



Wilson Carlile and the Birth of the Church Army

Steve Addison

www.steveaddison.net

Early life and calling

At the age of fourteen, Wilson Carlile (1847–1942) left school to work in the family silk business. His one ambition was to make money.

During the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71 he dodged about on the Continent, often enough between the lines of the opposing forces, picking up the raw material of his business at low, panic prices. At twenty-five he realised his ambition having amassed a fortune of £20,000.

The depression of 1873 wiped out his fortune and Carlile found himself bedridden with a serious illness for six months.

In those months of despair and illness he gave his life, his heart, his soul absolutely and completely to God. Later he said, “God threw me on my back so I could look up better.”

St Mary Abbots, Kensington

In 1880 he was ordained for the ministry in the Anglican church and became a curate in Kensington responsible for the evening service.

Two things concerned him. The sparse evening congregations and the crowds that passed by the church unshepherded.

He soon introduced an early form of cinematography-- the magic lantern--into the service. This had the effect of driving away all the “orthodox” people in horror and attracting men and women from the street.



He started week night gatherings for the rough and rowdy lads of the district using comic lantern shows to attract and entertain them followed by a devotional message and the opportunity to receive Christ. Many did.

He ran open-air services at night to reach the butlers and groomsmen of the wealthy at the end of their day's work. Vast crowds gathered and at times the meetings turned violent. Some of the worst men in Kensington became his regular workers.

Carlile discovered that he could be far more effective if he put up ordinary working men and women to speak, keeping them on the platform for a relatively short time. He was the leader, they were the workers. It was this insight that ultimately led to the establishment of the Church Army.

After a few weeks his Vicar called him in and asked him to close stop his outdoor work. There had been too many complaints and the police were concerned.

Soon after he resigned his curacy to devote himself to evangelism by mobilizing converted lay men and women. He chose to work within the Anglican church and deploy evangelists to any parishes that requested them.

Why 'Army'? Carlile's answer was that the evangelists intended to make war against sin and the devil.

Two men-servants who had been his first open-air speakers at Kensington volunteered to be trained as Church Army officers.

Westminster

The focus of his ministry moved to the slums behind Westminster Abbey. The same strategy was applied. Open-air meetings attracted large crowds. Ordinary people proclaimed their faith. The crowd violence grew worse. Church Army workers were pelted with red ochre and stones. They were beaten. Yet some of the most hardened sinners were won over to Christ.

In 1883 a criminal gang member, enraged that an associate has been converted, attacked Carlile. He spent the next six months recovering.

Carlile wrote about this era, "It often happened that those who had treated us the worst, being by their very deeds convinced of their own wrong-doing, came with us to the mission-hall, and apologized afterwards. They would sometimes kneel by our side praying God to forgive them for their disgraceful behaviour. It was in this way that we first made the acquaintance of some who became invaluable helpers afterwards."

In the early days he was accused of dragging the Church into the gutter. The press, including the Church papers, was hostile.

The attack was a turning point. For six months Carlile lay in bed wondering if God had laid him aside as a instrument tried and found wanting. Once he had recovered the movement began to make rapid progress. He was back on his feet, more determined than ever, full of plans and energy to put them into effect.

Expansion

He set up a centre in Oxford to train lay evangelists. He embarked on a national tour to explain the aims, ideas and methods of the Church Army to Anglican clergy.

By the end of 1885 the Church Army had 65 evangelists and 6,000 voluntary members in parishes throughout the country. Many of them were “one time drunkards, gamblers, wife-beaters, blasphemers, and others--who are now working for the cause of Christ.” That year, the Church Army held 20,000 outdoor meetings and 20,000 indoor meetings with a total attendance of 3 million people.

Reffold describes how workers were typically recruited:

“The ‘cadet’, as the raw recruit was called, was often brought into the work in his native town or village. A Church Army captain, attached to the parish church had won him, probably more by influence than by eloquence, to see the beauty of Christ and the joy of his service. Soon he began to help the Church Army captain, and to tell in homely, halting speech about the Saviour Whom he had met and learned to love. So gradually there came upon him the conviction that he must leave all and, following after Christ, give up the rest of his life to the service of God and man.”¹

Carlile had been inspired by the example of the Franciscans and the Methodists. Both movements had mobilized committed bands of lay people for mission. He was aware that committed lay people had left the Anglican church to join the “Nonconformist” movements because they blocked from making a contribution.

In the first two years 700 applications were received to join the Church Army from Nonconformists, many of them were local preachers wanting to return to the Church of England.

In 1885 the Training College was moved to London. Training rarely lasted more than three months. It covered the basics of Scripture, the Prayer Book, Apologetics, Church History, and Practical Mission Work.

The day began at 6:30am with chores followed by lectures, prayers, private study and field work. The day ended with an outreach meeting in Hyde Park followed by an indoor meeting which finished at 10:00pm.

Eventually Carlile saw 1,000 trained and commissioned men and women in the field.

¹Reffold, Wilson Carlile and the Church Army, 117.

St Mary at Hill

In 1892 Carlile took over an empty city church as Rector--St Mary at Hill. Within a short time it was filled to capacity with 4-500 people. He introduced a band to parade through the streets and topic sermons with titles like: Test Match, Cup Final, Cat Burglar, Night Clubs. Hundreds of people saw their first movie in his church.

He was known to go into the local pubs to drag his congregation out of the pubs. Once the building was full he would go out onto the street to tell people who couldn't get in to come earlier next week. He never spent much money on advertising as the papers were constantly calling him to find out what was going on so they could report it.

Mobile missionaries

In 1892 Carlile, inspired by the example of the preaching friars of the thirteenth century and the early Methodist circuit riders, decided to mobilize a band of men who would travel throughout the country in twos and threes preaching in hamlets and villages.



The plan was to provide them with caravans, similar to the ones used by the Gypsies of the day. An officer was in charge of each van and accompanied by one or two trainees.

They ministered among the villagers, the seasonal farm workers and even the gypsies who were impressed that the Church was coming to them in caravans.

The arrival of the caravans saw conversions, baptisms, confirmations and even weddings of couples who had been living together. The Church Army workers only went where they were invited by a local Anglican church and the local church was responsible to follow up the people who had been reached.

Eventually there were 70 vans crisscrossing the nation. The vans moved about 1,000 a year, five mile each time, from village to village. But the Church Army did not own a single horse to pull them. Workers relied on the support of local farmers who would lend them a horse to get the caravan to the next stop.

In addition to the travelling caravans, each summer up to 100 workers would assemble in a Cathedral city and with the blessing of the Bishop fan out in teams of 8-10 to walk from village to village conducting crusades as they go. They spent up to two months on the road, sleeping at nights in parish halls. They held open-air and indoor meetings. They shared the gospel door to door.

After a journey of 200 mile all the teams converged on popular seaside spot for a 4-6 week crusade amongst the holiday makers.

Lasting legacy

Carlile's heart for the poor led him to establish a wide range of ministries for people in need: Labour Homes for the long-term unemployed; Lodging Houses for the homeless; Rescue Work on the streets of London; Women's Shelters, a Medical Mission in the slums for women and children; a Prison Ministry; a Ministry to the Armed Services in two World Wars.

The Church Army spread to the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, India, Japan, China and East Africa.

Wilson Carlile's explanation of his success was his unconventionality, "I don't care a rap what I do, so long as I help men. That attracts the men who mean business, even if it horrifies others."

Carlile died in 1942 at age 95 and lies buried in the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral, London.

"He waged warfare. . . he made real what other men have only talked about. . . he raised an army to fight. . ."²

² Public Orator when Carlile admitted to Doctor of Divinity at Oxford, 1915. Quoted in AE Reffold "Wilson Carlile" Great Churchmen No 2 (London: Church Book Room Press, nd).

10 Movement insights from Wilson Carlile and the Church Army

1. Founder

Without Wilson Carlile there would have been no Church Army. As a pioneer he embodied the heart and the calling of the Church Army and successfully recruited others to its cause. He then went on to turn embody the vision in a movement that outlasted him.

2. Spiritual authority

God was at work sovereignly shaping Carlile's development: his success in business; his financial ruin and illness; the innovative insights regarding lay evangelism; his injury and renewed zeal for expansion.

3. Dissatisfaction

Movements emerge because something needs to change. Carlile was agitated over the exclusion of ordinary people from front line ministry. He turned that dissatisfaction into a positive agenda for change.

4. Urgency

Carlile raised an army to fight. He was continually on the offensive, taking the initiative in the war on sin and the devil. He worked within the authority structure of the established Church but he always assumed there was a way forward.

5. Conflict

Movements advance in the face of opposition. The early Church Army faced violence from the mobs and street gangs, concerns from the police and magistrates and criticism from clergy that they were dragging the church into the gutter. Eventually some of their best workers came from violent opponents and the church and society accepted the ministry of the Church Army.

6. Movement-institution tension

Carlile worked hard to keep this dynamic movement within the structure of the Anglican church. He built bridges with clergy. He delved into history to find precedents of a missionary order sanctioned by the church. Yet he did not surrender the Church Army's unique identity and calling to the prevailing church culture.

7. Wide and deep

Carlile refused to choose between a strategy for reaching the crowds and a strategy for making disciples.

8. Innovative methods

Carlile was clear about his cause and flexible in his methods: bands, parades, movies, open-air campaigns, traveling caravans, topical preaching, welfare services. If it helped him reach people he did it despite the criticism.

9. Rapid mobilization

From the beginning he determined that his job was to lead and to mobilize as many workers as possible. He removed the barriers to ordinary people ministering on the frontline.

10. Legacy

Carlile left behind a well trained army of workers and a movement that embodies the founding vision God had given him.

Today you can find the Church Army on the web at: www.churcharmy.org.uk follow the links to the various national bodies.