

Doing it hard: the Port Adelaide Central Mission during the Depression, 1926-1935

Brian Dickey*

Severe economic depression struck Australia, and especially South Australia, in the late 1920s and continued into the 1930s. Many were thrown out of work, and they and their families slipped into poverty. When the work of the churches in South Australia in response to that disaster is discussed in scholarly writing, or even in conversation, among the few examples it is possible to cite of a constructive or engaged presence is the work of the Reverend T.P. Willason at the Port Adelaide Central Mission.¹ Usually he is commended for his efforts in creating a 'fishing fleet' at the Port, believed to have created employment in the midst of deep crisis at the Port. Arnold Hunt implies that he was on the side of the angels in concentrating on such social welfare work, a judgement which might prompt the question of whether Willason was a social worker before his time. Might he have shared the widely accepted reformist, even left-wing outlook of modern social workers and church-based social helpers?

* Brian Dickey is an Associate Professor in History at the Flinders University, Adelaide. This paper draws on research reported more fully in Brian Dickey and Elaine Martin, *Building Community: A history of the Port Adelaide Central Mission*, Port Adelaide Wesley Centre, 1999.

1 For example, Arnold Hunt, *This Side of Heaven. A history of Methodism in South Australia*, Lutheran Press, Adelaide, 1985, p 321, on the Port Adelaide Mission and, more generally, Brian Dickey with Elaine Martin and Rod Oxenberry, *Rations, Residence, Resources: a history of social welfare in South Australia since 1836*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 1986, chapters 6 and 9. The most comprehensive review of women's service during the Depression in Adelaide appears in Martin Woods, 'Idealisation of the feminine "service" character during the 1930s', a draft chapter for his Flinders University PhD thesis, provisionally titled 'An ethic of service: voluntary service and womanhood in South Australia before the Second World War'. (I am grateful to Martin Woods for the fruitful interaction with his investigations his project has provided me.) Other scholarship specifically addressing the contribution of the churches in SA during the depression is dominated by Judith Raftery's "'Till every foe is vanquished': churches and social issues in South Australia, 1919-1939", PhD thesis, Flinders University, 1986. The Melbourne story is told in G.F.R. Spenceley, 'Charity Relief in Melbourne: the early years of the 1930s Depression', *Monash Papers in Economic History*, no. 8, 1980, and his 'Social Control, the Charity Organisation Society and the Evolution of Unemployment Relief Policy in Melbourne during the Depression of the 1930s', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol 22, 1986, pp 232-51.

On the other hand, the work of E.P. Thompson and those who have reacted to his interpretations of the character of English Methodism in the early nineteenth century all agree on the social conservatism of the movement, even if allied to a liberating spiritual experience which might or might not transcend the limitations of difficult material circumstances. While it is true that by the late nineteenth century, in both England and Australia, the 'non-conformist conscience' had taken on a liberal tinge, it was nevertheless dominated by a belief in opportunity and open competition. Methodists world-wide had listened to William Ewart Gladstone and his free trade doctrines, believing that they applied as much to open competition in religion as they did to small government and a competitive economy.² These ideas tended to discourage Methodists from state-sponsored, corporate action that might undermine individual responsibility. Theirs was a cautious social outlook.

Consequently, looking back at the work of T.P. Willason and the Port Adelaide Central Mission during the Depression years, we might expect to find generous-hearted activities, because they were good works designed to ameliorate social evils. But we would do well to look closely at what was actually attempted. In particular, there is more to the story of the Port Adelaide Central Mission and its aggressive Superintendent and Missioner, T.P. Willason, than the fishing fleet. Indeed, the fishing fleet achieved very little in practical terms. Willason and his Mission adopted a much more conservative social stance than is normally recognised, while at the same time being deeply engaged in delivering material aid to the people of the Port Adelaide district. Willason also mounted a sustained campaign against the Communists of the Port, whom he regarded as agents of Anti-Christ, the potential harbingers of spiritual as well as material disaster. And there was the struggle of the Mission congregation itself to survive in those challenging years.

This paper explores the complex activities of the Port Adelaide Mission during the Depression, from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s and queries what it attempted to do, the success it had, and the problems still remaining. Sources include the minutes and files held by the Mission, and their published writings,

2 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, London, 1968. David Hempton, *Religion and political culture in Britain and Ireland: from the Glorious Revolution to the decline of Empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, and his *The Religion of the People: Methodism and popular religion c. 1750-1900*, Routledge, London, 1996, update the debate over Thompson's interpretation of Methodist radicalism or lack of it. David Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience: chapel and politics, 1870-1914*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982, identifies the late nineteenth century English connection of Nonconformity to free-trade liberalism. Ken Elford, 'Church, state, education and society: an analysis of aspects of eastern Australian society, 1856-1872', PhD, University of Sydney, 1971, presents the evidence for a similar connection in Australia.

especially in the *Australian Christian Commonwealth*, the newspaper of South Australian Methodism for much of the Mission's existence.³

The Mission was established by the South Australian State Conference of the Methodist Church in 1919 by excising the Port Adelaide Methodist Church, itself established in the 1850s, from the existing Port Adelaide circuit. The normal circuit ministry for most of the general Port Adelaide district south and east of the Port River was henceforth to be led by the Methodist Church at Alberton. Similarly, another circuit, based on Semaphore, organised Methodist work on the seaward side of the river. The Port Adelaide Central Mission could then focus on building a congregation amidst the working class people of the Port itself, and perhaps more widely. By this decision local Methodist leaders aimed to rejuvenate a declining congregation.⁴

Central missions were usually located in districts with large numbers of working class residents. The task of such missions within the Methodist Church was to expand their congregations by vigorous, even unconventional, evangelism, free of the constraints of circuit life, the quarterly preaching programme and much besides. By whatever means, they were to reach the apparently unresponsive working classes. An important advantage provided a mission was that it could appeal for financial and other support throughout the state because it was an agency of the State Conference. Its superintendent was expected to be especially good at organising and executing evangelistic campaigns. The central missions, whether in London, Sydney, Melbourne or Adelaide, possessed a core worshipping congregation. They tended to mount their evangelistic campaigns through a variety of institutional efforts such as women's meetings, boys' and girls' gymnastics, special meetings for men, a cinema church, perhaps, sewing and thrift clubs, and open-air meetings.⁵ All had also created welfare work departments, as they recognised that their target audiences experienced significant material deprivation. Shops and depots collected gifts of second-hand clothing and other items such as food and stocks of firewood, which were distributed to needy applicants who presented themselves. This work was usually co-ordinated by 'Sisters of the People', full-time paid workers with perhaps nursing qualifications, or training in a Bible

3 The manuscript records cited in this essay are held by the Mission and used with permission. The Mission's (hereafter PACM) contributions to the *Australian Christian Commonwealth* [hereafter ACC] appeared fortnightly 1919-1955, and are held as clippings at the Mission.

4 The circuit arrangements mentioned here were approved at the 1913 State Conference, while the approval of the Port Church as a mission was confirmed at the 1919 Conference. The complex story is narrated in chapter 2 of *Building Community*.

5 See, for representative studies, Don Wright, *Mantle of Christ*, A History of the Sydney Central Methodist Mission, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1984; Renate Howe and Shurlee Swan, *The Challenge of the City: The century history of the Wesley Central Mission 1893-1993*, Hyland, Melbourne, 1993; Brian Chalmers, "'Need, not creed": a history of the Adelaide Central Methodist Mission 1900-1952', MA, Flinders University, 1986.

college, who visited families at home both to assess need and to offer encouragement. The members of the mission congregations joined vigorously in all these activities – or they relocated to a church more to their liking.

T.P. (Tom) Willason succeeded Fred Humphrey as Superintendent at Port Adelaide in 1924. Aged 42 and possibly born in Ireland,⁶ he brought to the job youthful experience as a mariner in sail, work as a butcher in New Zealand where he had been converted, a renowned tenor singing voice and over a decade's experience as a Methodist minister. He was accompanied by his wife Ethel and three children, one of whom died a few months later. There was a Sister of the People in place, Sister Ethel Marsland and, as opportunity permitted, a young assistant, usually a man in training for the ministry. The congregation numbered about 150. They worshipped in a large rectangular church in Dale Street, which runs parallel to St Vincent Street, and which in the 1920s contained many respectable residences, a number of churches and other institutions such as Lodges. A weekday women's meeting, the Bright Hour, was already operating, along with the All Boys and All Girls Clubs for gymnastics, and examples of the other institutions already mentioned. After a short and unhappy period living in the manse in Dale Street, the Willason family were provided with a home at Largs Bay.

The 1921 census and other data about religious affiliation reveals that a greater proportion than the state average identified as Protestant in Port Adelaide, due mainly to the relative weakness there of the Roman Catholics. The Presbyterians had a fine church on St Vincent Street, but it struggled under a load of debt. The Church of England's St Paul's church occupied another fine site, but it too was struggling. The Congregational Church on Commercial Road under Lionel Fletcher, just beginning his major world-wide ministry, was probably the most vibrant Port church in the 1920s.

Whether any of them were actually growing is another matter. It was a working class area, where well-established alternative cultures revolved around the thirty-eight pubs of the town were entrenched. Work was dominated by the port: the arrival and departure of ships and their cargoes, the associated storage and transport industries and a growing number of heavy industrial activities banished to the waste-lands bordering the Port River to the north of the town.

Willason and his supporters at the Mission maintained a normal ministry throughout this period. There were two services each Sunday, plus Sunday school sessions. There were special anniversary meetings, outdoor worship meetings, the All Boys and All Girls Clubs, the Bright Hour and more. All this

went on as Fred Brasher, the first Superintendent (1919-1922), had marked it out.

Again and again in the columns of the *Christian Commonwealth* Willason praised the work of the many helpers who contributed to the life of the Mission. Clarence C. Keley and Albert Keeling acted as treasurers, circuit stewards in all but name, balancing books with their complicated cash flows in and out. T.J. Cunningham and A. Brown were two more of the financial team. Throughout the years assistants to the missionary arrived and were replaced after relatively short stays. The Bright Hour continued to attract between 100 and 150 women to each meeting, Miss May Harvey serving as its secretary. A Helping Hand Club began in 1933, so that many of the mothers could visit the Mission twice a week and make clothing for their children from donated materials. The group assisted in the making of Sunday School Anniversary garments from bought materials. The Sunday school work was under the direction of a succession of devoted superintendents, for example Hugh Fagotter in the early 1930s. At the annual picnics, children proudly wore their new clothing and several received certificates of merit for their regular attendance. But while these good works and evangelistic efforts went on, economic crisis was enveloping Port Adelaide.

During the first half of the 1920s, the majority of those who were unemployed in South Australia did not approach public officials for assistance. Many could not demean themselves by complying with the exacting procedures of the Destitute Board, which were designed to protect the public purse from imposition and pauperisation. A desire to distinguish between the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' poor marked such dealings. The administrators and the policy makers confidently assumed that men who really wanted to would and could find work. Generally, the 'able-bodied', whether men or women, did not get aid for themselves. They were more likely to receive it if they were family men with children to support. Unemployed women rarely if ever gained government aid when out of work.⁷

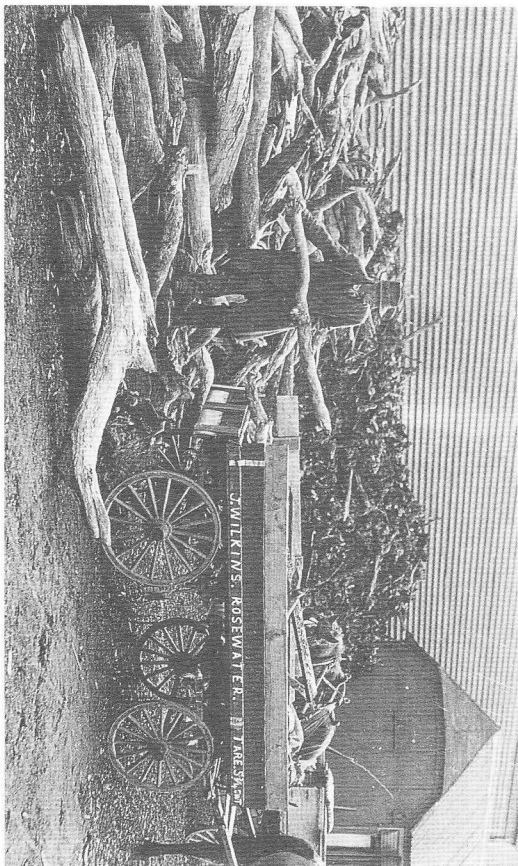
Consequently, despite the steady increase in the number of unemployed in South Australia through the 1920s, well before what is usually regarded as the onset of 'the Depression' in 1929, government provision for those affected was modest in total and basic for the individual recipient of the ration order. The government and the Destitute Board liked to think that charitable organisations would offer additional aid to the deserving poor, or that the economy would provide enough work for those seeking it. Even so, money spent on out-of-work men rose from £380 a month in 1927 to well over £1,000 by March 1928, as the effects of a severe drought in the state and a fall in the flow of overseas

6 Ireland as his place of birth is attested by his daughter Louie (interview with Arnold Hunt in December 1983), admittedly without documentary evidence. The official Methodist Conference entry places his birth in London. ACC, 4 August 1939, contains the official obituary and Sam Forsyth's memoir of Willason.

7 For a general discussion of the work of the Destitute Board see Dickey, *Rations*, chapters 7 and 9.

investment funds were felt.⁸ Between June 1927 and June 1928, the number of unemployed family units receiving relief increased overall from 558 to 4,427.⁹

In the winter of 1926, confronted by 'a long season of unemployment', the Port Adelaide Council and the Destitute Board (which became the Public Relief Department under legislation passed that year) asked for the Mission's help in collecting and distributing material aid. It was one of a number of steps taken by the Relief Department to mobilise community assistance to make its aid go further. The Dale Street site became the depot for donated aid. Bread and firewood flowed in and swiftly out again.¹⁰



Timber dump at the Mission, News, undated

It was this rising unemployment and distress that underlay one of the concerns that found expression in Willason's writings for the *Australian Christian Commonwealth* and in policy discussions at Quarterly Meetings during these fraught years. That preoccupation was communism, or what was often called the 'Bolshevik menace', usually a reference to the fear of take-over by an expanding power system driven from the USSR through its international arm, the Comintern. Willason saw himself engaged in a battle for the minds of

⁸ *ibid.* p 182.

⁹ Ray Broomhill, *Unemployed Workers: A social history of the Great Depression in Adelaide*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1978, p 79. Broomhill's book is the most comprehensive study available, and encompasses earlier scholarship on the subject.

¹⁰ ACC, 25 June 1926.

the people of Port Adelaide within the context of that vast international power struggle, a concern heightened by the suffering he saw all around him.

Occasionally, [he wrote in 1927] we rub shoulders with men of the extreme Bolshevik type. These men are the avowed enemies of the Church, and tell you so in the filthiest and most disgusting language.

*We literally see the devil reflected in the faces of these unholy disciples of Bolshevism.*¹¹

Comments such as these pepper the fortnightly entries Willason published in the ACC for the next few years. It is as close as Willason ever got to a distinctly prophetic ministry, where he commented upon contemporary thought and practice and offered a very clear, indeed highly critical, opinion. There can be little doubt that his utter distaste for 'communist' ideas was shared by his leadership team and by the wider Methodist constituency to whom he was appealing in the ACC for support and donations. But the terms were powerfully expressed and angry in the record of Quarterly Meetings. This was not mere public relations talk.

The problem of unemployment sharpened at the Port in 1927, and the Mission's resources were placed under increasing strain.¹² With the approval of the Relief Board and the aid of the Mission, a camp of some 60 to 70 unemployed men had been established at New Kingston near Rosewater by early 1928, to which Willason gave fresh food and whatever other help could be afforded from Mission resources. In a letter published in the evening *News* Willason addressed H.F. Cook 'of the unemployed camp at New Kingston near Rosewater' to contradict Cook's claim that no assistance beyond government rations was reaching them. Willason pointed out that he was regularly visiting the camp with donated vegetables, meat and fruit. Willason also welcomed the offer of the Harbors Board for unemployed men to doss down in empty buildings in Francis Street, which Mission people would be preparing for occupation as soon as possible, including the installation of a 'Wiles' mobile cooker.¹³

Plainly there was hostility and suspicion between 'do-gooders' such as Willason and the Mission on one side, and the leaders of the unemployed who were so angry with the system on the other. Willason was nevertheless eager to help any of these men find whatever work they could. He reported their dismay at the cut in the value of rations and reiterated his belief that 'These men are not lazy nor unemployable, but anxious for work of any kind, and willing to go to Timbuctoo to obtain it'.¹⁴ The special work with the single unemployed was

¹¹ ACC, 11 March 1927.

¹² ACC, 15 July, 18 November 1927.

¹³ The clippings survive in the PACM collection, but I have been unable to date the letters from the newspaper files in the Montlock Library.

¹⁴ ACC, 6, 20 January, 30 March, 11 May 1928.

supplemented by money sent from the Government Superintendent of Labour and, in the winter of 1928, a striking gift of 100 lamb carcasses. 'Hungry men must be fed or they will resort to deeds of lawlessness,' Willason wrote.¹⁵ His social theory was obvious enough.

In August 1928, the Butler Liberal government, attempting to address fears of a challenge to established authority, discontinued rations to all single men in the metropolitan area other than those living in Port Adelaide. But they did not fully assess the possible repercussions of this coercive step. No doubt, at six miles to the north-west, the Port was far enough away not to be as embarrassing a spectacle as were the tents lining the banks of the Torrens near the Zoo that citizens noticed every time they visited that place with their families. But as a result, an exodus of single men arrived at the Port.¹⁶ It helps to explain why the waterside confrontation the next month was so angry, and why, over the next few years, the number of unemployed single men at the Port was extremely high.¹⁷ Perhaps, too, both men and government acknowledged the tighter sense of community that still sustained the Port district, and also the well developed agencies such as the Port Adelaide Central Mission, with its clubs and relief department, which could offer decent support to the men. So it had proved, and so Willason and his helpers intended it to continue.

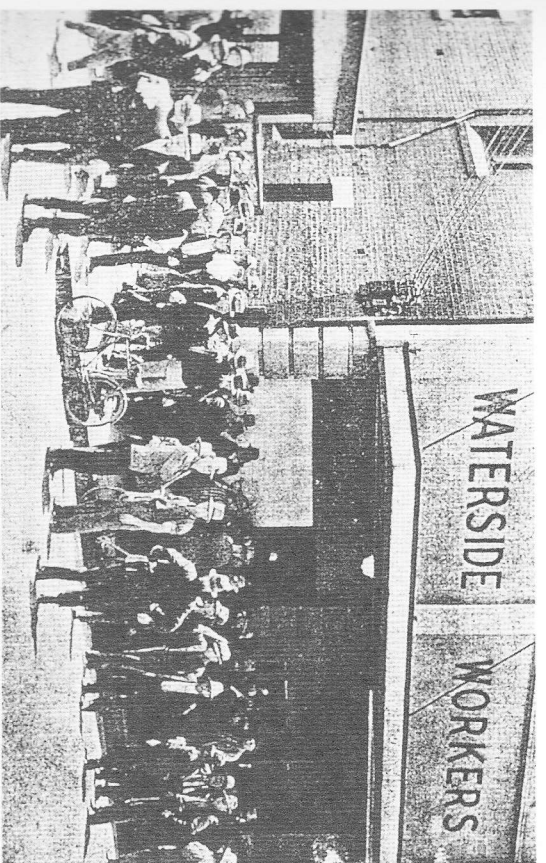
At the very time the government was forcing men to move out of Adelaide and down to the Port, the stevedoring and shipping companies were slugging it out with the Waterside Workers Federation (WWF) in a series of bruising disputes around Australia during September-October 1928. The waterside workers rejected the industry award, handed down in August, in which Judge Beeby provided for a second, afternoon, pick-up, that degrading meat-market method of worker selection. The WWF branches around Australia protested by striking, just as Beeby expected they would. He looked for the destruction of what he privately described as the power of 'an arrogant faction'. The Bruce-Page Federal government obliged by passing legislation permitting the licensing of waterside workers for the privilege of working on the wharves, a law known contemptuously by the watersiders as the 'Dog Collar Act'.¹⁸

¹⁵ ACC, 25 May 1928.

¹⁶ Broomhill, *Unemployed Workers*, p 161.

¹⁷ For example, in March 1931, there were 3,119 single unemployed men in Port Adelaide. They represented 55 per cent of all those unemployed in the Adelaide area. Broomhill, pp 150-151.

¹⁸ Stuart Macintyre, *The Oxford History of Australia, Volume 4, 1901-1942. The Succeeding Age*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1986, pp 244-246.



Outside the Waterside Workers Federation rooms. 'Worth Capturing for Christ', ACC, 28 April 1939

All this strife made matters worse for the Mission, for striking workers meant yet more starving families. Further, attempts were made, as the new Act allowed, to employ new labour, some of whom might well be drawn from the recently re-located unemployed men. A great deal of anger and frustration resulted. The fear that the new workers might be intimidated by WWF protesters led conservative groups to enlist four 'battalions' of a 'Citizens' Defence Brigade' to prevent unionists from removing the volunteers, or 'scabs' as the unionists preferred to call them.¹⁹ During September 1928, there was a series of often bloody skirmishes between Port Adelaide workers, police, and the Citizens' Defence Brigade.²⁰ The Dock Railway Station was transformed into an ambulance centre for the resulting casualties. Passes were issued to allow the 'collaborators' through the police barricades: 'Please admit bearer within the lines'. As workers continued to demand improved conditions, and attempted to obtain employment wherever possible, the dispute dragged on. Under the weight of this rallying of conservative forces and the ready availability of alternative workers protected by the 'Dog Collar Act', the strike was broken in Adelaide as elsewhere by October. At least one death (in

¹⁹ Broomhill, *op cit*, pp 173-4. Obviously, these terms were loaded with attitudes deriving from the differing positions taken up in the context.

²⁰ ACC, 20 July, 3 August 1928; *Port Adelaide News*, 21 September 1928 (strike), 28 September 1928 ('serious riot at waterfront').

Melbourne) resulted directly from this violence. The WWF was gravely weakened and lay quiet for several years.²¹

Significantly, the Mission leaders had considered the communist issue in that same month of August 1928, as the possibility of strike action at the Port increased. The Quarterly Meeting noted 'growing interest at wharf meetings' which Willason had developed as another means of reaching his community. The 'difficulties were great but our Superintendent's tact and courage had won through in spite of the communists' attempt to blockade the meeting', the minute-keeper wrote. Willason's meetings, held at 9 a.m. on Thursdays on the wharf, presumably among the wharfies not selected at morning pickup, or at morning smoko, had been undertaken at the request of the Vigilance Officer and the President of the Watersiders' Union, the local branch of the WWF. Willason welcomed the invitation as 'our wonderful opportunity of getting the church to the worker'. On one occasion the persistent interjections of what Willason called 'the leading I.W.W. lecturer of South Australia' were hooted down by a crowd of a thousand who 'wanted to hear the Padre', not the communist. On another, an attempt by his opponents to rush the platform was resisted successfully by the majority of his hearers. Willason put the number of 'Reds' at two to three hundred, 'these vicious disciples of destruction' whom he would have gladly imprisoned or deported.²² In Willason's words, 'Christ is the only man who can set the times right.'²³

During the strike Willason wrote several paragraphs in the ACC critical of the 'communist orators ... doing immeasurable harm'. He argued that 'the extremist section has had a big set back through misleading the men and causing riot on that memorable Thursday morning', 27 September. But he also remarked shrewdly that the continuing protection of the volunteer workers by the police was only prolonging the difficulties, and that they should quietly go away.

Meanwhile, ill-health caught up with Willason and he had to take three weeks sick leave in November 1928, intermitting his vigorous denunciations. On his return at the end of the month he boldly recommenced his pickup shed meetings, at the request of the waterside workers.²⁴ His most incisive and also prophetic comment on the disturbances came in December.

21 According to Robin Gollan, *Revolutionaries and Reformists: Communism and the Australian Labour Movement 1920-1955*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1975, pp 77-8, communist influence grew significantly in the WWF as the union recovered membership and strength later in the 1930s.

22 Minutes of Quarterly Meeting 18 August 1928; first reference to wharf meetings, ACC, 30 March 1928; interjector, 25 May 1928; rush on platform, 20 July 1928; prison, 28 September 1928.

23 ACC, 12 October 1928.

24 ACC, 28 September, 12, 26 October and 9, 23 November 1928.

*The spirit of pessimism reaching almost to despair has gripped many hundreds of the workless men, and they come to us to enquire the way out of it all. We generally reply that the fifteenth chapter of 2 Chronicles is the answer: 'When they in their trouble did turn unto the Lord God of Israel and sought Him, He was found of them.'*²⁵

He called on the Church to lead the combat 'against Bolshevism and every other satanic "ism" that is poisoning the souls of men and women today'. By early 1929, however, Willason could wryly remark that 'the men are playing the game now, and quietly hoping for better times in the New Year. Experience is a severe teacher but its lessons are profitable in the long run.'²⁶

But matters got worse for the South Australian community, and for the people of the Port district in particular. The onslaught of a world-wide monetary collapse in 1929 saw the cessation of further vital overseas investments and the introduction of a range of direct deflationary policies. These were designed to balance the national books in a bid to satisfy the expectations of cautious overseas investors. But their repercussions for the Australian economy were devastating. There was a further dramatic rise in unemployment to around 30-35% of the male workforce. The colossal army of unemployed, and an unstable shipping industry reeling from a contraction in overseas sales of the state's primary produce, crippled South Australia's economy. During the early 1930s the state experienced the highest unemployment rates in the Commonwealth.

The most striking statistical evidence comes from the 1933 Commonwealth Census. The Port district, according to that Census, contained 14,739 males, of whom 8,511 were classified as in the workforce. Reported as being unemployed on census night were 3,632 men, well over 42 per cent of the Port workforce. When the widespread use of short time and shared jobs is taken into account, roughly one man in two of the working men at the Port was unemployed or substantially underemployed.²⁷ The impact on family earnings of such numbers can barely be imagined.

The pressure was experienced even by Willason himself, for whom a further and extended holiday was arranged early in 1929 as an opportunity to meet with relatives in New Zealand. Willason was probably suffering from a heart condition, worsened by the stress of the job. The Butler government appointed him a commissioner to investigate 'educational methods and unemployment problems' while there. One presumes it was a financial grant, and in effect a vote of thanks for his work and words during the strike difficulties of the

25 ACC, 7 December 1928.

26 ACC, 4 January 1929.

27 Commonwealth of Australia, Census of 1933, *Report*, Vol I, Part IV, Tables 9, 10, 17, 18, 19 & 20. Of 2,339 working women, 568 were shown as unemployed. There were also 11,381 dependants and 718 male and 924 female aged or invalid pensioners.

previous year. Willason also planned to visit some of the Methodist missions in New Zealand.²⁸ As always with such trips by exhausted Methodist ministers, there was the possibility of a new appointment. (Willason did, in fact, accept, then eventually turn down, an offer to work in Dunedin.²⁹ He continued to need holiday breaks, so intense had the work become, and over the next few years arrangements were made for him to get away interstate.) There were signs that his health was failing.

On his return in mid-1929 he and the Mission struggled on. Willason felt moved at the beginning of 1930 to write of exaggerations in some reports of the degree of poverty being experienced at the Port. He acknowledged the ration system of the Public Relief Department, but insisted that the Mission was not engaged in the permanent support of applicants. This was not its role, he explained. He was addressing that characteristic fear held by some charitable donors that their gifts would create a permanent class of dependent paupers. Willason's problem was to get his givers to maintain the flow of aid so that he could maintain the regular ministry of the Mission and continue to respond to appeals for emergency help from the people of the Port, which was all the Mission could afford.³⁰ As Willason pointed out:

people must realise that the relief department of a mission is a means to an end, and not an end in itself. Otherwise the Missioner would only be a glorified second hand dealer, and his staff merely table servers. We must never forget that the spiritual goal is the objective of the mission, and all its enterprises are a means to that end.³¹

The Mission workers undertook another common response to these worsening conditions. In the winters of 1929 and 1930 they opened a soup kitchen for needy children for a few months at the old Marist Brothers school site in Commercial Road. It was sustained by gifts solicited through the ACC, the labours of volunteers, the visits of official dignitaries such as the Minister and Director of Education, and the thanks of the recipients. 'Gee, Mister Willason, it was bonzer stuff' (a remark of one youth which has survived in the records of the Mission). Some of the aid was gained through appeals broadcast over public radio station 5CL, begun in September 1929. In 1930 it probably also provided meals to unemployed men. By the time it closed, the kitchen had distributed some 12,000 meals.³²

But the strain of such good works on the Mission's resources told, just as they did on Willason's health. By September 1930 Willason was writing of the

28 ACC, 4, 25 January, 8 February 1929.

29 Quarterly Meeting, 1 October 1930.

30 ACC, 24 January 1930.

31 ACC, 12 September 1930.

32 ACC, 12 July, 9 August, 6 September 1929, 10 January, 24 October 1930.

need to retrench staff unless income rose. He announced that he would not take up the invitation to an appointment in Dunedin. Plainly, a good proportion of the congregation were themselves out of work and little able to contribute to salaries at the Mission. At the Mission's Quarterly Meeting in January 1931 Sister Ethel resigned, as did Mr Hobbs, the current assistant. Willason announced the departure of all the paid staff except himself a month later.³³

In November 1930 Willason returned to the anti-communist charge. The records of the Mission contain a typescript of a Communist Party leaflet dated 20 October 1930, 'Devil-dodger denounces communists'. It claimed that Willason would expel any of his congregation who attended Communist lectures:

Hundreds of workers are of the opinion that our lectures are of more value than kneeling before this professional bible-puncher, who used to be a useful member of the working class, but he has since forsaken this path, and now willingly adopts the life of a social parasite and charity-broker.

Willason, in reply, and primed by access to this text, gave as good as he got:

The enemies of the Church have launched a bitter attack of abuse on the Mission because it has taken a firm stand against Communism, by warning the community of its destructive policy in industry, religion and national life ... Communism represents a very small section of the working class at Port Adelaide, but it is an audacious and aggressive section, and has become notorious for its meddlesome interference in the vital affairs of the city. The missioner has been "warned" through the columns of the scurrilous effusion called "The Port Light" ... that the day is coming when not all his idols will be sufficient to save him from doing some useful work for society.

At present he is called a social parasite and a charity broker, a soul snatcher and dope pedlar, a Bible puncher and slimy tool of capitalism.

Willason was pleased to announce that he had been invited to a meeting at the wharves' pickup yard, where about 1,500 men were present to express their support for the work he and the Mission were doing on their behalf, and to repudiate the 'untruthful statements of Communism'. He concluded with an appeal to his ACC readers: 'We are fighting the battles of the Lord against a dangerous and unscrupulous enemy. We need the helping hand.'³⁴ In his next column Willason optimistically proposed that 'The hostility of Communism to the Church is going to do some good, if only to make people think for

33 ACC, 24 October 1930, 13 February 1931. Quarterly Meeting, 28 February 1931.

34 ACC, 7 November 1930.

themselves and to fan the smouldering embers of religion into a flame of righteous enthusiasm.³⁵

This optimism arose out of his experience at a public meeting convened with the authority of the Waterside Workers' Union. At the packed meeting Willason defended himself, the Mission and Christianity.

As the missionary drew the "fire" of the communists, they were seen in all their hostility to religion, constitutionalism and common decency ... The communistic leader got up and roared like a bull of Bashan, "That man is the greatest enemy of the worker in Port Adelaide ... he has delayed the Revolution two years. His charity has kept you quiet and made you satisfied with the present system ... " But he never finished the oration: the crowd yelled him down ... there were about five fights after the meeting. The missionary just managed to see a man falling headlong over some seats after receiving a blow from a woman who heard him utter a filthy remark about religion and missionaries in general. She replied with sweet coolness, "Take that you ungrateful traitor. You are not fit to mow the grass over which that man walks."³⁶

It was an exhilarating success, showing that there were many in the Port who sided with Willason and religion, who acknowledged the hard work the Mission was doing, and who would not have either it or the Missioner blackguarded for wanting to offer help in a time of trouble. Perhaps Willason's optimism was somewhat overstated, in that few if any of these people ever actually became regular churchgoers. But their support reflected the working class religiosity which has been the bedrock of the Mission's support at the Port.³⁶

More explicitly, six months later the Quarterly Meeting was rejoicing at the conversion of 'a notable Communist ... Patrick Fanning who publicly denounced the infamous doctrine of Anti-Christ and Anti-God'. Fanning, an organiser of the Communist Party at the Port and one of Willason's hecklers in 1928-9, testified publicly in 1932 that he 'renounced Communism in the Mission Church I wanted to destroy'.³⁷ It was a matter of rejoicing over the one saved, rather than over the ninety-nine lost.

The frustration and hardship being experienced at the Port boiled over again in January 1931. After the Relief Department switched from beef to poor quality mutton in the relief ration, a march of disoriented men and women

35 ACC, 21 November 1930.

36 This complex issue is further discussed in *Building Community*, pp 1-4 and following. The English scholarship is surveyed in Hugh McCleod, *Religion and Society in England 1850-1914*, London, 1996.

37 Quarterly Meeting, 15 July 1931. Hunt, *This Side of Heaven*, p 321, citing ACC, 19 August 1932.

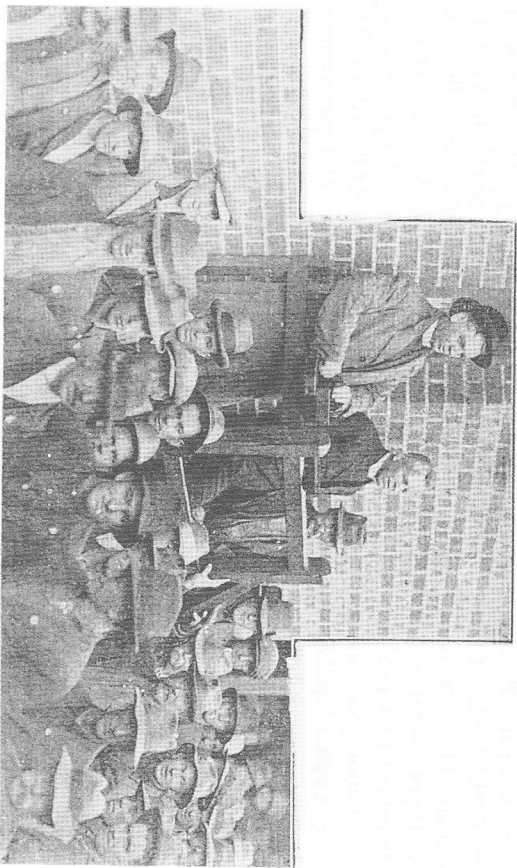
went from the Port right into the city on Friday 9 January 1931. 'We want beef', they chanted as they marched past Parliament House and on to Victoria Square. There the police were waiting for them, eagerly setting about the task of dispersing them from horse-back and motor-bike. It was virtually an ambush. Arrests and hospital admissions followed, along with a loss of support for the Hill Labor government. The premier was expelled from the ALP, and a right-wing citizens' political movement emerged which saw the Hill government decisively turned out at the next election and replaced by a newly-formed Liberal and Country League administration, which was to hold office for the next thirty-two years.³⁸

While these events were being worked out on the larger stage, Willason maintained his angry denunciation of 'my opponents': 'All who heard the "agitator" denouncing the pure faith of Christian people and ridiculing the glorious hymns as they were announced must have been impressed by the devilishness of the organisation represented by such fiendish looking men.'³⁹

Such outspoken remarks by Willason, reaching as far as the physical appearance of his opponents, come as a surprise to the modern observer, schooled in a more restrained public rhetoric. They are evidence of Willason's forthright style. But they are also evidence of the characteristic Methodist hatred of anti-Christian teaching, especially when it was socially radical, and of the intense sense of crisis which was so widespread during the Depression years at the Port. Too much was at stake to be reticent.

38 Broombill, pp 176-9. See also, for political context, John Lonic, "'Good Labor men": the Hill Government in South Australia, 1930-1933', *Labour History*, no 31, November 1976, pp 14-29 and his 'Non-Labor during the Great Depression in South Australia', *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, no 2, 1976, pp 30-45. In the same issue of the HSSA Journal see Steve Dyer, 'Farm Relief in South Australia during the Great Depression', pp 64-75 for comparison with how the Relief Board and other agencies responded to poverty among farmers, and for a review of land-based relief schemes, including Forsyth's Kutipoo Forest project, see Dyer's 'Back to the Land: Settlement Schemes for Adelaide's Unemployed, 1930-35', *Labour History*, no 31, November 1976, pp 30-37. The Kutipoo scheme is also examined in Chalmers, 'Need not creed', *op cit*.

39 ACC, 22 April, 20 May 1932.



Tom Willason, with harp, addresses workers at the pick-up. With him is the Rev. H.S. Joyce, of the Port Adelaide Congregational Church. Undated newspaper clipping

Nor was it time to be idle, no matter how constrained the Mission's resources. Willason launched the Mission's most ambitious and newsworthy project late in 1930. In cooperation with Captain J.A. Olsen, a friend and worshipper at the Mission church, Willason devised a scheme with a dual purpose. Unemployed men with fishing and shipping experience would be brought together to engage in not only an employment venture but a scheme to revamp the depressed fishing industry. The proceeds of the catches would be divided amongst the men, the owner of the ship, replacement, the Mission's relief department and an extension scheme for further fishing work. 'The sole objective of the scheme', said Willason, 'is to help unemployed men to get a living. We hope to begin with 30 men, but as the taking extends so other ships will be equipped and more men engaged.'⁴⁰ It was, too, a practical riposte to the communist agitators who so angered Willason.

The scheme required equipment costing about £2,000, including two small launches and six boats with sails, as well as refrigeration equipment for the *Fides* (a good biblical name, meaning faith and fidelity). The *Fides*, a four masted Finnish timber-built schooner part-owned by Captain Olsen, had been moored at Corporation Wharf for two years. It was proposed that she would operate as a mother ship to small vessels departing daily with nets and lines. It

40 News, 12 December 1930.

was anticipated that work would eventually be provided for over a hundred men. Public donations and gifts of equipment were therefore sought to make the scheme possible. As the premier, Lionel Hill, personally commended the proposal, Willason had hopes of government financial help.

But he endured considerable mockery from some in the community who deemed the scheme a certain failure before it even started. H.G. Rose, a long-time Mission executive committee member, recalled: 'A man of the cloth involved in such a flippant venture! He startled all his critics by producing a master's certificate of sail. He was a master mariner, with his ticket endorsed in sail.'⁴¹ It was Willason's master-stroke that helped get the project started.

It took months for that to occur, in which time the *Fides* never left harbour. The Mission's financial crisis in January 1931 was the first problem. Then Willason fell ill again and then had to take a holiday steamer trip to Sydney.⁴² Enough money was in hand through the autumn and winter of 1931 for a couple of small fishing boats to be purchased, one paid for by the All Boys Club. After repairs following two attacks by vandals these boats, one a motor launch crewed by three married men, set out for coastal fishing expeditions.⁴³

By the spring of 1931 it was apparent that the refurbishing of the aged *Fides* was out of the question. The breakthrough for the scheme came when wealthy philanthropists Tom Barr Smith and Sir Langdon Bonython funded the purchase of a metal-hulled fishing steamer, the *Gerritide*.⁴⁴ She arrived from Geelong at the end of the month and was soon being taken out on the Port River with 150 donors aboard, though it was too choppy to enter the Gulf. By mid-December she was in the Great Australian Bight, Willason's target fishing zone, and a month later it was proudly announced in the ACC that her first trip had earned £105, of which £77 15s 0d was paid to the unemployed men who had crewed her.⁴⁵

There followed some well-placed pieces in Bonython's *Advertiser*, reporting the *Gerritide*'s movements over the next couple of years:

41 ACC, 12 December 1930; News, 12 December 1930; *Port Adelaide News*, 12 December 1930.
42 ACC, 27 February, 27 March 1931.

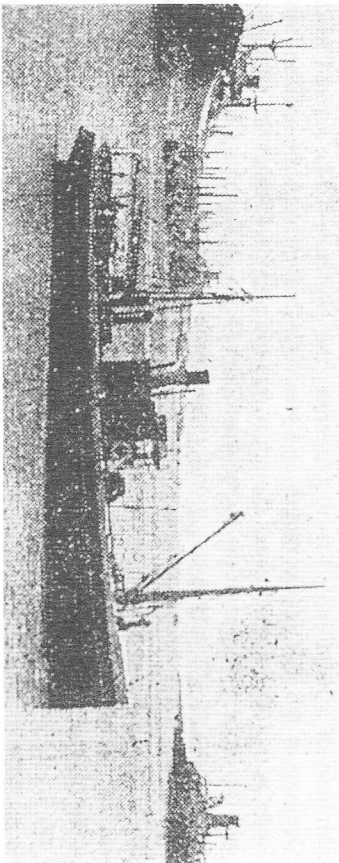
43 ACC, 24 April, 22 May; *Advertiser* 9, 13, 16 June and 1 July 1931.

44 Quarterly Meeting, 7 October 1931. Here the minutes refer to *Fortitude*, but everywhere else the vessel was *Gerritide*. Barr Smith was a wealthy landowner and Bonython owned the *Advertiser*. These two men funded a variety of charitable and public activities during the Depression. The University of Adelaide's Bonython Hall is the most obvious permanent survival.

45 ACC, 30 October, 11 December 1931; 29 January 1932; *Port Adelaide News*, 4 December 1931.

After a 450-mile fishing trip, occupying 11 days, the steamer *Gerrude*, which was bought to relieve unemployment, arrived at Port Adelaide yesterday with 30 tons of fish (estimated value £30/ton) ... Some would be distributed to hawkers, some sent to the market, and some sold direct to the public.

Captain L. Sheridan was in charge, with four men. They had cruised to Kangaroo Island, Wedge Island, and beyond. The steamer used some six tons of coal during the month or so they were away, and caught sweep, snapper, whiting, garfish, cod, flathead and groper. 'On Saturday two small cutters will be sent to the West Coast, and will work on the schrapper grounds in Sreaky Bay. They will act as feeding ships to the *Gerrude*.'⁴⁶ She returned again in April with 'a large catch of beautiful fish of many kinds. The whole catch was disposed of in eight hours. All expenses of the ship were paid, and a good cash gratuity given to the crew, and the people of the district had a plentiful supply of fish.'⁴⁷



The Mission's fishing trawler, Gerrude. Advertiser, 6 February 1934

Soon the *Gerrude* was back in Sreaky Bay, but this time her voyage was marked by two severe storms, resulting in a catch of only five tons.⁴⁸ This was a clue to the ultimate demise of the scheme. By June the *Gerrude* was on a fortnightly cycle, but the idea of a mother ship system had been abandoned: there was just not the capacity to manage it, nor were the West Coast fisheries

appropriate for small boat work. By December 1932 the vessel was being cleaned and surveyed, after which she did excursions from Henley Beach jetty during the January (1933) holidays. Meanwhile, a final decision was reached on the *Fides*, which the marine authorities had condemned as unseaworthy. The Mission bought the hull and broke it up, distributing about 200 tons of firewood.⁴⁹

Then it was announced that the *Gerrude* would be converted to trawler operations. Money had to be raised and alterations carried out. The ACC records Willason's optimism: 'We are hoping for great things ... the possibilities of a big industry are wrapped up in the venture.' But her nets did not arrive till December, and then she set off again, this time under the command of Captain J. Thompson. She caught a big haul of fish that autumn, but by the spring of 1934 she was laid up because fishing was not proving economical. The last we hear of her or the fishing scheme is in January 1935 when she was running free trips for the children of unemployed families, followed by some gulf fishing in February.⁵⁰

The fishing scheme was a genuine attempt to create employment in the depths of the Depression. It signalled something constructive being attempted by at least one Christian agency in a period when the majority of church responses to the depression were unimaginative, lacklustre and small scale. Of course there were exceptions, such as Forsyth's Kuipoo Forest or Bruce Montgomerie's soup kitchen in Whitmore Square.⁵¹ The fishing scheme built on Willason's connections with the sea and on the obvious fishing competence available among the unemployed in the Port. It was attractive to the major philanthropists because it appeared to create genuine work. It built on the good will Willason had amassed, not only as a vigorous helper of the unemployed but also as one of Adelaide's leading scourges of communism.

There were many weaknesses. The idea of using the *Fides* was poorly researched, and doomed because of her unseaworthiness. Her loss killed off the mother ship idea. Nor could the *Gerrude* hope to achieve repeated fishing successes or low running costs. The one was chancy, the other required large operating reserves. Nor did the existing fishing operators welcome the entry of a new competitor with philanthropic backing into a highly competitive industry. It was one of those charitable projects that mattered more because of the effort involved, than for its meagre outcomes. It showed care and concern, it broke

⁴⁹ ACC, 16 December 1932, 6 January 1933; *Advertiser*, 12 January 1933.

⁵⁰ *Advertiser*, 19 March 1933 and 17 January, 8 March, 16 September 1934; ACC, 3 March, 12, 26 May, 8 December 1933, 4 January 1935.

⁵¹ Kuipoo, note 38 above. For the Revd Bruce Montgomerie's soup kitchen at St Luke's Church of England, Whitmore Square see St Luke's Church of England, Annual Vestry Meeting, 4 April 1934. 15,000 meals had been distributed to the 'poor children of the West End of the city, 220 boys had been given a camp time, garments, boots, Christmas groceries, toys and sheets were distributed'.

⁴⁶ *Advertiser*, 4 March 1932.

⁴⁷ ACC, 8 April 1932.

⁴⁸ ACC, 22 April 1932; *Advertiser*, 3 May 1932.

the bounds of convention, it suggested that a central mission could undertake new and creative projects for its constituency. It became a point of reference for years to come. Henry Kelly, another long time Mission administrator, stated much later, 'I don't recall it to have been a tremendous success, but it certainly did gain a lot of interest in that practical solutions ought to be found to the unemployment, and it probably did lead to other works.'⁵²

This was not the end of the projects started by the Mission during these difficult years. Mrs Ethel Willason and a team of twelve volunteer women took on the relief work done by Sister Ethel.⁵³ It was some years before another paid Sister of the People could be employed, so in the meantime the volunteers received and sorted clothes, saw to their fumigation (a smelly task that spread its fumes through the whole of the old manse building in Dale Street), and then distributed them to needy applicants. They also shared out the home visiting, confronting at first hand the suffering of poverty-stricken families in the district. From time to time some of this distress was detailed in articles in the ACC.

In October 1933 a free kindergarten was opened at the Mission's kindergarten hall by Lady Hore-Ruthven, wife of the state Governor. This day-care agency, part of the kindergarten movement that had begun in the state before World War I, was open from 9.30 a.m. till 12.30 p.m. each weekday under the supervision of Miss Mary Williams and Miss Mary Lee. They would care for children 'to secure the tiny tots between 2½ and 6 years and surround them with an environment for good companionship, reverence, thoughtfulness for others, neatness, resourcefulness and general usefulness.'⁵⁴ Building on the informal child care that had been supporting Bright Hour each fortnight, the secular missionary zeal of the kindergarten movement was now deployed to a locality long neglected by this very respectable, middle-class group.

Then, in 1934, Willason announced that the Mission was trying to establish a residential colony. This was in direct imitation of the project that his long-time friend Sam Forsyth, now Superintendent of the Adelaide Mission, was developing at Kuitpo Forest, south of Adelaide, and of the several colonies conducted under the auspices of the Unemployment Relief Council.⁵⁵ The Port project sought to use a block of land near the Draper railway station on the Outer Harbour road. Settlers would be given a disused railway carriage as accommodation, to live eight per carriage. It was a scheme which continued the care the Mission had extended to the unemployed single men in their camps around the Port over the previous few years. But it never got off the ground,

52 Interview (Sue Marsden) 3 September 1984 on audio tape held by PACM.

53 ACC, 27 February 1931.

54 ACC, 13 October 1933.

55 Dyer, 'Back to the Land', *op cit*.

finding fulfillment only in the arrival of some carriages to the Dale Street site, there to provide accommodation for homeless men for many years.⁵⁶

While all this work went on to help ameliorate the desperate poverty of the Port, and while Willason attempted to confront communism directly, he never stopped his evangelistic work. The Mission was conducting Friday night evangelistic meetings outside the market by 1931 (and possibly earlier), in succession to those he had previously held outside the town hall and on the wharves. As always, they included Willason's tenor solos accompanied by his Jew's harp, along with a variety of vigorous speakers 'with their bright messages'. He was 'convinced that the Church is reaching hundreds who are outside the organised Church, and immeasurable good must be the result of these weekly gatherings'.⁵⁷

The Revd Cyril Wheaton, in a full-scale essay early in 1931 on Willason as a preacher, wrote that 'the overpowering first impression conveyed by Willason and his congregation was one of **muscle**' conveyed by Willason and his very masculine congregation.⁵⁸ So impressed was he at the towering bulk of some of the men that he joked that he was 'determined never to quarrel' with them. He went on:

The secret of the missionary began to display itself in the prayer. It was a singularly personal and realistic prayer, taking up all sorts and conditions of men, and assuming in a perfectly matter of fact way, that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, if applied, would meet their salvation ... The congregation trusts and respects its leader. That is very clear. Years of responsible and solid work have brought their reward ... The preacher has the generous outflung gesticulation of oratory, and a visionary quality of thought, yet also conveys the idea of a battering ram, hammering at the facts of life.

As a New Year sermon, Willason preached on Revelation 21.5, 'Behold I make all things new'. If Wheaton's extended summary has caught the drift of the sermon accurately, it is an important source for a judgement about how Willason located his work. Willason recognised a Christian eschatology based on a confident assertion that God is working. His purpose in all history, climaxing in Christ. The Church was called to persevere against the resistance of 'the evil spirit of the world', believing that Christ is present here and now. Willason was placing himself squarely in the dominant Protestant tradition of the period, which was an optimistic confidence that the churches were co-operating with God in bringing in the kingdom. Willason's version was pretty much a realised eschatology, in which the Church militant applied the gospel to

56 ACC, 16 November 1934.

57 ACC, 4 April 1931, 6 May 1932.

58 ACC, 9 January 1931. Wheaton was the current ACC editor.

the 'book of the world, translating Christ into the vocabulary of "larger efforts, the race problems and social achievements of history" ... a vision ... of the eternal present.'⁵⁹

If, as is reasonable, we regard this as a sermon that sets out the programmatic basis of the Mission, it was a call to unceasing effort, a struggle to realise here and now the benefits of Christ's life and work in the present time. No wonder there was so much to do. No wonder Willason had to take recuperative sea trips, including one of three months early in 1932 to New Zealand.

By 1934 the tone of Willason's articles in the ACC was more conversational, with no new initiatives in view. He remarked, somewhat defensively, 'It has come to my ears that the Mission is in a state of "coma" and is doing nothing to meet the requirements of the community. This is an absolute mis-statement of facts, as the record of the past three years will prove.'⁶⁰

In fact, the rumour was correct. At the Quarterly Meeting on 31 January 1935, Willason reported that he had accepted an invitation to the Archer Street Church in North Adelaide, a post of distinction and standing in the world of South Australian Methodism. Notwithstanding, many at the Port were anxious in their urgent desire to retain this dedicated missionary and his equally valued wife, despite the repeated evidence of strain that the Mission work was imposing on them both. An extraordinary stream of petitions flowed to the forthcoming Methodist State Conference, begging that he be left at the Port: from the premier, the mayor of Port Adelaide, 170 business houses, all the other churches at the Port and, not least, the Waterside Workers' Federation.⁶¹ It was a fine tribute to the unceasing endeavours of a dedicated labourer for Christ's kingdom in this world. Despite their appeals, the Conference insisted that Willason move to Archer Street, which he did, staying there for three years. He died suddenly in mid-1939, aged 57, having just moved from Archer Street to Parkside. Doing it hard at the Port during the Depression had caught up with him.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ ACC, 27 July 1934.

⁶¹ Petitions described in Quarterly Meeting 31 January 1935; Hunt, *This Side of Heaven*, p 321.

The Port Adelaide Central Mission under T.P. Willason made a busy and challenging contribution to the life of Port Adelaide during the Depression. On the one hand Willason continued unabated the prophetic and evangelistic ministry that Methodists expected of their Missions. But it is unlikely that the membership of the Mission congregation rose through these or any other means. The potential hearers were distracted by other more pressing matters. Or they fled the Port for more promising localities in which to live and work.

Secondly, the pragmatism of the Methodist tradition reigned supreme as Willason and his helpers tried to stem the pain of unemployment and hunger in the Port. They did what they could, co-operating with the government agencies in an intensely difficult period when no one had much idea of what to do or how to do it. Even the much vaunted fishing fleet was at best a very modest success, more important as a public relations exercise than in actually putting money in men's pockets. Later references to the fleet have been inclined to exaggerate its achievements.

Thirdly, it is important to notice that Willason and his congregation conducted their work with a clear sense of their opposition to communism. They were not left-wing do-gooders before their time, despite the tendency of later commentators to make them so. They reflected an entrenched Methodist conservatism about social relations and social values. But this did not stop them from putting their lives and their resources on the line in an effort to do some good at the Port. It was a Christian duty of service.