

LIONEL B. FLETCHER



Rev Dr Lionel B. Fletcher passed away on 19 February, 1954, after 46 years of ministry in which 250,000 people made public commitments to follow Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. In addition to his powerful influence as an evangelist, he touched countless lives as a pastor, author, correspondent and minister to ministers. It is impossible for us to know the full extent of God's work through him.

Lionel was the youngest of seven sons, four of whom were ordained to the Christian ministry, while the other three were well-known lay preachers. Although his family was noted for academic achievement, his first love was for the sea, so he headed for England on a sailing ship in 1894. He did well in this venture but decided a life at sea was not for him. Back home, he considered pursuing the life of a drover and was preparing for an expedition that would have taken six months and may have led his life in a direction that was different from the one he would eventually take. An elder brother challenged him about his lifestyle and in a rage, Lionel was determined to leave on the trip. But during that night, "the hand of God intervened decisively in the affairs of Lionel Fletcher." In the middle of the night he got out of bed, went to his knees and turned his face towards God forever.

Lionel Fletcher joined the Stanmore Methodist Church Christian Endeavour Society and in response to the testimony of Archdeacon Tess, claimed the power of the Holy Spirit as his Christian birthright. He commenced studies for the Methodist Local Preachers' Examination and gained practical experience working with his brother, Rev. M. Scott Fletcher, the minister of Oberon Methodist Church.

In January, 1900, Lionel married Maude Basham, daughter of a Sydney merchant, and they worked together in perfect harmony for the rest of their lives. He was offered a journalist position as a mining editor and went to Charters Towers to gain experience as an underground miner; although he was met with suspicion, he won acceptance. The Newcastle Morning Herald offered him a position, but by now he was certain God had called him to the ministry.

Lionel had a wife and child to support and through the Congregational Union, he was able to gain a position as Pastor of the Campbelltown Congregational Church in 1905. He continued his theological studies while his pastor's stipend enabled him to provide for his family. He took the Gospel to the workforce of nearly 1,000 who were building Cataract Dam and turned two rooms of the Campbelltown manse into a gymnasium for local youth. Consequently, the church had to re-open an almost-forgotten gallery to cope with the increased church attendance.

Lionel B. Fletcher was ordained in the Pitt Street Congregational Church in March, 1908. A month later, he began a ministry of only 10 months at Kurri Kurri Congregational Church, during which time he extended the work to Cessnock. His ministry in the Hunter Valley was cut short by the death through convulsions of their infant son. In these circumstances, when he received a call to the Port Adelaide Congregational Church in South Australia, he decided to accept it.

During his three-and-a-half years at Port Adelaide, Lionel began his "definite work as an evangelist." He was elected Chairman of the Congregational Union of South

Australia and during that appointment called all the heads of the other denominations to consider with him a united evangelistic campaign. He resigned from the pastorate of the largest Congregational Church in Australia to go out on a six months campaign without a salary and nothing in view beyond that timeframe. However, before the campaign ended, the next step was clear. Lionel was invited to become pastor of the Wood Street Church in Cardiff, Wales, which had the largest auditorium of any Congregational Church in the British Empire. But it was also a church on the point of closing, with a crushing debt of £3,000.

Lionel Fletcher and his family sailed for Wales in January, 1916, with the world at war, leaving behind at Port Adelaide, a church that now had the largest membership of any Congregational Church in Australia. The Wood Street Church had 236 members when he arrived, the vast majority of them from the poorer working class. In two-and-three-quarters years, the debt was paid and in six years, additional premises were purchased, the church was renovated and a £2,000 memorial organ had been installed. More importantly, more than 2,000 public conversions were registered, the membership roll grew to 1,200, the Sunday School grew from 250 to 1,000 and a thousand-strong Cradle Roll was formed. More than 2,000 people attended on Sunday evenings while hundreds more had to be turned away. During his time at Cardiff he also conducted evangelistic missions throughout Britain and at the request of the Australian Y.M.C.A. on Salisbury Plain, he ministered to Australian soldiers in England on their way to the Western Front.

In 1922, Lionel Fletcher accepted an invitation from the New Life Campaign committee to widen his ministry. Their letter said, "there are many competent to judge who feel very strongly that with your special gifts, you can best serve the Kingdom of God at this time by conducting evangelistic services in various parts of the country rather than by confining yourself to the work of an individual church." He knew the time had come for this to happen and the campaigns that followed showed that this was God's will for him.

In 1923, he was elected President of the Christian Endeavour Union of Great Britain and Ireland. He visited the USA, representing Great Britain at the World Christian Endeavour Convention at Des Moines, Iowa, and spoke at several Bible Conferences across the country.

In 1924, the Fletchers responded to an urgent call from the Beresford Road Congregational Church, Auckland, New Zealand, where Lionel faced a situation similar to the one he encountered at Wood Street. The church faced a crushing debt and its closure and sale of the property were imminent. However, the story of Wood Street was repeated - the church building was filled from the converts as a result of his ministry, the membership grew from a handful to almost 800. The debt was cleared and £10,000 was borrowed to enlarge the work; the church's giving to missions also increased. During this time, Lionel Fletcher was the first person in New Zealand to use radio as a medium for the Gospel message.

In the winter of 1930 to 1931, he returned to England to conduct a great London Youth Evangelistic Campaign. A luxurious home went with the position, but he declined it to return to his church in Auckland, a church that held a special place in his affection. He became Chairman of the Congregational Union of New Zealand Christian Endeavour Union and was also elected to the honoured position of World Vice-President of Christian Endeavour.

In England, the World Evangelisation Trust was formed and approached Lionel Fletcher to occupy the post of Empire Evangelist. He replied that their call "robbed me of sleep and drove my wife and me to our knees in earnest pleading for light

upon our path.” They were conscious that the church’s new debt remained to be paid, although it had been reduced from £10,000 to £3,000; the Trust promised £1,000 towards the debt. He realised it was God’s call again, but added that there was another, personal call, writing, “I have never before been the minister of a church which made me feel that I wanted to stay at it for the rest of my life.” But in accepting the Trust’s call, he added, “Today is the greatest day of opportunity since I came into the world, and if I miss this, I shall miss the great call of my life.” He held final evangelistic campaigns in New Zealand and travelled to Sydney for meetings before sailing for England. At a meeting in the Sydney Town Hall, there were 3,500 inside and a further 3,000 remained outside, unable to gain entrance.

Lionel Fletcher was in his 56th year when he became the Empire Evangelist, his campaign covering the British Isles. During that time, it was written of him that he was “a preacher of extraordinary effectiveness” and that he had “redeemed the name of evangelism.”

On three occasions, in 1934, 1936 and 1938, he held evangelistic campaigns in South Africa. These visits, which occupied nearly 14 months, added at least 18,000 to those who came to faith in Christ under his ministry. He was aware of the country’s social and political problems and ministered with great affection to all ethnic groups. His campaigns produced a degree of unity among the churches that had not previously been seen.

In October, 1936, Lionel commenced work as evangelist for the British National Council of the Evangelical Free Churches, but this was interrupted by the outbreak of World War 2 and saw his return to a Congregational pastorate. Then a call was received from Australia, where his evangelistic work could continue. The Fletcher family returned via New Zealand, their ship being part of a wartime convoy. They arrived in Sydney just before Easter, 1941. Evangelistic campaigns were conducted in Sydney, Newcastle and Melbourne, and during the summer months, he occupied the pulpit of Pitt Street Congregational Church and Scot’s Church, Sydney. His campaigns resumed during winter and continued even after Japan entered the war. By the time the war ended, he was in what he described as his “sunset years.”

Yet his ministry had not ended. Manly Congregational Church was filled every Sunday at both morning and evening services as he ministered there. He spoke at the Katoomba Christian Convention and the Salvation Army Congress Hall, and occupied the pulpit in Congregational, Anglican, Baptist and Methodist Churches. From 1945 onwards, he took to air travel to fulfil engagements in Australia and New Zealand and in 1951, he was not only World Vice-President of Christian Endeavour but also President of the NSW Christian Endeavour Union. He owed much to Christian Endeavour and more than repaid that debt. In the midst of it all, he still found time to be a member of the Manly Bowling Club!

In 1951, The Bible Institute and Theological Seminary of Los Angeles, USA, conferred a Doctorate of Divinity on Lionel B. Fletcher. Founded by Dr. R. A. Torrey, this Institute’s President at the time was Dr. L. T. Talbot, a former Sunday School scholar of Redfern Congregational Church; he attributed his conversion and entry into full-time Christian service as partly the result of Lionel’s preaching. The Pitt Street Congregational Church was filled to its 1,750 capacity when his doctorate was conferred.

Lionel B. Fletcher conducted his final service at Manly Congregational Church for a congregation of no more than 100. He was shortly to be admitted to a private hospital at Mosman. His notebook records his final visitors, his pastor and his wife, “Keith Matta and Maude.” On Friday, 19 February, 1954, having just listened to

the nine o'clock news, he reached across to turn the radio off and in that instant, went to be with his Lord.

In his book, "Twelve Hours in the Day," his biographer, C. W. Malcolm, paid this tribute to Lionel B. Fletcher: "His books, his writings, his exhortations, importuned men everywhere to follow the same path that led him to greatness. He kept no secret hidden that would enable another to achieve what he had accomplished . . . Lionel Fletcher resolved that the Holy Spirit should have full possession of his being - that God should have all there was of Lionel Fletcher. He believed that the promises of God are sure . . ."

During his ministry he covered more than 300,000 miles. On a very conservative estimate he must have written between fifty and sixty thousand letters. The volume of letters received was a continuous burden to both Lionel and Maude, the latter recording in her journal, "We answer every letter that comes, even if it is a child's letter - with prayer that the receiver will be helped spiritually." Some letters were even written after returning from evening meetings where he had ministered to many hundreds.

Somehow, between all their meetings and letter writing, they found time for Lionel to write a number of books: "The Effective Evangelist" - when revised was re-named "Effective Evangelism," "Mighty Moments," "South African Jewels," "The Golden Highway," "Faith, The Golden Link," "Hope, The Golden Light," "Love, The Golden Law," "Life, Quest and Conquest," "The Pathway to the Stars," "After Conversion - What?" "Prayer, the Secret of Power," "Kneeling to Conquer," and his final book, "Conquering Evangelism." The booklet that enjoyed the widest circulation was the one prepared for issue to those making a decision - "Step by Step in the Christian Life."

His last family letter recalled that it was the 60th anniversary of his setting out for England on the sailing ship 'Macquarie,' in 1894. He wrote, "Little did I dream then of what a varied and colourful life lay ahead of me . . . How much I have to thank God for!"

The ministry of Lionel B. Fletcher is one that the Church should not forget. The Lionel B. Fletcher Memorial Christian Training Centre continues to function through the Fellowship of Congregational Churches. However, his ministry cannot be confined to a centre or a denomination because it is also enshrined in the lives of those who came to know Jesus Christ through him.

