



Mary Scharlieb

LESSONS
FROM THE
ARCHIVE
EPISODE

5

THE MEDICAL PRAYER UNION

AND LIVINGSTONE COLLEGE

Mark Pickering draws out some colourful people and stories from the 75-year history of CMF's immediate predecessor, the Medical Prayer Union.



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In my fourth article I discussed how the coming of 'home medical mission' to London in the 1870s intersected with the remarkable Dr George Saunders and his first retirement from military medical service. His energy and passion led him to the fledgling London Medical Mission in 1871; from there he went on to play a key role in the founding of the Medical Prayer Union (MPU) in 1874 and

then the Medical Missionary Association (MMA) in 1878, shortly before retiring for a second time in 1882.¹ Numerous previous members of the Christian Medical Association joined enthusiastically with the MPU, such as Dr Samuel Osborne Habershon, who had supported the launch of the Guy's Hospital Christian Union back in 1849, and who chaired the first annual meeting of the MPU in October 1874.²

key points



- The combination of fellowship, student support, and promotion of medical mission that characterised the earlier Christian Medical Association was again evident throughout the life of the Medical Prayer Union.
- Specific partnerships with mission organisations such as the Medical Missionary Association and Livingstone College continued throughout its history.
- Ultimately, the MPU was unable to survive the disruption of two world wars. The earlier decision to move away from direct integration of student and graduate ministry was a significant factor in weakening the organisation.



SCAN FOR MORE

student events

Medical students were integral to the MPU from day one. In the last article we heard from Dr Saunders that, 'by 1880 nine of the eleven medical schools [in London] held meetings weekly for Bible study and prayer'.³ The students also met centrally, including in the Harley Street rooms of Dr William Fairlie Clarke, who organised *conversaciones*, where up to 200 students could enjoy an evening together and hear an inspiring talk from a Christian consultant or medical missionary.⁴ In later years, these gatherings became memorialised as the 'Fairlie Clarke Conversaciones'. At a time when the entire medical student population of London was around 2000, these events were able to pull in ten per cent of them!⁵

In addition, and demonstrating the close integration of the MPU and the MMA, from 1894 the MPU sponsored an annual student Missionary Breakfast, where up to 100 students would come to hear missionary doctors from many varied countries.⁶ These continued for well over 100 years, passing from the MPU to CMF after 1949. I remember helping to organise them myself as a student, being challenged by inspiring speakers as we met at the top of Guy's Hospital Tower!

BMA breakfasts

Another event with a long heritage was a breakfast held for doctors at the Annual Representatives' Meeting of the British Medical Association (BMA). This first began in 1892 and appears to have been held sporadically until becoming a regular feature from 1923, again until very recently. Each breakfast was usually chaired by the President of the BMA – a fascinating throwback to days when the BMA and its Christian members were much more likely to be in broad alignment than they are today!⁷

Harold Moody – 'Britain's Martin Luther King'

One of the many fascinating people in the MPU was Dr Harold Moody. Born in Jamaica, he came to London and graduated top of his class from King's College in 1910. However, despite his academic prowess, he faced very significant racial prejudice, being prevented from taking up a hospital post due to his skin colour.

He went on to found his own general practice in Peckham, South London. A blue heritage plaque marks the house today and a nearby park commemorates his links to the area.⁸

Later he also founded the League of Coloured Peoples and became a significant campaigner for racial justice – politely and persuasively making his case when others advocated more violent means. He has even been dubbed 'Britain's Martin Luther King'.⁹

In addition to these campaigning activities, he was a keen supporter of Christian missions, chairing both the Colonial Missionary Society and the London Missionary Society.¹⁰

However, there is also a heartwarming story of cross-cultural brotherhood from the time he was struggling to find work.

William McAdam Eccles

Mr William McAdam Eccles was a prominent surgeon at St Bartholomew's Hospital, and one of the main figures in the leadership of the MPU throughout the majority of its history, for almost 50 years. He was Secretary of the MPU in 1898¹¹ and was President at the time of his death in 1946. He was also President of the London Medical Mission¹² and a lecturer at Livingstone College (see below).

At the height of his struggles against racial prejudice in London, Dr Moody relates part of the story in his own unpublished autobiography, *My Life*, quoted here by his biographer, David Killingray:

Then quite a surprising thing happened, which convinced me that I was taking the right step and God was with me. Mr McAdam Eccles (not of my own hospital) who had known and observed me throughout my course offered me the job of the Medical Superintendent of the Marylebone Medical Mission at £150 per annum – a responsible post in which I was

very happy for some years.

Prof Killingray continues:

Moody's post as Superintendent involved attendance as a doctor for three afternoon sessions per week, and 'the conduct of religious services on Wednesday and Sunday evenings'. These relatively light demands of the appointment thus gave him time to continue with post-graduate medical studies at King's, particularly in ophthalmics which interested him greatly. The working environment at the Medical Mission was agreeable to Moody and made easier by the friendly relationship that he soon established with Miss EM Hancock, the sister in charge; she was to remain a life-long friend. Moody began work there on 1 October 1911.¹³

Despite the incredible sadness of the prejudice that Moody faced as a Black doctor in London, I found it inspiring to know that during that dark period, not only was he supported and welcomed by a leader within the MPU, but also that he gave back in service to the poor through his own work, including at the Marylebone Medical Mission. It was a particular joy to me to find Dr Moody's MPU membership form, tucked away in the remaining archive material kept at the CMF office!

medical students were integral to the [Medical Prayer Union] from day one

1874

MPU founded

1878

MMA founded

1882

Dr George Saunders retires

1882

Dr Mary Scharlieb becomes one of the first women to graduate in medicine in England

1889

Mr William McAdam Eccles becomes MPU Secretary

1892

First MPU BMA Breakfast

1893

Dr Charles Harford Battersby founds Livingstone College

1910

Dr Harold Moody graduates

1911

Dr Moody starts at the Marylebone Medical Mission

1949

MPU merges with the Medical Section of the Graduates' Fellowship of the InterVarsity Fellowship to form CMF

CMF was founded in 1949, and 2024 will be its seventy-fifth anniversary. However, its roots go back much further, and there is plenty to learn from the people and organisations that came before it. This is the fifth of a series of articles featuring some of the main highlights.

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◀ Mary Scharlieb

Another leading light through much of the MPU's history was Dame Mary Scharlieb. An inspiring pioneer in so many ways, she moved from England to Madras in India (today's Chennai), where her husband was a lawyer. Whilst there, she was moved at the plight of so many Indian women who suffered in childbirth. She trained first as a midwife and then as a doctor at Madras Medical College, graduating in 1878.

Returning to the UK, she became one of the first female UK medical graduates in 1882. She met Queen Victoria, spent time back in India lecturing at the Madras Medical College, and later took up various roles at the Royal Free Hospital in London, lecturing in forensic medicine and midwifery, and eventually becoming Chief Gynaecologist there.¹⁴

In her later years she was Vice President and then President of the MPU, chairing numerous student missionary breakfasts, until her death in 1930.¹⁵

Livingstone College

A unique and fascinating project during this period was Livingstone College, launched in 1893 and based in East London, which provided basic medical skills for missionaries who were not doctors. Many of them were going out to isolated areas without access to reliable medical care. If they or their colleagues should become sick, knowing some basic medicine could be lifesaving. This was a lesson learned from the early missionary movement, when a high proportion of missionaries succumbed to fatal tropical diseases.

It was founded by Dr Charles Harford Battersby, son of the founder of the Keswick Convention. He went out as a medical missionary to Nigeria in 1890 aged 25, but was invalided home after a couple of years with Blackwater Fever, a serious complication of malaria. Back in the UK, he became medical secretary of the Church Missionary Society, and founded Livingstone College.¹⁶ He was also another Vice President of the MPU.¹⁷

Over the years, Livingstone College provided many missionaries with basic medical education, for three, six or nine months, or an intensive one month summer course. Practical experience was gained locally, eg at an East London medical mission, or the Mildmay Mission Hospital.¹⁸ One early lecturer at the College was Dr Patrick Manson, the 'Father of Tropical Medicine',¹⁹ who went on to found the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in 1899. Despite his later worldwide fame, his very first experience of lecturing in tropical medicine was in 1894, at Livingstone College!²⁰

Dr Tom Jays was Principal from 1920-1946 and was also one of the last surviving MPU committee members. During his tenure the MPU held a Saturday day conference for some years at Livingstone College.²¹

Livingstone College was a fantastic answer to a pressing need during its first 50 years or so. However, in the period after the Second World War, as wider medical services developed, the need for the College reduced – its original mission had essentially been accomplished. Its new Principal from 1946 was Stanley Hoyte, previously a missionary surgeon in China. As the need for the courses dwindled, he gradually wound down the College's activities and the building was sold. Its assets were eventually merged with the MMA in 1963,²² which in turn merged with CMF in 2004.

two mistakes in the MPU

In its early years, the MPU made two decisions that seemed entirely reasonable at the time but which, in hindsight, caused deeper problems as the years went by.

student-graduate separation

Although students were vital to its birth and early momentum, over time these ties were gradually loosened. Within the universities and colleges of the British Isles, during the late nineteenth century, various evangelical Christian Unions and student missionary movements were springing up and coalescing. These were strong in cities such as Cambridge, Oxford, Edinburgh, and London, and spread to other cities, eventually forming a national movement in 1893 which came to be called the British College Christian Union (BCCU), soon renamed as the Student Christian Movement (SCM).²³

The graduate leaders of the MPU, as busy clinicians, recognised the importance of the growing national student movement. They first affiliated the MPU student work to the BCCU in 1898, and eventually in 1906 transferred their student work entirely over to what was by then the SCM.²⁴

Affiliation to the larger student movement made perfect sense, bringing in greater resource and broader horizons. We can see how it was tempting too for the MPU leaders later on to transfer their student work completely into what seemed like safer, and less clinically committed, hands. They did retain some student contact, chiefly through sponsoring the annual student missionary breakfasts. But the winds of change were afoot, and this was the first step down what became a darker path.

a lack of doctrinal clarity

When the MPU was formed, it aimed to draw together those Christians with a living faith who believed in the value of prayer. Its original object was simply '*the promotion of Christian intercourse amongst the Members and Students of the Medical Profession*', and the means employed included '*Prayer and the study of the Scriptures*'.²⁵

In its early years, further clarity did not seem necessary – its members understood each other. Yet as the years went by, liberal theology was gaining ground within evangelical church circles, and within the Student Christian Movement. Many were questioning the authority of the Bible, or the centrality of the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus. These growing tensions eventually led the Cambridge Intercollegiate Christian Union (CICCU) to disaffiliate from the SCM in 1910, along with some of the London hospital Christian Unions.²⁶ This rupture was painful at the time but necessary, laying the foundation for a rejuvenated student movement to be reborn in the coming years, of which I will say more in the next article.

However, because the MPU had distanced itself from its student roots, and lacked the doctrinal clarity to engage actively in the theological shifts of the early twentieth century, it was doubly weakened at a time when even darker storm clouds were gathering.

the disruptions of war and a gradual fading

The First World War, of 1914-18, disrupted the activity of the MPU and halted its annual student missionary breakfasts for a few years. However, the leadership made strenuous efforts to reinvigorate the Union in 1922. Amongst other things, this is when the annual BMA breakfasts were restarted, continuing regularly for many years.

Whilst activities went on for some years, they never appeared to regain their initial strong student links nor any sense of doctrinal clarity. The MPU in its later years was a worthy fellowship of doctors, supporting each other in prayer, doing what they could to live out their Christian testimony professionally, and supporting and promoting medical mission, including among medical students.

Yet the original vigour never quite returned. And when in 1939 war came again to the UK, the activities of the MPU dwindled yet further. Its leadership had aged without a regular influx of students and younger graduates, and some of the older leaders died around the time of the Second World War. Chief among these was Mr McAdam Eccles, who died in 1946 after being the backbone of the MPU during these later years.

a final attempt brings help

In the post-war years, the small remaining committee of the MPU made new efforts to revive the association. In April 1948 Dr Neville Bradley, MPU Secretary, placed an advert in the *Lancet*, seeking like-minded Christians:

It would seem from many points of view that the time is opportune to link medical men and women in some more effective way in order to promote and maintain a distinctive Christian witness in what is tending to become an increasingly secularised and nationalised service...²⁷

His words were prescient, and little did he know that such a 'distinctive Christian witness' was already arising – the Medical Section of the Graduates' Fellowship of the InterVarsity Fellowship (IVF). His advert was perfectly timed, and came to the attention of the IVF medical leaders, including Douglas Johnson. This was the catalyst that eventually led to the MPU and IVF medical graduates joining together in 1949 to form CMF.

The next article will flesh out this part of our story in more detail.

The MPU had run its course. For 75 years, during times of strength and weakness, it had been God's movement for that time. During those years, thousands of Christian doctors and students were supported, and a number of particularly inspiring individuals emerged. Some decisions made in good faith turned out to cause problems later, yet God's faithfulness

and provision clearly shone through. In his wisdom, he ensured that the faltering movement could be absorbed into a new iteration with fresh vision and energy.

what can we learn from the Medical Prayer Union and Livingstone College?

- Some ideas and organisations may be suited to particular times and situations, yet come to a natural end point, such as Livingstone College. We need wisdom and sometimes courage to recognise when something has run its natural course.
- We should consider the unintended future consequences of our decisions, and be willing to re-evaluate the situation as their effects become clearer, such as the separation of students and graduates in the MPU.
- The inspiring story of Harold Moody and William McAdam Eccles shows that Christian friendship can transcend racial prejudice in healthcare.
- We see from Mary Scharlieb a great example of a very early female doctor who combined a passion for medical mission and professional excellence with leadership in the MPU. ●

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This series will continue to sketch out the history of the modern Christian medical and nursing movements in the UK, as we approach CMF's seventy-fifth anniversary in 2024. If any readers have an interest in this area, or relevant material to contribute, please contact Mark on admin@cmf.org.uk