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Coleman Street's Children: A History of Colman Street Gospel Hall (Coleman Street Chapel) 1900-1999 and of the Brethren in South-East Essex

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Any who approach the study of the Open stream of the Brethren movement with the notion that there has ever been such a thing as 'a typical Brethren assembly' are necessarily doomed to disappointment by reason of the fundamental independence of outlook found in local assemblies. Nonetheless, the assembly which is the primary subject of this work may come as close as any to meeting that criterion, since, as the writer acknowledges, the Coleman Street assembly can be perceived as being 'somewhere near the middle', between the respective poles of 'traditional' and 'progressive' assemblies (p.28). This careful survey of local assembly life is, therefore, of considerable value to those seeking an introduction to the grassroots world of Open Brethren during the twentieth century.

The trends and developments observed here echo those occurring across the Open Brethren stream and, in terms of numerical strength, across the whole movement. Growth was strong until the middle decades of the century (with a peak of 500 in the Sunday School prior to World War II), followed by steady decline thereafter. In earlier years evangelistic endeavour was fervent and usually (but not always) fruitful. Like many assemblies in towns which expanded rapidly between 1900 and 1950, those at Coleman Street felt it incumbent upon them to start an evangelical witness on new housing estates in their area. This was undertaken in the belief, often not without foundation, that there were few other churches able or willing to do it. The brief story of a number of assemblies in south east Essex formed directly or indirectly through the involvement of Coleman Street widens the scope of the historical survey.

In the latter half of the century the tensions aroused among Open Brethren through increasing contact with other churches and the advent of charismatic renewal did not pass Coleman Street by. The assembly was the prime mover in a crusade led by Dick Saunders during the early 1970s in which eighty churches of varying denominations were involved, yet the impact on Coleman Street itself was disappointing. Changes which included a family service, music accompaniment at the Breaking of Bread, efforts to bring young people closer to the centre of the fellowship, and the short-lived appointment of a full-time 'minister', did not come easily but ultimately failed to stem the outgoing tide.

Although the author sees it as his brief to present rather than to interpret the facts and has in mind particularly those he describes as 'ordinary readers', the work is enhanced by a scholarly awareness. Besides perceptive assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of a specific local assembly, the movement as a whole is put into the context of wider evangelicalism, while the author seeks to rectify what is seen as a widespread misunderstanding of what Open Brethren represent, particularly as their distinctives have suffered considerable erosion in recent years. The even-handedness of the writer's approach is evident in the references to topics such as the Exclusive stream of Brethren and the Charismatic movement. If the book holds the greatest interest for those personally familiar with the Open Brethren, and especially the assembly concerned (hence a sometimes almost overwhelming wealth of anecdote, personal reference and reflection), it undoubtedly represents also a fruitful source for the historian of the Brethren movement. With this in mind, the provision of statistical information, e.g. of membership trends and Sunday school attendance, would have been a useful addition to the text.

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