

Coleman Street's Children

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a history of Colman Street Gospel Hall (Coleman Street Chapel), 1900 - 1999

by John Barber

Published by John Barber

But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. 1Peter 2v9

Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is His reward.
Psalms 127v3

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FOREWORD

I've just spent some quality time with a venerable old aunt of mine who I've not often visited and hadn't really got to know very well.

To my amazement she turns out to have been a great missionary with tremendous stories to tell about meeting the needs of the poor and marginalised, witnessing for Christ on the streets, loving and nurturing children and young people, working alongside other Christians, church planting, and her great vision for the whole community in which she lived.

Now, I've got a passion for these things too, and she so generously opened her heart and talked so freely and honestly about her failures as well as her successes, that she began to feel like long-lost family to me, and a precious resource for the work of God's Kingdom today. What was even more exciting is that she's spent her whole life and ministry in Southend and in the South East Essex Region that God has laid on my own heart.

That's what it felt like to read this book about Coleman Street Chapel!

John Barber has not only given us an insight into one local fellowship, but opened a window on the whole work of God through the Brethren in this area. I've only lived and worked here for eight years but I have a passion for seeing every man, woman and child reached with the Gospel. If you have the same passion, when you've read this book you'll realise *we* are Coleman Street's Children!

We serve the same God and Saviour, we're charged with the same Great Commission and we've inherited all the spiritual footholds and family silver deposited here by the Father through His people at Coleman Street, through the whole Brethren Movement, and through *all* the many and various moves of His Spirit in South East Essex down the years.

Coleman Street Chapel celebrates her Centenary in the year 2000 and this book is a history of her life, but its message is much bigger than that. It is calling us to see the 170 churches in our Region, with all they represent in their provenance and history, as our aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers and sisters in the family of God. The needs and priorities of Mission in the year 2000 would be almost unrecognisable to the Christians of 1900. And whenever we read history we discover again that, yes, the past is another country and they do things differently there. But let this book challenge us, galvanise us, even shame us if necessary, into working as faithfully and as expectantly as those who have gone before us.

And for goodness sake, let's do it *together*! I believe that is the only way we might live to see the task completed.

Stuart Kimber

Rev. Stuart Kimber is Minister of Golden Cross Community Church, part of the Anglican Parish of Hawkwell. He is also Director of Regional Development for SEELF (the South East Essex Local Evangelical Fellowship.)

The elderly aunt

I have lots of children, grand children too;
brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces.
But most of them aren't with me any more:
moved or drifted away or left or died,
yet all are dear to me and to my Lord.
He keeps me here to witness to His Word.

You ask me of changes, I've seen so much;
past is better they say, or was it such?
'Tis true, the world's a different place today;
image, approach, techie stuff, vast array
and varied. Memories down the years:
laughter, joy and smiles; sorrow, pain and tears.

Thousands of children have been born or come,
and they have grown and gone, and more again.
Different characters, yes in every way,
all have their gifts and place, visions and dreams,
who stroved and stayed and prayed and thought and done.
Some have failed to grow, some great victories won.

Misunderstood, comes frustration, conflicts, wounds;
accepted and encouraged, then new planes raise.
Deeper and higher, sure should be our goal,
but all must their own walk tread in this world.
Let them choose, I have freed them so to do.
Happy to say, many have children too.

The emotions felt: glad and sad, love and fear;
hurt, heal; estrange, unite; humbled pride here.
Some have not had succour they need each day,
and things get in the way, and so they stray
like sheep; they fail to find the promised rest,
or sheer refusal to accept what's best.

You may wonder, why my Lord spares me still,
when young things come with vigour to impart.
To bare more children, isn't that His will?
He gives new life, there lies my Lord's great heart.
Gift of eternal life, to all offered free,
the Saviour's wondrous love, to you and me.

(following on from Stuart Kimber's gracious foreword)

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Chapter 1 - Whys and wherefores

Give me children, or else I die (Genesis 30v1)

A new millennium is about to dawn, with all the excitement and anxieties brought about in the wake of this event. We can also reflect on the enormity of changes in the past one hundred years. Less dramatically maybe, but the year 2000 is also the centenary of the foundation of Coleman Street Chapel, Southend, known originally, and until recently and to many still as Coleman Street Gospel Hall. (Before 1930 the street was more commonly referred to as Colman.) According to the notices given in the Southend Telegraph, meetings were held at the Plymouth Brethren, York House on 15 December 1900 but at the Open Brethren, Gospel Hall, Coleman Street on 22 December 1900. There are many in Southend, some further afield, some involved in Christian service, others not, who over the years have had associations with and have had their lives markedly influenced by what went on at Coleman Street.

What went on in the past, particularly aspects that pertain to vital religion, continue to affect what happens now and in the future, and more widely than can ever be imagined, for who can limit the hand of the Almighty? It is awareness of these things, a respect and affection for the people involved, some of whom I knew or know well, a desire to set the record straight (and it needs to be), and because I want to tell a story worth telling, that has provided the impetus and motivation for writing this book. I want to describe events accurately so all can learn from and appreciate the past, even if we do things differently these days. Given changes in culture and beliefs, which has had great impact on churches and the way they operate, as well as on society as a whole, it is important to preserve and understand something of our shared heritage, and to see more clearly the situation we find ourselves in. We ought to respect all persons, whatever influences have been brought to bear, for the Christian perspective must be to seek to bring all into the fullness of Christ. By understanding better each person's particular world, we might be better able to do this. The importance of Christ's prayer for unity amongst His followers (John 17) is paramount. Notwithstanding important doctrinal differences, it seems that much disunity among Christians arises from not respecting the different traditions and positions represented and failing to distinguish between what is important and what is not. We should long for the day when the real followers of Christ truly unite in His cause.

When I declared my intention to write this book, some were curious as to my intentions. Like many similar works, Coleman Street has declined since its heyday, certainly numerically. This brings me to a book written by the late Leonard Ladd: *Seventy Years of Gospel Witness - the story of Coleman Street Gospel Hall and its founder Mr. William Iles (Senior)*. William Iles was also his grandfather and it is evident Mr Ladd wrote from a standpoint of admiration. Sadly much of the decline has taken place since that book was written. Whilst recognising that there are negative aspects, there has been and still is much that is positive and evidence of God's gracious and providential hand over the years. I have referred to Mr Ladd's book extensively. Remarkably, there is nothing in that book which gave away the author's identity. It was only quite recently that I discovered this to be Leonard Ladd. For those who knew him, this would be seen as a typical act of a man who was self-effacing, not wanting our attention to be focused on men, but rather toward the God he served. Therein lie both the strength and limitation of that book: strength because it sought primarily to see the hand of God in His dealings with Coleman Street; but limitation also, at least from an historian's point of view, because it did not tell the whole story, although the book itself was of necessity short.

Leonard Ladd represented much that was good and wholesome about Coleman Street. He was a kindly, gentle, humble and gracious man who feared and loved his God, a man of honour and integrity who, like many, quietly and diligently went about his regular business (he was a grocer). In a recent age he would have been well described as a Christian gentleman. When I was a disaffected teenager, coming into Coleman Street via the Young People's work, Mr Ladd would make a point of greeting me and speaking a word of encouragement. His courtesy, respect and concern was the attitude he had to people generally. And there were many like Mr Ladd who simply wanted to follow their Lord in the right way. I would not want to make these people out to be better than they were, for like us all they had their faults and limitations, yet their memory does bring with it a certain fondness and fragrance. It is to the memory of such people, many of whom have long since died, that I would dedicate this book. And not to these alone, but to current and future generations who carry their torch, seeking to know and make known the Lord Jesus Christ according to the situation in which they find themselves, even be this ever so different from what it was in olden times.

Writing history should be about painstaking research, presenting facts clearly, telling the story impartially, describing all that is significant, warts and all. I apologise in advance for errors, although I have tried hard to get the facts right. And if I omit what ought to be written, or misrepresent some aspect, or write what ought to be left out, then I accept all blame. I have sought, probably unsuccessfully, not to over preach or interpret events, since I see my role as primarily that of a faithful recorder and presenter of the relevant facts, and it is up to others to make what they will of them. Nevertheless, I would want and hope readers will allow for my particular preferences, beliefs and interests and desire to appeal to a wider audience. I want to cover different aspects: anecdotal, biographical, historical, religious and social, but especially the spiritual. Perhaps I have gone too deep regarding certain events and not deep enough regarding others. I have been mindful to exercise scholarly constraint, being conscious of the need to be meticulous and objective when dealing with the facts, and to be theologically accurate and Biblically sound; yet neither academia nor theologians are my principal targets. Whilst I have in mind thinkers, movers and shakers, I especially want to write for ordinary people. Yet I realise, by being all things to all men one could end up being nothing to anyone.

I am also mindful that all writers, without exception, begin with a set of beliefs, pre-suppositions and preoccupations, including those of the society and age in which they live, which cannot fail to influence what is written. Even the criterion whereby material is selected inevitably reflects what the writer deems important. Some may be disappointed that I have not provided a more comprehensive chronology of events, dates and offices held or discussed buildings, but I am not overly interested in such matters, for what interests me is what made the people tick and what is spiritually significant. For me it would be impossible to write as a dispassionate outsider. What went on in the past, is going on now, or may go on in the future, concerns me deeply and undoubtedly influences what follows. I write from the standpoint of a Christian believer, for if that were not the case I can hardly conceive how I would have had the desire or acumen to approach this task. Finally, I write as one who has himself been deeply affected by Coleman Street, and who is glad to be one of "Coleman Street's Children". I am conscious that my desire to find out more about my spiritual roots, coupled with an interest in historical research, was the main driving force behind my writing this book in the first place. With all these things in mind I would ask for the reader's forbearance and understanding.

Coleman Street's Children

For many still alive Coleman Street brings back lots of happy memories; and there are sad memories, hurts and grievances also, as well as disappointment that more was not achieved, both in personal and Chapel lives. I know such to be true because of what people have told me. We must not bask in past glories; we ought not bear past grudges, and we cannot undo past failings; but we ought to heed the past and live to make a better future, seeking to bring about reconciliation and healing in the present and get on with the business God has given us to do. I have sought to respect the different points of view represented and personal privacy, and to maintain careful balance, fairness and independence. Some happenings and opinions are best left unsaid. Some concerns are family matters, best kept within the family. Sometimes it serves little purpose to bring up certain things in the past; and I do not want to pander to the all too human desire to be interested in others' failures. But I have not shunned from considering less savoury episodes if it helps to provide understanding, realising that all the good which has been achieved these past one hundred years has been due to God's grace.

God is working today, often using different methods and in situations different from what our spiritual forefathers experienced or envisaged; indeed it has always been so. There is no point harking back to some golden age or dreaming of what might have been or ought to be. Much of the past contains that which is banal or of little positive spiritual value. What matters is what God is doing now and our willingness to get involved, with the same trust in and obedience to God as was exercised by those who established the work at Coleman Street all those years ago. This book has not been easy to write; for one thing, I feared producing something mediocre or unbalanced, and not doing the subject justice that is warranted. I therefore appreciate all those close to me, especially my wife Jolly, who have advised and encouraged, and to my God who, despite all my failings, is so incredibly gracious.

I realise I have raised an expectation in some and many others have put themselves out to give me information. I do not want to let anyone down. Whilst fascinated with and respecting the past, I am more concerned to convey something which is real and relevant. I prefer to disturb rather than present a cosy homily or indulge in an over-sentimental view of what went on. Yet, besides wanting to write something that will interest, I want readers to be encouraged and challenged. At the same time, being aware that many local church historical accounts may be perceived to be dull or uninteresting, I would like to present something which will fascinate and stir the reader. I feel too, that when it comes to history, we need to balance respecting the past and its traditions with the need to grasp the tremendous opportunities there are all around us, even if that means doing things differently, mindful that we should be primarily (maybe solely) bound by the Spirit and the Word, and not by what went on in the past.

In my research, I have had access to letters, personal diaries, newspaper and journal extracts, meeting minutes; and this has helped immensely. Most past members have not been good at recording events. Chapel records are poor compared with those found in some places. Some have been lost; and important papers were stolen when the safe which hosted them was blown open, when the Iles' contracting business premises was burgled, nearly fifty years back. There are inevitably big gaps impossible to fill and important insights no longer available. I would have loved to have observed persons and events in the very early days, but have to be content with the evidence at my disposal. But, I am thankful for those who have put my way various documentary material, including photos, of which a small selection are included in this book.

Of course there are the reminiscences of older members and associates, and these have proved

very useful, especially in helping to fill those gaps and providing verification, although one is aware of the limitations when relying on personal memories, owing to their subjective nature. Yet personal memories have played a major part in the writing of this book, although I have generally sought to use these in conjunction with written material and the memories of others. I am conscious that one major weakness is that by only having access to the memories of a fraction of those who knew something of, or were involved with, past events that I may fail to give a true balance. I am grateful to so many who have contributed in so many ways, for without this the book could never have been written. It has been a great privilege to be party to the memories and thoughts of many. I realise several have trusted my discretion and integrity in sensitively using the information that they have provided, and this I fully intend to do.

First and foremost, I would mention Dorothy Coker, who has been a most willing and capable research assistant. Her thoroughness and help in getting hold of and providing me with many useful details and high quality information, and generally keeping me on my toes, has been crucial. Dorothy has kindly lent me the personal diaries and records of her father, the late Walter Jiggins, which provided useful background to what went on. Mr Jiggins is still fondly remembered as another of God's gentlemen, one of upright character, very correct and discreet in his dealings, diligent in service, able to keep his own counsel whilst others would let it be known what they felt or knew. Sadly, I knew him only a little and that was in his later years when he was quite old and physically frail. He was one adept at making the switch from boiler suit (for he ran a small cycle repair business) to "tip top" dress, starch collar and all. He served Coleman Street for much of our period as an elder, a local preacher, young people's Bible class leader and Sunday school superintendent.

Then there are two current members of Coleman Street. Winston Chilcraft has provided important information concerning other local Brethren assemblies, pertinent since in the past Coleman Street has been involved with all of them. He has looked over the various iterations of the text, providing valuable comments, acting as a springboard for ideas, correcting my deficient grammar, and helping me to understand something more of the "Brethren mind set". Also, I am grateful for the support of Geoffrey Hayman, who bears much of the responsibility for the work at Coleman Street these days and has done as much as any to ensure the work continues today. Geoff (with his wife Valerie) has provided much valuable information concerning the more recent past and has afforded me every co-operation in writing this book.

Then there are two older, wiser (Plymouth) brothers, whose counsel is valued: Gwyn Jordan and Harold Rowdon. Harold, who has written and edited several books, is well qualified as a reviewer and kindly went through one of my later drafts of the manuscript, pointing out many areas for improvement in style. There are so many others to thank, particularly past members and those in other local churches, who have gone out their way to provide valuable details. I would especially cite the valuable glimpses of the more distant past given by Howard Clinch, who sadly has since died, and of Beryl Jones, daughter of Leonard Ladd. I should mention Matthew Wilson, aged 5, who helped to do one drawing. It seemed appropriate for a member of the Sunday School to contribute to "Coleman Street's Children". Also, I am grateful for Rev. Stuart Kimber for giving a non Brethren perspective and kindly writing the foreword and to Paul Lewis for his help in the type setting and printing of this book.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to David and Marion Iles. David is one of the great

grandsons of the “founder”, and has been so helpful in providing access to important archival evidence, particularly oversight minutes and correspondence. David and Marion have openly and graciously shared their reminiscences of the Chapel, where they have been so closely involved for so many years. The Iles family, for most of our period, has played a prominent part in Chapel life, and has been actively involved in its leadership. For some, Coleman Street and the Iles family are inextricably linked. When David and Marion left in 1991, it was an end to a long line of Iles’ representation. The role of the “founder”, Mr William Iles (senior), is pivotal to our story, even though others have also played important parts, particularly the godly, simple (long forgotten) folk who helped establish the work all those years ago. William Iles was one of those outstanding characters who deeply impact the lives of those around them. Many years later, one of his former construction employees met David and, on discovering who he was, recounted how on one occasion his old employer stopped him, along with some others, from undertaking a particularly hazardous operation concerning the digging of a sewer in Sutton Road. William Iles told them to move away, for he would complete the job, telling his men *if I die I am going to heaven, if you die you are going to hell*.

The matter of review of various iterations (and there have been several) of the manuscript has been vital. I have been impressed at the diligence and skill with which reviewers have gone about this. The final version, this book, is a result of individuals painstakingly going through earlier drafts and challenging me on mistakes, omissions, sensitive areas and ways to improve. I am glad they have, even though this has resulted in a lot of extra work; and often I have had to modify a view, or add, change or remove text. But this could only result in a better end product. I am still not entirely satisfied, but the time has come to turn off the computer, print and publish, including grammar errors! Many of my reviewers have themselves been closely involved with Coleman Street, and inevitably they have strong views about what is important and what is not, and of course I have to respect this. There are some issues where reviewers and other contributors differ in their recollection and interpretation of events. Partly for that reason, I have tried hard to refrain from giving anything other than a strictly neutral view on any contentious matter, such as inter-church co-operation, the Charismatic Movement, the aptness of traditional or progressive outlooks to Brethren assembly life, or what is or is not spiritually significant. The marvellous thing is that, in spite of the diversity of contributions, there has also been a remarkable consensus and harmony, and this I have tried to convey.

Every comment made has been addressed in one way or another. Right to very end I have received additional detail concerning the past, and this has led to a consideration of whether or not a change is needed to the text. In the majority of cases the comments I have received have resulted in some change. I am sure there is still room for improvement, and there are still things of significance which I have left out. Only eternity will reveal the true importance of what happened in the past. I have a feeling all of us will be surprised concerning those things that went on, not recalled, but which the Lord considered significant, as well as those things thought important but were not. Some have suggested that I should aim to make the book available to coincide with Coleman Street’s 100th anniversary, in November 2000 (DV), but I am keen for it to be launched as soon as possible. Not only do I want to get on with my next project but I believe the message of this book is important and addresses some of the needs of our times. With it comes the prayer that the book will help to re-vitalise spiritual life.

I have quoted extensively, and these generally appear as given, including grammatical errors,

in *italics*. I have linked quotations or imported material to their sources, although occasionally I omit naming the source where anonymity was requested or prudent to do so. I have parted from the academic convention of providing detailed foot notes, for example for references, as I felt this might be daunting. Titles of books and papers, referred to, are underlined. Regarding whether to use Coleman (or Colman) Street Chapel (or Gospel Hall), I have opted mostly for Coleman Street, because that is how it is referred to these days. Other times I use Coleman Street Chapel, as that is the official designation. Prior to 1983 it was called Coleman (or Colman) Street Gospel Hall. It was changed, after much deliberation, to help attract outsiders in. On the few times when this is appropriate, I have used the earlier form, or just Hall.

Regarding names, I generally used the form John Smith, although in the past such would have often been referred to as our brother Mr. John Smith. As for older members, who I knew, I generally addressed them as Mr Smith out of respect, although with some I used first names, as society's conventions or my relationship allowed. Regarding dates, I have usually adopted the form 31 August 1999, although in the past this was often written as August 31st 1999. Mindful of sensibilities of past members, desirous to avoid all forms of religiosity, I have used the terms they used, where applicable; for example "assembly", "meeting", "address", instead of "church", "service", "sermon"; yet understanding meanings is what matters, and making such distinctions have tended to bother Coleman Street members less than some Brethren. I have otherwise tried to avoid "Brethren-speak", and remained circumspect in use of language. I make no apologies for trying to make use of the rich diversity of the English language. Bible quotations are from the Authorised Version, as this was the one mostly favoured in the past. In some of these aspects, I may be in a "no win" situation and could upset modern sensibilities.

One abiding of one good friend of Coleman Street of many years standing, W.W.Vellacott, a preacher, whose earliest engagements included some at the Hall, a farmer and a poet, well known and respected in Essex, concerns Moses Abbott, who for many years served as a robust and forthright policeman. Apparently a section of Southend Council wished to place an order for the demolition of the Hall. This probably took place during the mid sixties when Southend town centre underwent considerable re-development, with many properties surrounding Coleman Street Gospel Hall pulled down as a consequence. Mr. Abbott, undaunted, volunteered to appeal against this order. *In our chapel*, he told the councillors, *men and women, boys and girls have found Christ and eternal life. Surely this raises Coleman Street Gospel Hall to a significant priority.* Coleman Street Chapel still stands. Whatever the past shortcomings or future uncertainties, Mr Abbott's words ring true.

Insofar as there has been a work of God is what matters most. It is to serve God and the people why the Chapel has any legitimate reason to exist. The thought of small, sometimes struggling, evangelical works, of which Coleman Street Chapel must be considered these days one of many, might strike some with sadness or pathos, even pitiable. But it is important to understand the concerns and motivation which keep the protagonists going, even if at times these may feel discouraged and perceive themselves as part of a dwindling remnant. With such I particularly empathise, but not without hope, for whatever we do "in the Lord" will not be in vain. It is such folk I especially have in mind when writing, as well as those who want to know what God has done in the past and have a concern to see His work prosper in our day.

Chapter 2 - Ancestors and Inheritors

I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ (Romans 1v16)

With little flourish of trumpets, the “open” section of the Plymouth Brethren have transferred their local meeting place from York House, High Street, to new and more commodious premises in Coleman Street, with the euphonious appellation of the Gospel Hall. Thus begins a article entitled “A new home for Plymouth Brethren in the Borough”, contained in the Southend Standard of 28 December 1900. The writer, along with many commentators over the years the movement had being going, then went some way to misrepresent what the “Plymouth Brethren” really did believe.

This writer credits the origins of the “Plymouth Brethren” to one Irish Episcopalian clergyman, Rev. J.N.Darby, who *induced many of the inhabitants of Plymouth to associate themselves with him for the promulgation of his opinions.* Amongst other questionable statements made, he affirmed that *the theological views of the Brethren differ very considerably from those held by Evangelical Protestants.* One of the distinctive doctrines was to consider official ministry as denying the *spiritual priesthood of all believers.* He also went on to describe the notion of the open meeting and other practices. He considered the Brethren believed *their mission is not to the heathen, but to the “awakened” in the churches,* and that good works when practised were *limited to their actual membership or regular attendants at the public services.* Whilst some of his writing revealed that the reporter misunderstood the Brethren, much of his description regarding the beliefs and practices specific to Coleman Street at least had an element of truth.

We need to look more closely at who the “Plymouth Brethren” are, in particular their beliefs and practices, and to explore to what extent Coleman Street can be deemed to be representative of that movement, in order to help our understanding why Coleman Street believed and acted as they did. For there has continued to be much misunderstanding and ignorance as to what the “Plymouth Brethren” have stood for in the past, and it is important to put the record straight. Even the well-respected contemporary evangelical writer, David Bebbington, in his popular and generally excellent book Evangelicalism in Modern Britain, 1730s - 1980s, has somewhat dismissively branded the Brethren as *another adventist sect.*

The need to redress the balance is perhaps more necessary given the modern tendency for Brethren assemblies to become more accommodating toward other Christian traditions and less resolute as to the importance of those aspects which made the Brethren Movement so distinctive in the past. The cohesion that once existed, achieved for example through having shared ideals; recognised, authoritative Bible teachers and regular conferences, now does so to a much lesser extent. There has often been a tendency to dismiss, ignore or apologise for the past. At the same time many of the distinctive Brethren principles have become increasingly accepted and adopted by churches in many denominations as well as the new charismatic style churches. This can be partly attributed to the earlier pioneering work of the Brethren.

In his book, David Bebbington identified the following as being the central and distinctive evangelical beliefs: conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism. In the main Brethren believers attach great importance to the belief that lives needed to be changed through a personal commitment to Christ (conversionism), are dedicated in their efforts to

make this so (activism), seek to understand and be subject to all the tenets of Holy Scripture (biblicism), and attach considerable importance to the death of Christ on the cross (crucicentrism). On that premise the Brethren should be deemed as certainly evangelical.

But who then are the Brethren? The writer above identifies J.N.Darby as the founder, and the Plymouth meeting he supposedly founded, as where it all began. In fact others were also prominent and the teachings can hardly be dismissed merely as Darby's "opinions". Also, similar meetings took place prior to and at same time as the one in Plymouth, notably in Dublin (around 1828). Many of the early Brethren leaders came from other churches, from such diverse groups as Anglican clergymen, Nonconformist ministers, and Quakers. At their best, they had a passionate desire to be true to the scriptures, live lives uncorrupted by the world, be led by the Spirit, practise a "no frills attached" form of corporate worship, uphold the spiritual priesthood of all believers and follow the example of the Early Church.

To an extent the Brethren, at least in their early days, were a product of the times they lived in. They were reacting against what they saw as compromise and corruption within the Establishment and Dissent alike. They, like many, particularly among the ruling classes (and many of its leaders were from the upper classes), were fearful of the mood of revolution and radicalism which was in the air, and had a profound sense of the growing tide of evil. There was within the movement a strong sense of romanticism, which in other manifestations was to profoundly affect the arts. This cult of sensibility, of other worldliness and nostalgia for the past contrasted to the cult of reason which was associated with the Enlightenment that preceded it, has continued to affect western thinking ever since. They felt beholden to uphold those very things which had been compromised. For the Brethren, as with the Tractarian (or Oxford) Movement, in the Church of England, and to some extent the Irvingites, (a forerunner to the modern Charismatic Movement), which all emerged around the same time, their vision was for a purified, visibly united church, which alone could combat this deeply held sense of a growing tide of evil and promote a more vigorous brand of Christianity.

Around 1845 the Brethren suffered a split, nominally over an issue of doctrine relating to the humanity of Christ and with whom it was acceptable to associate for the purpose of Christian fellowship. As with many other splits personal differences played a significant part. It began at Plymouth (in 1845) where a thriving Brethren congregation had been built up. The dispute spread to the Bethesda meeting Bristol (in 1848), where one George Müller of founding orphanages and "living by faith" fame ministered, and then beyond to other Brethren meetings. The question which caused so much consternation was whether believers should associate with those who themselves were associating with those who adhered to false teachings (which the Bethesda meeting was accused of doing).

Entrenched positions were taken on what has been referred to as the "Bethesda question". The resultant split led to "Open" and the "Closed" (or "Exclusive") groups of Brethren, each holding differing views. The Brethren Biblical scholar, the late F.F.Bruce, has suggested that there were two particular strands of teaching, held in some sort of tension, in Brethrenism up to 1845, both of which related to the principle of Christian unity: separation from evil, and the common life of the family of God. Both groups of Brethren were keen on Christian unity, but not at any cost, and then only with true believers. Although it may be over-simplistic to say so, the "Closed" group tended to emphasise the separation from evil aspect whereas the "Open" group emphasised the common life of the family of God. After the split the different

groups went separate ways, although loose links would often be maintained thereafter.

Both groups of “Brethren” have reacted against being labelled as a denomination. Even the report accompanying the 1851 Religious Census recognised that “Brethren” was more a description of how its members saw their relationship to one another, rather than the name given to a denomination. Rather than being yet another sect, their existence was a reaction against a sectarian spirit and a yearning for the true Church of Christ to be visibly one.

The Brethren have tended not to attach much importance to self-publicity or defending their position to outsiders. Furthermore, they were acutely aware they were *ambassadors for Christ* (1Corinthians 5v20), *not of the world* (John 17v16), and *strangers and pilgrims on the earth* (Hebrews 11v13). They felt beholden not to be *yoked with unbelievers* and to *come out from them and be ye separate* (2Corinthians 6vv14,17). Whilst these days a more pragmatic and outgoing approach can often be discerned, there has often been a tendency in the past to withdraw from worldly affairs, other than fulfilling obligations to governing authorities, and to distance themselves from other churches, which they felt had compromised their testimony. All this may help to account for the suspicion with which they have often been held and the misrepresentation from some non-Brethren quarters, both Christian and other.

The “Closed” group was to subsequently suffer further splits, often over what appears to be some obscure point of doctrine or personality clash, and on occasions to fall into disrepute through its narrowness and hostility toward outsiders, as well as the excesses of some of its leaders. Sections of the “Closed” group tended to insist that adherents adopt specific teachings and lifestyles, supposedly determined by the whole body, although in reality as laid down by one or more dominant persons. They tended to have little to do with those who did not believe and act as they did. There was an insistence on strong links and inter-dependence between the different meetings. Notwithstanding, there can often be found amongst its ranks a concern for Biblical holiness, fidelity to the Word of God and sound ecclesiological practices and order, as well as deep devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ. The devotional writings of some of the “Closed” Brethren of the nineteenth century are felt by many to contain particularly profound and sublime Biblical insights and thoughts concerning Christ, which are rarely surpassed.

The “Open” group, although strict by many standards, tended to be more accommodating toward Christians holding different views, particularly when these were deemed not to be essential for salvation. They often associated with different denominations for the purpose of evangelistic outreach. They advocated that each assembly should have autonomy over its own affairs. Despite this freedom to determine one’s own affairs, links and interactions between the various “Open” assemblies tended to be strong. Certain distinctive beliefs and practices could often be discerned amongst such meetings. The “Open” group (and to an extent the “Closed” group also) tended to benefit from the revivals and mission activity which took place in the second half of the nineteenth century, and were perhaps as much in tune as any other evangelical group of the time to the rapid social changes then taking place. No doubt the founding of Coleman Street Gospel Hall would have been an indirect result of such efforts.

As a consequence of this missionary enterprise the Open Brethren experienced significant growth during the latter part of the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth, and were active in mission, both at home and overseas. The extraordinary explosion in missionary enterprise during that period was due, to a significant extent, to the contribution of Brethren

missionaries, more than is commonly recognised. The *Echoes'* multi-volume publication on the history of Brethren missions, That The World May Know, contains plenteous witness to this fact. (*Echoes of Service* are a Brethren agency, based in Bath, which has for 150 years helped channel support to numerous overseas Brethren missionaries, who were commended from their local assemblies. Coleman Street has long dealt with the "Brethren at Bath".)

In recent times a number of groups with roots in the Open Brethren tradition have thrown off this label altogether and have pursued distinct identities, sometimes being aligned more with other evangelical, charismatic, or community focus type groups. Other groups have fought to hang on to many of these distinctive practices, with varying degrees of success. However, this is not the place to elaborate further on the history and various aspects of the Brethren movement, and we must turn our attention back to Coleman Street. The author would recommend Harold Rowdon's Origins of the Brethren and Roy Coad's History of the Brethren Movement as excellent sources of general information concerning the Open Brethren, but sadly both these works are now out of print and there seems little else around to fill this gap. Coleman Street Chapel has always been firmly rooted in the Open tradition.

One of the hallmarks of the Open Brethren has often been its common understanding of what represents important sound doctrine. They would concur with most of the commonly held evangelical beliefs. Whilst differing regarding emphasis and on some, usually minor points, of doctrine, they would largely subscribe to what is found in writings as diverse as Basic Christianity by John Stott, Mere Christianity by C.S.Lewis, the Westminster Confession of Faith, the ancient creeds and catechisms of the church, the Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England, and more recently, the *Alpha* course material. Unlike most of the denominations, which over the years have frequently wavered from upholding the important Bible doctrines and tenets of faith, which Brethren consider to be essential, (as well as deviating from their own articles of faith), the Brethren have mostly held firm. Such doctrines include: salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone; the uniqueness of Christ who is truly God and truly man; His death and resurrection; the need to live holy lives with the help of the Holy Spirit; the imperative of preaching the gospel to all nations; a belief in all of the Bible, which is the Word of God; the realities of Heaven and Hell for the saved and lost respectively; and the imminent personal return of the Lord Jesus Christ to this earth in power and glory.

And not only on doctrinal matters, such as given in Coleman Street's trust deed, stated later in this chapter, but also on what constitutes New Testament assembly principles. Part of the Brethren tradition was to model their beliefs and practices on those of the early church, which *continued stedfastly in the apostle's doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread and in prayers* (Acts 2v42), although it is unlikely that in the main they saw restoring the New Testament pattern of apostles and prophets or the more spectacular spiritual gifts as something feasible or even desirable. As a consequence, a number of Brethren distinctive beliefs and practices (compared with those held by some of the denominations) have arisen. Indeed, such would have been the consensus existing amongst Brethren assemblies, that at one time one could visit an assembly in many places in the world and expect to see most of those aspects upheld, although nowadays there is more variation in what is believed and practised. A fascinating study of what the early Brethren believed concerning the doctrine of the church can be found in: The Ecclesiology of the Early Plymouth Brethren, James Callahan, 1996. Further consideration of what these distinctive beliefs and practices are, and in particular how these have been worked in the life of Coleman Street Chapel, can be found in Chapter 6.

One might suggest that, these days, many Open Brethren could be deemed either traditional or progressive. I use the term traditionalist to refer to those Brethren who have sought to maintain those assembly principles and practices which have long been widely accepted. The progressives have often looked beyond the Brethren Movement for their inspiration and have sought to accommodate other church traditions where deemed appropriate. The strength of the traditionalists may be they have sought to adhere to New Testament principles when all around there is compromise; and their weakness may be a refusal to recognise what God is doing outside their small circle and their emphasis on doctrine at the expense of life. The strength of the progressives may be their willingness to make changes when necessary and accommodate the good things in other traditions; and their weakness may be they have abandoned too readily the good things of the past and have compromised doctrinal soundness.

Because of the notion of Open Brethren assembly autonomy, each assembly will adopt whatever position it sees fit. Although there are eminent Brethren teachers, who are often deferred to on doctrinal matters, one suspects there is a greater diversity in their teaching of what constitutes best assembly practice than that which at one time existed. These days, to an extent, assemblies will associate with those teachers who are most closely aligned to their own outlook. Examples of what might be deemed as more traditional Brethren teaching can be found in publications such as those emanating from *Precious Seed*. Examples of what might be deemed as more progressive Brethren teaching can be found in publications, such as those emanating from *Partnership*. But there is still much common ground between the two, even though one may sense that there is a gap and it is difficult to see how this will be closed.

It has been construed that Coleman Street is somewhere near the middle, taking good and bad from either camp. Certainly, there is reason to believe that in the past Coleman Street would have been deemed lax or liberal by some of its neighbours. One contributor recalls a veteran, elderly, local, lady believer, who considered Coleman Street Gospel Hall to be nigh to a variety hall. Perhaps the practice of associating with other churches, a somewhat patriarchal attitude within the oversight, a more tolerant outlook on less essential matters, and inviting non-Brethren preachers (especially after 1970), meant some practices deemed important by more traditional Brethren were not sufficiently upheld. Quite likely, some more traditional Brethren pundits would have considered Coleman Street defective in its understanding of assembly principles. Yet, in the main, it has been accepted as a bona fide Open Brethren assembly and has had good relationships with many other assemblies over the years.

One theological aside is that Coleman Street has attracted in the past preachers who were interested in Bible prophecy, often basing their views on those of J.N.Darby concerning dispensational pre-millennialism, i.e. God deals with mankind in different ways in different epochs and Christ will come secretly to take his people prior to the Great Tribulation and then return in glory with His saints to establish His millennial rule on Earth. This has for a long time been orthodox teaching for many (but not all) Open as well as Closed Brethren. Even so, members in the past were usually not pressured to accept such a dogmatic interpretation and tolerance was maintained. Yet the expectation of the imminent return of the Lord, that almost all held, was an essential part of Coleman Street as well as Brethren teaching (especially in the early days) and would partly explain their desire to evangelise and be personally prepared for that coming, and not be diverted by undertaking what were perceived as less essential tasks, such as maintaining records of what they were doing or engaging in activities which

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were not specifically Gospel related. But to give a proper balance, Brethren believers have recognised that they needed *to love thy neighbour as thyself*. They have often been involved in ministries of compassion, many of which required longer term strategic planning. These included the setting up orphanages, hospitals and schools, in the UK, but especially overseas. Coleman Street has supported many of these ministries in the past.

Coleman Street has tended to uphold traditional Brethren belief and practices, but more significantly has sought to be faithful to the teachings of the Bible, although some have felt it has sometimes lacked spiritual life. Priority has generally been given to supporting other Brethren assemblies, missions and organisations. Yet links to other denominations have been maintained over the years, and Coleman Street has frequently co-operated with other groups for the purpose of Gospel outreach. Coleman Street has had a history of good relations and common purpose with the Peculiar People, particularly, recently with the nearby Southend Evangelical Church. This was previously at Lambert Street, but the church had to be pulled down as part of the town redevelopment. There was a move in the eighties to combine the two churches, especially as both had reduced numerically, and build a centre on derelict land (on which Queensway surgery now stands), to provide facilities to serve the local community, including a nursery school and sheltered accommodation for the elderly. In the end the obstacles proved to be too many. The organisational set-up of the Peculiars would have meant Coleman Street Chapel being incorporated into that set-up, which was deemed unacceptable.

Earlier on in the century the Peculiars had begun to wane, some of whom would be drawn into the ranks of the Brethren. A few joined from Lambert Street, through marriage, but some were attracted by Coleman Street's more open style. William Heddle, son of the famous Bishop Heddle of the Peculiars, and proprietor of Heddle's Cash Clothing Store in the High Street, joined Coleman Street from the Peculiars, mainly because he came to see the importance of believers baptism and the regular observance of the Lord's Supper. Alf Prentice, and members of his family, who played an active part in Chapel life, also joined from the Peculiars. In the main, Coleman Street did not share the Peculiars pacifist sentiments, practise divine healing to anywhere near the same extent, or have such an authoritarian structure.

Cordial relations have been maintained with many other evangelical churches, although Coleman Street has maintained an independent existence, except in the case of special meetings and outreaches. Links would also have been maintained by virtue of Coleman Street's support for one or other inter- or non-denominational organisation. *Scripture Union, CSSM, Covenanters, Crusaders, Gideons, London City Mission, Scripture Gift Mission, The Bible Society, Tearfund, Christian Aid, The Leprosy Mission, Youth for Christ, Operation Mobilisation* and *SASRA* are some non-Brethren organisations supported over the years. Individuals within Coleman Street have long maintained strong, close ties of fellowship with those representing many different denominations. The current trend for more togetherness and co-operation amongst churches, manifested for example in the area by the activities of *South East Essex Local Evangelical Fellowship (SELEEF)* and nationally in events such as *Spring Harvest*, has affected Coleman Street, at least a little. Finally, looking over the years, when members did transfer to or from other churches it is the Baptists who top the list.

For Coleman Street, links to other churches can be demonstrated by the fact that many of the visiting preachers over the years have represented many of the main evangelical groups and

this continues to be the case, although some might comment this has been to the detriment of encouraging local ministry and upholding Brethren principles. The main stipulation for inviting outside preachers has been that these were sound in doctrine and to an extent gifted in preaching. The Chapel would have felt most comfortable working with those who shared their position concerning essential doctrines and practices, and would have looked with some suspicion on those who did not meet these criteria. Whilst the principle of unity based on union with Christ was recognised, the notion of soundness of doctrine has never been far away, even though this was mostly related to the important tenets of faith. There has usually been a certain amount of tolerance to differences in beliefs, provided the basics were held.

Consequently, there has been a tendency to view with some suspicion non-evangelical groups, in particular those who hold liberal views concerning scripture, as well as the Ecumenical Movement, and to a certain extent Pentecostals and Charismatics. A noticeable trend toward the end of the millennium is that whilst church attendance may have dropped, more of the churches have become evangelical (often with a charismatic and perhaps more liberal flavour) and new churches with these tendencies have sprung up. In recent years, *Southend Christian Fellowship* and *Southend Vineyard* have started up, both within a mile of the Chapel, sharing many of Coleman Street's evangelical beliefs, although differing to some extent in their outlook and practices. Whilst some at Coleman Street have reservations regarding some beliefs and practices held, they would feel more in common with such churches in terms of preaching the Gospel of Salvation, than with the more liberal spirit that existed not so long ago. Finally, whilst tending not to be as vehemently anti-Roman Catholic as some evangelicals are, the distinctive Catholic (as opposed to Protestant) beliefs have never found much acceptance at Coleman Street or at any other orthodox Brethren assembly.

As one might expect, links have tended to be strongest with other Open Assemblies. For a long time the various assemblies in the Southend area did much to support one another, not least in attending each other's special events, although these days such co-operation seems less. For some years during and just after the Second World War there were joint oversight meetings involving Coleman Street, Shoebury and Alexander. There seemed to be a significant amount of interchange on ministerial and pastoral matters, for example when someone associated with one assembly wanted to join another or when a new ministry was started. At the same time care was generally taken not to interfere with the running of other assemblies and the "Open" principle of local church autonomy was well respected.

Coleman Street also played a significant part in bringing these other assemblies and missions into being, as will be discussed later, which would also help explain why there were such close ties subsequently. Indeed today these links still exist although one senses a greater degree of independence and diverging of paths than before and that links are closer with some assemblies than with others. The term "assembly" (ekklesia - εκκλησία) has tended to be favoured in Brethren circles, as referring to a localized gathering of Christian believers, eliminating the conflicting connotations associated with the word "church". These days, Coleman Street tends not to be too bothered about using "correct" terms. Like many of the progressive assemblies, they feel it is more important to speak language more easily recognised on the street, and concentrate on the main issues of bringing the Christian message.

Most Open Brethren distinctive beliefs and practices would have been seen at Coleman Street

as can be seen in the **Doctrines and Practices taken from the Trust Deed of Coleman Street**, which has many similarities to many of the other evangelical statements of faith:

Doctrines:

1. The Divine Verbal Inspiration Authority and Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures.
2. The Unity of the Godhead with the distinction of Persons in that Unity namely the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit to whom equal honour is due.
3. a. That the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, truly became man being begotten of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.
b. That His death was a sacrifice to God and a propitiation for the remission of sins.
c. That He was raised from the dead.
d. That He ascended to the Right Hand of God and is now the All-sufficient High Priest of His people.
e. That He will come again to receive them unto Himself and to set up His kingdom.
4. That in consequence of the fall of Adam man become 'lost' 'without strength' and 'against God'.
5. The need of the Holy Spirit's work in regeneration and sanctification.
6. a. That the Justification of the sinner before God is by faith alone.
b. That every justified one is also born of God.
c. That such new birth results in and is made evident by holiness of life and good works.
7. a. That at death the spirit of man does not cease to exist or become unconscious.
b. That the dead will be raised either to life or to condemnation and that the blessedness of the righteous and the punishment of the unrighteous will alike be eternal.

Practices:

8. The customary observances of the ordinance of Believers' Baptism by immersion on personal confession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and the commemoration of the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week in so far as circumstances allow.
9. The reception at the Lord's Table of all Believers known to be sound in faith and godly in life.
10. The conducting of meetings for worship under the guidance of the Holy Spirit with the opportunity for the exercise in the assembly of all true gifts for edification subject to the Lordship of Christ.
11. The ordinary activities of an assembly of Believers such as Gospel Work, Sunday School, Young People's Meetings and

such other purposes approved of by the Trustees for the time being.

It could be said that one can learn something about what a church stands for by surveying the premises where it meets. Although Coleman Street would be the first to say the church is not a building, for to put it in Biblical perspective it comprises those who follow Christ, who, individually and collectively, are the habitation of God's Holy Spirit. In looking at the building, certainly the outside does have a chapel look about it. Indeed, some would say it has some architectural merit, evidenced by the fact it is now a Grade 3 listed building. But there would be little in the inside to show it to be a religious establishment other than the expected quota of Bibles, hymn books, and religious literature. There are of course many of those things present that are normal these days in comparable premises: cloakrooms, toilets, kitchen, lounge area, meeting areas for young people's and other groups. But concerning the part of the building where the main worship services are held, there is little of the religious symbols one might expect to see in a church, not even a cross.

For many of the early Brethren there would have been an aversion to such things as detracting from the person of Christ. Indeed the title Gospel Hall implies the main consideration is the Gospel of Christ, the power of God unto salvation, the premises merely serving as a meeting place where Gospel related activities take place. Whilst the term Gospel Hall might these days seem somewhat antiquated, to the extent that many Brethren assemblies, including Coleman Street, have more recently repackaged themselves, and are now called something different, as chapel, church or fellowship, it does convey what the premises are used for. Ironically, history suggests that many assemblies were strongest when bearing the name Gospel Hall. Indeed in a day when music halls were popular, this designation would seem to be particularly apt.

In order to understand what Coleman Street Chapel is primarily all about, a consideration of what the members understand concerning salvation is essential. This term covers the benefits, past, present and future, which a believer has on the basis of what God has done in Christ. It includes the notions of "forgiveness", "justification", "reconciliation", "regeneration", "sanctification", "adoption", "redemption" and "glorification" - all Biblical terms, which have been the subject of many past addresses at the Chapel. It involves health, healing, wholeness, deliverance from the kingdom of Satan, and transference into the kingdom of Christ. Believers are promised the Holy Spirit to indwell, comfort and empower them. Ultimately the saved will enjoy living eternally in the new world God has prepared. All this is made possible because of what Jesus Christ did by coming to Earth, dying on a cross and rising from the dead. Members would have been quite adamant that salvation can come only through faith in Christ. It was not something that could be earned through personal merit or effort, being a gift of God. *For by grace are ye saved through faith; and not of yourselves: it is a gift of God* (Ephesians 2v8).

Although the emphasis has tended to be on individual salvation, the people at the Chapel have always believed that the Gospel message of salvation is the only message which can transform peoples and societies to the good, human efforts being of little avail. Much energy has been expended in spreading this message. Thus particular prominence was given to evangelism and mission, both at home and abroad. Moreover, there has always been an imperative for those who are saved to live in a befitting way. All that has happened to the saved person in Christ, all the progress he or she can make spiritually, and all future benefits,

are down to God's limitless grace and mercy towards miserable sinners; the response must be to follow Him in faith and obedience. Whilst members of Coleman Street may have failed to always be completely gripped by and focused on the implications of the message of salvation, even though they may have been diverted from what is important and may have been poor exponents of it. Yet this message is at the heart of what members believed, and has been of paramount importance, causing them to be active in God's service.

One of the hallmarks of early Brethren preaching was the emphasis given to the awfulness of sin (which alienates, blemishes, condemns, destroys and enslaves), the holiness of God (who hates sin, but loves the sinner), the need for all to repent of their sins, the finality and terror of Hell for the impenitent, and the expectation of the imminent return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Although the love of God was regularly taught, so was the fear of God. It would seem that when the response to Gospel preaching was greatest at Coleman Street the content of the preaching would often have contained many of these elements. Many were convicted of sin, and then being marvellously liberated and transformed through responding to the Gospel message. Yet to accommodate modern sensibilities these elements have often been played down within evangelicalism, and to some extent Coleman Street has also been susceptible.

The give away that some form of Christian activity is taking place at the Chapel is the texts that are prominently placed front and back of the inside of the building. At the front, the text is *Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today and forever* (Hebrews 13v8), reminding us of one who, being in the beginning, and having walked this earth doing good, never changes and is willing and able to do the same today. At the back, and before the preacher's eyes, is the text *When I see the Blood I will pass over you* (Exodus 12v13). Just as the children of Israel needed to apply the blood of animals to the doors of their homes if they were to escape the angel of death, (a fact acknowledged in the annual Jewish celebration of the Passover feast ever since), so we need the blood of Christ applied to our lives in order to be saved. It is as if the preacher is being reminded that he must not fail to give due prominence to the blood in his message. Before alterations to the interior of the Hall, in the 1960's, a different set of texts were painted on the front wall: *Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy; My son God will provide himself a lamb; Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world and God is light, God is love*. The painting of texts on the interior of the Hall was evidently considered important, as it is in many Brethren assembly buildings the world over.

Then there is a simple table at the front of the hall, upon which usually stands a beautiful arrangement of flowers during meetings other than for the Breaking of Bread. On one side of the table is the text inscribed *This do in remembrance of me*, reminding all of the significance of the bread and wine which is placed on the table during the Breaking of Bread meetings. The central focus of that meeting is on the One who gave His body for us, bearing our sins, whose blood was shed in order that our sins can be forgiven so that we can come into God's holy presence. One is also reminded we do this *until He come*.

Chapter 3 - Birth and Life

But God hath chosen the foolish things of this world to confound the wise; 1Corinthians 1v27

William Iles (senior) was born in Bristol on 5 January 1847, one of a family of seven children: five boys and two girls. Not having access to free education he reached early manhood unable to read or write. He was by his own admission a wild-living, hard drinking and generally dissolute person, fearing neither God nor man. Inclined to violence when “in drink”, he was kindly disposed when sober. He afterwards recalled those years with regret and shame, (often reluctant to give his early testimony), and counted them as precious time wasted.

Unable to find employment in Bristol, he made his way to London, walking and hitch-hiking, expecting to link up with his father and brother Edmund, who both had earlier preceded him. William and Edmund shared the same kind of life and behaviour, but later Edmund, carrying out work for Middlesborough Council, fell ill, principally through hard drinking. Soon afterwards Edmund was converted to Christ, and gave up his former ways. He returned to London to tell his godly mother and together they entered into a prayer partnership for William's salvation. So concerned was he for William's spiritual state that Edmund resolved to visit William, who at that time was a foreman in charge of public works at Littlemore, near Oxford. He spent the day pleading with William to turn to Christ but to no avail. Indeed, such was the response that, when William finally dismissed him, it was with the expressed hope that he would never see his brother's face again.

Years passed but the prayers of Edmund and his mother were not to go unanswered. On one occasion a shotgun exploded in William's hands but he was spared, but not without his being concerned as to what would have happened to him if the worst were to have happened. William was involved in rescuing a person from a burning house and another from drowning in the Thames. In London, he met one Sarah Ann Sutton, whom he married. He already had three children before an incident occurred which was to radically alter the course of his life. There came a time when William became ill and this caused him some spiritual anxiety. So burdened, he entered Rose Hill Chapel, near Oxford, and heard the Gospel message proclaimed. That day he, together with his wife, recognised their need to trust Christ and both committed their lives to Him.

The prayer fellowship became three: Edmund, his mother and William. They prayed for the conversion of the father and the rest of the family. Most eventually were converted. As for William, a real transformation had taken place. For one thing the money previously dissipated for drink was now saved and used for Christian service. For a time afterward he would often cross over the road when passing a public house and would not even drink the communion wine, no doubt conscious of the enticement of addictive habits, even to the converted. From the time of his conversion until his death he was an enthusiastic soul winner, seeking to lead others to Christ. Mr Ladd recalled his telling *his life story* and seeing *him sitting by anxious souls simply explaining and applying John 5v24, his first “Gospel Effort text” was a great experience. He brought many to Christ in this way, including Mr Ladd's wife, May.*

Soon after, William joined Edmund, (who had already set up business on his own account,) in partnership, trading in Wimbledon as E&W Iles. An account of some of what transpired in Wimbledon can be found in Brethren: the story of a great recovery, D.J.Beattie, 1940. Their

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business prospered but at the same time *they prayed God would open up the way for a Gospel testimony in their midst*. In 1878 they acquired premises in North Road, Wimbledon, for use as a yard and stabling accommodation for their business, including an old two-storey wooden building which had originally been a clock factory. The brothers saw the possibilities of this being a hall for preaching the Gospel and decided to convert this into a single storey building for the worship and service of God's people in the area. The building was duly named "Haydon Hall". After much hard work by interested parties the project was successfully completed and services were conducted there until 1884-1885.

One of the early events was to invite a preacher to draw the people. William Groves (Happy Bill) was chosen and did stir up the people, ably assisted by his wife. *God did indeed set His seal to the preaching, strong men being broken down and melted to tears by the preacher's impassionate appeals. So great was the Spirit of God manifested that in many cases the awakened and anxious ones would not leave the building until they were brought into peace with God.* This was the basis of a thriving assembly, with believers becoming established in the faith, with further people coming into the church, and also being saved. Later, when this structure was old and showing signs of decay, it was replaced by a brick building. The work of Haydon Hall continued until relatively recently, when mainly due to declining numbers it merged with the two other Brethren assemblies in Wimbledon, with which it long had good relations, into a single work at Worple Road. This merged assembly is still an active concern.

During the course of time, the brothers thought it desirable to separate their business interests. William Iles moved to Southend in 1896 along with his family of four sons and four daughters. He settled firstly in York Road, on the corner of St. Leonards Road, and then in a house he built in South Avenue, which he named "Wembley". This had an adjoining yard and stabling facilities for his business. His business prospered, for there was plenty of scope as a Public Works Contractor in this fast expanding town. He carried out contracts for the Town Council, Water Board, Gas Company and other bodies, and was responsible for making up scores of public thoroughfares and was involved in the construction of the sea wall and other projects. It seems that he enjoyed the respect of most of those with whom he dealt because of the high standard of his workmanship and his personal integrity. His practice was to lay each contract before God in prayer before despatching any tender.

Whilst being well engrossed in his business affairs William continued to be concerned with spiritual activities. This could be evidenced in the various works in which he played no small part. Sunday morning services were held in premises called the "Onion Shop" in the High Street (presumably after being suitably fumigated) and afternoon Sunday school was commenced in Caldecott's (Medical) Mission Hall in Clarence Street, where in 1897 it was noted that the fellowship had also been based. 36 names and addresses of members were noted in 28 February 1897. But in the heart of William Iles lay a passion to erect a church in a working class area, where the needs of the people could be met with the Gospel. His earlier idea of building a public house had now been replaced by that of building a church, where the public could worship God rather than drink alcohol. Although discussions took place concerning the acquisition of more permanent premises, (for example in April 1900 the possibility of hiring the Masonic Hall or purchasing the Peculiar Chapel was discussed), in the end it was William Iles who undertook to provide a building for such a work, (for which a rent of ten shillings per week was agreed with the rest of the oversight, although they had proposed thirteen shillings), mostly it would seem from his own substance and building

efforts.

The work prior to that of Coleman Street Gospel Hall's commencing was significant, for this meant that a solid foundation had already been laid. This included regular meetings on Sunday and during the week, together with a Sunday school and lively missionary interest. Each Sunday a Breaking of Bread meeting was held in the morning and once a month one was held in the evening too. Normally Sunday evenings were used for preaching the Gospel. At the oversight meeting, 22 March 1898, it was agreed that a notice board should be produced with the words *Short Bright Gospel Services are held every Sunday Evening at 7 pm. All are Welcome. Sunday School at 3 pm.* There was also a missionary interest and concern to help the poor. Funds were established to assist in this. Whilst the oversight minutes that were available at the time were quite rough, often terse, and seemingly somewhat disorganised, these did throw light on a thriving assembly becoming established. These show that careful accounts were kept concerning the income and expenditure (as well as numbers at meetings), and stewardship of money was exercised. Of the interesting snippets found around that time was a discussion which took place concerning the immortality of the soul, where it appeared the oversight felt they needed to make known to one member what the scriptural position was. These minutes also provide evidence of a mission held (at Prittlewell), and of a deliberation which led to members sitting round the table for the Breaking of Bread meetings.

Significant numbers were in attendance at the regular fellowship teas (18 November 1897 - 40 (60 on the 'Roll Book'), 26 May 1898 - 39, 27 October 1898 - 59). On 21 July 1898 11 persons were baptized at the Palace Swimming Baths, whose names were recorded. In 1898 the number in fellowship was 65. In 1899 the number in fellowship was 75. In July 1900 the number in fellowship was noted to be 64, and on 31 January 1901 and 20 March 1901 (on the occasion of the fellowship tea), now meeting at Coleman Street, the numbers were recorded as 70 and 83 respectively. It was also recorded that the mother's meeting had 110 on its books. (No previous mention could be found of a mothers meeting being held, although as early as 1897 discussion took place regarding starting one.) The attendance in the Sunday school on 31 January 1901 was recorded as 145. It was noted that at York House (51 High Street), prior to the transfer, the number of Sunday School children had been 60, whereas on 9 March 1897 it had been 38. (It is not clear whether York House and the Onion shop were the same building. It seems that before transferring to the building in Coleman Street, the oversight were merely content to rent premises according to convenience. Also mention had been made prior to 1898 of a hall in Prittlewell, which it was decided not to continue with.)

It was in November 1900 that the doors were opened to a new building in Coleman (Colman) (it seemed both spellings were deemed as valid) Street, close to the heart of the town and surrounded as it was in those days by many working class dwellings, where lived many who were deprived materially. (It appears that the first meeting was on Wednesday 14 November, at 4.00pm and 7.00pm, with tea at 5.30pm with invitations given to neighbouring churches including *a few of the London Assemblies*). Although extensions were later added, (in particular, in 1906, when the main building was extended by some thirty feet,) these are the same premises which are currently used for the purpose of Christian worship and Gospel outreach. A further part of the building extension work was for a rear vestry to be added, with a room above it to accommodate an infant's class. There was seating for approximately 300 in the main hall, about 100 in the rear vestry and the same number in the front gallery. During main gatherings it was not uncommon to find the building packed to capacity. Often a prayer

meeting took place in the upstairs (infants) room at the same time as the Gospel meetings, partly because there was no room in the main hall.

Prior to the opening of the Hall, believers were baptised in Absalom's Floating Bath, a kind of floating swimming pool which stood out from the shore off Southend sea front and advertised *4 to 5 feet of water always ready*. But a baptistry was incorporated in the original church building and remains in use to this day, albeit in a renovated condition. The early years saw a remarkable expansion in numbers and activities, having arisen out of such modest beginnings. For example in the oversight minutes: 25 April 1901, 12 names were given for baptism; 30 June, 6 or 7 names were expected and on 25 September 1901, 6 names were given. Up to the 1960's, baptisms usually took place on Wednesday evenings. On 2 April 1908, *the names and addresses of those received into fellowship since the last meeting* (six months previously) comprised 33 names. And this remarkable growth continued into the 1920s. For example, it was recorded that, on 4 February 1920, 25 persons were baptised.

During this time a women's meeting, young peoples fellowship, and Sunday school were well established as well as weekly meetings for prayer and Bible ministry, which were fervently supported and well attended, even though many who attended had already worked a long day. From the beginning, right up to the 1960's, watchnight services were held on New Year's Eve. Often, on such occasions, the invited speaker would give a stirring address looking back over the past year and looking forward to the year to come. Some of the texts spoken on, mentioned in Mr Jiggins' diary, included: in 1920, *Come to me all ye who are weary and heavy laden*; 1921, *My God shall supply all your need* and 1924, *Hitherto hath the Lord helped us*. It did appear though that nothing special took place around Christmas time, at least in the early years. One interesting custom at Coleman Street was for William Iles (senior) to take the first Sunday evening service of the new year, a tradition which other members of the Iles family were to take on for many years following his death.

From the early years there was a full range of social activities, which included: church outings for the whole fellowship as well as for the women's meeting, young peoples get togethers, garden parties, teacher's outings, public holiday excursions. Howard Clinch has recalled the *annual Fellowship Outing on a Wednesday afternoon to Hockley Woods. Tea was provided and it was essentially a fun day. There were two invariable features. My father walked on his hands along the table tops of a number of trestle tables placed end to end and Arthur Iles organised a game of "bull and bear" - a blind fold pillow fight with two contestants moving round in circles tethered to a central iron pin. The afternoon ended with hymn singing in Hockley Woods*. This could have taken place around 1913.

There were annual anniversary, fellowship and women's teas each with an special meeting, all well supported, and often with visitors from other assemblies, who were warmly greeted. (These have continued to be a feature of Chapel life. They were held on Wednesdays (to coincide with early shop closing day) but now on a Saturday. Such events continue to be popular. Harvest teas, and for a time harvest suppers, and harvest thanksgiving services would also later take place every year after 1950.

Howard Clinch also recorded that an *adult Bible Study class was ably led by Harold Cole, a truly fine man and an expert in the Tabernacle*. Mr Cole was a member of the oversight from 1921 to 1939, when he moved to Folkestone. He took many Gospel and ministry meetings

during that time, and was well adept in opening up all manner of difficult passages in the Old and New Testaments. His services were in demand further afield, for example the Chalkwell Park oversight minutes recorded that he was invited to take some teaching meetings in 1920, the subject being Solomon's Temple (with model). There were many gifted preachers and teachers, who regularly ministered at Coleman Street from the outset until shortly after World War Two. Among those who did visit were J.M.Shaw, J.B.Watson, W.G.Hales, G.Howley, Montague Goodman, Reuben Scammell, James Stevens, Mark Kagan, James McKendrick, P.J.Shorey, Dr Goldstein, Dr Hanton, F.A.Tatford, Percy Parsons, George Harpur, Will Harrison, who were well known and accepted as gifted preachers within wider Brethren circles. Several came down from London or even further afield, especially to take these meetings. It says something for their commitment that they did so, as some of these held full time secular jobs. Others were local, and most of the members of the oversight preached at the Hall, although it has been commented that some of the local talent, which was abundant at Coleman Street, was overlooked, even though the talented did often get to preach elsewhere.

The Sunday school continued to increase in numbers until by World War Two it consisted of some 500 scholars, comprised of 44 classes, two senior and two junior Bible Classes and an infants class of up to some 90 children, with the upstairs gallery taking the overflow of four of the older boys' classes. The Sunday school was led by a succession of able superintendents. During the early years these were Edwin Harding and William Arrol, and then Harry Iles for 25 years: 1916 to 1941. One can only imagine the effect the teaching which was given had on so many, who have since expressed gratitude for such a grounding. Although their numbers are dwindling, there are many in Southend who have vivid recollections of the Sunday school.

Howard Clinch recalls his Sunday school teacher, Walter Jiggins, *in one of the four boys' classes in the Gallery, he impressed on me the need to remember scripture in whole chapters rather than verses. I have before me the prize he gave me for repeating the whole of Hebrews 1. The two volumes are inscribed in his hand writing and dated Sept. 1925. They have an honoured place on the bookshelves in my study.* The affection between pupil and teacher was reciprocated: in his journal for Sunday 16 January 1927 Walter Jiggins wrote: *I part with my old scholars, some I have had for sometime, among whom is Howard Clinch, Herbert Smith, Jack Little, Reg Capon, Jack Wenden and they say they will not forget me.*

It was often considered to be a natural progression for Christian young people belonging to the assembly to take a full part in helping to teach in the Sunday school. This was no light option as they were expected to play a full part. Regular meetings took place for the Sunday school teachers, plus occasional outings. For a time, from 1924, Sunday school teachers had an annual conference. The teachers were also expected to contribute regularly to the Sunday school's funds. One contributor recalled: *one Sunday each month was known as "Open Sunday" and men teachers took it in turns to take the whole service. It gave all the other teachers, male and female, a 'free' afternoon, and the unfortunate man was expected to hold the attention of about 300 boys and girls aged from around six years old to 14 or 15 - plus the Junior mens' and Ladies' Bible Classes. (The Senior Mens and Ladies Bible Classes were held in the back room behind shutters which were pulled down with a long pole). A very popular (at least with the children) diversion was when they were asked to bring along on the following Sunday an object mentioned in the Bible, together with its reference. A man volunteered or was selected to go to the platform, unwrap the parcel, and give an extempore talk about the contents, lasting about 5 minutes; after which another man and another*

“object” were brought together. Quite a few articles turned up and they tested the ingenuity of the poor teachers as they strove to get some spiritual lesson from them!

Sunday school summer treats were an important feature. In the early days (up to about 1925) they took the form of visits by horse-drawn brakes to local farms. Catering was the responsibility of the teachers. Trestles, tables and a mobile tuck shop, with a free distribution of sweets for the less fortunate, all had to be organised, together with games and prizes awarded to the winners. In later years longer excursions were made to Hockley Woods, Maldon, Theydon Bois, Chingford and London Zoo. These outings required a fleet of coaches or double decker buses, and more than once special trains were laid on. One reminiscence just prior to the last war was of the Sunday school children marching down Southend High Street in orderly procession and being greeted by local shop workers coming out of their shops, some of whom were linked to the Gospel Hall. The Sunday school's winter treats, held on a Wednesday, early in January, with its huge Christmas tree with fairy lights, were also outstanding occasions. These included recitations and other items from the children and the award of book prizes in every class. The infant treat was held on a separate occasion and each member received a suitable gift, for the girls it was a doll.

One regular activity which began in 1935 (or before), and continued to the early 1970's, was the Young People's Bible Study Class (YPBSC), much later known as the Young Peoples Fellowship (YPF). This met for one hour on Tuesday evenings. During the summer months evangelistic activity took place among the villages, as well as recreational activities. (Prior to 1935 there had been a Bible reading on Tuesday evenings, although it is not clear what form this took or who attended.) Numbers of 40 or more young people attending were common before the war. Mr Jiggins, who led the class from 1935 until 1952, kept a record of each meeting, in particular the people who participated, the hymns and the Bible reading and topic studied. From the beginning, until he moved away around the start of the war, Arthur Richardson, a man of similar age and with a heart for the young people, co-led the YPBSC.

The first date for which there was an entry, 26 November 1935, Mr Jiggins recorded *young men act as chairman, sisters to choose hymns*. A committee comprising himself, two of the young men and two of the young women, was appointed to run the YPBSC. Suggestions were made concerning topics, with a proposal for Bible studies alternating with special subjects such as missionary matters, how we got our present Bible, and other religions. The idea of a question box where the speaker would address questions which members had submitted beforehand was discussed and implemented on several occasions in future years. In the year that followed subjects spoken on included: how do I know the Bible is the Word of God; the study of the Bible; what the Bible is all about; the written Word; authority, admonition, application and assimilation of the Word; baptism; assurance; the Church; Breaking of Bread; prayer; giving; Gideon; confidence; Abigail; Esther; Deborah; Justification; and the Holy Spirit. That summer they went on rambles to Hadleigh Castle, Stambridge, and Thundersley Glen, and played games in Priory Park along with some of the older members of the assembly.

In the early years, especially, there was a certain amount of local poverty, for it was before the advent of the Welfare State. Although the extent to which Coleman Street sought to address these material needs may have been limited, nevertheless there were plenty of examples where the assembly sought to alleviate physical hardship and was instrumental in helping in

practical ways including free distribution of bread and soup. For many years Coleman Street operated a "poor fund", essentially to help support the poor in the neighbourhood known to the Hall. Howard Clinch recalls the "Dorcas Meeting", where ladies met at the Hall, possibly monthly, to co-ordinate their efforts in making garments for those in need. He recalled there was a Poor Law Institution in Rochford, where *with the consent of the master and Matron a small party from Colman Street visited on Saturday afternoons ... distributed cakes to the inmates (kindly donated by Garons) before dividing into two groups to hold brief Gospel meetings, in the men's and women's day rooms. Once a year we were permitted to have all the inmates together in the main Assembly Hall, to give a tea followed by my father reading a 'moral tale' illustrated by magic lantern slides.* This continued after World War Two. In all there is plenty of evidence of philanthropic giving by individual members, mostly unsung.

As with all sectors of British society, World War One (1914 - 1918) had a marked effect on the people at Coleman Street, although from a reading of oversight minutes covering that period there seemed little reference to the fact that a war was going on and life would appear to have proceeded as normal. A few scattered references could be found toward the end of the war, alluding to the wider term effects of what was taking place in the battlefields of Europe: the need to exercise austerity, some open air activities being restricted due to so many brethren absent, declining a request to hold services only in daylight hours, and replying to a letter from the town authorities that, whilst they would support a special intercession service to be held 7 July 1918, they did not require special places to be reserved.

Although, unlike many churches, there is no memorial for those killed in the war, there were members who laid down their lives serving king and country. These included three of the Bible class scholars and one teacher, all killed in France. In both World Wars a number of the young men and women served in the Forces, as well as being involved in important civilian support tasks. Some from the assembly were conscientious objectors, and had to suffer the consequences. But their position was generally respected by the rest, who it would seem were largely prepared to bear arms in order to defend the national cause. There is some evidence that the First World War had a marked effect on the faith of some, and in some instances faith was considerably shaken, if not lost entirely. One civilian casualty was Miss Lily Shepherd, who as a young girl was maimed as a result of a bomb explosion resulting from one of the few raids by German Zeppelins. She remained crippled for the rest of her long life, but was active at Coleman Street for most of that time, until her health and sight failed completely.

In the period leading up to World War Two there were several missions, for the prime purpose of evangelistic outreach and some Bible teaching, each up to a fortnight in duration, and were often seen to be a highlight of assembly life for that year. These were often preceded by periods of intensive prayer and leaflet distribution, advertising the meetings. These campaigns often resulted in many conversions. It was the norm for converts to then be baptized and received into membership of the assembly. All were encouraged to manifest in their lives the reality of their conversion. One abiding impression is that many of those men who came to take the missions preached the gospel with great power and there was much fruit as a result.

Mr Jiggins recorded a mission held 15 February - 27 February 1920, led by Percy Beard. His comment was *we have had indeed much to praise God for, numbers have been very large, a hall full every night - afternoon Bible reading well attended and hall practically full. Every*

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night the Lord has been saving souls and the ministry of the word in Bible readings most helpful. He recalled two missions in 1921, 20 February - 27 February, led by J.M.Shaw and 6 March - 18 March, and involving various members. Regarding the first he commented *the week continued in special prayer and on Saturday a large open air meeting at Heygate Avenue. Six of us with sandwich boards and at 8.30 a march through High Street to Sutton Arms.* Regarding the second he commented *the closing day of mission and I suppose the last time for a period of being a sandwich man. The weather has been very good all the way through and although results are not prominent the Lord has been working.*

Mr Jiggins was to recall special week- or fortnight-long missions in 1922, 1923 (where he commented *our special meetings are attended with much blessing and some very real cases of conversion*), 1924, 1925, 1926, 1927, 1928, 1929, 1930, 1931, 1932, 1933, 1934, 1935, 1936, 1937, 1938 and 1939 (which, where comments are available, indicated varying degrees of success). For example, concerning the mission in 1937, Walter Jiggins recorded: *the special mission under Mr. Ainsworth did not seem to prosper, an apathy seemed to hang over the place, and there was little response.* The missions generally took place around February, although from 1942 these were held in autumn. Some of those who led these missions have been remembered with special affection, including James McKendrick, Mr Tocher, Edward Rankin, Albert Widdoson, all of whom were gifted evangelists.

Open air meetings were an important feature from the earliest days. For 25 years a witness was maintained in the streets surrounding the Hall, together with after-service open air testimony on a field in Southchurch Road. There were also regular meetings on the sea front, typically on a Sunday afternoon (with an accompanying portable organ), but sometimes on Saturdays and Bank holidays, somewhere between the Pier and the Kursaal, during the summer months. Open airs were held in the High Street during the winter months. One contributor was told by Moses Abbott that when he and Harold Clinch were preaching in the High Street, if the rain came, one would hold the open umbrella over the speaker's Bible to protect it from the rain. Often young people from other assemblies joined those from Coleman Street for this purpose. Many young men began their preaching ministries during the open air meetings. The Gospel meeting on a Sunday evening has long been a feature of assembly life, and was the time when the Gospel was preached with the view to inviting sinners to turn to Christ. In the early days prayer preceded and carried on during the Gospel meeting and for half an hour after it had ended. Prior to the service, members would take to the streets in order to invite people from neighbouring homes to attend the Gospel meeting at Coleman Street.

Coleman Street were contributors, along with other churches in Southend, to regular services held at "Happy Valley" (a site on the Southend cliffs, where concerts and other popular entertainment were held from 1909), presumably during the summer months. An entry in the oversight minutes, 20 May 1909 recorded that *Mr Jones reported attendance on Committee of Happy Valley Open Air and spoke of the happy feeling in the meeting and the apparent deep desire for real gospel work.* An oversight minute, dated 7 November 1917, showed that the oversight were resistant to the notion of the Free Church Council's taking over of that meeting *as it was felt that the tendency would be to lose the simple form in which the Gospel was now presented and the introduction of other subjects which were not relevant.*

A further example of inter-church co-operation was the relationship between the Gospel Hall and the Pilgrim Preachers, a band of men who undertook twenty four tours throughout the

length and breadth of the land, with the aim of preaching the gospel to all. This remarkable group of men travelled often on foot and looked to God to supply their daily needs (like St Francis's friars). Their aim was to win the nation away from the spiritual darkness and stark materialism that they perceived was prevailing in the country and bring them back to God. They preached in the open air and elsewhere, using whatever means they felt appropriate to fulfil their aim. These tours took place between 1919 and 1938. For a period around 1922 Coleman Street gave its practical support and co-operation to these Pilgrim Preachers, when they were visiting in nearby districts, although details, other than that they took the Sunday evening Gospel meeting at Coleman Street on 23 April 1922, are not available.

Coleman Street also started an active work in the Essex villages, spurred on by the desire to bring the Gospel to places where a clear cut Gospel witness did not exist and where accessibility to the nearby towns, where churches which preached the Gospel might have existed, were severely restricted. As early as 25 April 1901, the oversight minutes recorded *Mr Reed suggested that he and Mr Arrol should take the village work during the summer on permission of the oversite also to take 2 or 3 of the young men of the meeting to help.*

One of the many positive outcomes of this work is that it did provide dedicated and gifted young men with outlets for Christian service, the experience gained being put to good use early on. Amongst their number were Sidney Saword, Don Meadows and Walter Jiggins. Sidney Saword served later as an overseas missionary. Don Meadows was a builder by trade. He moved away from Southend in the 1930's. Finding he had many opportunities for preaching, he went on to become a full time evangelist. One of his achievements was helping to set up the Hants and Dorset Christian camps, which were instrumental over many years in bringing young people to Christ. One of these was the author. These young men were widely different in personality: Don Meadows, for example, was very outgoing and prone to play practical jokes on his friends. Walter Jiggins, on the other hand, was of a more sober disposition. Yet they all seemed to complement one another, working well together, no doubt united in their desire to serve God.

One account brought to hand (others are no longer available) can be found in the diary of Walter Jiggins who, when aged 26, spent 3 months from 9 June - 29 September 1921 doing evangelistic tent work, first at Aythorpe Roding (9 June - 2 July), then Sawbridgeworth (2 July - 15 August) and lastly at Epping (15 August - 29 September). It seems that his main means of transport was the bicycle. The work he undertook seemed to be remarkably similar to that carried out by Counties evangelists during their early days. This primarily involved tent meetings for adults and children. Sydney Saword and Don Meadows visited and helped for some of that time. Besides many profitable meetings, resulting in some conversions, what does impress is the evident joy he had doing God's work and knowing His gracious leading.

There also seemed to be a lot of encouragement from and fellowship with the oversight members at Coleman Street. It was these who encouraged Walter Jiggins to do this work in the first place, especially as it would provide a good training for future missionary work. This was also at the time when he was much exercised about being an overseas missionary and the oversight were seeking to wisely steer him in the right direction and making many helpful suggestions. In the end, because of poor health as much as anything he wrote (30 November 1921) that he was *constrained to think that my cherished thoughts of being a missionary must be set on one side and the trivial round of common daily task entered upon*, and further (31

December 1921) *I am still waiting His time who up till now has supplied my every need.*

Yet another example of Coleman Street's spreading the Word was that several new assemblies and mission halls were brought into being, during the years leading up to World War Two, in the Southend and surrounding areas, with members of Coleman Street playing significant parts in establishing and building up these works. This was mainly brought about by the desire to establish gospel testimonies in what was becoming a rapidly expanding town, and in the areas where existing members lived. The story of when and how these works came into existence and how these were to develop thereafter is discussed in a later chapter. From the earliest days there was a strong interest in missionary activity, and this has remained the case ever since. Monthly missionary prayer meetings, with reports from many fields of service or visits by missionaries on furlough have long been a feature. (A consequence of that legacy is that today, even with much smaller numbers, there is still a significant missionary element in Chapel life.) With this was the practice of regular giving to organisations and individuals. Mr Ladd's book noted that the arrival of the magic lantern helped to bring added interest, although this would later be superseded by coloured slides, films and videos.

The oversight (elders) who led the assembly in the early years were seen to be men of vision and ability, deeply devoted to the Lord, His work and His people. Time was spent meeting together discussing more mundane matters such as finance, hymn books and the building fabric. However, a certain prominence was given to prayer and pastoral matters, such as visiting those connected with the assembly, in particular newcomers and absentees. They sought to effect reconciliation where this was seen to be needed, looked out for the spiritual needs of the people, looked for opportunities to relate to other Gospel based enterprises, encouraged support for missionaries and were concerned to ensure good discipline and order and reverence in services. There were cases of some being excluded from fellowship because of inappropriate behaviour, but restoring people back into fellowship was also practised, sensitively and in confidence. Such considerations appeared to be the norm, as well as providing material help to individuals when this was deemed necessary.

Although different in temperament the members of the oversight blended well together. Their versatility was indicated by the fact that between them they combined a whole range of activities: Church secretary, treasurer, Sunday school superintendent, Bible class leader, chairman, doorkeeper, precentor, counsellor, sick visitor and many other duties. (Regarding precentors, Harry Iles, who had a fine voice, led the singing in the morning meeting for many years.) Besides Mr William Iles (Senior) the names of Messrs Arrol, Jones, Hocquard, Cole and Jenkins are brought to mind, all giving long and sterling service at the Gospel Hall, and there were several others too. All four sons of William Iles (senior), William (Will or Willy), Henry (Harry), Arthur (Art) and Edward (Ted), gave long, valued service on the oversight.

Besides the oversight, there were many others over the years, with a range of gifts and abilities, who were active in the life of Coleman Street, assisting in prayer, preaching, teaching (all ages), visiting, encouraging, and many practical tasks. Although many of these may have been long forgotten, there is a sense, at least from a Christian perspective, that God was pleased to use and bless their efforts. The respective individual contributions all combined to produce a thriving work.

One should also mention the caretakers who occupied Number 9, next to the Gospel Hall.

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These generally served the Hall well. Some still have fond memories of Mrs Godward, who served from before World War Two until the 1960's. She often got up in the early hours to stoke the boiler fires, so that the building could be heated before meetings commenced. The effects were often felt by those attending, especially in the days when it was the done thing for men to wear jackets and ties, and for ladies to wear hats and coats inside the Hall. She would often be seen slipping out toward the end of a service to make tea for the speaker. Upon her death, her family presented Coleman Street with a pulpit Bible, containing the inscription: *In remembrance of Mildred Mary Godward who served the Lord with gladness in Coleman Street Gospel Hall for over 50 years, 1Cor 15v58, called home May 1982.*

Whilst it was not the practice for women to take a public role, particularly in "mixed" gatherings, their role was undoubtedly crucial, even though too often their contribution was limited or overlooked. The wives of the elders conscientiously ran the women's meeting, made and embroidered garments for each member at Christmas, helped in visitation, entertained visiting speakers, played the organ, led Bible classes for ladies and girls, helped in the Sunday school, organised the teas, standing with their husbands so they could be the overseers of the flock which they served, and did numerous other things besides. One was May Iles, who was organist for many years, undertook hospital visiting on Sunday afternoons before taking a Sunday school class, and frequently had people home for tea.

William Iles died 19 May 1924. A description in the Southend Standard of 22 May stated: *Modest, retiring, concerned outside his business only with the little religious cause which he served with unfailing fidelity, Mr William Iles was one of the foremost figures in Southend life - standing there not alone by reason of achievement, but because of the unswerving integrity of his character which made his word his bond and his work of first class quality. Few men had a better knowledge of what lay underneath Southend streets, for he must at one time or another have dug trenches for Corporation, Gas Company or Water Company in most of them, and he was also responsible for making up scores of private thoroughfares. He was of the men to whom the acceptance of a contract meant the contribution of the best that he could give in thought, time and material. Can a man serve his day and generation better?*

From the description of the funeral in the Southend Standard of 29 May the esteem in which William Iles was held was evident. In the memorial service held at Coleman Street the building was packed, whilst outside *hundreds stood bare-headed during the progress of the service.* His old friend Mr Wells, assisted by William Arrol and Hindley Jones conducted the service. *Mr Wells spoke feelingly of the deceased's connection with the Gospel Hall and his activities in the work of the Master during the past 43 years of his life. His was a pure and blameless existence during that period. Mourners were taken to North Road Cemetery in 10 coaches, a number of private cars following. In addition 130 employees walked reverently behind their late master's coffin.* Nearly a thousand persons assembled at the graveside. Mr Jiggins' diary record on 19 May 1924 was *our beloved and esteemed brother in the Lord, Mr. Wm Iles, goes home to be with the Lord. His work is done, he rests from his labours, but his works follow him indeed.* His diary record on 23 May was *funeral conducted by Mr. Wells and an appeal by Mr. Arrol at the graveside. The crowds that followed were impressive for surely he has a good name among us all.*

William Arrol died 24 March 1925, aged 56. A description of his funeral service, which took place at a full Gospel Hall, was included in the Southend Standard of 9 April. It was

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conducted by J.B.Watson, supported by E.W.Davey, W.Stunt, J.Hocquard, H.Jones and H.Cole. The service was well attended. The address was based on Paul's words: *By the grace of God I am what I am.* He referred to Mr. Arrol as *a true man of God whom they had met together to commit to the ground. Mr Arrol was one who had tasted deeply of the Grace of God.* He further described many instances of how the grace of God was evident in Mr Arrol's life: in early life teaching him his need of a Saviour, how the Word of God was *the one authority for the conduct of his life*, teaching him to do God's will, exercising the gift of an evangelist, the intensity he lived his life for God and of his zeal and care for God's people. It was this grace which made William Arrol's life a consistent whole, in business a man of integrity, and in his home and family a gracious and loving father and husband, and to have a care for God's people, who gave him a place of honour amongst them. *The long cortege was accompanied to the cemetery by employees of Elton laundry, who filled two charabancs.* A great many floral tributes were given, demonstrating a widespread affection.

Walter Jiggins' diary recorded: *on 29 March 1925 on the way to the morning meeting Miss Jones tells us of the home call of our beloved brother Mr. Arrol. Never shall I forget this meeting as after the Breaking of Bread Mr. Jones announced first that Mr. Foster who conducted our special meetings had been called Home, and then as he told of our own loss. The sobs and tears of the assembly surely showed grief, and for my own part it was the biggest blow I have ever experienced. It was my turn to open School in the afternoon and so we had a hymn by which I remember Mr Arrol when Superintendent of our school 'Safe in the arms of Jesus' ... The service at the graveside was again impressive and after committal, Ned (probably Ted) Iles gave a stirring word. We had the hymn again 'Safe in the Arms of Jesus'. The coffin was inscribed 'William Arrol called home March 28th 1925 aged 56 years. When I look back and think that when Mr. Arrol first came amongst us he was only about 30 years of age, about my present age, and yet when I remember the place he took of standing faithful for the truth, I am bowed before the Lord in humiliation and shame that I have not grown more nor made a definite stand as did he. Again the thought impressed me of our loss, yet the Lord never makes a mistake and we are called upon to pray earnestly for those who are left, upon whom rests the burden, the care, the responsibility of the assembly of God's people.*

Mr Hindley Jones died 2 May 1932. A description of the funeral service, which took place at a fully attended Gospel Hall, was included in the Southend Standard of 12 May. This was conducted by Mr. W.Stunt, assisted by Mr. W.Iles (junior). In his address Mr. Stunt referred to their late brother as *pre-eminently a servant of God; he went about doing good. He was never heard to say an unkind word about anyone... They had waited upon his word in that place and had profited by his counsel...they thanked God as they reviewed his life.* Mr Jiggins' diary entry of 5 May 1932 recorded: *the funeral of Mr. Hindley Jones, another of the old brigade, loved and esteemed, but now his course on earth is run and he enters the presence of His Lord, the one whom he delighted to talk about. Mr. Wm Stunt gave the address, and was brief and very sweet. The graveside service was hurried owing to the hailstorm. So passes the last of the three who were regarded as pillars in the church.*

Shortly after Howard Clinch married in 1936, his father, Mr. Frank Clinch, who at the time was an elder, spoke in the morning meeting, after the Breaking of Bread, and it made an indelible impression on one young lady. With his wife sitting next to him, he said he only had a short time to live, and when he got to Heaven he would give the love of the assembly to William Iles and the other elders who had died. Mr Jiggins' diary entry for 20 May 1938

recorded: *our beloved brother Clinch passed into the presence of the Lord, a tragic homecall.*

In the pre-war period William Iles, William Arrol and Hindley Jones would have stood out as leading lights at the Gospel Hall, yet they died within just a few years of each other. In a sense their deaths marked the end of one era and the start of another, detailed in the next chapter. Mr Ladd commented: *God buries His workmen but carries on His work.* One Sankey hymn, not sung much these days: Precious thought - my Father knoweth, was sung at each of their funerals. The sentiments expressed in this hymn no doubt reflected the spiritual experiences and aspirations of those men, and suggest that they would have been under no illusion of the cost of Christian discipleship. They would have no doubt concurred that we can put our full trust in a loving Heavenly Father, whose ways are perfect love and goodness. Included on William Iles' gravestone are the words *for what ere my father doeth must be always right.*

Precious thought - my Father knoweth!
In His love I rest;
For whate'er my Father doeth
Must be always best;
Well I know the heart that planneth
Naught but good for me;
Joy and sorrow interwoven,
Love in all I see.

Precious thought - my Father knoweth!
Careth for His child;
Bids me nestle closer to Him,
When the storms beat wild;
Though my earthly hopes are shattered,
And the teardrops fall,
Yet He is Himself my solace,
Yea, my "all in all."

Oh to trust Him then more fully!
Just to simply move
In the conscious calm enjoyment
Of the Father's love;
Knoweth that life's chequered pathway
Leadeth to His rest;
Satisfied the way He taketh
Must be always best.

L. Woodbury

Chapter 4 - Life and death

Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3v11)

The Second World War brought about many changes, not least at Coleman Street. For one thing the Sunday school was severely reduced overnight (to less than a dozen scholars with a teaching staff of 44), due to the evacuation of children and a number of adults away from Southend to safer areas. Several of the men were called away for military and other service and many others were involved in the war effort, including Home Defence, in one way or another. Restrictions brought about due to the war no doubt took their toll, such as severely restricting the use of private vehicles. Nevertheless, Coleman Street were resolved to carry on and keep its doors open (even though some services were brought forward to avoid people's travelling out during the black-out), giving whatever help it could to the Christian witness in Southend and beyond. Some of those from other churches, which had closed down, attended the meetings at Coleman Street during that time. Missions continued to be held at the Hall during the war as circumstances allowed, including those led by Harold Wildish, 3 - 17 March 1940; Edward Rankin, 20 September - 2 October 1942; Mr McEwen, 4 - 17 September 1943; Alfred Schultes 17 - 29 September 1944.

Only those who lived through those dark days would have known of the anxieties and concerns which were experienced, especially in the early part of the war when Britain looked in grave danger of being overrun by the enemy. Mr. Jiggins' diary, 26 May 1940, recorded: *we visit Hornchurch - this is the Day of Prayer following the collapse of France and Britain's need is great. A remarkable meeting. On arrival home we learn that evacuation has been ordered for this district.*

During the period 26 March 1931 and 8 October 1943, there were no oversight minutes available. It was noted *informal meetings were held at the Hall after one of the services on several occasions* and that *Mr. Jiggins was invited to join the oversight in 1942*. Mr Jiggins recorded in his diary: *During 1942 I was asked to help on the oversight. It was a great privilege but not without responsibilities as many incidents could show, but only those which shall leave a record to encourage will be mentioned. The other things will be omitted* - perhaps a timely reminder for this author! During the 8 October 1943 oversight meeting the arrangement of a baptismal service was discussed, to take place 27 October, to be taken by W.G.Hales. (Regular baptismal services had been and continued to be regular occurrences.) Those who were baptised on that day were David Iles, John Farmer, Dennis Bayer, David Stannard, Mrs Smith, Rita Jiggins, Mary Tiviotdale, Marion Prentice, some of whom are known by many today. David Stannard still remains active in the fellowship.

During the war period it was common for military personnel to attend the Gospel Hall, often in uniform. On one occasion in 1940, Captain May, (written about in chapter 5,) marched into the Hall, leading in a number of soldiers from Shoebury barracks, who heard the preacher, Harold Wildish, give a powerful Gospel address. In 1943, a young man, serving at the time as sergeant in the RASC, came to Southend. Having set out to find a suitable place for worship and fellowship, he turned up at Coleman Street one Tuesday night at the YPBSC, and was amongst those invited to the home of Mr and Mrs Ladd for supper. In 1945, he married Beryl Ladd, the daughter of the house. On demobilisation in 1946, he made Coleman Street his spiritual home, serving later as a Sunday school teacher, Covenanter leader, preacher and elder. He was David Brynmor (Bryn) Jones. This writer has particular reason to be grateful to

Bryn, for supporting him as a troublesome youth and leading him to faith in Christ.

One of the highlights during the war were the Tuesday evening meetings of the young people's Bible study class (YPBSC), which met whilst observing blackout restrictions. The back room was often packed to capacity, with others sitting on the stairs leading to the upstairs room, (often totalling more than 50). Some recall how hot it was in the winter, the coal fire burner doing its job. Mr Jiggins, or one or more invited speakers, would lead the Bible studies, which continued to address a whole variety of topics. Looking at Mr Jiggins' records of the speaking topics, one can not fail to be impressed at the depth and diligence with which the Bible was studied. The pattern established before the war with men leading and ladies choosing hymns continued, although the ladies would also contribute in playing music, singing solos, and giving recitations and testimonies. A feature which became prominent was the "Golden Text". Sometimes, letters were read from missionaries or those who were away. Announcements and taking of an offering formed part of each meeting. Occasionally, a "Bright Hour" was held, with different members making some suitable contribution. A limited programme of summer outings and recreational activities was maintained.

Young people from the nearby Evangelical churches also attended, their own meetings having closed due to the war, plus several military personnel staying in Southend. In one of the prayer lists produced at that time, mention was made of 20 members from Coleman Street, or member's children; 52 members of the armed forces, who had visited the assembly or YPBSC; and 12 members of Shoebury Gospel Hall, who had attended the YPBSC. Often hospitality was provided for the men and women of the armed forces, mostly carried out by 5 or 6 families from the assemblies, and this proved to be a blessing for those giving and those receiving alike.

Whilst Coleman Street members were spared much of the carnage wrought from civilian bombing, one family was particularly affected. Heddle's High Street (opposite Cliff Town Road) Cash Clothing Stores received a direct hit on 13 October 1942; it had already been damaged as a result of a bomb falling on the London Hotel next door, in 1941. The manager, Mr Chandler, was killed; Malcolm Heddle (son of William) was seriously wounded and Norman Brunton was injured because of this later incident. It seemed at the time that the business was finished, but thanks to the kindness of others, notably the Raven family, who owned a rival business in the town, the business would later be rebuilt. Mr. Jiggins' diary recalls later *for the first time we (the YPBSC) went to sing carols at the Southend General Hospital and thus to cheer Malcolm. Carol singing outside Mr Heddle's led to singing in the ATS Reception Station.* Malcolm can nowadays look back with gratitude at the regular visits and letters received, particularly Ted Iles' visits and Walter Jiggins' letters.

Regarding William Heddle, referred further to elsewhere, two particular aspects have been remembered as happening around that time: firstly as a result of the bombing there was a need for civilians to find shelter. One air raid shelter was in the shop's basement. During these times impromptu service(s) took place which included singing of hymns. One contributor recalls an occasion when the hymn "Will your anchor hold in the storms of life?" was sung, and a message given by a "Faith Sister", a lady gospel worker! The second concerns Mr Heddle's involvement with the *Shipwrecked Mariners Society*. The Southend Standard, 24 July 1998, recorded he was *often called from his Victoria Avenue home at all hours to look after seamen who had been brought ashore at the pier head with only the clothes they stood*

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up in or sometimes nothing but a blanket. One contributor recalled those years when he was sometimes absent from the Breaking of Bread service, and without any ostentation, had been willing to open his outfitter's shop to equip ship-wrecked people landed at the pier.

Following the end of the war, life slowly returned to normal, although the effects, such as rationing and rebuilding, remained for some years to come. Those involved in war-time activities resumed civilian duties. As for the assembly, most of the pre-war activities resumed, although in some respects, such as the size of the Sunday school and infants class, life would not be the same again, although it became a flourishing concern, until numbers dropped from the 1970's. The Sunday school would again be led by superintendents, who conscientiously went about their task. Walter Jiggins had taken over the job as Sunday school superintendent from Harry Iles in 1941 and served until 1945. The succession after that was: Charlie Childs (1946 - 1952), Fred Iles (1953 - 1955), George Hardingham (1955 - 1960), Randolph Melville (1960 - 1968), David Marett (1968 - 1976) and for the final few months, until it closed, Barry Owen. Dorothy Coker continued until 1978 with an infants class. After the war, until the 1950's, a mid-week children's club was held, led by Eddie Iles, and this proved popular. A full programme was laid on including singing, stories and magic lantern slides. A lot of effort was taken in constructing an impressive set of visual aids and flannel graphs to use during the teaching times. Much of this material still exists.

Missions of up to (often) a fortnights duration, or series of special meetings, usually held at the Hall, but other venues were also sometimes used, continued for many years after the war. The missions included those led by: Mr McEwen, 16 September - 28 September 1945; Edwin Lewis, 12 October - 27 October 1946; Jock Troup, 11 October - 26 October 1947; Mr. W.A.Norris, 9 October - 24 October 1948; Eric Hutchings, 9 October - 23 October 1949; Edwin Lewis, 30 September - 15 October 1950; Harold German, 13 October - 28 October 1951; Stan Ford, 4 October - 19 October 1952; Peter Brandon, 3 October - 11 October 1953; Richard Green, 9 October - 17 October 1954; Mr. A.E.J.Burnham, 6 October - 21 October; Harold Wildish, 12 October - 20 October 1957; Mr. A.W.Grimsey, 5 October - 19 October 1958; Edwin Lewis, 5 November - 9 November 1961; Peter Brandon, 23 September - 7 October 1962. Regarding Peter Brandon's mission, Walter Jiggins recorded in his diary: *The special effort at Coleman St. in October with Peter Brandon as speaker was effective in many ways. The two Sunday evenings at the Palace Theatre were well responded to and of those who professed we were glad to notice as time went on that they stood. The mission also did an amount of good to the Assembly.* Conversions were professed at many of the missions held.

Whilst there were a few years when missions were not held, most years they were, and it is possible that the above list is not complete. There were also other missions held in the town which were not specifically organised by the assembly, but which the assembly supported, for example those led by Dr Stephen Olford in 1953, as well as some held at missions which Coleman Street helped to support. Other missions did take place after 1962 but these were much less frequent. One contributor reminded me of a week's mission led by Clive Calver and his team in 1970, with a particular emphasis to reach young people. Certainly for Roy Stannard this was significant, for it was during this time that he came to the Lord. The outstanding mission was in 1972, led by Dick Saunders, discussed later in the chapter.

There were also, later on, missions specifically aimed at children and young people, for example (Uncle) Jim Fraser and his liquorice kids (1967) (for he gave out sweets as prizes),

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and two led by Geoff Carr (1975 and 1976), one of the Counties evangelists. Several series of teaching meetings were held in the post-war period, with an invited speaker taking a series of meetings on selected topics. John Baker led a mission 6 -13 April 1975. The last recorded mission was led by Peter Glasgow, 6 - 11 June 1986, where a varied programme was laid on, including a treasure hunt, a ladies "knit-in", men's dinner and evangelistic meetings with a difference: including buffet meals and interviews.

Open air meetings on the sea front, held at the puppet theatre, began in 1947. Monthly Saturday night rallies, often with a well known outside speaker, and usually with an evangelistic thrust, were held from 1947 until 1953, when interest had to an extent dwindled. The rally held at the Hall on 8 March 1947, with Lieutenant General Sir William Dobbie was packed out. Usually they were held at Coleman Street, but sometimes other premises were hired, such as the Palace Theatre. A new activity which started up, when open air meetings were not being held, was a Sunday evening Fellowship Hour, following the Gospel meeting. This was intended for members to get to know each other better often in a relaxed atmosphere, enjoying light refreshments. These lasted several years. One sign of changing with the times was the introduction of annual Christmas carol services. Often a choir was formed for the purpose of performing during that time, often starting practices from October, initially under the leadership of Eddie Iles. The programme would be supplemented by other musical items and a small orchestra. The choir performed at other times too and this was a popular activity amongst the young people.

The activities of the YPBSC continued, with numbers of well over 40 being maintained for several years. The tried and tested pattern of meeting developed over preceding years continued. The summer recreational activities were supplemented by open air meetings in the nearby villages, which were successful, thus making for a full summer programme. The leadership of the YPBSC was taken over from Mr Jiggins by Dr. F.Arthur Hudson (a chemist with May and Bakers) in 1952, who ran it up to 1961, when he moved away from Southend. Mr. Malcolm Heddle took over after that. During that time the members' committee were very active and diligent in running the YPBSC, ensuring a varied programme; and they met regularly, with agendas and minutes being produced. Extra features included coach outings on Easter and Whit Mondays and a Christmas dinner at a restaurant in the town. An extension of the young people's activities, which began in the 1960's and ran for several years, were the monthly Saturday night squashes held in the homes, firstly of Charles and Peggy Leswell, and then Barry and Jean Owen. This was usually a good social occasion for the young people, as well as a time for presenting the Gospel in a relaxed setting.

Another feature of young people's activities were the times spent at one or other of the homes of members' of the Hall, following the Sunday evening service. Many undertook to provide hospitality. For some time after 1947, Ron Iles held open house in his home on a Friday evening, when young people were invited round. David and Marion Iles were frequently hosts to the young people, not only on Sunday evenings but during the summer programme of the YPBSC (YPF), and on other occasions also. They felt that as the Lord had provided them with a house, with grounds and good facilities, (firstly at Bell House, and then at New Hall), this was good reason and opportunity to entertain large numbers as part of their service for the Lord. Many will remember the wide games, "Its a Knockout" and bonfire nights held at New Hall. These times always ended with an epilogue conducted by an invited speaker.

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And not only young people, often the whole assembly were invited home, continuing another Iles' tradition of garden parties, and also a new one. This was coffee (and mince pies) and carols, held the Saturday before Christmas day and, later, on Christmas Eve. For at least one contributor, this was the highlight of her Christmas. Their home was often used to entertain visitors, including many who took meetings at the Chapel. For a period, when two of the young people at Coleman Street, Keith Girling and Colin Harris, who were also members of the sixth form at Southend High School for Boys, New Hall was host to the Christian Union on some Friday evenings, when David would lead a Bible study. A thing which particularly impressed him was the single-minded desire of the young men to study the Word and not be diverted by other activities. (This author can recall a number of similar such groups at that same school over the years, who clearly had a spiritual hunger.)

A work which had town-wide significance for young people, not run from Coleman Street but involving several members, was the Christian Youth Program (CYP). This was linked to British Youth for Christ (BYFC), whose aims included *winning youth for Christ* and *evangelising the world in our generation*. The principal activities were CYP rallies; several took place between 1948 and 1956. (Whilst the Coleman Street oversight supported these activities, they generally decided not to cancel meetings if these clashed with those of the CYP, or anything else that was happening in the town.) Mr Hudson was involved in organising Southend's CYP. He also edited the BYFC magazine. His brother-in-law was Eric Hutchings, a BYFC vice-president, who also conducted a mission in 1949 at Coleman Street. A singing quartet, including David Iles, and some musicians, were formed. Later, Geoff Hayman, along with his old school chum, Paul Bullivant, helped form and organise a young people's choir, involving young people from all over the town, and this became an integral part of the CYP's activities. Once, in 1953, the CYP choir sang on a float in the Southend Carnival. Large numbers attended the CYP rallies, which were well organised and geared to attracting the modern youth, with venues such as the Kursaal, Pier Pavilion and the Palace Theatre being used. Many young people in the town were affected and a number were saved. Highlights included in 1948 a "Golden Sunset Cruise", with Professor Don Robertson as speaker, and in 1949, a visit by a young American evangelist, Billy Graham!

During the late 1950's another young people's work began, seeking specifically to address the needs of younger teens, especially when it was felt that these had outgrown Sunday school and their interest needed to be further engaged. This was "Covenanters", started by Bryn Jones, who was assisted by John Maxted. Covenanters provided a wide range of social and recreational activities to complement the spiritual ones. Many of these involved competitions and awards. Prominent features of the work included camps, houseparties and rallies. The various activities often provided occasions to meet with other groups, including the many active groups from different denominations in the South East Essex area. Notable activities included Bible reading competitions and Bible quizzes. On two separate occasions, Coleman Street negotiated several rounds with other quiz teams, unbeaten. (The author particularly remembers being captain of one of those teams, a highlight in his life. The other team comprised four friends, who he recalls as one of the smartest he has ever come across.) The regular meetings were held 9.45 on Sunday morning, with a programme of choruses, chain prayer and reading, memory verses and a well thought-out Bible talk; and a club night, when games such as table tennis, snooker, chess and darts were played, held on Fridays. Various outdoor recreational activities were held during the summer months. Many young men owed much to their involvement with Coleman Street Covenanters.

A Covenanter group was also formed later for the girls, led by Ivy Hardingham, with the help of others. One earlier girls work was that led by Grace Alderton in the late 1940s and 1950s. Besides being an able and respected teacher, she and her husband, John, often had the girls back to their home for tea, and took them on outings or out for meals. They maintained contact with several of the girls for many years after that and several attended Grace's funeral in 1997. John and Grace were also involved in putting on the Service of Song: "Signposts" and "The Wondrous Life" during the Sunday school treats of 12 January 1949 and 11 January 1950. Grace Alderton also helped to lead the women's meeting at Stambridge mission for a number of years.

Yet another young people's work that has had significance to many still alive, although not an assembly activity as such, was "Crusaders". This was a non-denominational, non-church based, work, geared (in the early days) to children (from nine years up) of middle class parents (originally, one needed to go to a grammar or private school to attend), and often these were not connected with churches or catered for in existing churches. Whilst some at Coleman Street felt that this detracted from the activities of the assembly, and tended to divide the young people and exclude working class children, the Crusaders did have a marked effect in reaching a whole section of young people who might not have otherwise been reached. There were many at Coleman Street who were much involved in this work. Ted Iles helped to start the Thorpe Bay branch in 1930, ably assisted by a young Howard Clinch. Ted's first wife, Amy, helped to lead the girls' work. After the war, the Thorpe Bay branch was led by Victor Levett, assisted by Jack Hume, upon returning from the War. Margaret Hume led the girls' work. David Iles, John Girling and Malcolm Heddle from the Hall all helped as assistant leaders for many years. Later Malcolm Heddle took on the leadership of Thorpe Bay Crusaders. Many can recall these men with fondness, not only opening up the Word of God, but also their lives and homes. They had undoubtedly a great desire to bring their charges to Christ. Victor Levett's home was often made available at all hours and he would frequently involve the boys in his own interests, such as taking them out in his boat and on rambles. There were other branches represented. Evelyn Schooling led a thriving girl Crusader's class in Eastwood for some years and saw several come to Christ, many from non Christian homes.

Jack Hume, who was earlier involved in helping at Shopland Mission, was considered to be an able preacher, and was much in demand. He was also instrumental in reviving the open air work on Southend sea front, which continued for many years. Another of his extra-assembly activities was with the Southend branch of the Scripture Union, where fellowship with many from other denominations could be had. Malcolm Heddle could recall the many groups that met in the Southend area, the well attended annual rallies held at Cliff Town Congregational Church, and outstanding chairmen, such as Rev. (Colonel) Dye. Later Jack and Margaret Hume decided to emigrate to New Zealand, where he continued his career with the bank. It was noted in the oversight minutes of 25 July 1963 that a farewell meeting was to be arranged for Mr and Mrs Jack Hume, in conjunction with Alexander Gospel Hall, to be held 24 August. Jack and Margaret (who is still alive) had many years of fruitful service in Brethren assemblies, and with the Scripture Union, in New Zealand.

Another young people's activity was the "Young Sowers League" (YSL), groups of which met regularly for some years from the mid 1950's; for a time at the Hall, and led by Randolph

and Madeline Melville, and also in the home of the Hardingham sisters (Ciss, Ivy and Grace). Grace began it with the older girls from Girls Own, a sewing and knitting class for girls, which also incorporated such activities as chorus singing and the giving of a Gospel talk. YSL was an activity of the *Scripture Gift Mission*. Coleman Street has been involved with SGM almost from the day it began. A key feature of the YSL was to get young people to increase their knowledge of the Bible. YSL would set a question from each chapter in the Bible, which had to be answered by copying out a verse from the chapter, which answered exactly the question. The young people received a portion of the scriptures, a Bible or a Bible commentary, as a reward for their efforts, depending how much they achieved. There were some who managed to answer a question on every chapter in the Bible, and the Bible, which was their prize, is still treasured. YSL was one (of many) activities which William Heddle held close to his heart. He was involved for several years as a member of SGM's general council. It was fitting that his funeral in 1982 was led by the then general secretary of SGM.

Finally, on the subject of the various young people's activities, something should be said about two activities which involved many of the young people and which had already been going for many years: the open airs on Southend sea front, which had re-commenced after the war and the regular (weekly) visits to the old folk who resided at Roche House, until this closed in the 1970's. In 1955, David Iles and David Prentice approached the oversight with the proposition (which was agreed to) that the young people be given full charge of the open airs on the sea front. It had been felt that the previous two seasons had not been too successful. The two David's and their helpers undertook to carefully plan the open airs services. For a time, there were two services, 6.30 and 8.00, on Sunday evenings, with preachers, and those giving musical contributions, booked beforehand. Many from other Brethren assemblies, as well as some from non Brethren churches, assisted in this ministry. One of the preachers was Geoff Hayman, often using his chalk board. The author also preached there, as a young believer in his teens, and many others did too. The open airs took place near where the puppet theatre was located, one hundred yards east of the pier. Later, Joe Barnes, who held the lease to the puppet theatre, allowed this to be used for the open airs, and this created a better facility for meetings to be conducted and for passers by to drop in; although when the theatre was enclosed, the meetings were then held outside. Whilst numbers who made Christian commitments may have been only a few over the years these meetings ran, thousands heard the Gospel preached and were spoken to personally or handed tracts. The open airs continued unabated, albeit with different persons involved, until the early 1970's.

Roche House was visited on Saturday afternoons, usually for an hour, often by a large group from the Hall, including many of the young people. They would take mini services and meet the residents in different wards, sometimes splitting up in order to ensure maximum coverage. On occasions they would lay on special teas for the residents and distribute gifts at Christmas time. Later on it was decided to organise a rota, with a different team each week, led by a nominated leader. Each team would visit once a month. Those taking special interest in, and leading, this work for many years included Eddie Iles and then Moses Abbott. I have recollections of helping in the late 1960's and early 1970's. I was in the team led by Barry Owen. I recall we usually met at Barry's house first for a time of prayer before going off to the home. We would generally try to visit at least two, and often three wards, and sometimes we split up in order to cover more wards. A portable organ and a set of Sankey's hymn books was there for us to use. Members of the team took different roles. One might lead the meeting, another pray, another read from the Bible and another give a short Gospel message. The

residents would usually choose the hymns, often being able to recall old favourites from their Sunday school days. Sometimes there might be a special musical item if one of our group was talented in that area. Always, we would take time to speak with the residents. I am not sure if there were conversions directly as a result of our efforts, although many were helped and encouraged and looked forward to our visits. A number of the residents were showing signs of senility, and it was often difficult to know how much had sunk in. We tended to visit mostly those who we knew would respond best, although we did try to reach all. Sometimes the men, usually in a small minority, were neglected, for many of them seemed more interested in the horse racing on television, and we thought it better not to disturb. I recall one of our number, Peter Marett, would later bring his young son, whom he would introduce to the delighted residents, and this always proved a good ice-breaker. Looking back at it now, I see these were important times, and well worth the sacrifice of giving up a Saturday afternoon. Sadly, toward the end interest among members, in visiting old people's homes, declined.

Around 1956 a difference in opinion arose regarding the future ownership of the Coleman Street Gospel Hall building. Some members, specifically from the Iles' family, had wanted this be sold on to the assembly, whilst others felt this should be given to the assembly in trust. The oversight minutes, dated 18 June 1924, had put on record: *the following extract from the will of the late Mr. W.Iles was read - "I give the Gospel Hall in Coleman St, Southend/Sea to my said four Sons upon trust to carry on the Services as now carried on, but the Hall shall not be sold except by the agreement of all my four sons, and in the case of such agreement and sale I give the proceeds thereof unto & equally between all my children living at my decease."* Lively discussion took place concerning what should be done, and specifically what were the intentions of William Iles' will, culminating in a special church meeting, chaired by Mr Hudson, held on 31 May 1957 to discuss the matter, with a wide range of views and propositions being presented. (Later, the value of having further church meetings to keep the assembly informed of events was discussed and agreed by the oversight, although in the main such meetings did not materialise.)

Although the meeting was inconclusive it was eventually agreed that the building should be handed over in trust to UKET (now Stewardship Services), and has remained so ever since. Also, Number 9 Coleman Street, the caretaker's house, which adjoined the Hall, and had also belonged to William Iles, was later (in 1960) purchased by the assembly from the Iles' family and was handed over in trust to UKET. Arrangements were made so the assembly could collect rent from Number 9, subject to UKET approval, although Coleman Street was responsible for upkeep, maintenance, and insurance, just as it was for the Hall. The situation continues to remain; and (it is felt) with good relationships between tenant and landlord.

In the later 1960s and early 1970's there were three church weekends; two were held at Cromer (at the guest house run by Charles and Peggy Leswell) and another at Folkestone. This was for the whole assembly, with many young people and assembly members' families attending. These were times for fellowship and spiritual renewal, as well as recreation, fun and getting to know one another. There were invited speakers (one year Jim Fraser; another Paul Bullivant) and themes (one year "Retreat to Advance"). During the 1970's three weekends were organised for the young people at "Fellowship Afloat", a Christian sailing centre in Tollesbury. Besides having opportunities to sail dinghies, the young people also enjoyed the planned sessions led by an invited speaker: Geoff Carr (twice) and Robert Taylor.

“Thursday Fellowship”, later known as “Ladies Link”, began in 1970, and met one evening each month. It had been felt that there was a need and opportunity for reaching the younger women. It was, in the early years, sometimes referred to as “Young Wives”, although all women, regardless of age or marital status, were welcome. Marion Iles, Bunty Heddle and Ruth Bullivant wrote to the oversight with a proposal for starting this meeting, and this was accepted. They formed a committee to take care of the organisation and went about inviting ladies, who had some contact with the Hall, to come. This included writing to the mothers of each of the Sunday school children. One of the mothers contacted, Shirley Boon, continues to be a member to this day. The committee organised a programme of events, mostly led by speakers who would speak on a subject of topical interest and give a short Gospel message. Many came in as a result of the invitations given. Ladies Link still remains a popular activity.

In June 1972 a fortnight’s “Way to Life” crusade was held in Southchurch Park, in a large purpose built tent. This was led by Dick Saunders, an able and powerful preacher of the Gospel, who had a wide radio ministry, and his gifted team, who were and are associated with *Counties*. The oversight had been exercised concerning such an undertaking for some years, although prior to this the time did not appear right; indeed there was a feeling that the assembly was not in the right spiritual state for such an undertaking. The preparation for the crusade began at least eighteen months previously. Whilst Coleman Street were the initiators of this event, the oversight soon recognised that it was desirable to involve other churches, having taken the advice of Dick Saunders and Cyril Wiggins, an eminent Christian businessman in the town. Many churches did respond and were to play active parts in this event. Other local Brethren assemblies participated, although in some cases support was withheld because of non Brethren participation. Churches from various denominations, including Baptist, Methodist, United Reform and Pentecostal, were represented. Although Anglicans were less involved, Richard Wilson, who belonged to St Augustines, Thorpe Bay, ably led the choir for practices, until John Hall took over for the actual crusade.

Eighty churches in the area were involved, and these were kept up to date with what was going on by regular news letters. The steering committee comprised the members of the Coleman Street oversight, and were joined by representatives from other churches. Some Christian leaders who played or were to play significant parts in the spiritual life of Southend, joined in, including Chris Chilvers and David Saunders. Careful planning and preparation was made. Those involved worked extremely hard, counsellors were trained, and a fine choir was formed. Not least, many prayer groups were mobilised across the town. During the course of 1971, not much happened, but then everything seem to fall into place (presumably helped by prayer), not least getting Council permission to hold the meetings on the site intended, (although the fact that the mayor of Southend lived next door to one of the committee members, and the deputy mayor was a patient of another, did help).

It took three days to set up the site, and volunteers came from all over the place to help. Winston Chilcraft recalls *the tent was geodetic, first time out, with none who knew precisely how to put it up. I wielded a sledge hammer to drive the tent pegs into the ground. The Rev David Saunders, a fellow slave, was surprised at a poor simple gospel hall man’s ability to wield a heavy hammer; I gave the credit to my paternal grandfather. The three days’ labour promoted close fellowship and common sweat.* A group of ladies, ably marshalled by Mrs Campbell, wife of one of the elders, organised hot meals and refreshments for the men. During the course of the crusade many were reached and some 500 decisions concerning

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Christian commitment were registered. For the most part, these were steered toward those churches from which they came in the first place. One of the many remarkable conversions which occurred included that of a notable middle aged couple, who out of curiosity decided to follow the sign, which a motoring organisation had erected, where the words "Way to Life" were displayed, rather than the expected "Way to Life Crusade". They came in, they heard the Gospel preached, and they were converted; and to this day they are following the Lord.

As a result of the crusade, a number of churches in the Southend area experienced significant growth. Of the other positive outcomes from this event were the many close relationships which began between those belonging to the different churches, and these have long endured, as have some of the prayer partnerships which began then. Ernie and Joan Maycock, who sang in the choir, saw during their association with the crusade that some older single people hardly ever had a holiday, and developed a business and ministry which filled that gap for many years, thus continuing the fellowship started by the Way to Life crusade. This inter-church venture may well have been the first of its kind in Southend, and has opened the way for others to follow. One looks forward to forthcoming missions which have been planned to take place, organised by a number of local churches associated with SEELEF.

Although Coleman Street were the prime movers in the event, many of the members were not fully committed, and in terms of the mission contributing to church growth, this largely did not happen. There were conversions, including children of assembly members; some had discovered fulfilment and outlets in doing service for the Lord, often discovering talents they did not know they had; others were helped spiritually and found a deeper level of fellowship with other believers; but the assembly as a whole was largely unaffected. During the ensuing period there were internal happenings at the assembly which caused some upset. Also, the Charismatic Movement, which in some other places had helped to inject new life, creating in many the aspiration for a deeper, spiritual life, including some at Coleman Street, tended to often be a cause of division. With one notable exception, the members of the oversight tended not to welcome this new movement, which had come to affect many within the town and a few in the assembly, although some attitudes did soften over time.

The period which followed the Dick Saunders crusade saw a continuation of a decline which had already begun, with the overall trend for people to drift away from the assembly, and in some cases join other local churches, although some moved away because of home, job or study. The number of young people aged late teens to twenties, had fallen drastically from the large numbers which were in fellowship during the mid sixties. Although the question of how to attract and keep the young people had frequently occupied the oversight since the 1950's, being addressed with varying degrees of success, many left anyway. The oversight, partly fearful of too many radical changes, may have been perceived not to have gone far enough to accommodate the needs and aspirations of the young people. Consideration had also earlier been given to make the church more family friendly, and this culminated in a family service being started on Sunday mornings, with, for a time, a crèche. The matter of family service had been raised in the early sixties, but it took several years for this to be adopted, some being concerned that worship should take precedence and reluctant for the Breaking of Bread meeting to be changed in time or format.

Some of the stalwarts, who had given years, sometimes life-times, of sterling service to the assembly, died during this time. It was hard to see how these were going to be replaced. These

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included the afore-mentioned Walter Jiggins (1973), William Heddle (1982), Moses Abbott (1985), and Leonard Ladd (1992); and there were others too, including several faithful, hard working women. One of the long serving stalwarts was Charlie Childs, who died in 1981. Mr Childs had given a life time's service at Coleman Street. Besides serving in the Sunday School, he contributed significantly to the preaching and teaching ministry at the Hall and further afield. He was remembered as a quiet, faithful, gracious and helpful man. A little prior to this period the last of William Iles' (senior) sons, William and Edward died (1965), and David Byatt (his son-in-law) in 1968. The other two sons of William Iles had died earlier: Arthur in 1940, and Harry in 1956. Whilst most of these had died in old age, and their assembly activities in later years had been much curtailed, their loss was still deeply felt.

Yet, the work did continue, and seemed to prosper. A number in the assembly were much committed to the works which were going on, and to starting new works in the assembly. Prayer and Bible Study meetings continued. Geoff Hayman took on the Covenanter (and Jucos for younger boys) work for some years, taking over from Lou Brook, who had himself taken over from Bryn Jones, including seeing the merging of boys and girls' activities, a sign of the times. Others later took over from Geoff, including Richard Iles, Ray Hogg and Ian and Sue Bird, and this work continued up to the late 1980's. The Jucos' work had been started by Ken Garrett. Various other young people's and children's works also took place. Some enthusiastic young peoples leaders were involved. Peter Marret led a youth club, called the Doorway Club, for those aged 13 and above, for a number of years until 1978, along with some older helpers, and arranged a number of special activities, including camps. One memorable camp was held in 1976 at Danbury Common, and most of the teenagers attended with several older members helping out practically. It was felt to be a good time spiritually and for the fun that was had and getting to know and relating to the youngsters.

Key Nights began for 9 to 12 year olds in 1976, following Geoff Carr's children's mission. It was the "key" to the Doorway Club when members reached 13. Several assembly members helped in this work and took turns in telling stories and leading other activities. In 1979, with some who were 13, and the Doorway Club having closed, these were split off into their own group, called "Contact". This work was led by Peter and Suzanne Brown, together with some young helpers, and they did much to mobilise and motivate the young, with often exciting, innovative programmes. Few around then can forget the special productions which were put on, notably of "Joseph and His Technicolour Dreamcoat". Contact closed in 1981. Key Nights closed in 1985. In the early 1980's a YSL group was run for older Key Night members.

Shortly after the mission in 1972, discussions took place concerning the appointment of a full time worker for the assembly. There were some reservations and in the end the matter was dropped for a time. However, toward the end of 1981 the assembly did invite Graham Poland to help and he stayed over two years (February 1982 to June 1984), although part of the time he was involved in itinerant ministry. Graham had previously worked with *Gospel Literature Outreach* (GLO), and when he left he undertook another position with GLO. During the early 1980's, Coleman Street had some involvement with GLO, partly through John Girling, the then missionary secretary. On one occasion a GLO team had come to Southend to run a training weekend. Some of the young people became further involved with GLO activities. Keith Girling served on a summer team with a church in France, and his contribution was much appreciated by the people there because of his whole hearted desire to serve. Denise Girling, joined GLO on a full time basis, based initially in Motherwell, although she had

earlier served on a summer team in Spain, and was supported for some years after by the assembly. Mark Owen and Richard Iles served on a GLO summer team in Portugal.

Regarding Graham and Maureen Poland, it was necessary to find them suitable accommodation for when they arrived. When a suitable property had been acquired, many within the assembly worked hard together to get the house ready. Graham made significant contributions in evangelistic and pastoral visitation, and in the teaching ministry and general life of the church. He also helped in "Open House". Open House was held on one day during the week (usually Thursdays, 11 am - 2 pm). Anyone could turn up to the Chapel for a cup of tea or coffee and a chat, with a view to bridging the gap with the local community. It ran from September 1982 and finally closed November 1989. It began partly as a response by evangelical churches to the Pope's visit to the UK, 28 May - 2 June 1982, when the church opened each day 24 May - 28 May. A few came in, and it was felt that it would be a good means of outreach if held on a regular basis. Many in the assembly helped, in particular David and Beryl Marett, who were among the leading visionaries for this work. Open House continued to be led by David Marett after Graham left, until David and Beryl themselves moved away from Southend. Open House did help to provide a valuable contact with the local community, and as a result a number came to some of the other meetings in the assembly, in particular the women's meeting and family service.

When Graham decided to leave Coleman Street, it was felt he did so having concluded that he had not been able to contribute in the way he wanted and that the spiritual desire and vision of the assembly, to support an effective ministry, was lacking. As far as Coleman Street was concerned, they had expectations for him to build up the young people's work, and this had not materialised in the way expected. Thus Graham and the assembly parted, albeit on amicable terms. In later years, Graham would serve as a pastor of Grosvenor Church, Barnstable, helping to effect significant spiritual growth in that church, (10 Changing Churches, Harold Rowdon (ed), 1999).

Notwithstanding Graham's departure, the work at the assembly continued, even though the general trend toward a decline in numbers was to continue. One innovation, which had a degree of success, was to involve some of the young men in leadership activities in the assembly. A group called the "Youngers" was set up, which worked closely with the Elders. One activity was to invite a team from Youth for Christ to work within the assembly. The team that came stayed for the best part of a year: 5 October 1986 - 11 August 1987. It comprised two boys and two girls: Simon Clinton (leader, aged 23), Ronald Jenkinson (aged 18), Rachel Carter (aged 18), Christine Spänke (deputy leader from Germany, aged 25). These came from a variety of church backgrounds, none of which was Brethren, yet they integrated well with the people of the Chapel, and took part in many of the activities, injecting a breath of fresh air, which was appreciated. In particular, they did valuable work among the children, including starting a mid-week club and holding two holiday clubs, helped by members of the assembly. One of the assembly young men, Timothy Coker, was encouraged by the visitors toward Christian service. Tim later joined Youth for Christ for a year (1987 - 88) and then studied two further years in a Bible college (1988 - 90).

On 5 May 1987, the Mums and Toddler group was started, with Sherry Brown, Carole Bastin and Sue (Brandon) Iles from the assembly leading it. This began with a view to reach local mothers in a friendly and relaxed setting, and one where the children were well catered for.

This has generally proved to be a good means of reaching out to local families, some of whom have kept contact with the Chapel.

I re-joined Coleman Street in the early 1990's, having been away for much of the 1970's and 1980's, first as a student and then having to work away. When I came back to Southend in the mid 1980's I looked around for another church in the area to join, but did not feel I could settle in any of them. I had been earlier associated with Coleman Street through belonging to the Covenanter class in the mid 1960's, being subsequently converted, baptised and joining the fellowship. Three things particularly struck me upon returning: firstly, the elders and leading lights, I had known in the past, were no longer there. The last of these, David and Marion Iles, left shortly after I came back (1991). Some had died and others had moved away, either out of the area altogether or had joined another local Christian fellowship. Regarding those in fellowship elsewhere, contact and cordial relations were largely maintained. Many came to visit from time to time and stayed in touch. Secondly, there were very few young people at the Chapel. Some of the enthusiastic leaders and workers from a few years previous had left, and with that the work also dropped off. Thirdly, I received such a warm welcome upon returning; I felt a bit like the Prodigal Son, when he returned.

As for the subsequent years, it could be construed there was not much of significance by way of change to report, yet the work has continued, often in quiet, undramatic ways, and the people have remained faithful. Possibly there was more tolerance and less acrimony, but then the situation has made that so. Certainly a kindness existed amongst the members. Some past activities have continued, whilst others ceased, understandably, given the reduced numbers and predominance of older people. Whilst Sunday services have continued to be well supported, meetings at other times, for the purpose of prayer, Bible study and fellowship, though taking place, have not always occurred on such a consistent, regular basis.

The current situation, detailed in the final chapter, may seem similar to that observed in the early 1990's. There have been conversions and baptisms; and a few joined from other churches, including from Elmsleigh Hall, which had closed during that time. But as far as numbers were concerned, newcomers have barely replaced those who have died or have moved away from the area. All this is a long way from the days when the church was full, a hive of activity, with regular conversions and baptisms; and inevitably one feels some nostalgia and sadness, yet at the same time not without hope, for the Lord Jesus Christ has not changed. He will build His Church as He promised. *Faithful is he that calleth you, who will also do it* (1 Thessalonians 5v24).

Chapter 5 - Children and relations

For we are members of his body, of his flesh and of his bones (Ephesians 5v30)

For good reason Coleman Street has been referred to as the mother assembly in the Southend area. Not only was it the first Open Brethren assembly in the area, at least as far as this author is aware, but it has played no small part in bringing several other Open Brethren assemblies and missions into being within South East Essex and providing subsequent support, even though for the most part they have maintained independent existence. These include Shoebury Hall and Alexander Gospel Hall (was Chalkwell Park Gospel Hall, now Alexander Free Church), together with missions at Shopland, Great Wakering and Fambridge. One contributor has described these missions and another at Pound Lane, Pitsea, (which is still going, although no longer connected with Coleman Street), as being *Coleman Street outposts*.

Significant parts were played also in the establishing of Carlton Avenue Gospel Hall, Westcliff and Elmsleigh Hall, Leigh, although these were more the direct result of church plants by Alexander (thus making Coleman Street a grandmother). Financial, prayerful and other help was also provided in establishing Thundersley Gospel Hall (also known these days as Thundersley Evangelical Church). There is even a record of one 'nearly' planted church. A hall had become available for purchase in Damaltia Road, Southchurch, around 1913. Some members were interested in purchasing this to start a meeting. In the end the oversight decided to advise against, particularly as the Gospel Hall was only a mile away. Soon after, it was noted that Mr Sergeant was leaving Coleman Street to take over that work for Belle Vue Baptist church. Coleman Street has long had close relations with several independent missions in the South East Essex area (of which many had existed in the past), as at Barling, Stambridge, Paglesham, Sawbridgeworth, Burnt Mills and Bethel (now Rock Dene Christian Fellowship, near the Anne Boleyn public house, Rochford), and played some part in supporting and helping to keep these works going. There was also a People's Mission at Southchurch (which was likely that in Dalmatia Road) to which Coleman Street supplied speakers for its meetings.

With many able and willing members in its early years, Coleman Street was well positioned to help out with the preaching in many of these places. It has supplied preachers to all the Brethren assemblies and missions named above, for many years after commencement, and also has received preachers from them. In the early days relations were close, although latterly this closeness has mostly been less marked. Even so, good relationships are maintained with those that survive, including many strong individual ties, although links are stronger with some than with others.

There would have been times when some of these village works were poorly supported, particularly in the post-war years, when all around church attendance was in decline, and moreover the nature of village life had changed, with agricultural work becoming less labour intensive and nearby towns becoming more accessible. It says something for the commitment of the people who helped, that these works continued so long. Often much of the work was done by the ladies, who were also the main supporters. Although not able to pray and minister publicly, they did many of the other jobs, including arranging the meetings. The people who attended these places were often humble, warm hearted, straightforward folk, many of them farm workers. These were attributes which several of the visiting preachers much appreciated.

Regular preachers, from Coleman Street, among the villages included the afore-mentioned

Moses Abbott, Walter Jiggins and Leonard Ladd. But several others were involved too, including Reginald Ladd, Alf Prentice, John Girling, David Iles, Fred Davis, John Alderton, Charlie Childs, Thomas Root and Jack Beehag. The latter two, faithfully and with enthusiasm, ran services at Stambridge and the Jubilee Hall, next to Belle Vue Baptist church, for a number of years. Jack Beehag also had a significant involvement with Bethel Mission. John Alderton, who was also active in Sunday school work, as well as being a member of the oversight for some years, is still a member of Coleman Street Chapel.

Coleman Street was effective, at least in the early days, in establishing new churches, seeing this as something they should be doing. The town was rapidly expanding and it was felt that a gospel witness was needed to the new estates which were springing up, as well as a spiritual home for Christians who lived in those areas. There was a perception, which may well have been the case, that there were few other evangelically minded fellowships around who could or would address this need.

The following is a brief historical survey of the various Brethren linked works in the South East Essex area, leading up to the present day. I am indebted to persons associated with these works, who for the most part are or were in leadership positions, for supplying much of the information: Jim Massey (Shoebury), John Simmons (Alexander), Winston Chilcraft (Elmsleigh), Peter Scott (Carlton), Eric Jordan (Thundersley), Gwyn Jordan (Swans Green), John Overall and Walter Cadge (Shopland), as well as some of the members and ex-members of Coleman Street, for filling in some of the gaps. The description provided is far from exhaustive. Because of the nature of the information available, I have provided more detail for some works than for others, and also the type of detail given differs in each case.

Regarding **Shoebury Hall**, according to the oversight minutes a special meeting was held 6 September 1906 *to consider a proposal by Messrs Levett and Tillbrook regarding to commencing a meeting at Shoebury for the "Breaking of Bread". It was understood that there were four who would break bread over there including Mr and Mrs Tillbrook and that Mr Levett and Mr Jones would be going over there to help and for fellowship.* Whilst it was decided to hold over the matter it was agreed that there would be a week-night meeting on a convenient evening regarding the principles of such a meeting for those who previously had not been accustomed to such a meeting and that Mr Levett would take a cottage for the proposed meeting.

Shoebury Hall was built and opened for services on the first Saturday in October 1920. Anniversary conferences have henceforth been held on that Saturday. Two current members, Mrs Crowhurst and Mrs Donaldson, have referred to a family from Westcliff holding Breaking of Bread meetings in a house in John Street some years prior to that. Two of the founder members were the Levett brothers, Sylvester and Victor (senior). Sylvester's wife, affectionately known as Grandma Levett, was the sister of Bernard Maycock, who was active at Coleman Street, and a master printer by trade. Miriam Chilcraft recalled her first hesitant venture into Shoebury Hall as a young, recently converted WAAF. She was welcomed at the door by Mr Glasscock and was bidden by Grandma Levett to sit next to her. (Mr Glasscock's son Tim was later commended from Shoebury as a missionary to Spain, where he still serves). Her recollections were *I was really surprised and heartened by such a warm welcome ... it was like being in heaven - the ministry of the word was so fresh to me.*

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Membership grew to over 100 and included several local tradesmen, the manager of Shoebury Waterworks, the manageress of the Soldiers' Home and several railwaymen and soldiers. (Shoebury was home to a regiment of the Royal Artillery and site of the Proof and Experimental Establishment, whence came numerous loud bangs). Besides Sunday services, meetings were held on Mondays (Bible teaching), Wednesdays (Bible reading) and Fridays (prayer). In the early days converts were baptised in the River Thames, although a baptistry was later installed in the hall. There was a women's meeting, special services for railway workers (with tea provided) and open-air witness in the High Street. The work among the children found good response with the Sunday school and children's meetings well attended. Sunday school outings required seven coaches to convey the children, when over 200 were taken to Maldon.

One of Shoebury's members was Captain Sydney May (1898 - 1989). He was posted to Shoebury as a staff sergeant in 1933 and served some years there before taking a position, in 1945, as assistant secretary to SASRA, (an organisation devoted to the welfare, particularly spiritual, of British soldiers and airmen). Captain May was well known and active amongst many of the Southend assemblies, sometimes attending with fellow soldiers and often in uniform. In his memoirs he recorded *I was received into fellowship at the gospel hall in Wakering Avenue and gave help in the Sunday school and open air meetings*. He was part of a team which conducted open air meetings in surrounding villages. He would carry a folding organ on the luggage grid on his car while team members used their bicycles. In 1936 a hall was hired in West Road for Sunday school and Gospel services, and he became Sunday school superintendent with a team of five teachers. He recalled that in those days life was very full. On Sundays he had a 10.00am Bible school, 11.00am Breaking of Bread, 3.00pm Sunday school, 5.30pm young people's meeting, 6.30pm Gospel service, 8.00pm open air meeting and 9.00pm an epilogue in the Soldier's Home.

During the war he was posted to Cumbria. From private correspondence it is clear he continued to be much involved in Christian service, maintained a sincere devotion to his God, sought to encourage his correspondents in the things of God, and continued to have an affection for his friends in Southend. In one letter he mentions a young people's meeting he was invited to in Barrow with almost 100 young people, which reminded him of *Colman Street*. In another he wrote that he was too old to marry, in response to a suggestion that it would be his turn next. In fact, he married Grace, in 1947, who shared his burden to proclaim the Gospel. They had three children and six grandchildren. His wife outlived him.

Shoebury continues to function, keeping to many of old the traditions, and with a concern for sound doctrine. The meetings are mostly led by competent local brethren. The Sunday Breaking of Bread (still keeping the open format), Gospel meetings and Sunday school, and some of the mid-week meetings and annual conferences still continue, albeit with smaller numbers in attendance, and like Coleman Street comprises a large proportion of older people, many having belonged to the Hall for many years. Their main links to other churches these days are with Coleman Street and Carlton Avenue.

Regarding **Alexander Free Church**, according to the oversight minutes of 17 November 1910 they met *to consider the question of the desirability of Mr May and Mr Mitchell renting the Iron Room at the corner of Ronald Park Ave Westcliff for the establishing of a mtg there for the Breaking of Bread & Gospel work they having expressed their desire to do so*. In the

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ensuing discussion several practical points were brought up: the fact that they had also sought a suitable place in Leigh (where some members lived) but none could be found; the desirability of knowing who would attend such a meeting; the need for the brethren involved to take responsibility (Mr May agreed to undertake financial responsibility); a suggestion to start with special meetings in order to gauge support before commencing the Breaking of Bread; and a concern that foreign mission giving be maintained should people leave to help.

At the front of the Chalkwell Park Gospel Hall oversight minutes, the following note was written: *For some considerable time it had been felt there was great need for a Meeting in the neighbourhood of Chalkwell Park and Leigh, and a few brethren waited upon the Lord that He might open up the way. The desire was made known to the Brethren at Coleman Street who gave their full fellowship. Subsequently the Hall in Leigh Road became vacant, and it was decided to rent the same for six months to commence with at a rental of 13/- per week, and to begin on Sunday December 11th 1910. It was also agreed that the Hall should be called "Gospel Hall, Chalkwell Park" and that in addition to Breaking of Bread, a Sunday School should be held in the afternoon and the Gospel should be preached in the evening; also that a Meeting for Praise & Prayer should be held on Tuesday evenings.*

The names of those who attended that first Breaking of Bread meeting were recorded: 23 were present; 21 of whom were from Coleman Street. 14 children attended the Sunday School that afternoon, and 34 were present at the evening Gospel Meeting, where the preacher was William Iles (junior). 23 were present at the Praise and Prayer meeting the following Tuesday. For the next few Sundays a record was kept of those attending Sunday morning. A record of those coming into fellowship were kept for some time, usually by transfer from other assemblies, with accompanying letters of commendation. Messrs May and Mitchell between them managed the affairs of the assembly and were joined by others to form the oversight, with proposed monthly meetings, in 6 April 1914.

It would seem that meetings did take place in a small corrugated iron hall, known as the Tin Tab, brought up from Southend by a horse drawn wagon, and erected at the corner of Ronald Park Avenue and London Road, from the beginning, assuming this is the same Leigh Road premises referred to earlier. There is evidence that there had been some tent work on the site even prior to that. This primitive hall was replaced by the present hall for the main meetings, having been previously moved to the back on rollers where it was used to house additional activities. The new building was opened on 17 May 1924. It was named after the landlord (and presumably the builder) Captain Alexander. (Most Brethren assemblies are named after the road or district in which they are situated.) The building could seat up to 300. The building was purchased outright by the assembly in 1952 at a reasonable price. Improvements were made to it around that time, and significant refurbishments were made in the early eighties, by which time the "Tin Tab" had been removed. Provision of the large sum of money, needed for the work, was seen as evidence of God's providence.

The first baptismal service was held on 31 August 1924, with 7 - 8 being baptised. William Arrol from Coleman Street was the speaker. (Mr Arrol's son-in-law, Cyril Argent, who was married to Verna, long served as one of the elders and took a leading role in the affairs of Alexander.) One of those who was baptised on that occasion was Phyllis Harding, who, with the others, and as was often customary, received a card stating her baptism was on confession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Her text was *my sheep hear my voice and I know them, and*

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they follow me, John 10v27. The first anniversary service was also the occasion of Harold Wildish's farewell, before leaving to be a missionary in Brazil. (Harold Wildish married another of Mr Arrol's daughters, Marion, at Coleman Street Gospel Hall on 27 July 1929, presumably whilst on furlough from the mission field.) Besides the Breaking of Bread and Gospel meetings, the early years saw many different activities being undertaken.

The young men, supported by some of the young ladies and older brethren, started open air work in outlying districts. Someone with a motor bike transported hymn books, harmonium and banners displaying texts. They sometimes linked up with those from Coleman Street for this purpose, particularly working on Southend sea front and in the High Street. Part of their work was to visit the gypsy encampments. Open air meetings were also conducted in nearby streets, and regular tracting was done. One of the young men was given help to acquire a tent, and this was used as a basis for doing Gospel work in Canvey, Benfleet, Canewdon, Ashingdon and Eastwood.

There was a girls' missionary sewing class, which sent parcels to different countries and to children's homes in this country, although the class stopped in 1942 due to shortage of materials. There was an active children's and young people's work and a woodwork class for boys. There were combined oversight meetings with Coleman Street, and occasionally Shoebury, just prior to, during and just after the Second World War. One of the topics discussed in some of those meetings concerned the new church plant at Ebenezer Gospel Hall, Carlton Avenue. It appears that for part of the war some meetings at Alexander ceased and combined meetings with Coleman Street were held. It had been proposed that these alternate at each other's premises.

Although for a short time during the war the Sunday school ceased because of the evacuation of children, the work continued to attract large numbers of children. The work flourished for many years after the war, although this was adversely affected when families moved away to newly built council estates. There was also a mid-week children's club, with about 80 attending, from just after the war. At its peak the Sunday school attracted numbers upwards of 50, and was led by many able and dedicated superintendents and teachers. The Covenanter work, with its programme of spiritual, social and physical activities (including camps, rallies and houseparties), focusing on the older children and teenagers, began in the fifties and has continued ever since. Around 1947 a new work began, with premises in Valkyrie Road, now a homeless centre, started by some who had seceded from Alexander. In the early 1970's some young people left to join the nearby Westcliff Baptist Church, over the "charismatic issue".

In recent years with many of the older members having died, a number of changes were made to the way the church functioned. A leadership team of six (including two wives of the men in the team) help to guide the church's affairs. The church might be described as moderately sympathetic to the Charismatic Movement with the gifts of the Spirit being allowed for. In the past 4 -5 years *Alpha* courses have been run, attracting those on the periphery of the church. These have resulted in conversions and baptisms, amongst both old and young. Alexander have felt the importance of developing links with other churches in the area, although conscious of the need to take care not to compromise concerning key doctrines. It is currently represented on the working group for a joint *Pentecost Celebration* mission, planned for 2000.

Open style Breaking of Bread meetings continue. These are held in the morning except on two Sundays in the month when there are family services. Then the meetings are held in the evening. Other Sunday evenings there is Bible teaching. Bible ministry and prayer meetings are held on Tuesday evenings. There are around 35 adults in membership, 80 attending family services (including children) and 15 attending the Bible teaching meetings. Other activities include mums and tots, friends and neighbours, women's meetings and men's night. There are children's and a young peoples' work, with Covenanter activities particularly featuring.

As a footnote to this brief sketch on the history of Alexander, a set of oversight minutes and related records concerning Chalkwell Park Gospel Hall, (1910 - 1921), have recently come to light. These are quite detailed and well presented. (I am grateful to Peter Scott (Carlton) and Neil Buckland (Alexander) for lending these to me.) They are an excellent supplement to the record we already have and give information not previously available. Consideration of much of that detail is outside the scope of this book, although it has caused me to revise some of what I wrote earlier, but there is room for further study. Amongst other things, these provide evidence of vibrant assembly life, close ties with Coleman Street, moves to practically help servicemen (and one German who was in fellowship) and special prayer during World War One, a mothers meeting (started by 1914), conversions (leading to starting a young believer's meeting in 1919), missionary support, open air work and missions, and items of pastoral and practical concern, as well as systematic help given toward the poor.

Elmsleigh Hall opened in September 1930. The work had begun a little prior to that. The Coleman Street oversight minute dated 20 December 1928 recorded *it was understood that the matter regarding the Leigh mtg was satisfactorily settled & now in fellowship with Alexander Hall, it was now decided to announce the Meeting next Lords day.* The work was begun by members from Alexander as a result of the need for believers who lived in Leigh to meet locally, especially for those persons living in the Highlands estate in the west. Not all of Alexander's Leigh contingent transferred right away, and there was some concern over Alexander's numbers reducing because of the new meeting. But the meeting began, early members including Mr and Mrs Herbert Fenn, Mr and Mrs Edwin Sibley, Mr and Mrs Waddilove, Mrs Marshall and her daughter Elsie Marshall, who lived to 103, and was well known and much loved as a nurse and midwife in the area, Mr (who also became a centenarian) and Mrs Oswald Pearce, and Mrs Mary Phillips and her daughter Joan.

One of the features of the early days was a lively children's work begun by Edwin Sibley who was succeeded by Hartley Fenn, one able and gifted in that service. Wednesday evenings, 6.30pm, saw the hall full with children wanting to see magic lantern slides. (In those days they could walk safely in the streets, even at night.) Oswald Pearce was the father of the Wednesday evening Bible readings. Winston Chilcraft has recorded that *he was much gifted as an expositor ... he could make the complex very simple and the obscure very plain, being Spirit taught and Spirit led.* Many of the preachers came from other local Brethren assemblies, with several from Coleman Street, including Leonard Ladd, Walter Jiggins, Moses Abbott, Ted Iles, and John Alderton. The composition of Elmsleigh was unusual as many were immigrants from the area between Algate pump and Hadleigh castle, representing several Brethren assemblies, each with their own rich traditions. From further afield came John and Betty Breavington, returning from army service in Kingston, Jamaica (where they had fellowship with Harold and Marion Wildish), and Edwin and Muriel Warnock who had served as Counties evangelists in Suffolk.

Many of Elmsleigh's early members served with distinction in the forces during the World Wars. James Perry served with the Royal Fusiliers, being wounded and taken prisoner in 1918. He later became a tailor by trade. Oswald Pearce served as a Royal Artillery muleteer in France 1914-18, seeing at first hand much of the carnage wrought. George Turner was a driver with the Royal Army Service Corps, who had driven ammunition trucks during the 1944 D-Day Normandy landings. Stanley Ellis was a major in the Royal Engineers, who had commanded a train retreating from the advancing German army in 1940. Ron Carpenter served in the Royal Army Service Corps, and had delivered water to front line troops in Italy. Herbert Robinson had been an RAF Met officer in Iceland. David Hylton served as a leading torpedo man on a naval cruiser. Winston Chilcraft did RAF and army service, having served at the Nuremberg military tribunal. One Gospel mission in the late 1940's was led by Bob Pettifer, who had piloted RAF aircraft ferrying British secret agents to and from France. Civilians also had vivid war-time memories, including those affected by bombing, as John Dilley. War-time experiences had a significant influence on the collective membership, not least causing them to have a realistic appraisal of humanity's depraved state, the failure of man to address the wickedness in the world and the all-sufficiency of the Gospel message.

One of Elmsleigh's strengths, particularly in its early days, was the family spirit which predominated. There was a sense that each belonged to the other. There was usually a good welcome at the door to those coming in and a warm farewell greeting. Children were encouraged, rewarded for helping, such as collecting hymnbooks. Christmas and birthday presents for the children were plentiful. Elmsleigh has long had a more than nominal interest in missionary affairs. Monthly missionary prayer meetings were well and fervently attended. Several missionaries were well supported. The annual sewing class display was a significant occasion marking the great efforts of the women in this very practical support of missionary causes. Two of Elmsleigh's members, at least in their younger days, have gone on to make significant contributions in overseas mission. David Ellis was led into service with the *China Inland Mission* (now OMF) in Java, Indonesia, later Singapore, and later became its UK director before retiring in 1999. Stephen Chilcraft has served with *Operation Mobilisation* and is now European director of *International Teams*. Ron Carpenter was an able and fervent Gospel preacher, serving many years with the *SE Essex mobile unit*.

By 1992 Elmsleigh was down to an elderly remnant after a number of years of steady decline. Those who died were not being replaced. Some had migrated to other places and others drifted away, having failed to maintain their earlier profession of faith, seeming to have lost some of the early zeal and discipline. UKET became trustees of the building, thus relieving locals of that responsibility. Eventually the closure came in December 1992 and a new tenant was eventually found for the hall: the "Potter's House Christian Fellowship". Residual funds were dispersed among various Gospel causes which the assembly had supported. Responsibility for winding up affairs fell on the shoulders of Winston Chilcraft who, with the passing away of George Clark in early 1993, was the last of the remaining responsible brethren.

Carlton Avenue Gospel Hall was opened some time between 1935 and 1938 and was referred to in the beginning as Ebenezer Gospel Hall. The deeds for the conveyance of the land in 1935 showed the original trustees as Moses Abbott, Robert Richardson and George MacKness. (It appears from the Coleman Street oversight minutes, dated 8 October 1943, that

an earlier joint oversight meeting between Alexander, Shoebury and Coleman Street, on 29 October 1936, had taken place to discuss the opening of the hall.) The hall was built on land purchased from Moses Abbott, whose own home stood next to the hall, although the exact arrangements are not clear.

Not long after its opening, meetings were suspended, likely as a consequence of the war. A further joint meeting between Coleman Street and Alexander was held on 15 October 1943 to discuss legal, financial and other matters regarding the hall. It was felt at the meeting that, before the hall could be opened for Gospel services, differences which existed between two of those responsible for the work at the hall needed to be resolved and *a suggested invitation be made to both these brethren to meet the combined oversight, with a view to a reconciliation.* The meeting also noted with respect to the (fabric of the) hall that *damage had been done by enemy action.* It is likely that during the war the building was used as a food store.

The oversight meeting of 13 November 1943 saw a reconciliation of the differences between the two brethren mentioned, who were in attendance and subsequently shook hands. Discussion then took place regarding the monies owed and how to clear them. It was recorded that Mr Northcroft (of Alexander) placed a £1 note on the table, thus commencing paying of monies outstanding. One further joint oversight meeting was held 21 March 1946, also involving Shoebury, regarding the re-opening of Ebenezer Gospel Hall and how best to go about this. The proposition was to recommence the work in a small way, starting with the Sunday school, then Gospel testimony followed by the Breaking of Bread. It was suggested that new trustees be appointed, *one from each of the local assemblies should be invited to form the new trust (Alex Hall, Leigh, Thundersley, Coleman St).* The sequence of events thereafter is not clear, although by April 1948 Carlton was up and running. C.B.Pamment and Sydney Fryett, from Alexander, were specifically instrumental in recommencing the work, and were joined in this venture by others, including Mr and Mrs Wood. In 1952 new trustees were appointed representing Alexander and the Shoebury and Thundersley assemblies.

The work at Carlton Avenue Gospel Hall continues and is often seen as the assembly in Southend which most closely adheres to traditional Brethren assembly principles. There are currently some 40 persons in fellowship. On Sundays Breaking of Bread meetings are held in the morning (following the Brethren pattern of an open meeting where believers worship and minister as felt led by the Spirit), with an evening Gospel meeting, along with an afternoon Sunday school and young people's Bible class. During the week, meetings for prayer and Bible ministry are held respectively on Tuesday and Thursday evenings, together with a children's club on Tuesday evening. Two regular features are Saturday night Bible ministry meetings held once a month, November to June, and Sunday afternoon open air meetings to preach the Gospel on Southend sea front, opposite Pleasant Road, which started in 1958, during the summer months. Carlton has several links with other Open Brethren assemblies, and provides those who are willing and able to minister the Word in many of these places.

Regarding **Thundersley Gospel Hall**, the building (still being used), situated in Kiln Road, was completed in November 1926 although work had been going some years before that. (It is possible Chalkwell Park Gospel Hall had a hand, as their oversight minutes, dated 5 January 1920 recorded *the question of the desire to commence a meeting at Thundersley for Breaking of Bread was briefly discussed.*) They had first met in a hall at the side of Shipwrights Drive, now a centre for the handicapped, and numbered around 50 - 60 people. The original elders

were George Jordan - master grocer, Roland Lake - bank official, Alfred Harrison - hardware merchant and Charles Denny - builder.

In the Coleman Street oversight minutes, dated 16 April 1926, it was noted that it was agreed to hold a special collection for that work. (An earlier oversight minute, 14 October 1909, recorded that Coleman Street agreed to pass on a gift of £1:10:0 to Mr Breavington toward a mission started at Thundersley, although it is not clear if this was a forerunner to Thundersley Gospel Hall or if this involved the same Mr Breavington who was a member of the early oversight of Chalkwell Park Gospel Hall.) The land had been given by William Sheridan, a gentleman landowner and benefactor. He was invited to the official opening when grateful public thanks were expressed to him. He produced a large black bag containing sixpenny pieces and offered all the children that were present a personal "dig or dip".

The new church building and Sunday school became full. One needed to arrive at the hall early in order to get a seat. Services were 11:00am Breaking of Bread, 3:00pm Sunday school, 6:30pm Gospel service and Tuesday at 8:00pm prayer and ministry. A number of special week-long outreaches were held over the years. One involved erection of a huge marquee at Victoria House Corner, now a roundabout, and another was held on the Salvation Army farm by Hadleigh Castle. Past members included a robust evangelist, James Hodson, one time champion weight lifter, and Mr Barnardo, nephew of the famous doctor who founded children's homes.

As the district was developed the need for more accommodation came to be felt, especially in connection with young people's work. In 1956 a porch was added, giving 20 extra seats. In 1962/3 there was further extension, increasing seating to 120 - 130. A new hall was built to the rear of the existing building and annexed to it, with seating for around 90, together with kitchen and toilet facilities. Around 1995 re-development of the land adjacent to the hall gave an opportunity for the church to purchase that land and further extend the hall, providing a comfortable lounge area, improved toilet facilities, disabled access and an enlarged car park.

A regular feature of the church were houseparties for young people and for the whole membership. These typically took place at Sizewell Hall (Suffolk) and Letton Hall (Norfolk). One of the annual events emanating from Thundersley was week- or fortnight-long camps in the Lake District, mostly at a campsite situated by Castlerigg Fell, for young people and extending to all ages. These were initiated by Paul Bullivant in 1965 with support from some of the older members, such as Mr and Mrs Lodge, who were originally from Brentwood. The camp allowed participants to enjoy the many facilities on offer in this most amazing part of God's creation. Most of the Lake District fells have been climbed at one time or another and countless games of football played over the years. For the less energetic, a good many of the tea and souvenir shops have been frequented in the area and most of the tourist attractions have been visited. There has always been a significant spiritual input, with an open style evening meeting, with different members leading morning devotions, and often informally sharing in small groups. The camp was initially organised on fairly regimented lines, although it was relaxed in later years. Use was made of a main block for meetings and meals. It could be said of the food: "that was good, that was very good, that was excellent, that was delicious"! The campers resided in tents, caravans or huts and all helped with chores.

The composition and spiritual atmosphere of the camp changed considerably over the years,

no doubt reflecting the changing times. In 1973 a further camp was started in Bala, North Wales, which was not so charismatic in emphasis. Even so, both camps attracted those of different theological persuasions, and in general with considerable care and tolerance being exercised by all. Many different groups have participated over the years (including from Coleman Street) and strong lasting friendships were built up. Most importantly several people have been saved, and many more encouraged and challenged regarding their Christian commitment, often later going on to take up prominent roles in church leadership. Times of fellowship and worship were often felt to be precious. One senses there have been many instances of God's presence and blessing during those times, in particular keeping participants safe. After some years, the organisation of the Castlerigg camps had no one from the Thundersley area on the committee, and they were subsequently run by different groups before ceasing in the early eighties. In 1986 the Lake District camps were restarted by Gwyn Jordan, with some of the old hands from the earliest days. Castlerigg camps continue to this day adopting similar principles and programmes as at the beginning, with the mantle for organising and running these being passed to a younger generation.

Around three years ago a new fellowship was begun at Thundersley. This was partly due to differences over the interpretation of experience and spiritual phenomena in the Christian life. A new fellowship based in a community hall in the nearby Swans Green district eventually resulted. This included some from the Gospel Hall, with a few others joining them from nearby churches, plus some new believers. Whilst there are differences in outlook between the two fellowships, good relationships are to be had amongst the respective members, with co-operation taking place between the two.

The work of Thundersley Gospel Hall continues, based on the early pattern, with a strong young people's work, many of whom, having been recently converted, attend the regular meetings. The Sunday meetings have been rearranged so that the morning meeting is a family service and the Breaking of Bread takes place during the evening meeting, albeit restricted to a shorter period. There continues to be an active "friends and neighbours" and women's work. Significant missionary activity is maintained. Members have many active outside interests, including Lionel Felgate (Gideons) and Mike Henson (India Link Ministries).

Swans Green, formally known as Thundersley Community Church, continues with an average of 40 attending each of the Sunday morning and evening meetings, including a fairly large fringe. Numbers of around 80 have attended special events like the Christmas lunch meetings. The morning meeting is based on the unstructured open format loved by the early Brethren, where all are encouraged to exercise their gift and contribute to mutual edification, with the Breaking of Bread providing the central focus, and often with a liberty that has been lost in many Brethren meetings. Women are permitted to participate in the meetings and are allowed to "prophesy" (give words of exhortation and encouragement), although elders are male. It is generally felt that teaching of doctrine should be undertaken by the men. The evening meeting is primarily for Bible teaching, preceded by praise, worship and prayer.

A variety of musical instruments are used. The church has produced its own song book which includes a wide mixture of Christian songs and hymns, ranging from the traditional Brethren Breaking of Bread type hymns (as found in Hymns of Light and Love) and some of the newer choruses which have emanated from the charismatic movement. The exercising of the gifts of the Spirit is encouraged within the discipline of the church. Once a month a family service is

held with a particular focus on all-age worship, teaching and evangelism, followed by a church meal. A Wednesday evening prayer and Bible meeting takes place with an emphasis on open participation and a parallel young people's meeting. There is a children's club, a mother and toddlers' group, a ladies' prayer meeting and a ladies' Bible study. The church is governed by four elders. The elders meet as a group with elders' wives but occasionally as a group of elders alone. The elders and wives also meet regularly with the leaders of the various church activities as a leadership team. There is a particular concern for reaching out to the local community. The church has run *Alpha* courses and is currently contemplating using the "Jesus video" some time in the future. More novel ways of reaching out to the community, such as providing drop-in free car washes, are continually being looked at and employed.

Regarding **Shopland Mission** a good deal of evidence is available, including the memories of Walter Cadge and John Overall, who were involved in the mission, both as children and as young people before the Second World War. Although John Overall settled in Southend, becoming a member of Southchurch Baptist Tabernacle, following his demobilisation from the army after the War, Walter Cadge continued to remain active at the mission, eventually taking on the main responsibility for the work until it closed down quite recently, mainly as a result of diminished numbers.

A substantial description of the work of Shopland Mission can be found in *The History of Rochford Hundred* by Lily Jerram-Burrows (1979). The author records that *in the south-west corner of Butlers Farm, surrounded by trees, stands a small building of corrugated iron - the Shopland Mission - founded in 1911 by William Andrew and his sister Eleanor Andrew of Butlers Farm, for farm workers and their families*. It is understood that William had been in dispute with the vicar but they also had a concern for the welfare of the farm workers. Not only were they concerned for their spiritual state but they were mindful of the social needs too. The mission hall which was erected was not only used for services on Sunday but during the week was a place where the illiterate adults were taught to read and write by Eleanor.

The mission also initiated a self-help club which members would pay into. Times were often hard, and at Christmas, the families received help from the coffers. The author records *in its early years the Mission was run by William and Eleanor Andrew and their farm workers, together with Mr. and Mrs. Outten* (who later started the Barling Mission) *of Barling and that the little mission chapel became the very heart of this agricultural community*. In the early years two sisters, Muriel Rayner and Myrtle Robinson, were active, and they started up a "Band of Hope".

The mission was registered as a place of worship for Christians in 1935 and trustees were appointed. These included two from Coleman Street: Edward Iles and Jack Hume, who was a leader of the mission before joining the RAF in 1942, after which Walter Cadge took on the leadership. Amy Iles, who died in 1937, first wife of Edward, had led the women's work at Shopland for several years. Many others from Coleman Street were amongst the regular visiting preachers, including Leonard Ladd, Moses Abbott, Walter Jiggins, Charlie Childs, Fred Davis, Alf Prentice, John Girling and David Iles. In later years, Barry Owen and Peter Marett often preached at the mission. (The other trustees were William Vellacott, mentioned in chapter 1, Walter Cadge, (both still trustees in 1979), and Milner Vellacott.)

Some of the early memories included a flourishing Sunday school with anniversary services

and annual outings being amongst the highlights. The large numbers of children in the Cadge and Overall families alone ensured a good number to start with. In these days of organised football teams and manicured pitches one might reflect on how Shopland provided a team of young men who played in the meadows against rival teams from other churches, including the young people of Coleman Street. Harvest Thanksgiving Services were a grand occasion, held on a Monday evening as soon as the harvest was gathered in. A Thanksgiving Service, with a special speaker, often from the *London City Mission*, followed a communal meal.

A number of Christian conferences took place during those years, and these were held in a marquee erected on Butler's farm. There was a thriving women's work. Regular mid-week meetings were held for prayer and Bible ministry. Many other memories remain from those days up to the last war. One was Harold Wildish being taught to shoot on the farm, presumably a useful skill for the mission field! Another was of the military personnel at Butler's camp during the war, some of whom attended the mission. Whilst the post-war days might appear less exciting and, as in many other places, saw a decline in numbers and activities, the work continued faithfully for many years without a break.

Like many similar works the links from, and influences of, what went on at Shopland Mission, are manifold and many can never be recounted. However, there was at least one who is known to have owed much to Shopland mission. She was Miss Gwen Barrell, who for many years prior to her death on 22 December 1998, aged 87, was a well loved member of Coleman Street Chapel, and who had spent most of her working life 'in service'. A tribute to Gwen contained in the Coleman Street Chapel magazine, February - March 1999, recorded three points about her that Geoff Hayman brought out at her funeral. These were *the joy of her salvation which she experienced since she came to know the Lord; her longsuffering, as despite her disability (she was born physically handicapped and remained so throughout her life), Gwen never grumbled; her generosity in giving, not just money but her time to others and the Lord's work.* The same tribute recorded that *Gwen attended the Sunday School at Shopland Mission. In September 1934, Harold Wildish was the speaker there and Gwen's brother-in-law's sister, Alice Overall, invited her to the meeting. There Gwen gave her heart to the Lord and was so happy. Cycling home to Rochford she sung:- "from sinking sands He lifted me; with tender hand He lifted me; from shades of night to plains of light, O praise His name, He lifted me!"*

Regarding **Great Wakering Mission** the first note concerning the work can be found in the Coleman Street oversight meeting minutes of 5 November 1925: *letter read from Mr Green regarding taking over the Mission Hall, Gt Wakering - decided to answer; asking what they really wanted us to do* and then on 16 April 1926: *letter read from Mr Green of Gt Wakering asking for the Lords Table to be commenced.* Walter Jiggins' diary entry of 23 May 1926 recorded *Breaking of Bread commenced at Wakering Mission Hall. Mr Harry Iles and I go that morning.* It appears from the oversight minutes, dated 21 September and 28 September 1928, that Coleman Street had taken over much of the financial and ministerial responsibility for that work, for it was recorded *It was decided that several of the brethren should be responsible to go over to the Breaking of Bread Service* and a rota was arranged for that purpose. Also, *It was agreed to hold special Gospel mtgs Oct 16 to 30 to be conducted by Mr Widdison.* There were other missions after that. Members of the Iles family took particular interest in this work. It seems in the early days Mr William Iles (junior) often visited, effectively handing the responsibility to others once it seemed to be a going concern. Mr Ron

Iles also served some years as Sunday School Superintendent.

George and Elsie Hardingham, and sisters Cissie and Ivy, had many years earlier volunteered to serve at the mission, which they did with great and stalwart faithfulness. Concerning George Hardingham, he started going to Wakering before his marriage, (which was in 1930,) and took much of the responsibility for that work, being there for over 50 years. He retired from the work in 1981. Not only was he there Sundays, morning and evening, but also for the mid-week meeting. He would also be at Coleman Street on Sunday afternoons, for the Sunday school. It seems he was reliant on public transport in the early days, and it was not an easy journey, and he often went unaccompanied. As a young man, it would have been tempting for him to enjoy the security and support of being more involved in a large assembly. Furthermore he worked hard at his secular work; he was a blacksmith and welder. George Hardingham is still fondly remembered by many, not only for his dedication to this work, as well as his faithfulness and steadfastness, but also by the gentle (although he was a big man) and kindly way in which he served, and for the diligence with which he sought to study and apply the Scriptures. Over the years he built up a large store of notes relating to his Bible studies and sermons, containing meticulous detail. Whilst strict in his adherence to traditional Brethren principles, he was an approachable man, with a sense of fun, and was well able to relate to people, young and old alike, who held him in high affection and esteem.

His wife, Elsie, accompanied him, especially when from the 1950's, when he acquired his own transport, and his sisters also helped from the early 1970's. Winston Chilcraft records: *there were three Ivy's in the meeting, Mrs Ivy Adams, Mrs Ivy Cornwell and Miss Ivy Hardingham. (more likely in more recent times) The two sisters Eva Riley and Ivy Adams were genuine Foulness Islanders. Miss Riley taught at Barling school and was also the organist; another talent was as an articulate presenter of the gospel at women's meetings.* Mrs Smith, who ran a sweet shop in the village, was also remembered as one who was actively involved from the early years, including many years as an organist. Although the work was never large in numbers, there were many faithful people, most of whom were ladies, who were involved for many years. After George Hardingham retired the few remaining (mostly elderly ladies) kept the work going and men came to help from elsewhere. Winston Chilcraft, and later Jim Massey, were among those who maintained the burden of responsibility for this work. The mission continued until 1998, when fewness of the members brought about its closure. The building still stands, with assets remaining to be disposed of.

Barling Gospel Mission was largely the work of Isaac and Elizabeth Outten, with daughter Eva, who were led to build the mission hall in the 1920's. (It has already been noted that Mr Outten had also been involved at Shopland Mission.) Isaac was a Southend-on-Sea district colporteur; he had been wounded in the arm during the 1914-18 war. He was eventually supplied with a motor cycle for his daily round of door-to-door work. Winston Chilcraft records: *by the time the 1990's arrived the work of the mission was drawing to an honourable end. Isaac Outten had entered into glory ... Regarding Coleman Street's link with Barling, one sensed particular brotherly affection between Mo Abbott and Ike Outten, both earnest contenders for the faith, genuine Essex men with a soul winner's love for Essex villagers.*

Many from Coleman Street had been involved in that work over the years. One person, who for three years was a caretaker at Coleman Street, also another colporteur, Arthur Rivers, was involved for some years. He helped to build up and lead the young people's work. Peter and

Jenny Marret belonged to and served at the mission in some of the latter years. Near to the time of closing there was still significant activity, including youth work. Finally, the proximity and similarity in outlook between the missions at Barling, Great Wakering and Shopland meant there was considerable interaction between the three, especially in the early years.

Regarding **North Fambridge Mission**, the work was started in the 1920's. The first meetings took place in a house. Later a local farmer gave the land and a small hall was erected. This remained standing, until quite recently, in someone's back garden. Don Meadow's building business put in footings etc., and the 'tin' building was purchased and erected with interested persons helping in different ways to get the building ready. Missions were held there in the early years. Walter Jiggins was to become much involved in the work and was a regular visitor up to the time Coleman Street relinquished responsibility. In the first of many entries in his diaries, he wrote concerning Fambridge, 15 April 1928: *we accompany Don to Fambridge in the evening, but little thought how prominent a place it would have in our service for the Lord.* In his diary entry of 19 October 1929 he wrote: *the new hall opened at Fambridge, and I am privileged to take Mr Denny and Rita to that opening. As everything went off all right and a number of local people coming in, it was very encouraging.*

It did seem that after the war Coleman Street (and probably before) had taken an interest in the Fambridge mission, and a number of references were made to it in the oversight minutes up to the 1970's, when others took over the work. Preachers were supplied on a rota basis and financial support given. For a period prior to the war, it seems that the work was looked after by two ladies: Miss White and Miss Lemon. Coleman Street's young people occasionally helped in conducting open air meetings, sometimes as part of YPBSC summer activities. It would seem though that by the mid fifties there were problems with small, often fluctuating numbers, although the work did continue for some years after that. One of the difficulties in establishing the work was that those who took main responsibility came from some distance, where it would of helped if they were based in village. When Coleman Street did finally hand over responsibility, it was to Dr. Leslie Dent, who was living in the village at the time. He kept the work going for some years after that, until it finally closed.

Chapter 6 - Believing and doing

Ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. (Jude 1v3)

We turn to some of those doctrines and practices, and the issues involved, which are particularly associated with, although not necessarily unique, to most Open Brethren assemblies. In several cases, until quite recently, these were not widely adopted by other non-Brethren churches. In particular we will consider how these have been worked out in the life of Coleman Street over the period of its existence. This is not done in order to provide a justification but rather to help provide some explanation of why things are the way they are, why people have felt the way they felt, and why they did the things they did. This is also done by way of comparison with what is believed and practised elsewhere, and in order to help better understand the Brethren and the people of Coleman Street.

We will consider how practice corresponded with belief, and what might be deemed to be best practice. Whilst not wanting to avoid considering difficult issues, it is intended to minimise aspects which might shame or embarrass, for not all things occurring in the past at Coleman Street are good adverts for the Brethren, or more importantly Christ's Church. What should be deemed to be the right set of beliefs and practices concerning church life has too often resulted in a considerable divergence of views, and sadly schism and disunity in the Brethren, as well as the wider church, down the years. These issues continue to occupy the minds of many. The following are the observations of one interested and involved individual, and should not be taken to represent any "official position". Likely, a view of what exactly comprises right beliefs and practices does not exist in the Brethren or Coleman Street, if it ever did.

Like all of God's people, the people at Coleman Street ought to be seen as weak and fallible human beings, who at best were/are His unprofitable servants, and what good they did/do achieve was and is only because of God's grace working through them, sometimes despite the actions of His people. Quite evidently there are examples of good and bad among what was believed and done, and the reader is invited to draw his/her own conclusions. Yet, there has long been a desire at Coleman Street to follow the precepts and practices of the early church. Whilst members have been mostly simple, sincere folk, and, with a few exceptions, were not outstanding Bible scholars or concerned with theological debate, many will have studied and known their Bibles well (often seen to be a hallmark of a Brethren believer).

Whilst the chapter contains some important historical details, it deals mainly with aspects which concern the spiritual life of the assembly. There is little profit from debating issues of the past, about which we can do little; yet understanding why things are the way they are can help us to deal sympathetically and wisely with current challenges and concerns. The debate about what comprises true and right beliefs and practices is important. Whilst appearing to be critical, scathing even, my concern is for Christians to adopt those beliefs which are true and those practices which are right and, at the same time, be sensitive and forbearing when differences do arise. We should be thankful, that despite much confusion and acceptance of what is of lesser spiritual value all around us, God is always working and is ever gracious.

Church government: Coleman Street has for the most part been overseen by a plurality of elders who look after the Chapel's spiritual and practical affairs. An examination of the minutes of oversight meetings from the outset to the current time suggests that time was spent

discussing what would seem fairly mundane matters, such as money and buildings, although pastoral and ministerial issues did significantly feature too. There was usually prayer, and sometimes a devotional meditation. The elders were not appointed from within a church hierarchy or by democratic voting by local members, but rather these were co-opted by the existing oversight from within the assembly. These usually comprised those most active in the life and work of the assembly, and often contained members representing a wide diversity of personality and view points. For periods (in the 1960's and 1970's) there have also been deacons to concentrate on practical matters such as building maintenance and as sidesmen. One who has been fondly remembered in this capacity was Alf Sims, who undertook many of the practical duties in ensuring meetings went smoothly, for several years.

Unlike many other churches, including other Brethren assemblies, there have been few meetings of the whole church to discuss, let alone vote on, matters of importance to the assembly. The annual fellowship tea was an occasion to report on matters of import regarding the assembly, including finance, although little opportunity for questions and discussion was given. Some Brethren assemblies have members' meetings to discuss matters of concern to the whole assembly. As for Coleman Street, such meetings have been few and far between. It could be that oversight members shared the suspicion that existed in Brethren assemblies of democratic principles usurping the wisdom of God, or just disdained meetings that were not specifically related to the spiritual matters. There could have been a desire to avoid the acrimony that can be felt when delicate subjects are discussed in an open forum. This has led to discontent and frustration among some when unable to express their views or give vent to their true feelings. Sometimes, gifted members were ignored or overlooked, and decisions were made without the consultation with and consent of members. Sometimes, needed action or leadership was not given out of fear or in order to appease a minority.

It is quite probable that for long periods elders exercised too much responsibility, and not enough was done to encourage gift or younger members' taking responsibility. Whilst there were many instances when the older, more mature brethren mentored the younger, less mature, some have felt that what did take place was inadequate. In a subtle way, by creating a dichotomy between the oversight and the rest, the clerical system whereby only the ordained can do certain jobs, so resisted by early Brethren, was given some implicit support.

In looking at Brethren oversights in general, at their best the members have been sensitive to what people felt and, more importantly, how God was leading, and sought wisely to lead, guide, teach and encourage members to exercise their gifts, to act in unison, and in the Spirit; leading through example. At their worst, they were products of a system of co-option by human choice, appointed without having the gift to care for the flock, resistant to the leading of the Spirit, failing to apply the Word and not giving the necessary lead to, or sufficiently involving, the people. Quite likely, there have been elements of both the best and worst of these aspects at Coleman Street. As in all places, good leadership has been an important factor in ensuring that the work prospered. Whatever the faults of the elders, there would seem to have been a resolve at Coleman Street to recognise those who were deemed most active, able and gifted, and those who did serve sought to do so honourably and faithfully. One impression, derived from reading the oversight minutes and speaking with people, was the diligence, dignity and decorum with which members conducted themselves, even when addressing difficult issues or those where opinions differed.

In more recent years the impetus to consult has been generally stronger. One might observe that in the early days of the work there was a greater deference in society as a whole and people “knew their place”. Many would have been merely content to obey the scriptural injunction to obey the elders. The need for good leaders, whatever method is used to appoint them, ensuring proper accountability, best involving and satisfying the needs and aspirations of all the flock, and most importantly having a true shepherd’s heart to tend and care for the flock, is something which applies throughout the church. Perhaps when the Holy Spirit leads the assembly, as Brethren have long desired, the need for human leadership decreases anyway.

Whilst on the subjects of elders, the Brethren belief has usually tended toward equality regarding the influence and authority of individual members of the oversight. In practice this has not always been the case, both at Coleman Street and in other Brethren assemblies. As is often the case, the one dealing with correspondence, and booking speakers, has tended to have a slightly more prominent position regarding the exercising of leadership, perhaps due to the important role of being a main point of contact. Such has tended to be so in the past at Coleman Street. Another peculiarity, by no means confined to Coleman Street, is the dominance of a single family in assembly affairs, leading to accusations of nepotism. In the case of Coleman Street, this has been the Iles family. All four sons of the “founder”, William Iles (senior), (Will, Harry, Arthur and Ted), served many years on the oversight, having joined at a young age and serving thereafter most of their natural lives, exercising considerable responsibility in the affairs of the assembly. More recently, David Iles served as an elder from 1963 to 1991, and was for most of that time the “correspondent”. Before that his great uncle, Ted Iles, spent over fifty years as correspondent, although David helped him toward the end. Other members of the family were also very much involved in the affairs of the Gospel Hall, as well as their wives. Moreover, several others became joined to the family through marriage. In many cases, they were amongst the leading lights and figures of influence in the assembly.

Yet, what cannot be overlooked was the devotion and diligence with which members of the Iles’ family exercised their responsibilities, the creative talents and energy which they brought to bear, the integrity they demonstrated, and the considerable effort expended to perform frequently unrecognised tasks, such as building maintenance, visitation, entertaining and administration. Whilst elsewhere in the book it was noted there had been a difference of opinion regarding the stewardship of the building prior to its being handed over to UKET, up to that time the family had played a major part in looking after building fabric and heating, often, it seems, without much in the way of financial compensation. Even though the assembly had agreed to pay a reduced rent of 10 shillings per week for the building, (ref. oversight minutes, 9 October 1900), it is probable that this had not been paid for some years.

Coleman Street has in the past tended to make limited use of strategic planning, and have not employed the management practices and techniques (as adopted commercially) favoured by some progressive assemblies these days. Whilst planning and organisation was clearly evident, it does seem that when Coleman Street was at its most vibrant, in particular in the early 1900’s, things did get done and spiritual men and women did work together effectively in the cause of Christ, achieving much, seemingly with a minimum of fuss and deliberation. Also, as with many Brethren assemblies, there has been a reluctance to appoint full time ministers, partly out of fear of creating a ministerial class and a reaction against one man,

usually professional, ministry. This was deemed by some to threaten the freedom with which individuals, as believers, were priests and ministers by right, and should have been able to exercise their gifts within the assembly. In recent times many assemblies have appointed full time workers, sometimes as pastors, to work alongside the part-timers and, as discussed in Chapter 4, this happened at Coleman Street for a period.

Ordinances: The baptism of believers by full immersion in water has always been practised at Coleman Street as this was considered to be the Biblical norm. Dissenting from the views of the aforementioned J.N.Darby, the practice of baptising infants has generally been considered to be unscriptural. Although not a mandatory pre-requisite for membership, believers have always been encouraged to be baptised. It has been normal practice for new believers to be baptised (although some have argued whether there should be a delay or this should take place immediately) and then welcomed into fellowship the following Sunday, after which he/she would then participate in the Lord's Supper. Other local assemblies and missions, not having such facilities, have often used the baptistry at Coleman Street. On occasions, those belonging to churches, not practising believers baptism, have been baptised.

Howard Clinch recalled the days when *William Arrol always carried out the baptisms and Hindley Jones stood by the pool and read a text as each candidate emerged from the water. Afterwards each candidate received a card recording the date of baptism and the text given.* Such a custom continued long after. Whilst it has been normal practice for members of the oversight to conduct baptisms, as well as the Lord's Supper, this was by no means restricted to such, and non oversight members have often been involved. It was the practice for a time for the invited preacher to do the baptizing, although later, often at the preacher's bequest, this was usually done by a member of the oversight.

A practice, from around the late 1950's, was infant dedication, which generally took place during Sunday meetings. The assembly (or Sunday School) would stand with the family in dedicating the child to God, praying and hoping he/she would eventually follow the Lord. Prior to that, birth announcements were given and a prayer said. When mother and baby turned up the first Sunday after birth, an announcement and thanks were given for "a life given and a life spared".

Regular meetings, every Sunday morning, have taken place for "remembering" the Lord Jesus Christ in the Breaking of Bread, ever since Coleman Street began, and continue to this day. There has also been a shared Breaking of Bread on other occasions, notably occasionally after the evening Gospel service in the early days. During the interwar years it was held once a month after the Gospel meeting, in the Infants room upstairs, for the benefit of the 3 or 4 single ladies who were in "service" and could not attend in the morning. Occasionally the Breaking of Bread was celebrated in individual's homes, especially if these were unable to attend the meetings, for example through illness.

The celebration of the Lord's Supper is the central event in the life of the Chapel. It has been suggested, though, that this has sometimes borne the potential for sacramentalism, in that "fellowship" may have been deemed to be attending the morning meeting, whereas individuals sharing spiritual matters and other meetings for prayer and worship, have been neglected. For some, the act of commencing the Lord's Day with this most important act of worship, was sacrosanct. For many years, the idea of change, for example to accommodate a

Family Service, was met with stout resistance by some. The notion of remembrance and considering the person of Christ, in particular focusing on His death, has been of key importance during the Breaking of Bread meetings; other aspects were mostly discouraged.

Although Coleman Street has always adopted a policy of an open table to all who love the Lord, irrespective of denominational affiliation, concern was exercised, particularly in the early days, to ensure attendants were believers of good standing and were not persisting in a known sin. It was often expected that visitors should bring a "letter of commendation" from their home assembly or church, especially when they wished to join the fellowship, and individuals were discouraged from partaking in the Lord's Supper if it was felt that their spiritual standing meant participation was inappropriate.

For many years boards were attached to the back of chairs during the Breaking of Bread meetings. These displayed the notice: *will those wishing to break bread sit in front*. Normally only those in front of the boards would partake of the bread and wine. This arrangement was intended to save embarrassment for those who were not able, or did not wish, to take part in the communion, although servers would still need to keep a watchful eye, especially in the case of late-comers who had to sit at the back. In some Brethren assemblies the notion of meeting around the Lord's table was taken literally, with a table in the middle of the hall and people around it on each side. In the past, at Coleman Street, the table was often placed a short distance from the platform and people sat on the three remaining sides. For many years before that, some rows backed onto the platform, so people did sit on four sides. (Some have pointed out that people tended to sit in the same seats; so much was this the case that the entire match of people to seats could be almost precisely predicted.) Nowadays everyone sits facing the front of the table, except when one comes behind the table in order to "break bread".

Usually open worship and ministry accompanied the Breaking of Bread, with various male members leading in announcing a hymn, prayer or a reading a passage of Scripture, sometimes accompanied by an exposition or exhortation. Over the years, many have contributed to these meetings, from a whole range of Scriptures, but usually with a devotional theme, often contemplating some aspect of the person and work of the Lord Jesus, especially His sufferings. Many individuals, often speaking on their favourite themes and passages, will readily spring to the minds of those who attended those meetings. Some felt that the meetings should follow a discernible theme; others felt this did not matter provided the Holy Spirit is leading. In one meeting, during the last war, one got up exhorting the congregation to smile and be happy, followed by another who suggested a more sober attitude, given that our Lord was the "man of sorrows". A third brother sought to redress the balance by reading from Ecclesiastes: *There is ... a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;* (3v6). On another occasion (1979), one brother (Mr. Albert Brockway) collapsed and died whilst speaking of His Lord. He was reading the passage in the Bible where "doubting" Thomas met with the Lord Jesus, after He had risen from the dead (John 20v26-29.) This incident had a marked effect on at least four young men, who shortly after were baptized.

The notion of an open meeting, where the leading of the Holy Spirit is sought, applies to other meetings too, and has not been confined to the Breaking of Bread meeting, even though for some the open meeting has become synonymous with the Breaking of Bread. For long periods of Coleman Street's existence it has been the custom to allow any male member to get up at

an appropriate point in the meeting to administer the bread and cup, and when no-one had been previously delegated for that task. This responsibility was often undertaken by a member of the oversight, although a number of others have also officiated. On many occasions oversight members took responsibility to "break bread" only because no one else did so and in order to prevent the meeting from over-running. After apt prayers, concerning what the symbols represent, the bread and the wine would then be passed from person to person. During the entire history of Coleman Street, there has been no record of active participation of women in the Breaking of Bread meetings.

In recent years there has been a tendency for some Open Brethren assemblies to curtail or drop altogether the open meeting. It has been felt that this has often been subject to abuse due to inappropriate contributions or, sadly too often, long silences, where it seemed members did not have anything worthwhile to share and had not come to the meeting suitably prepared. Also, some did not share, who could have, because they had been previously discouraged. Whilst, to some extent, these things have also been true at Coleman Street, order has generally been kept, yet allowing freedom for ministry. The length of open times have been reduced in recent years, partly due to fewer males attending, and in order to allow for a different type of meeting, nowadays referred to as the Family Service. At best the open meeting has been the forum whereby members of the local body (of Christ's Church) could exercise their gift to the edification of the whole, and the means for the Holy Spirit to operate within the body. Coleman Street members can look to a past when this has been the case, especially when there were many, able and willing, to contribute in this way.

Mission: Contrary to what some may have thought, Coleman Street has always sought to reach the unconverted in all areas of society and the world with the Gospel, and in a variety of ways. Until recently, the Sunday evening Gospel meeting was specifically for the purpose of bringing the unconverted to Christ. Many meetings took place on a regular basis, for example Sunday school, youth work and women's meetings, with the important goal to bring the attendants to a living faith in Christ. A more recent addition has been the regular "Mums and Tots" group. Coleman Street has long sponsored, initiated and partaken in special outreaches. In the earlier years, these would have included annual week, or fortnight-long missions. Regular open-air activity in the surrounding neighbourhood, on the sea front and in the villages, and participation in planting new churches, have long featured. From the earliest days it has keenly supported Billy Graham and similar evangelistic campaigns (including in more recent years Mission England), and has often co-operated with other Christian groups.

Coleman Street has consistently been enthusiastic in its support of missionary activity, at home and overseas. The monthly missionary meeting, where various needs are brought to members' attention, has long been a central focus for such activities. Many recall when a giant map of the world was effectively suspended from the ceiling of the Chapel, with the missionary secretary pointing to some far flung corner, often using a long, stout, bamboo pole, and speaking on some point for prayerful interest or reading out letters that had earlier been received. Excellent missionary secretaries, including Messrs Hindley Jones, Griffiths Jenkins, William Heddle, John Girling, have in the past served Coleman Street. In recent years a number have served in this capacity, including Malcolm Heddle, Graham Poland, Maurice Dowsett, David Iles and currently the author. These have acted as a link between the individual missionaries and the assembly and as facilitators of missionary activity.

Coleman Street's Children

Of all the missionary secretaries, William Heddle stands out, not only due to his longevity of service (1937 - 1971), but by the way he went about the task. One contributor has paid the following tribute: *as missionary secretary he was without equal - diligent in finding out and presenting the facts, thoughtful about people's feelings and needs, and so warm hearted*. On his retiring from his position as missionary secretary, the assembly presented William Heddle with a globe of the world, in grateful recognition of his services. Missionary support has included regular prayer by the assembly and individuals (including becoming informed through magazines and other literature), regular offerings and gifts, exchange in communications (mainly letter although, these days, electronic mail is often used), visits by missionaries or organisations that are represented and various other forms of practical help.

Often past members of Coleman Street visited other places to meet and hear missionaries, who sometimes were home on furlough, and had served several years overseas. Outstanding amongst these occasions were the London missionary meetings, held annually 1895-1989 over a four day period toward the end of October. This was a time when leaders and members of Brethren assemblies, from all over the country, would gather together for prayer, fellowship and Bible ministry, and hear many missionaries whom they would not normally see. They would give accounts of their work. David Iles served many years as one of the convenors of the London Missionary Meetings. It was his sad duty as chairman to oversee the closing of these meetings, due to an understand decline in attendance and changing (not always for the good) patterns of assembly life and mission.

A work undertaken for many years was to take services at old people's homes, principally Roche House (formerly Connaught House), Rochford, until it was closed. Also, for a period, Coleman Street has participated, in a rota along with other churches, in taking services at Grosvenor House. Several members have been engaged in helping to establish other churches in the Essex area which is discussed in another chapter. Several members have undertaken "mission activity" for periods ranging from a few weeks to most of a life-time. Geoff Hayman, who is the current church secretary, has served with *Counties* (formerly known as the *Counties Evangelistic Work*). That work began in 1899. (*A Story to Tell*, Brian Mills, 1999, provides an amazing one hundred year history of Counties.) Throughout its existence, Coleman Street has had strong associations with Counties in its endeavours to take the gospel to the people. Even today, with the small numbers that are in membership, many individuals and missionary organisations are supported both materially and through prayer. One, not to be overlooked, aspect is the work done by the ladies to make and supply goods to be sent to, and used by, overseas missionaries, via the auspices of *Medical Missionary News*. Many regular meetings, which have been held at the Chapel, have had a missionary emphasis.

A significant portion of Chapel expenditure has been for missionary giving, though still barely adequate considering the vast needs which Coleman Street interest's represent. Whilst being diligent in providing regular financial support for individual missionaries, this has represented only a fraction of the overall needs. One of the characteristics of Brethren mission in the past has been the notion of "living by faith". Figures such as George Müller, who founded orphanages, looking after thousands of children, and who often did not know where the next meal was coming from, and Hudson Taylor, who founded the *China Inland Mission*, not having guaranteed support, have long inspired Brethren believers. Both men made it their practice not to appeal for funds. Even today, the sensibilities of Coleman Street members are such that preference is often given toward supporting those who adopt such practices.

Review of the Chapel archives shows that the following long serving overseas missionaries were being supported through regular prayer, financial support, exchange in communication, and occasional visits for several years:

Mr Sidney Saword: was originally converted then baptised (1909) at Coleman Street but was commended to the mission field from Canada (to where he had emigrated with his family in 1912). (A note in the oversight minutes, 20 October 1920, showed that he, together with Walter Jiggins, had desired to go together as missionaries to Japan. Quite evidently the two were close). Sidney Saword, together with his wife, served as missionaries in Venezuela from the early 1920s. He died in 1988 (aged 94) but even up to the time of his death, with his faculties beginning to fail, he sought to be actively involved in helping to bring the Gospel, even to the remote places of that country.

Mr Harold & Mrs Marion Wildish: Harold was commended to the mission field in 1925 from Alexander Gospel Hall, Westcliff. At his farewell service around 350 people were present, coming from all over Essex. Tea was served to all in two sittings. Harold first worked in Brazil amongst tribal Indians. Here he contracted malaria. He then served for fifty years in West Indies, and was a powerful, respected and well travelled evangelist and Bible teacher. He married Marion, one of the daughters of William Arrol, at Coleman Street in 1929. A number of their relations remained members of Coleman Street Chapel for many years. All indications are that Harold and Marion Wildish were effective soul winners. During his times on furlough he would come and preach at Coleman Street and other places and many decided to follow the Lord following his preaching. Even as I write this, I note in the latest *Echoes* magazine obituary column that one Geoffrey Bull, a well known Brethren missionary and author, had been led to Christ by Harold Wildish.

Mr Gordon-Smith: Mention was made in the oversight minutes of a farewell meeting for Mr (Sidney) Gordon-Smith to be held on Monday 26 April 1926, and to let the Shoebury and Chalkwell Park assemblies know. (Chalkwell Park oversight minutes recorded support for Mr Gordon-Smith as early as 1919.) It is understood he served in British Guyana and his children were educated in England. Records of assembly support can be found up to the 1950's. When returning to England they were often put up in the house, in Ilfracombe Road, which the Byatt family made available for missionaries to use. (The Byatt's also had a missionary home in Woodgrange Drive, which was also frequently put to good use.) Descendants of Mr Gordon-Smith became active in Christian service and overseas mission. His grandson, Ian, and his family, were tragically killed in Thailand, where he was working as a surgeon.

Miss Barbara Jones and Miss Phyllis Peters: were commended from Coleman Street in 1947 to work in China. However, like all western missionaries, they had to come out of China when the communists took over the government, in 1948. Afterwards they undertook other spheres of overseas service. Assembly interest and support continued for many years after.

Miss Lillian Stockman: served as a missionary in Italy. Although the context is not clear there is a note in the oversight minutes, 12 September 1907, stating *it was considered whether it would be advisable for Miss Stockman to return to Italy under the present circumstances... decided to write to Bath to ascertain all the possible particulars in regard to the position there before going further into the matter*, showing there was a pastoral concern. Miss

Stockman was regularly provided a small allowance and corresponded with regularly. *Echoes'* history of Brethren mission indicate that Miss Stockman was one of a number of single lady missionaries who spent many years of service in Southern Italy. She adopted some orphan children there. This remarkable lady served in Italy from 1904 to 1940 and 1945 to 1967.

Mr Malcolm Jones: (great, great grandson of William Iles (senior)) from 1971 worked with *Operation Mobilisation*, firstly in France (until 1982) and then Canada (until 1985), (marrying a French wife and having three children during that time), before returning to the Southend area and resuming a legal career. He is now an elder in Ashingdon Free Church.

In Brethren the Story of a Great Recovery mention is made of Mr. Conrad Lohr, who served in Central Africa (from the late 1920's), *commended by Southend Assembly*. Although well known to Coleman Street, and other local and East London assemblies, no record has been found of his being commended or supported.

In more recent years the pattern of mission has changed, becoming more flexible and enabling people to serve for limited periods of time. The young people who served for periods of a year or more, and who were commended and given some financial support, included:

Mr. Stephen Maxted: who from the mid 1970's worked with the *In the name of Jesus* team, which was led by Clive Calver, before moving to other spheres of Christian service.

Mr. Paul Greenwood: who, having come to faith in Christ whilst serving in the army, became involved in UK-based evangelism, from the mid 1970's. (Paul's mother lived for some years in Number 9, and served the Chapel as caretaker.)

Miss Denise Girling: (appropriately daughter of one of the missionary secretaries) who served with *Gospel Literature Outreach*, initially based in Motherwell, from 1981.

Mr. Tim Coker: who served with a *British Youth for Christ* team in Bolton for a year, 1987/88, after which he studied two years in a Bible college.

Life and ministry: The centrality of the Word of God can be seen in the importance given to it in most of the meetings. Usually the exposition of the Word was undertaken by the preacher invited for the purpose. The Bible would have been the key text and there would be little room for church tradition and other writings. If one were to discern a main theme, the centrality of the cross would be it and, as has already been discussed, the message of salvation. Indeed, in the Gospel meetings this message would have dwarfed anything else as far as preaching is concerned, with the unsaved (whether or not present) being invited to turn from their old way of life, put their full trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and follow Him. For many years, having a Sunday evening Gospel meeting, aimed specifically at the unconverted, was deemed essential.

One might reflect that it was expected that members of the Chapel should not only be saved but show they are saved by their changed lives and day-to-day conduct. There has always been an emphasis on the need for godly living and the notion that whilst being "in the world" believers were not "of the world", but rather belonged to His world which is to come. There

would have been with it a certain emphasis on the “negative” aspects of holiness such as not going to dances or cinemas (as such things could cause one to backslide). Generally it was held that there was no instant solution to leading godly lives. Sometimes the importance of believers striving toward godliness and being surrendered or committed was emphasised, although what often came with it was the ensuing discouragement if this was not achieved.

One contributor has felt that in the past at Coleman Street, as in many other evangelical fellowships, there has been an element of legalism in its teaching. The thought would be put forward that “it all depends on us” and that believers needed to pull themselves up by their “bootstraps” in order to make spiritual progress, although not in such explicit terms. Believers were exhorted to be fully obedient, and only then God would bless, with the onus being put on one’s own efforts rather than upon God’s enabling grace. Free grace would be preached during Gospel meetings but a “mingle mangle” of grace and works of the law at those meetings aimed toward believers. Yet to provide the balance, others felt Coleman Street preachers did consistently preach the Gospel of the grace of God. The Gospel is not just the means whereby sinners are saved from the penalty of sin but also from its power; it is that which enables one to live for God in the present, keeps and preserves until entering glory and does not depend on one’s efforts. There are many at Coleman Street who have testified to such grace over the years. For there is nothing good within us, and we are completely beholden to God’s grace, by which alone we can overcome the world, the flesh and the Devil.

Some have felt that Coleman Street has been deficient in providing pastoral support and spiritual care and has failed in visitation and building personal relationships. This applies to young believers coming to grips with the implications of their new found faith as well as to the more mature, suffering from doubts and spiritual conflict, as well as personal difficulties, sickness or bereavement. Perhaps there was the notion that members could overcome personal difficulties just by using those resources which were at their disposal as Christian believers, negating the need for providing pastoral support. Yet again to provide a balance, many did much by way of prayer, counselling, encouragement, and exhortation. A number have gone out their way to visit and help in various practical ways, without any ostentation.

Another contributor has detected a trend to play down the importance of sin and repentance in preaching, in accordance with modern evangelical trends. For in the past this was preached most fervently, along with the holiness of God. Many were converted as a result of hearing such preaching, and frequently were broken down under realisation of the awful consequence of their sin, yet finding relief in the Gospel of God’s grace, through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Favourite preaching subjects would have included the life and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, practical Christian living (certainly this was a key theme in young people’s Bible studies), “the Blood” shown throughout scripture, Christ as revealed in various Old Testament settings, (as diverse as the Levitical Law and Song of Solomon,) missionary themes and prophetic subjects, especially relating to the imminent return of Christ. As has been mentioned, several at Coleman Street subscribed to the teaching of the “Secret Rapture” (Christ taking His own from the Earth before later returning to set up His kingdom), although others were content just to believe that the Lord Jesus is coming soon and at any time. The appeal to people to be ready for that coming was, in early years especially, a recurrent theme. This also included Gospel appeals, and many responded, realising they were not ready for when He comes.

Coleman Street's Children

Some members can recall those past days when preachers came with charts to illustrate their eschatological teaching, with the whole of the prophetic scriptures subject to consideration. Certainly when Bible teaching was at its strongest, no part of the Bible was ignored. Visual aids have sometimes formed a part in the teaching ministry. Formerly these included flannel-graphs (although mostly in Sunday Schools); nowadays white boards, flip charts and overhead projector slides are all used. One of the most dramatic visual aids were the models of the Tabernacle, which Harold Cole, and, more recently, Basil Deen, used. Sometimes models were especially constructed in order to teach Sunday school children.

During some assembly meetings opportunities were given for a brother in fellowship to give a word (as felt led of the Spirit). This was so during the Sunday morning Breaking of Bread meetings. Following the celebration of the Lord's Supper, a longer period was allowed for Bible ministry, although invited speakers for the day were usually given preference. (Sometimes, at this point a few of the sisters left, often to prepare dinners). Also there were some Bible study meetings when the men could share. Many men in the assembly were encouraged in their preaching endeavours, from an early age. It was often the practice for a veteran preacher to take one or more of the young men as curate(s) on preaching engagements.

Also, the various open air meetings were opportunities for developing preaching talent. Many young men "cut their teeth" preaching in the open air and went on to have substantial preaching ministries. One was David Ellis, a preacher of international renown, who started on his road of preaching on Southend Sea Front. It was normal practice to invite the young men present to give a text or short word. David Iles, who was leading the open air meeting on that occasion, asked David Ellis to participate in this way and refused to take "no" as an answer! But some have felt that Coleman Street was deficient in encouraging local gifts and ministry when compared with early Brethren practice. This was not helped by the practice of inviting outside, often well established, preachers to minister the Word, although this may have been partly due to a desire for members to benefit from the cream of preaching talent.

The vital element of any activity in the church is the presence of God, mindful of Christ's promise to be in the midst of those met together in His name and the Biblical warnings that without the Lord's blessing what is done will be in vain. Warm fellowship was often seen as one of the hall marks of the early Brethren. Testimony as to how much this presence was felt to be manifest, and the extent to which warm fellowship existed at Coleman Street, varies. Sometimes these were felt powerfully and other times not so. It is noted in the oversight minutes that on occasions discussion was given on how best to encourage more reverence in meetings and deeper spirituality amongst members. Concern was also expressed that members did not attend mid-week prayer and ministry meetings, when no good reason was apparent for absence. (In the early days, many would have made big efforts to attend all these meetings.)

Some felt ignored or "cold shouldered", when attending meetings. There was poor time keeping, (people arriving late or leaving early, when this could have been avoided), leading one to conclude that some may have come to the meetings with wrong attitudes. Some have pointed to a perception of an underlying class system in operation, with cliques. Others have felt that real fellowship was sometimes lacking. Such accounts would seem to have been more evident in later years. In past days, Coleman Street contained a wide social mix. Seemingly inevitably, in such a large assembly people would tend to associate with those with whom

they felt they had most in common. Besides, in the days when few had cars, if people did not get to know each other at the Hall they may not otherwise have the opportunity to meet.

In recent years a number have left the Chapel, some of whom were in leadership positions, to join other local churches, even though in most cases the partings were amicable, and several still keep in close contact. Often it seems, those who left did not share their true reasons, maybe because they did not want to offend those who remained. The reasons could be many, but a likely common factor may be that a feeling of belonging, shared vision, true fellowship and purpose was felt to be missing. Whilst there has never been a serious split at Coleman Street, some remained or left in a state of disaffection, where legitimate concerns were not satisfactorily addressed. To put it in proper context though, many have testified to having attended the meetings with godly expectation, where warm fellowship was shared, with Christian grace and love and numerous kindly acts being exercised toward one another.

Prayer took place at all meetings and meetings were specifically convened for that purpose. It would seem that there were times when there was great freedom and power, and other times when the opposite was the case. One might suggest that when blessing was greatest at the Chapel, it was because of the intensity of the prayers. It is not clear if fasting was practised to any extent, although some recognised its value; but there is little evidence to this being taught. The main meetings mostly comprised the three elements: reading and preaching of the Word, prayer and singing of songs and hymns, with notices as appropriate and occasionally reports and testimonies. In that respect meetings tended to be traditional. (Although some reasons have been long lost, the term "meeting" has been preferred to "service", just as "assembly" is preferred to "church", to avoid connotations of sacramentalism or churchianity. These days people tend to feel less strongly about this, and even in the past both sets of terms were used).

The Authorised Version of the Bible has been the one which has been most favoured, even to the present day, although more recently other versions have also been used. (There has been a feeling that modern versions sometimes dilute the Word and, besides, the older members have been brought up on the Authorised Version and feel comfortable with it.) Preaching tended to be the dominant activity and mostly this was solidly Bible based. Prayer would have been mainly extempore but often with a discernible pattern. Prayer is usually made 'in the name of Jesus' or some similar phrase. The "Thee" form of addressing the Almighty was that most commonly used (even these days). The Bible has always been held in highest esteem and looked on as the guide to faith and conduct. Although the reading of suitable religious books has been encouraged, this has always been secondary to the Bible. Besides regular meetings when the Bible was expounded, individuals were encouraged to study it privately and regularly. The young people, in particular, were encouraged to learn by heart whole passages.

Regarding church tradition, it might be construed that the only traditions that were given much credence were those which came into being within the fewer than 200 years the Brethren have been going and, much less so, the 2000-year tradition of the church as a whole (at least consciously). Whilst the Brethren have often claimed to be anti-tradition, in effect a whole set of traditions have been built up over the years, which though having a scripture base cannot be made mandatory from scripture, and sometimes these have been adhered to when they should have been discarded. As for non-Brethren traditions, knowingly or otherwise, these have been followed, especially if these have a strong Biblical justification.

Unlike with most sections of the church, there has been little consideration given to observing special days, especially in the early years at Coleman Street, except the Lord's Day (Sunday), (although strict observance of this has often been relaxed these days). The exception was Christmas, and to an extent Easter, and then more from the point of view of evangelistic outreach; although in the very early days making something of these occasions was not considered, based on the notion we should always be celebrating the birth, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and moreover we should not have anything to do with what often has pagan origins and commercial connotations. Concerning liturgy, nothing formal is observable, although one could suggest that the patterns of some services and recurrent phrases in some prayers represent a liturgy. Also, the Lord's Prayer is not prayed in public, unless by an outside speaker unfamiliar with Brethren customs. One of the benedictions, found in the Bible, is sometimes used to close a meeting.

The hymns and songs were mostly traditional and deemed to be part of an accepted canon, chosen from one of the Christian music books in use. The main musical accompaniment in the services was the organ and sometimes a piano. Up to 1980, singing in the main Breaking of Bread meeting was unaccompanied, with a musically gifted brother often leading the singing. (This produced a certain strain on the Precentor, who had a very short time to find the announced hymn, and pitch a suitable tune.) The rationale was that the spontaneity of the Holy Spirit needed to be allowed for, and, for some, feelings ran high concerning this principle. On a few occasions a mini-orchestra, guitar or other instrument have been used in meetings.

Until recently there have been regular weekly meetings for Bible teaching and prayer, together with a monthly missionary prayer meeting, although this regularity has for a time been dropped in recent years, partly due to declining numbers. These meetings would have been held mostly at the Chapel, although, in recent years, occasionally in homes. Prayer and teaching of a Bible topic, in meetings of special interest groups, such as for women, young people and children, have long been an important feature, although there was more of a social and recreational element and less formality in those gatherings

Regarding collections, Coleman Street has mostly been (humanly) reliant on its members for all monies, whether for ministry, mission, the poor, or building maintenance, even in the 1960's through to the 1980's when considerable expenditure was needed for the Hall, in particular making a front lobby and cloakrooms, repairing the roof and replacing the heating system, although many of the smaller jobs were undertaken by members. Occasionally gifts were provided by friends, sometimes through legacies, and once from the Sir John Laing trust fund. On another occasion a loan was given by UKET. There has usually been little recourse to seeking outside help, but the material needs have been met. Indeed, significant sums have been given for mission, both at home and overseas. Although several persons who were relatively wealthy have belonged to the Chapel, a substantial part of the giving has come from those of more modest circumstances, who have given sacrificially. The need for regular tithing has tended not to have been taught, although several practised this, and some much more.

Offerings were normally taken at the morning Breaking of Bread meetings and these were mostly for the general fund, but on occasions special offerings for the building or some aspect of missionary work were also taken. Coleman Street believed it should not look to outsiders

for help, which is why collections were taken at the meetings attended primarily by believers. It was felt that although the Gospel is not cheap, it is free. (Often, in the past, when advertising meetings aimed at attracting outsiders, the words “no collections” appeared.) Offerings are generally taken swiftly, with minimum fuss and announcement. Usually this quietly follows the end of the sharing of the bread and wine and before the giving out of the notices, so if one were to blink it would be missed. (This contrasts with the practice of many churches where offerings play a central part in the worship.) Other opportunities have also been provided for giving, particularly a free will collection box at the rear of the main hall. More recently the practice of giving via charitable trusts, (to take advantage of tax concessions), has been adopted by some.

Coleman Street Chapel has tended not to attract social or community activists, and political involvement was usually frowned upon. In researching the archives it is difficult to find much by way of political or wider community involvement. However, many members ran small businesses, which provided employment in the town. Many were small tradesmen or worked in shops. (In earlier days, “tea” meetings, and Sunday school treats, were held on Wednesday afternoons, because of half-day closing.) Some ran substantial businesses, employing many. These included: William Iles (Public works contracting), William Arrol (Laundry) and William Heddle (Clothing retailer and tailor). These businesses appeared to be well run, adopting principles of Christian integrity, and the people running the businesses were well respected in the town. Others were involved in professional life, including lawyers, teachers, dentists, chemists, stockbrokers, accountants, bankers, civil servants, local government officers, police officers, engineers, computer specialists, nurses, health visitors and midwives, playing valuable parts within their chosen profession. One reviewer, keen to redress the balance, reminded me: *happily there have also been valued manual workers whose practical skills redeemed the deficiency of those professionals who couldn't knock a nail in straight.*

There has always been a tradition of practically caring for members and those connected with the assembly, often done by individuals not broadcasting the fact. One example was, during 1953, when floods caused havoc to the homes of many in South East Essex. Coleman Street undertook to give financial and practical support. £314 was raised from various quarters, and distributed among 27 families in need. There were many acts of good neighbourliness, by one or another member, to people with needs, within and outside the assembly. The oversight minutes, often made mention of the “Poor fund” and discussion on how best to deal with the needs of individuals. Mention was also made of a Poor Saints fund (Christian believers being referred to as saints) and a Dorcas fund (after the woman mentioned in Acts 9v36 who was *full of good works and alms deeds*). (It is likely that these funds were all one and the same.)

In the early years Coleman Street was involved practically as well as spiritually with the Poor Law Institution in Rochford. Mr. Ladd's book mentioned soup kitchens for the poor. Corroboration for this has come from one Victoria Strohm, maternal grandmother to Winston Chilcraft, who used to speak of Coleman Street's soup kitchen in the early 1900's. One of the oldest members of the Chapel these days, Lily Sims, remembers the time, before World War Two, when there were many poor people, often with large families and no regular income, who had connections with the Gospel Hall. Coleman Street helped several of these. She recalls that Mr Arrol had been instrumental in ensuring that material help was given to those who needed it. Later Mr and Mrs Byatt took up a similar role, visiting people who were in need, often with much welcomed material help. Some recalled how Mr. Byatt acted as the

chauffeur and Mrs Byatt made the personal contact. Mr Byatt was a successful businessman, who was able to retire early (at forty) from active business life. He was running the biggest butchers in Southend when he retired. He and his wife devoted time and resource to giving much appreciated practical help. Besides their “missionary houses”, they made a room available in their home, referred to as “the prophet’s chamber”, (2Kings 4vv8-11), for visiting preachers. Gwen Barrell served several years as a valued household help to Mr and Mrs Byatt.

The influence of the Charismatic Movement has grown significantly in churches over recent years. Whilst the theological and practical implications may not have been fully explored at the Chapel, and whilst still tending toward more traditional views, Coleman Street is prepared to embrace charismatics and non-charismatics in Christian love. There is, however, suspicion of more extreme manifestations, such as the Toronto Blessing or an insistence on speaking in tongues or a second blessing. Some regret would have been felt when, in the past, some charismatics have been dismissive toward member’s personal experience of the Holy Spirit. Whilst some members believed the gifts are not applicable for today, others have been more open, especially in the light of what is happening in these days. Also, some were reticent about expressing emotion, and would have been suspicious of much of the more exuberant charismatic phenomena. Like as in many of the mainstream churches, many of the songs used in charismatic circles are now used in the regular services. Not only is Hymns of Faith used (before the 1970’s Sankey’s Sacred Songs and Solos was used), together with the Believers Hymnbook (for Breaking of Bread meetings), so are Songs and Hymns of Fellowship, which includes many examples of the popular, albeit less unorthodox, modern words and music. (For Sunday school, “Golden Bells” hymns and *CSSM* chorus books were used for a long time.)

When the Charismatic Movement began to influence churches in Southend in the early 1970’s, there was a marked reaction against what was happening by some (but not all) at Coleman Street. As happened elsewhere in the town, some left as a result. Paul Bullivant, who had served previously as a Counties evangelist and was widely respected as a Christian “minister”, was healed of a painful back. He often contributed to the preaching and teaching ministry of the assembly. Whilst at Coleman Street, he held meetings in his home for prayer, fellowship and bible study. People attended from different churches, including some from the Hall. Some were sceptical of Paul’s testimony of divine healing and not happy with his links with the emerging Charismatic Movement, acceptance of many of its teaching, and new found liberty. They took the view that much of what was happening undermined long, sincerely held beliefs, tended toward emotionalism and was not entirely doctrinally sound. Eventually, Paul felt he should leave Coleman Street to continue his service elsewhere, becoming part of the growing band of “were-Brethren” Christian leaders with charismatic leanings.

Some have suggested that many of the new churches founded in recent years, which have been established by those men who have left the Brethren, having felt frustrated concerning a lack of spiritual life, are in effect “Brethren” churches, since they have sought to address many of the concerns that have always occupied “Brethren” believers. Neil Summerton has argued that such might be considered as part of a new denominational grouping - the “were-Brethren”, (Local churches for a new century, *Partnership*, 1996). Whatever the misgivings, the concern expressed by charismatics, for the Holy Spirit to be allowed freedom to act as He will within the church, has long been an important tenet of Brethrenism (in theory and at times in practice) since the earliest days. Such a view, many past members of Coleman

Street would have heartily endorsed. Whatever the faults of the Charismatic Movement, it has to be recognised that, at its purest, it helped to create in some a dissatisfaction with religious forms and mediocrity, and a hunger for spiritual reality that only the Holy Spirit can satisfy. Notwithstanding the important doctrinal concerns, which continue to exercise and challenge, perhaps the most important issue of them all is the need for spiritual life, in all the churches!

Women: The Brethren have often been accused of holding back the cause of women, when in recent years women's issues and the feminist agenda has affected the thinking of much of society including that of the church. Throughout the history of Coleman Street it has generally been felt that leadership within the church should be male and that there should be distinct roles for men and women. It believed that women, in accordance with Paul's injunction (1Timothy 2 v 12), should not publicly teach the Word (although this has often been extended to include not making audible contributions other than in the singing) in mixed gatherings or to exercise authority over men. Whilst most of the women at Coleman Street have accepted this state of affairs, without murmur; nevertheless, some have felt frustrated that they could not make contributions, especially when those of the men were so meagre. Nowadays, sometimes women pray and speak (testify, or report but not teach) in certain mixed gatherings (but not during Breaking of Bread meetings) at Coleman Street. Many assemblies still consider traditional beliefs to be consistent with Scripture, and this has to be the prime consideration, although others, more so in recent years, have relaxed many earlier restrictions on women's ministry, and equally consider that their position has Scriptural warrant.

The importance of women in assembly life was recognised, even if not permitted to exercise a public role. Coleman Street, as with many Brethren assemblies, has long had a strong women's work, led by very capable ladies, including Mrs Emily Byatt, Mrs Elizabeth Iles, Mrs Maud Heddle, Mrs Lily Davis, Mrs Marion Iles, Mrs Joan Campbell, Miss Ivy Crump and Mrs Miriam Chilcraft. Women often played the organ in the various meetings, notably Mrs Emily Byatt, Mrs May Iles, Mrs Beryl Jones, Mrs Marion Iles, and these days, Mrs Valerie Hayman; and in an important way, although often not realised, have helped to lead the worship. The majority of Sunday school teachers were women, including many who were single. What women could not achieve by virtue of a leadership position in the church was sometimes achieved as a result of influencing behind the scenes (both for good and ill).

Until recently women have been expected to wear a head covering, (ref. 1Corinthians 11 vv1-16), when there was public prayer. During the 1980's there was some lively debate concerning "sisters wearing hats in meetings". Nowadays freedom of choice is allowed on this matter and the practice of head covering has been largely dropped as an act of spiritual significance, (although some still consider this to be important). Whether or not the position at Coleman Street will change or there will be an honest re-appraisal of the Scriptures regarding women's ministry, remains to be seen. With a largely older, traditional membership, and a feeling this may not be the issue to risk division, the status quo would seem likely to prevail, at least in the short term, even though there is more freedom and tolerance existing than in former times.

Change: The question of change has affected all churches in recent years, and none less so than the Brethren, faced as they have been with major decline as well as the general issue of enormous cultural shifts in society and a reduction in church attendance. Coleman Street will, like many, have been challenged with the need to balance responding to changing times, with

holding firm to the unchanging Word. Sometimes, these two principles have not been properly understood or held in right balance, and change has either been made, or has been resisted, without due regard to Scripture. At their best, Coleman Street members have sought to find the right balance, being prepared to overturn tradition, in the light of Scripture, to address current needs; and respecting differences among them not essential to the faith, whilst seeking to *maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace*, (Ephesians 4v3). The importance of following Christ's example, and esteeming others better than oneself, is also important. The Bible passage which relates to this, (Philippians 2), often read in morning meetings, concerns the one *who, being in the form of God ... took upon Him the form of a servant*. And one over-riding principle: *in all things he (Christ) might have pre-eminence* (Colossians 1v18).

Coleman Street has changed significantly since it began, along with massive changes that have taken place in the world during this century. Some changes have been forced, such as those due to reduced numbers or changing circumstances. Examples of change can be found throughout this book, although some changes have taken place to address the issue of decline rather than that of expansion. Some changes have been made which seemed good at the time but the positive benefits have not been carried through, especially, as has happened on some occasions in recent years, when the leading visionary(s) leave. However, with many Brethren assemblies declining and even closing down, whilst other evangelical groups experience real spiritual growth, even allowing for the fact that sometimes these groups may have pandered to worldly notions, the question arises how to respond? Surely, it makes no sense to accept decline when around us is spiritual growth, which can not be attributed merely to an increase in popularity, activity and numbers; often among those who might be considered as not entirely doctrinally sound, and who are often less active. But only God can give the growth!

It is likely that some changes should have been made at Coleman Street but were not made. It has generally been resistant to change for change sake, or in order to court wider popularity and attract numbers to meetings, considering it more important to be faithful than successful. For some, the need for a work of the invisible God, as being more important than changes in the visible, has led to a suspicion of changes that appear only to deal with outward, earthly forms. Some have judged that "doing" is less important than "being" and "activity" is less important than "prayer". Whatever the rationale, it cannot be denied that too often decline has come as a result of accepting things as they are and failing to cry out in prevailing prayer *O Lord revive thy work in the midst of the years ... in wrath remember mercy*, (Habakkuk 3v2).

The need to maintain sound doctrine is an important consideration, and one that the Brethren, of all people, would find hard to ignore. The need to be those who are faithful, irrespective of outcome, is essential. The issue that needs to be addressed is to recognise that God is blessing all around us, and to seek God's guidance and special blessing for one's own situation, however costly this might be. The need for, and nature of, change has been, in recent years and is likely to remain, the most important issue facing Coleman Street, and especially now as it enters into a new millennium and wishes to maintain a viable, vibrant Gospel witness.

Chapter 7 - Now and beyond

Draw me, we will run after thee (Song of Songs 1v3)

Finally, we turn to review the current situation at Coleman Street. Members now number 19, of whom all but two (due to old age) attend regularly. Although numbers are small, relationships are close. Members are all committed to the work. A leadership team helps oversee the work, although they meet infrequently and informally, as and when the need arises. Of their number, Geoff Hayman, takes a major responsibility, combining the roles of pastor, church secretary, treasurer and odd job man, and is supported by the other leaders. In particular, David Stannard ably assists in the latter two tasks. A significant amount of Geoff's time goes toward organising speakers for the 104 Sunday speaking slots in the year, and has compiled a filing system containing some 80 names of speakers. A large proportion of members have reached retirement age, although there are two young men among them. A small fringe and occasional visitors also attend. A conscious effort is made to make visitors welcome. More than one has commented on a peaceful, calming atmosphere. There is sensitivity toward those coming in, who are weak or needy, so that all might feel accepted. Visiting the sick and house bound is undertaken by the different members.

Sunday services are: in the morning; Breaking of Bread (10.30 - 11.15) (although this usually finishes a few minutes before to get ready for the next meeting), and follows the traditional pattern of a Brethren open meeting; Family Service (11.15 - 12.00) with an invited speaker; and in the evening (6.30 - 7.30) a service which includes Bible ministry, also with an invited speaker. A small Sunday school takes place at the same time as the family service, and often a children's talk is given within that service. In recent years there have been some baptisms.

Weekday activities include a women's meeting on Monday afternoon, which attracts a number of ladies from outside the assembly, and where the Gospel is presented. Miriam Chilcraft leads the meeting and books speakers. The monthly Ladies Link, where speakers are invited to talk on an item of topical interest, usually with an accompanying Gospel message, is led by Valerie Hayman. A Mums and Tots group meet Tuesday mornings, when many mothers and their children are in attendance, and this is led by Carole Bastin. The mid-week activities have with them special outings and events that are usually well supported. Mid-week meetings for prayer and Bible study sometimes take place in homes, and occasionally in the chapel if there is an invited speaker. Annual harvest, fellowship, anniversary and women's meeting tea meetings continue, and remain popular, particularly among older members and friends. The other lady members, (Ruby Stannard, Lily Sims, Florrie Bond, Dorothy Coker, and Jolly Barber), quietly, without publicising the fact, assist in these various activities.

Some older members and friends have died in recent years. Their presence is sorely missed. Their funerals, often held at the Chapel, were well attended. Good contacts are maintained with many past members and friends, who visit the Chapel from time to time. Often greetings are sent on special occasions, such as wedding anniversaries, to past members.

Coleman Street continues to attend other assembly and church events. It has a close relationship with Southend Evangelical Church, and is on good terms with many local churches; some supply preachers for Sunday services. Whilst taking an interest in the wider local Christian scene, it is not greatly involved in what goes on among different churches, but

Coleman Street's Children

does take an interest in some local projects, such as in schools, and recently has been represented in the activities of *SEELEF*. For example, the author is involved with those seeking to provide effective pastoral care for people with mental health needs. Individuals, as has long been accepted practice, are at liberty to be involved with extra-assembly activities, and do so. Coleman Street regularly participates in the Essex regional fellowship of *Counties*. Recently it started to subscribe to *Partnership*, a movement devoted to fostering links between and stimulating growth of Brethren type churches. Dorothy Coker produces a bi-monthly magazine detailing events and items of interest, with members providing contributions, and this is widely circulated amongst the members and friends connected to the Chapel.

During recent years significant building maintenance and improvements have been undertaken, both for the Chapel and Number 9 (no longer occupied by a caretaker, but by a tenant, usually linked in some way to the Chapel). The Chapel is fortunate to have members particularly gifted and willing in such practical matters. Ron Coker, an expert horticulturist, ensures a good display of fresh flowers throughout the year. One recent project was to refurbish and open the upper gallery, which had been closed for some years, having fallen into some disrepair, with Geoff Hayman building an internal staircase to the gallery, the work of a true craftsman! As far as building fabric and maintenance, and financial management goes, the Chapel is well equipped to accommodate growth and expansion in the future.

Coleman Street continues to maintain a keen mission interest. Several of the Sunday meetings and occasional midweek meetings have a missionary content, often with one of the missionaries, or organisations represented, partaking. It is my privilege to be missionary secretary and I am constantly reminded of the enormity and importance of the task of world mission. A large proportion of monetary outgoings goes on missionary work. Following recent consultation amongst the members, it was determined that dependant on the respective situations Coleman Street will be committed to supporting specific named missionaries and organisations (listed below). Relationships with these are already in existence, and often have been for many years, and these will be developed further. The term missionary is understood in the broadest sense as applying to those who are involved with presenting the cause of Christ as their main employment. (Several other missionary contacts have also been made over the years, and an interest is also taken in what they do too.) Support involves:

1. providing substantial, regular, financial and material support, and encouragement
2. praying on a regular basis (collectively and individually)
3. paying particular attention to what goes on (in receiving / soliciting information)
4. communicating on a regular basis (e.g. letter, telephone, fax or e-mail)
5. periodically meeting with the organisations or individuals concerned

The missionaries and organisations, which Coleman Street currently support, are:

1. London City Mission

LCM is an inter-denominational mission working in many needy areas in London. The Chapel has had contacts with several LCM missionaries over many years.

2. Echoes of Service (including Disaster Fund, Retired Missionary Aid Fund)

Echoes channels support for many of the Brethren missionaries. They have been an important

instrument of the Chapel in its support for several overseas missionaries, ever since the Chapel was founded, along with administering these special funds.

3. Medical Missionary News

MMN is based in Wickford and is concerned with sending much needed material, especially medical, help to missionaries round the world, including items regularly given by the Chapel.

4. Scripture Gift Mission

Our support of SGM goes back to the early days of the Chapel, when gifts, especially around Christmas time, were given for the work. SGM provides (and translates) Scripture portions to some 350 different language groups.

5. Local Ministries: Network Schools Project, Southend Gideons

Network Schools is a ministry of SEELEF providing Christian outreach to schools in the Southend area. There are currently tremendous opportunities in our schools.

Gideons is an international organisation involved in distributing Bibles to hospitals, schools, hotels etc. We have long taken interest in the activities of our local branch.

6. Special Areas: SASRA, The Leprosy Mission

SASRA ministers to the needs of our soldiers and airmen. We have taken an interest in SASRA's work over many years and know some of the workers.

We have long taken an interest in the work of the Leprosy Mission, who are working to relieve leprosy suffering world-wide and to preach the Gospel.

7. Counties: Steve & Dawn Morley, Heather Smith

Counties is just a year older than the Chapel. We have supported Counties for much of that period. Traditionally the main thrust of the work has been evangelistic tent campaigns. Nowadays, a diversity of methods for reaching people for Christ are employed, and often at the cutting edge of society. Whilst our interest in Counties is multifold and many workers are well known to us, it is Steve and Heather, two of our (newest) Essex evangelists, who have worked most closely with us in recent years.

8. "Retired" missionaries: Jim & Dorothy Ford, Maurice & Pat Thomas

Jim and Dorothy have laboured many years in Zambia and France, seeing much fruit, and we have long taken an interest in them. Jim remains active even in retirement.

We have followed Maurice and Pat during their efforts to serve the needs in Eastern Europe, for many years. Now, Maurice's activities are restricted due to bad health.

9. India: Paul Barnes (India Link Ministries), John & Jolly connection

In recent years the Chapel has focused on India more than any other foreign country. Although in India there is much opposition, the opportunities and needs are enormous.

We have had many contacts with Paul these past 3-4 years. Paul does sterling work with India Link Ministries, which is devoted to supporting many Indian workers.

It is my privilege to visit India occasionally and be involved with several pastors and evangelists. We have been able to channel support through the Chapel. Jolly's father and several family members are currently ministering in India.

10. Old friends: Jack Cole, Sam Leaman, Bill & Thelma Gibb

There are a number of old friends, known for many years, with whom we have much to do, who visit us from time to time and are engaged in various Christian ministries.

Jack has been involved in doing personal work on the sea front and elsewhere.

Sam continues to commend Christ to Jews in the Southend area.

Bill and Thelma represent the work of Good News Broadcasting.

11. Mike & Valerie Lomas (Seaman's Christian Friend, Tilbury)

Mike is involved in meeting and supporting seamen coming from all over the world, typically when they stop over in Tilbury. Our association goes back many years.

12. David & Mary Coulter (Mission Aviation Fellowship)

David works in the key role of administrator in Tanzania for MAF. He visited us for the first time a few years back and we continue to enjoy regular correspondence. David and Mary are currently our only named overseas based missionaries.

Having considered something of the past 100 years of Coleman Street history, what lessons can be drawn? It would be tempting to state this or that was good or not, or now needs to be done, or such and such scriptures need to be applied. There are those better qualified who can do this. Readers must draw their own conclusions. Some may see what has happened to Brethren type churches in South East Essex as a microcosm of what has taken place throughout the United Kingdom, and would want to suggest reasons for this and what might now be done about it. As stated at the outset, the intention was to describe clearly, as a matter of fact, what went on in the past.

If there has been any surprise, it has been the pleasant one that so many good things have gone on, of which I was previously ignorant. This has stretched far beyond the meetings and confines of Coleman Street Chapel. Moreover, I have discovered many of the Lord's servants of the past, whose fruit remains. To my shame, concerning those who I did know, who by then were mostly quite elderly, I did not appreciate enough, at the time, what dedicated service they had given to the Lord and His people.

I would have liked to say more about the four Iles' brothers, (Will, Harry, Arthur and Ted). Sadly, I came along too late to get to meet any of them. Not only did they do so much for the assembly, but they were strong, vibrant personalities, and yet quite different from each other and all gifted in a variety of ways. Will was the pastor, Harry the administrator, Arthur the servant and Ted the preacher; yet they all had many strings to their bows besides. Whilst it is evident from what people have said, they all had notable flaws, their devotion to Lord's work and His people at Coleman Street, can not be denied, and nor could the high esteem and affection in which they were held by the assembly and elsewhere. Similar sentiments could be expressed for the many others who served on the oversight down the years.

Some members of the oversight have hardly been mentioned at all. One such was Mr Anthony Campbell, who served as an elder 1968 - 1981 (he died in 1982). I remember this white haired, smartly dressed, Scottish banker, with an austere demeanour. Behind this appearance was a peaceable and kind man, and perhaps surprisingly, one who was cultured, had many wide ranging interests and was knowledgeable of the wider world. Mr Campbell loved to study the Bible, and was well respected for his knowledge and understanding of the Word. His contributions to the oversight, and ministry on Sunday mornings and week nights, were valued. Although it seemed he was in the traditionalist mould, he was not beholden to tradition and neither was he narrow minded. He was his own man, who sought to come to a position on any issue that would arise based on an understanding he derived from the Word of God, irrespective of what others thought, and even if that meant himself changing.

Many have not received the mention they deserve. Often this can be put down to my ignorance of what went on and a natural tendency to talk about leaders rather helpers. Without them, the work could not have been done. Many will receive the divine accolade, and the only one which really matters, *well done good and faithful servant*, (Matthew 25v23). I have in mind people like Mr Bill Ward. The daughter of Mr and Mrs Ward was among the many children evacuated from Southend during the War. During that time she was converted to Christ and wrote home to her parents describing her experience. Bill and Kit, curious to find out more, went to the Gospel Hall and were themselves converted, whereupon they became and remained members. I recall they were usually at the Hall on Sundays. On occasions Mr Ward would announce the opening hymn in the Morning Meeting, and it seemed this would always be number 238 in The Believers Hymn Book: *Rise my soul! behold 'tis Jesus, Jesus fills thy wond'ring eyes; See Him now in glory seated, Where thy sins no more can rise ...* Whilst not being aware of other specific public contributions, other than for a short time they helped out in caretaker's duties, Mr and Mrs Ward did much to help behind the scenes, and I can still remember his human warmth, simple faith, beaming smile and kindly words.

As I go through the final iteration of the manuscript I note one contributors remembrance of Mr. Tillbrook, *who took the direct route to the throne of grace. I suspect some restrained minds considered him to be eccentric. He did me good.* Like with so many other worthies, I know little about brother Charlie Tillbrook, except seeing him in some old photos, which showed that he was active in open air and other Gospel activities, but my book has to end!

The failure to mention those who deserve it applies largely to over half of the membership of Coleman Street Chapel. As has been discussed, it was mainly the men who had the public profile. Yet the women also did much behind the scenes to ensure that the work prospered. Many prayed in secret and maintained an effective "silent" witness. As far as the married women were concerned, they did much to support their husbands, enabling them to do the service they did, often at personal cost; others sought to be good wives to unbelieving husbands; and as mothers most sought the welfare, spiritual and otherwise, of their children. And the single women too, who so faithfully and patiently played their part in ensuring there was an effective ministry at the Chapel and beyond.

Whilst Harold Wildish was engaged in a fruitful international ministry as an evangelist and Bible teacher, I recall his sister-in-law and her two unmarried sisters. They were often together and referred to as the "Wildish sisters", although their maiden name was "Smith". On

several occasions they spoke to me (and others) words of encouragement. One of my earliest ventures of faith was as a student on an *Operation Mobilisation* summer crusade. Only when I turned up did I learn my support had been provided. It transpired, some time later, that my benefactors were the Wildish sisters.

Then there was Miss Ella Lyons, a member of Coleman Street from around the time of the War. Burdened for the salvation of those round about, she stood near Sutton Arms pub on Sunday evenings, distributing tracts and giving personal invitations to passers by to come to the Gospel meetings. Many did come in as a result. Some can remember her speaking to passing soldiers during the war and to passers-by during the open air meetings held on Southend sea front.

Nowadays there are many churches in Southend more active and would appear to be more successful, particularly in drawing numbers, than Coleman Street. Such has not always been the case. Maybe they are reaping fruit from seed sown in the past from Coleman Street. We should thank God when His work prospers, and support His people, wherever they may be placed, and whatever their denominational affiliation, who seek to do His work, yet not compromising those important Biblical principles. For all who are "in Christ" are inextricably linked, irrespective of those things which keep them apart. For the Biblical view is that we are members of the same body; if one suffers all suffer; if one rejoices all rejoice. There is no room for complacency. Not only is there a great need for a deepening of the spiritual life in all the churches, but the needs and opportunities, locally and wider afield, are varied and vast; yet the Gospel message is essential in meeting those needs, and man's only hope.

Any Sunday night, irrespective of the weather, a few hundred yards from the Chapel, there is a full car park. In a nearby building, people play bingo, attracted by this seemingly pleasant diversion and an expectation of a warm reception, acceptance and winning prizes, yet those meeting at the Chapel at that time are few in comparison. Since the nearby blocks of flats were built, Coleman Street has sought to reach the residents, through visitation and the giving out of Christian literature and Chapel newsletters. Some have come in, and others have gone to nearby churches, but largely the people in the flats, as well as in the close proximity of the Chapel, seem to be barely touched. Indeed, the need and challenge remains ever great.

Much good went on in the past at Coleman Street Chapel, as well as the sad and the bad. Other than apologise for the wrongs and make good when we can, there would seem little that can be done now, other than to take heed and move on. Of course there have been many failures and disappointments, but the amazing truth is that God can make up for all of these if one is willing to let Him do so. Many, who played such an important part in Coleman Street's past, have passed on. Leonard Ladd's comments, regarding some who had recently died, is applicable to all: *we miss their presence and honour their memory*. For we must thank God for their lives, notwithstanding their faults, and be glad for those; *to be with Christ; which is far better*, (Philippians 1v23). For all who remain, whether or not they belong or have belonged to Coleman Street, and who love Christ, we must embrace, for in Christ we are one and, as members of His body; we ought to share each other's sufferings and joys.

For those who have wronged and been wronged, let there be contrition and forgiveness; for the estranged, let there be reconciliation; for the hurt, let there be healing; for the failures, let there be restoration; and for all may there be death, life and ultimately fruit and a unity in

performing the great task that God has given us to do. *Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit* (John 12v24). And for those who are not saved, may the invitation so often passed on by William Iles (senior), and many others after him, be accepted: *He that heareth my (Jesus') word, and believeth on Him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not pass into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life* (John 5v24). God knows we fall short of what can and should be, but we thank Him for His all sufficient grace and the limitless potential of what can be achieved.

As for the future we should note the comments of Harold Rowdon, a leading Brethren scholar, (Revival in our Churches, *Partnership*, 1999): *whilst other churches have experienced significant growth in recent years it can be scarcely denied that the segment of God's people in UK today, commonly called 'Brethren', stands in dire need of revival ... from constituting probably the most virile evangelical and evangelistic force in the land before the war and immediate post-war years, they have been reduced to a shadow of their former self. The number of their 'assemblies' has fallen by at least a quarter, with perhaps another quarter reduced to a handful of mostly elderly believers struggling to maintain some kind of witness.* One of Harold's observations is that those churches which are experiencing the most spiritual blessing are those which have been prepared to make changes and be changed, having *learned the principle of bringing even the most hallowed of traditions to the bar of scripture, and the cardinal 'Brethren' principle of sitting loose to tradition.*

C.E.Hocking, who is a widely respected Brethren Bible teacher has noted, (Church Doctrine and Practice, *Precious Seed*, 1984), we live in a constantly changing world and that *the conditions abroad in our generation cause many a heart to faint and fear and the spirit of any given generation tends to affect the attitude of God's people living in it.* He warns, however, against Christians being pressurised into making changes which *mimic the conditions abroad in the world, whether secular or religious, and which go to undermine a spiritual work, and can only tend to disaster.* Instead, we are invited to look at that which does not change: the Lord *who changes not* (Malachi 3v6), the Lord Jesus Christ, *the same yesterday, and today, and for ever* (Hebrews 13v8), and the unalterable Word of God revealed in the Bible.

With few, predominantly older, members now remaining, Coleman Street is in grave danger of no longer being a viable concern, as has happened in many similar situations elsewhere. There is no accounting for the changes which could occur over a very short time span, and we should not presume. The change that ought to be sought after most, and the one that would be most beneficial, is for the realisation of the presence, grace and power of the Holy Spirit, where these have been absent. It is this author's heart's desire and prayer that Coleman Street will be and do what is needed; God will act and there will be a people after God's own heart; and again there will be a thriving work at Coleman Street. May we see a real, deep, Bible-based, Spirit-led, enduring work of God in our day, so that He will be honoured and glorified.