

The Anglican Historical Society of New Zealand *Te Rōpu Hītori o te Hāhi Mīhinare ki Aotearoa*

Hannah Dawson (Mother Hannah) 1863-1938

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In 1894, a group of three Anglican women moved into a cottage in *Grey Street* (now *Greys Avenue*) Auckland, thereby founding the *Mission to the Streets and Lanes*.

Their purpose was to assist the clergy in five inner-city parishes by working among the poor in the slums.

By 1899, there were four women missionaries who remained for many years while a few others came and went. They helped with the *Women's Home* (founded in 1883 for unmarried mothers), visited the sick, provided food and clothing for the destitute, taught Sunday Schools and adult Bible classes, and visited the hospital, gaol and the *Costley Home for the Aged Poor*. One of the four was **Hannah Dawson**.

Hannah Alexandra Dawson was born in 1863, the eighth child in a family of twelve.

Her parents, **Benjamin** and **Hannah Dawson**, had emigrated from Buckinghamshire, arriving in Dunedin in 1853.

Benjamin farmed in Waihola (a rural area south of Dunedin) and then entered the railway service. In 1874, when Benjamin was station master at Ravensbourne, Dunedin, a measles epidemic broke out in Otago, the disease allegedly brought on immigrant ships. In two and a half dreadful weeks in October/November four of Hannah's siblings died: first, a baby born the previous year, next Jane Hemblen, aged 17, and then within days twins, Ellen Agnes and Arthur Stanhope, aged nineteen. It is hard to imagine the effect on 11-year-old Hannah.



In July 1896, Hannah Dawson joined the little community in Grey Street. Described as an able, attractive woman in her early thirties, she was a trained and very experienced Sunday-School teacher and brought the highest testimonials from the Bishop and clergy in Dunedin. In 1901 she extended her training by spending three months in Melbourne, visiting the *Mission to the Streets and Lanes* to see the management of the *Neglected Childrens' Home* and to gain experience in rescue work. Before making the decision to join the *Mission* she allegedly felt some uncertainty but, in the event, she was to remain for the rest of her life.

For almost a decade after Hannah joined the *Mission* there were departures and tensions within the small community and years of debate and argument in the *Anglican Diocesan Synod*. Internally issues of leadership caused a number of problems and there was division among the women and the diocesan clergy as to the nature of the community. Were the women to be deaconesses or members of a religious

sisterhood, leading a more conventual way of life?

Finally at the diocesan synod in 1905 the *Mission* was reformed as *The Order of the Good Shepherd*, a religious sisterhood in which the members or sisters took life-long vows and followed a rule of life.

On 22 December 1905, at the Church of the Epiphany in Karangahape Road, three sisters were professed: Hannah Dawson (Sister Hannah), Frances Williams (Sister Frances), and Charlotte Halstead (Sister Charlotte). Although the youngest, Sister Hannah was voted Superior or Mother in January 1906, a role in which she continued until her death, 32 years later. During these years the Order remained small: numbers fluctuated but there were never more than about a dozen sisters.

Two months after Mother Hannah's election the sisters took a bold step and opened a crèche for the children of working mothers in a rented cottage next to the *Mission House*. A larger crèche, built with funds donated by John Logan Campbell, ran until the 1950s. At the opening on 16 May 1911, Campbell formally handed over the imposing two storey brick building (demolished in the 1960s) to *The Order of the Good Shepherd*.

During World War 1, the *Mission House* became a focus for soldiers' families, who often experienced severe hardships. Mother Hannah took on the role of official Visitor for the *Auckland Provincial War Relief Association* and in 1919 was awarded an MBE in recognition of her special war effort among the dependents of soldiers. Her public role expanded, and she became a recognised spokeswoman for people struggling to survive in the inner city. Her professional expertise was recognised in the press where she was referred to as a 'social worker' and regularly called on for comment. Later she was a member of the *Auckland Social Workers' Association*, a body of core church social workers, formed during the Depression.

Mother Hannah was a foundation member of the *Auckland Hospital Auxiliary* for which she worked for 30 years and an official visitor to the gaol and mental hospital. She had a particular concern for women and children. In 1924, she took over management of the struggling *St Mary's Homes*, having been on the management board for a number of years. She oversaw the building of a new *Mission House* to replace the badly dilapidated original building, a project which was completed in 1926. In 1930 the sisters took responsibility for the newly opened *Brett Memorial Home*, an orphanage in Takapuna. Mother Hannah was also active in the *Society for the Protection of Women and Children*, and one of the original members of the *Plunket Society Committee*, and on the executive of the *Auckland Unemployed Women's Emergency Committee*, founded in 1931.

In the Anglican Church she was active in the *Mother's Union*, which she represented at the Auckland branch of the *National Council of Women*. Although hardly a feminist she believed some women of the right kind, women of intellect, education, and common-sense, should be in parliament.

In 1931, when Mother Hannah left to spend several months in England, she received a number of public farewells, while gifts from the *National Council of Women*, the *Society for the Protection of Women and Children*, the *Mother's Union* and others showed the esteem in which she was held. In 1935 she was one of about 1500 New Zealanders honoured with a medal to celebrate the King's Silver Jubilee.

Mother Hannah died on 13 October 1938 after an illness of some weeks. Two days later, after a memorial service in the chapel of the *Mission House*, the funeral cortege, with a number of cars filled with wreaths, left for *Purewa Cemetery* where she was buried.

Obituaries in the Auckland papers described her as 'one of Auckland's greatest social and

Christian workers', a woman 'deeply loved and respected by all who knew her', 'a gracious and

attractive personality, combined with a wise judgement and wide experience of life'.

McClure, Margaret, *Saving the City: The History of the Order of the Good Shepherd and the Community of the Holy Name in Auckland, 1894-2000*, David Ling Publishing, 2002.

Community Loss. Devoted Life Ends, NZ Herald, 14 October 1938, p.14.

City's Loss: Christian Worker, Auckland Star, 14 October 1938, p.3.

Mother Hannah Loss to Community, NZ Herald, 17 October 1938, p.16