



Helping Hand Mission 1898-1907.

Photo courtesy of Adventist Heritage Centre, Australia.

The Helping Hand Mission, Melbourne

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The Helping Hand Mission (1898-1907) in Melbourne was a charitable enterprise that benefited the poor and needy as a result of efforts by the Seventh-day Adventist church members.

Plans

When Dr. Edgar Caro arrived in Australia from America after studying under Dr. John Kellogg he promoted the establishment of small benevolent enterprises offering material and spiritual help for the destitute along the lines of Kellogg's Chicago model.¹ The need was palpable because Australia had experienced a major financial depression during the 1890s. Many were without employment and large numbers turned to alcohol or larceny.

On May 29, 1898, a group of twenty-one leaders from the Melbourne Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) churches met together and formed themselves into six committees to plan various avenues of assistance for the needy.² They had big plans but could only deliver small outcomes. The most enduring enterprise became known as "The Helping Hand Mission." They wanted a small sanitarium, also, but that plan resolved itself into a nurse or two within The Helping Hand Mission who were occupied mainly with house calls.³ They wished for an orphanage but only placed a few children in foster homes. They started a home for the elderly in rented quarters but the owner sold the premises twelve months later. They tried to establish a wood yard and laundry to provide employment for the poor but efforts were unfruitful.⁴

Real Help

From the start The Helping Hand Mission attracted substantial assistance from Melbourne businessmen and church members. Premises were rented at 224-226 Latrobe Street, inner Melbourne, and renovated by volunteers to provide a chapel, sleeping quarters, toilet and bathroom facilities, a kitchen and dining area, and a room where massage and simple hydrotherapy treatments could be given.⁵ Its official opening took place on September 12, 1898, attended by Victorian Conference officials, a member of the Victorian Legislative Council and a leader in the Melbourne Methodist Church.⁶

Many of the needy were given free meals and a bed in return for some light work. The majority, however, contributed a penny for a meal of pea soup, brown bread and a dessert. If they stayed for the night, they paid three pence for a bed. Clients were expected to bathe before retiring and their clothes were fumigated overnight.⁷ No smoking or alcohol was allowed on the premises. Also, newspapers were provided to assist the able-bodied to find employment opportunities.⁸ All were encouraged to attend gospel services and Bible studies, held regularly by the chaplain. A nurse was on site to give massages or hydrotherapy treatments, especially for rheumatic sufferers. House calls were made to those who called for help. Most medical cases were referred to a registered physician because their plans to attract a resident doctor did not materialise. For that reason the word "Medical" was dropped from their title soon after the opening ceremony.⁹

Reports were rosy from the start. For example, from February to June 1899 over ten thousand penny meals were served and there were 7,757 payments for beds. Over seven hundred hydrotherapy treatments were made and 127 pieces of clothing given away. Employment was found for 29 individuals. They even arranged the

funeral of a destitute woman who had died of hunger. Attendance at gospel meetings conducted by the Chaplain, William Knight, numbered 5,409 with 48 professed conversions to Christianity. Despite the good results the institution became poor while helping the poor. Their overdraft for this period was 146 pounds.¹⁰

Steady Decline In 1901 eighteen more beds were added and a heated room for drying clothes during the winter weather was installed. Administrators believed the model would be self-supporting, but they eventually concluded their plans were unrealistic. They had attempted some light industries to generate revenue including waste paper collection and furniture repairs. These efforts were eventually unsuccessful because the repairs were sub-standard and no buyer could be found for the paper.¹¹

Behind the scenes administration folded its arms. Dr. Caro and all things associated with Dr. Kellogg shrunk from favour. There was a deliberate move against the model set by Kellogg's International Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association. The growing preference was designed to place all mission enterprises under the full control of the Union Conference rather than being semi-autonomous. The Australasian branch of the Association was therefore disbanded in 1900 and any benevolent enterprises became a part of the Medical Department of the Australasian Union Conference.¹² From that point top administrative energies and finances were channelled into the establishment of a large medical institution in Sydney where church members were encouraged to direct their donations. Benevolent institutions withered and died.

Blame for the gradual demise of the Helping Hand Mission was laid at the door of a similar effort by another denomination that offered meat in the meals. They were said to cater for "those who have not learned the necessity of a control of appetite."¹³ In 1904 an accumulated loss of 225 pounds was reported. The following year there was a deficit of 61 pounds and in 1906 the deficit was 98 pounds.¹⁴ Therefore, early in 1907 Victorian Conference officials closed the institution.¹⁵ It was a peculiar decision in view of the fact their health food business, based on another Kellogg model, was showing losses eight times greater than the Helping Hand Mission over the period 1905/1906.

Assessment In terms of Christian charity The Helping Hand Mission in Melbourne was a resounding success. Undisputed civic benefits came to Melbourne's lower class as a result of efforts by church members. But, like similar philanthropic efforts during the Caro era, it died of financial starvation. No reports mentioned any direct converts to the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

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NOTES

1. A[sa] T. Robinson, "Australasian Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association," *The Bible Echo*, May 2, 1898, 139.
2. "An Excellent Meeting and a Good Work," *Union Conference Record*, June 15, 1898, 69-71.
3. "The Helping Hand Mission," *The Bible Echo*, November 28, 1898, 381; "Nurses Report," *The Bible Echo*, November 28, 1898, 381.
4. "An Excellent Meeting and a Good Work," *Union Conference Record*, June 15, 1898, 69-71.
5. N[athaniel] D Faulkhead, "Helping Hand Mission," *Union Conference Record*, July 19, 1899, 15-16.
6. N. A. Davis, "The Opening of the Helping Hand and Medical Mission, Melbourne," *Union Conference Record*, September 15, 1898, 94-95.
7. "An Evening in the Helping Hand Mission," *The Bible Echo*, October 17, 1898, 333.
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 11. C[harles] P. Michaels, "Report of the Helping Hand Mission, Melbourne," *Union Conference Record*, November 1, 1901, 13.
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