

Book Review: Agency of Hope: The story of the Auckland City Mission 1920 to 2020, Peter Lineham, Massey University Press, 2020

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DAVID HAIGH, OCTOBER 2020

One hundred years ago, Christian denominations were important in the lives of Aucklanders, but in dealing with pressing social issues, there was little collaboration between them. The Methodists operated their missionary work in Freemans Bay and Newton (then the poor parts of town), the Salvation Army worked from Onehunga and Queen Street, and the Presbyterians were in Parnell and Grafton. At the same time, the Sisters of Mercy and St Vincent de Paul gave aid to Catholics. Anglicans focused on institutions helping seamen, women and children rather than alleviating poverty, and for this they were criticised.

However, along came Jasper Calder, son of the Anglican vicar of Ponsonby. He was an unusual cleric, interested in sport, acting, boxing, horse racing and yachting. As an acting vicar, he drew large crowds to hear his entertaining sermons. The parishioners at St Matthew's wanted him as their vicar but the Bishop refused to make the appointment. The choir went on strike in protest. In 1920, while the Bishop was overseas, Calder was appointed the first City Missioner for Auckland, with his support committee drawn from his friends at St Matthew's. His political views were complex but he is described as a Christian Socialist. As missioner he worked long hours while suffering serious health problems, and retired in 1946.

In the first stage of the Auckland City Mission's (ACM) work, the focus was on church services, which attracted huge crowds. Voluntary guilds were set up for men, women and girls. The ACM set up a hospital library, and collected furniture and clothes for needy families. Other activities included aid to prisoners and the accused, children's camps for the poor and sick, a 'down and out' fund for people in desperate need, e.g., for groceries and rent.

A medical and dental clinic was established. But when the Great Depression hit the country it came with a crisis of hunger, poverty and unemployment. The ACM responded with a soup kitchen and support for the homeless with a night shelter. During the depression, funds were short but needs were high. With the election of a Labour Government in the 1930s, and the establishment of the welfare state, the demand for aid subsided. After the Second World War, the ACM focused on the needs of older people. The new City Missioner, Canon Douglas Caswell, had a vision of establishing a village for older people and eventually, after enormous fundraising efforts and a subsidy from the government, Selwyn Village was built in Point Chevalier. The first residents arrived in 1954. Later, a youth hostel was set up in Greys Avenue. In collaboration with other churches, the James Liston Hostel for homeless men was established. But with so much happening the ACM took their eye off the original issue – the poor.

In the 1970s, church social services started to modernise. For example, many adopted a community development model of social action. There was a greater degree of collaboration; for example, the appointment of community worker Bruce Hucker to work in Auckland's inner city. The Anglican Methodist Social Services (AMSS) was established to focus on community work, which had expanded into suburbs such as Māngere and Henderson. Highly skilled staff were employed, including Gavin Rennie, Pam Bell, Warwick McNaughton and Jim Greenaway, who were all committed to the community model. But tensions between the more radical and the traditional services never went away and the AMSS agreement ended in 1981.

With the appointment of Don Cowan as City Missioner, the Hobson Street site became the venue for ACM activities such as housing the homeless for short periods. A detox centre was also established. In the 1990s, poverty became entrenched in Auckland and queues started to grow at the ACM Hobson Street centre for food parcels (over 10,000 in 2015). A respite centre for people with HIV/Aids was set up in Herne Bay. The most popular activity for the ACM was the yearly Christmas dinner, attended by well over 1500 people.

In 1997, Diane Robertson was appointed City Missioner and she brought stronger management and leadership; ACM became more businesslike. Chris Farrelly was appointed City Missioner in 2016. There was growing concern about the homeless and rough sleepers, which resulted in Housing First being set up to find permanent accommodation for the homeless. This was an activity brought together by ACM and Lifewise, and supported financially by the government. As this book was being published, the ACM was (and is) in the process of building a new centre for the homeless, Mission HomeGround, on the Hobson Street site.

Over the 100 years of the ACM, it has, by and large, managed to keep its values of service to the poor intact. It has striven to balance its image as both a church and secular organisation. This is a valuable book for anyone interested in the history of Auckland and changes in the delivery of social services.

David Haigh has a long career in community development. He is the former head of CD for the Auckland Regional Authority and has recently retired from Unitec New Zealand, where he taught in social practice, sociology and not-for-profit management. David is active in Auckland Action Against Poverty.