunday, and 1,500 children attending Sunday services in four locations.\textsuperscript{73} St. Peter’s was a good example of the kind of artisan and working-class parish that developed in rapidly growing industrial towns in late Victorian times, though it was more successful than most, and was certainly closer than any other to Magee’s ideal.

**Personal details**

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\textsuperscript{73} *St. Peter’s Parish Magazine, passim.*