

OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

THE McALL MISSION TO THE WORKING MEN OF FRANCE.

The readers of THE PRESBYTERIAN know something of the religious crisis through which France is passing at the present time. From my letters on the Reformed Church and its missions, it was seen how willingly the people listened to the teaching of the Scriptures, many of them accepting the Gospel and allying themselves with some branch of the Protestant Church. My last letter told something of the Atheism which prevails at the same time, and of the opposition to all positive belief which is manifested by a small but growing party—a party which is making itself heard by its noisy utterances and impassioned advocacy of all that is extreme in politics, morals and irreligion. I turn to-day to a work which is exercising a marked influence in Paris and other cities of France—a work which began on the smallest scale, and which has been carried on by what may be regarded as the feeblest instrumentality, but which has, nevertheless, attained, in a single decade, an extraordinary magnitude and importance—the work of Mr. McAll amongst the working classes of France.

Most of those who take an interest in such subjects as this know that Mr. McAll was formerly a Congregational minister at Sunderland, England, and afterwards at Hadleigh, Suffolk. While spending his vacation in Paris in the summer of 1871, at the close of the late Franco-German war, he and his wife went one sultry afternoon to Belleville, then notorious as the populous quarter of the city which had supplied the leading members of the Commune that had wrought such terrible mischief during its brief reign. Having supplied themselves with tracts to hand to the artisans on their way from the workshops, they were brought into conversation, so far as their scanty knowledge of French would permit, with the *ouvriers* of the district, and found them to be by no means the savages they were reported to be. Without entering here into particulars as to the nature of the conversation held with them, I may state that the result of this visit was the creation, on the part of Mr. and Mrs. McAll, of a strong desire to know more of these people, and, if possible, to be the means of benefiting them morally and spiritually. Happily, those whom they met, and who openly stated that they had forever broken with the Catholic Church, became interested in their visitors and the conversation which ensued, and were led to say that if they had such teachers as these English tourists proved themselves to be, they would not refuse to listen to their instructions. This casual visit finally led to much correspondence with the Protestant pastors of Paris, and to a determination on the part of Mr. McAll to resign his English charge and take up his abode amongst the Communists of Belleville. In November, 1871, he recrossed the Channel and began the necessary preparations for the work which he contemplated. All being ready, he held his first meeting on the 17th January 1872, as many as forty having entered the room in the course of the evening. *Cantiques* were sung, Mrs. McAll playing an accompaniment on a harmonium; short addresses on appropriate subjects followed, variety and brevity being specially studied, so as not to fatigue those who had already spent the day in physical toil. Illustrated papers were then distributed, and a kindly shake of the hand given by Mr. McAll as each passed out of the door. All this, so different from what these poor people had been accustomed to, made a favourable impression on them, and on the following Sunday evening the room was quite full, more than one hundred being present. And so the work has gone on from year to year extending, until now—just ten years after the opening of the first meeting—there are no fewer than fifty-seven stations, thirty-two of which are in Paris and its suburbs, and the remaining twenty-five scattered over France, with a sitting accommodation for upwards of ten thousand persons, the past year having witnessed the opening of no fewer than eighteen new stations.

The news soon spread throughout France, and ere long requests began to come from all the large cities for similar meetings to be held, and recently Mr. McAll has been in a position to comply with some of these invitations, and would gladly accede to the requests of all had he only the men and the money needed for such a gigantic undertaking. In the north-

east of France, stations have been opened at Dunkirk, and at Roubaix and Croix, suburbs of the great manufacturing town of Lille; while at Boulogne two stations were opened previously. On the west coast very promising work is being done at La Rochelle and Rochefort, Saintes and Cognac, as well as at Bordeaux and Arcachon. At Montauban and Toulouse, in the south, crowded meetings are now held regularly amongst the working classes; and in the east several stations have been opened at Lyons and St. Etienne, and more recently a mission has been commenced at Clermont-Ferrand, in the very centre of the country. At the end of last year a very pressing invitation came from the pastors and others for a similar mission amongst the French in Algiers.

FINANCIAL POSITION.

With the increasing growth of the mission, of course the expenditure has increased in proportion. Whence come the funds? In the first place let me state that everything is done on the most economical scale. Mr. and Mrs. McAll have from the commencement given their services without any remuneration, and they are assisted by some workers, at least, who are also no charge upon the resources of the mission. Further, the Protestant pastors generally enter heartily into the objects of the work, and give their services in addition to their own special work. Still so widely extended a system of working, including the heavy rental of over fifty mission halls, and the support of such agents as have not private resources, involves a serious outlay. The means for meeting the outlay is chiefly met by the exertions of auxiliary societies in England and Scotland, and the contributions of American friends, who are most generous in the sums they send, nearly all the large cities being now interested in the work. I see by the last report that Canada has also contributed a small sum, which it is to be hoped may be largely augmented on a future occasion. France, of course, does something, and no doubt will do more from year to year. The whole receipts during the past year, from all sources, amounted to £8,906 sterling, so that the Treasurer closed the year with a balance of £265 on hand to meet contingencies.

FREE DISPENSARIES.

A new feature of the McAll mission is the establishing of free dispensaries in certain needy districts of Paris. Two were organized during the last year, and it is found that their influence has extended far beyond the boundary of the quarter in which the halls are situated. People come from great distances, even from outside Paris, for the healing of the body. A short service is held prior to dispensing medicines, and as long as patients have to wait their turn, opportunity is given to Christian workers to hold conversation with the sick. In this way some are met with and the Gospel preached to them, who would otherwise, in all likelihood, never come within its joyful sound. This branch of the work will probably be considerably extended in Paris and elsewhere in future.

JUVENILE MISSION.

Children's religious services are held in connection with most of the mission stations—a work which may yet prove of great importance to the religious interests of France. The different directors speak very encouragingly of the progress made in this department of the work during the past year. An important feature of this progress is the introduction into these schools of a complete Sunday school organization. The teachers in these schools have hitherto, with few exceptions, been volunteers from the Protestant churches of Paris. Recently converts of the mission have been tried, and it has been found that the enthusiasm and eagerness of these untrained evangelists more than counterbalance their lack of experience, and in consequence the system has been extended into other districts. The number of Sunday schools, children's services and juvenile classes is stated to be now 2,753, and the aggregate attendance 116,454.

INNER WORKING OF THE STATIONS.

From the very commencement of the mission great care had to be taken that nothing of a political character, nor anything savouring of religious controversy, should be introduced in any of the meetings. Indeed, in the earlier years this was absolutely forbidden by the civil authorities. Some time had elapsed before the conductors of the mission began to read the Scriptures; but when the confidence of the people had been sufficiently gained to allow of this, the stories of the Old Testament, which were quite new to them, greatly in-

terested the audiences. By-and-by, when the way had been prepared, the co-operation of the Protestant pastors in the conducting of the meetings was secured. Bible classes were formed and a practical link established between the mission room and the various churches. During the past year an additional step was taken. The workers looked out for the senescent listeners, and took means to detain them for conversation at the close of the meetings—an expedient which has been attended with beneficial results, so that *after meetings* have become one of the recognized modes of evangelistic working in this mission. Domestic visitation also is attended to—at least so far as the regular attendants are concerned—by Bible readers and Christian ladies. Yet while carrying out all these various methods of working, Mr. McAll has long felt the need of bringing into an avowedly Christian association those in the stations who gave evidence of the vital change. Since the passing of the recent French law which permits *reunions*, he has frequently spoken to his fellow-workers on this subject, his aim being to secure a Christian recognition and provision for mutual edification which should not compromise the unsectarian character of the mission, nor interfere with the introduction of the converts to membership in the various evangelical churches. After much thought, he laid before the French representative committee of pastors a proposal to form in each station a carefully selected group of converts, in order to their partaking of the Lord's Supper in the respective mission rooms, under the presidency of the neighbouring pastors. To this proposal the committee seemed to think there were insurmountable obstacles, and so it was modified. Mr. McAll is now organizing a "*Société Fraternelle*," composed of those who have received the Gospel in the mission rooms. In this way a careful selection of those entitled to be enrolled as members will be made, and these will be convened periodically in a private meeting for mutual edification and prayer. Serious persons not yet enrolled as members will be allowed to be present, and in this way it is hoped that religious inquirers will be helped, by making known their doubts and difficulties.

IS THE GOSPEL PREACHED IN THESE MEETINGS?

A report having gained currency in some way that the Gospel was not preached in these meetings, Pastor Theodore Monod, so well known in America and Great Britain, and who has taken part in them from the beginning, writes thus to Mr. McAll. "Whether one looks over the names of the well-known evangelical pastors and laymen who labour with you (not to mention, first and foremost, your own name),—whether one considers the ordinary meeting, the house-to-house visitation, the Sunday schools, the Bible classes, or the 'Conferences' given in the large halls,—whether, especially, one takes notice of the *after meetings* for inquirers now established in several stations, not without tokens of the presence and blessing of God,—nothing is easier than to ascertain that the Gospel is not only preached, but is preached with increasing success, in your mission. In fact, one may say that the seed faithfully cast upon the waters for the last ten years is now beginning, on a much larger scale than hitherto, to yield a harvest. I am acquainted with several definite conversions myself, this very week I met with a man I well know, whose heart and life have undergone a thorough change. . . . In a word, the bone and marrow, the nerve and sinew and life-blood of the teaching continually going forth from your manifold meetings in Paris, and throughout France (God grant that they may yet greatly increase and multiply!) is purely 'the Gospel of the grace of God.' Any rumour to the contrary would be a downright misrepresentation, did it not arise from an utter misunderstanding."

IN CONCLUSION.

Whether we consider the time at which this work was begun—just after the close of the terrible scenes of the Commune in Paris, the fortuitous meeting, that sultry summer evening, of the English strangers with a group of tired *ouvriers*, and the singular conversation which ensued; the harmony which has invariably prevailed amongst the workers in the mission, and the absence of anything at any of the numerous stations to bring these workers into collision with the jealous agents of the many civil functionaries, reactionary and otherwise, which have been in power during these ten years; and the result, direct and indirect, of the first decade's work, by such apparently feeble instrumentality and at such a trifling expense—