

## SISTER FRANCIS AS AN EVANGELIST.

Laura Francis was born in West Maitland, New South Wales, in 1865, a daughter of Mr. E. Francis and his wife (nee Mary Ann Starr). Mr. Francis had been born in Bath, Somersetshire, in 1834, and came to Australia in 1858. The Francis family moved to Grafton when Laura was six years old. As Laura grew up in Grafton, her commitment to Christ became a vital thing for her, and she became very active in various aspects of the work and life of the local congregation.

In 1889, the Rev. W.G. Taylor, superintendent of the recently formed Central Methodist Mission in Sydney, announced a number of plans he had for developing the work of the Mission in the city of Sydney, to serve the needy of the city in various ways. One of these plans was to form a Sisterhood of unmarried ladies to act as pastoral assistants in helping the poor and challenged people of the city. He was very busy with other aspects of his work, and he had not proceeded with this plan during the 12 months following.

In 1890, he received a letter from Laura asking about the Sisterhood plans, and pleading that if nothing was done to develop this plan she would have to apply to the Salvation Army for a full-time opportunity to serve Christ. But she would prefer to work within the Methodist Church, which had so much meaning for her in her Christian life to that point. Apparently this letter prompted Mr. Taylor to act on this matter, and before the end of the year, a house had been purchased, and a small group of ladies had assembled to begin this work, under the leadership of Mrs. Taylor.

So it was that Mr. C. Page, the superintendent of the Grafton Wesleyan Sunday School, gathered the teachers and friends of the School at his home on the evening of Tuesday, 15 July, 1890, to say “good-bye” to Miss Francis. After the supper provided by the hosts, the Rev. W.H. Williams “expressed the regrets of the Church and the School at the prospect of Miss Francis’ departure, and hoped that many others would emulate her zeal and devotion.” She was presented with a handsomely-bound teacher’s Bible, and a beautifully framed address. The choir master also presented her with a lined and fitted “work basket.” Her father responded to the speeches on his daughter’s behalf, and Laura Francis left Grafton by “The Australian” the next morning.<sup>1</sup>

One of the first acts in her ministry was to be taken by the Rev. W.G. Taylor to be introduced to the Medical Superintendent of the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. From that time her visits to this Hospital were marked, so that her Jubilee of 50 years as Visitor were marked by the Hospital on 5 August, 1940, “with short breaks.”<sup>2</sup>

In January, 1891, the Central Methodist Mission published the first issue of the *Methodist Gazette*, in order to further their activities. The editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted this new production, and Sister Francis’ name appears along with Sisters Gannon, Nichols, Thomson, Atkins, and Bibby. Mrs. Taylor is described as superintendent of the Sisters’ Home, with Sister Bibby as the Sister in charge of the Home.<sup>3</sup>

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1 *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*. Saturday, 19 July, 1890. Page 8.

2 *The Methodist*. 14 December, 1946. Page 3.

News about another new C.M.M. venture appeared in the paper about six months later. An avalanche of gambling had occurred amongst the younger generation in Sydney, and W.G. Taylor responded by forming the C.M.M.'s Social Reform League. The inaugural meeting occurred in the Centenary Hall, York Street, on 8 July, 1891, where the problem was exposed, and reform sought. Sister Francis' name appeared as one of the Officers of the League for the first 12 month period. She was one of the two secretaries.<sup>4</sup>

The superintendent minister, the Rev. W.G. Taylor, moved away from Sydney for three years, from 1895 to 1897, becoming the minister in the Bathurst Circuit. During this time he also served as President of the Conference. The new minister at the C.M.M. for that period was the Rev. Rainsford Bavin, who was also an outstanding minister. Bavin had served for a number of years in New Zealand.

31 October, 1893 saw the inauguration of the Children's Home, as an arm of the C.M.M., and the first premises were opened on that date at 104 Woolloomooloo Street. Soon after the first Anniversary, a meeting was held in the Centenary Hall, under the chairmanship of Rainsford Bavin, to report upon the progress of the Children's work. The number of children who had been admitted to the home during the year was 25, of whom 3 were orphans, 5 were motherless, and 8 were fatherless. 8 had been returned to their friends; 3 were in the home for a term only, because of neglect by the mother; and 3 had been adopted into Christian homes in the country. The Committee raised all the money to operate the Home, and at that time held a good balance. "Sister Francis related some very touching anecdotes concerning the children."<sup>5</sup>

An interdenominational Christian Conference was held in Petersham Town Hall in August, 1895. Sister Francis was not one of the main speakers, but at an "Interval Meeting," after the evening meal break, she "gave interesting details of the sisters' work in connection with the Central Methodist Mission."<sup>6</sup>

A few months later, a special anniversary celebration was held in honour of the Sixth Anniversary of the founding of the Sisterhood. The celebration lasted for several days. At that time, Sister Haslewood was in charge of the Home, and the other sisters were Sisters Francis, Tebbutt, Huggart, and Nursing Sister Reay. The building at 88 Woolloomooloo Street was described as a comfortable and substantial building of 14 rooms, tastefully appointed. The number of sisters in residence varied, but there was vacant space for several more. Sister Reay had "last year paid at least 2,000 visits to the destitute sick and suffering of the city. Apart from this great work, the other members of the Sisterhood had paid at least 7,500 visits to those poor persons residing in the slums of this city." They also visited Little Bay Hospital and the Newington Asylum.<sup>7</sup>

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3 *Sydney Morning Herald*. Wednesday, 7 January, 1891. Page 5.

4 *Sydney Morning Herald*. Thursday, 9 July, 1891. Page 6.

5 *Evening News* (Sydney). Friday, 23 November, 1894. Page 5.

6 *Sydney Morning Herald*. Friday, 9 August, 1895. Page 6.

7 *Sydney Morning Herald*. Thursday, 10 October, 1895. Page 5. And 12 Oct. page 10.

Sister Francis not only got experience of an evangelistic kind at meetings led by W.G. Taylor and Rainsford Bavin. At least on a few occasions she had a go herself. For example, in August, 1895, she went with Mr. Cummins to conduct a ten-days' mission at Milltown, in the Bathurst District. "Sister Francis delivered an earnest address on a Sunday afternoon, and Mr. Cummins preached at night to a crowded house."<sup>8</sup>

However, she was back home at Grafton for a holiday as the new year started. It was not a simple holiday, because "her health [had] considerably suffered of late."<sup>9</sup>

Over the turn of the century, Sister Francis embarked upon a new project. She left Sydney to work for the Door of Hope Mission in Auckland for about two years. This mission apparently had struggled in recent years. She managed to re-establish the work on a stronger foundation financially, by interesting a number of the city's wealthy businessmen in the enterprise.

However, it took its toll upon her, and by mid-1901 she was back in Sydney, and also enjoying a time at home. The published report says that she had been working in New Zealand for five years, but that may be an over-estimate.<sup>10</sup>

To further recover her health, Sister Francis went on an overseas tour, to inspect Mission work in various countries. She was provided with Letters of Introduction to the heads of Mission and Rescue work, and was well received wherever she went. She "had abundant opportunity of both witnessing the vast amount of philanthropic work that is being performed, and at the same time the appalling amount of vice that loudly calls forth for the intervention of Christian agencies to suppress it. Sister Francis asserts that the slums of Australian capital cities cannot compare in depravity and wickedness with those of the chief centres of England or America." She sailed against the "roaring forties", and visited the Cape of Good Hope, before spending seven weeks with friends in the city of Bath, England, where her father had been born. She spent Christmas in New York, and saw how they fed the poor. The leader of the Methodist work gave her an introduction to all the other Rescue places in New York. She visited Washington, and was shown through the White House. She went to Philadelphia, Boston and Buffalo, and visited the Niagara Falls. She visited the prison where was held the man who murdered President McKinley, and visited the spot where the deed had been done. She visited over 70 rescue homes and mission establishments of various descriptions, and linked to various denominations, and listened to various famous preachers. After four months in the U.S.A., she went back to England, and spent two months exploring the rescue work in London, especially the various Methodist enterprises. She visited other, non-denominational works, such as those of Dr Barnardo. She also visited the Keswick Convention, Liverpool and Wales.

She said, "It is extremely hard in many cases to rescue the depraved, who though apparently impressed are liable to relapse into their old ways of living. On the other hand, there is much to encourage by the numbers who have been led to abandon the associations of slum life and

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8 *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*. Monday 26 August, 1895. Page 2.

9 *Sydney Morning Herald*. Saturday, 11 January, 1896. Page 10.

10 *Sydney Morning Herald*. Saturday, 15 June, 1901. Page 12.

become useful members of society.” With this wide experience, she brought much encouragement to those involved in this work in Australia. On 29 October, 1902, she was again to leave for her work in Auckland.<sup>11</sup>

So far as I can gather, Sister Francis continued this work in Auckland for a little over a year, until her health came against her again. She returned to Sydney, and after a short period, left for another overseas tour. At the end of about a year, she began work in New York at the Water Street Mission, which lasted for much of 1904, leaving finally about the end of the year.

She arrived in Liverpool very early in 1905, without any formed intention of visiting Wales, but found that the secular newspapers were reporting widely upon a spiritual revival movement which had broken out in Wales just a month or so earlier. Like many others, she was intrigued by this news, and went to Wales for about a month to explore further.

## 1905.

Sister Francis was not the only person to arrive back in Australia in 1905 singing the praises of God, and bubbling over with the wonders of His acts as they had seen them in the Welsh Revival. Reports of at least three others appeared in the papers.

The first person to start telling the story of the revival, after visiting Wales, was the Rev. D. C. Hughes, of Wilcannia, who preached at the Blende Street Methodist Church, Broken Hill. On the previous night he had presided at the consecration meeting of the local Christian Endeavour Society. The local reporter said that Mr. Hughes was able to portray with much vividness the enthusiasm that prevailed as a consequence of the message of Evan Roberts, the famous Welsh miner.<sup>12</sup>

Several months later, the Rev. E. Mona Jones, was preaching in the Goulburn Baptist Church. He described what he had seen in Wales.<sup>13</sup>

The most extensive report about the revival appeared on the North Coast of N.S.W. arising from a letter sent by Mr. J. N. Davies to his parents in Australia, and which was published extensively in a local paper. Davies had gone from Australia to fight in the Boer War, and was visiting his father's homeland afterwards.

His letter begins:- “I will try and give you some of my impressions with regard to this wonderful revival. **Dywygiad** it is called here in the vernacular, and I think it gives a more appropriate meaning; it means reformation, and that is really what happens here these days. It is not so much the refreshing and reviving of the churches, as the reformation of the lives and character of individuals that have come under its influence. That is the amazing and convincing part of it.”

Davies went on to describe at length what he knew about the beginnings of the movement, and, amongst comments about his relatives with whom he went to church, he described a very enthusiastic service at which he was present in the town of Penmorva, led by a group of “Christian endeavurers,” and the minister – who was also a blind man. Davies thanked God for this service. “It brought a new light into my soul. There was something indefinable pervading the whole service.

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11 *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*. Tuesday, 21 October, 1902. Page 8.

12 *Barrier Miner*. Tuesday, 5 June, 1905. page 2.

13 *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*. Thursday, 5 October, 1905/ page 2.

Most of the old pilgrims knew it, and hence the responsive aspect of the service throughout; the audible amens and other suppressed interjections significant of the blessedness of the moment. The tears that trickled down many a cheek like sparkling diamonds told of a wave of feeling that was new to me.<sup>14</sup>

The rest of the letter was published a week later, and contained a great many typing mistakes. He says that the revival flame burst at Loughor, through the instrumentality of Evan Roberts, who has now become known around the world. "It went through these parts like a mighty torrent, which dumb-founded old experienced ministers, which made the churches a living mass of praise and prayer." In the last part of the letter he discusses the emotional aspect of the movement; the spiritual power which appeared in some of the sermons he heard, and the radical transformation that had taken place in the social and moral standards of Welsh society.<sup>15</sup>

By September, 1905, Sister Francis had returned to Sydney, to renew her work links with the Central Methodist Mission, and bringing with her a new enthusiasm from the visit to Wales, hoping and praying that the God of the Welsh Revival would similarly bless her prayers and efforts, and those of her co-workers. The immediate reaction of the Mission leaders was to organize an evangelistic campaign, which would include an opportunity for Sister Francis to tell her story. 175 names of enquirers were recorded before the mission finished. The Mission staff also decided to set Sister Francis apart so that she could respond to requests from churches around the State to lead evangelistic efforts anywhere as requested.<sup>16</sup>

Her first addresses in country towns about the Welsh Revival occurred as early as August, 1905. After her arrival in Australia, she visited her family in Grafton, and travelled to address meetings of her friends in Lismore, and then to address an afternoon meeting of the Sunday scholars in the Grafton Methodist church, followed by an evening meeting, where she was announced to speak about her experiences in Wales.<sup>17</sup>

One of the early missions Sister Francis conducted, over Christmas, 1905, was at the Central Methodist Mission, Newcastle. Christmas Day occurred on a Monday that year, so the Christmas Eve services were special, including an extensive choral and orchestral presentation took place in the morning, in the Mission Hall, and also in Newcastle Hospital in the afternoon. The evening service in the Social hall featured "the story of the Welsh Revival, told by Sister Francis." She told briefly the history of the Revival, "and related some thrilling incidents in connection with the wave of religious enthusiasm that attended it."<sup>18</sup>

The impact of the Welsh Revival upon Sister Francis was reflected at her funeral service in 1946, when the Rev. T.M. Taylor said, in his address, "This latter experience (i.e. the Welsh Revival) greatly enriched her own spiritual life, and on returning to Sydney she was engaged as the travelling evangelist of the C.M.M."<sup>19</sup>

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14 *Northern Star*, Lismore. 30 August, 1905. page 6.

15 *Northern Star*, Wednesday, 6 September, 1905. page 2.

16 For example: *Sydney Morning Herald*. 9 September, 1905. page 7.

17 *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*. 26 August, 1905. page 4.

18 *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*. Tuesday, 26 December, 1905. page 5.

19 *The Methodist*. 14 December, 1946. Page 3.

## 1906.

The early months of a year were never auspicious or easy times for a circuit to organize a mission. A better time was winter or spring. So it is not clear how regularly Sister Francis's diary was filled. In many cases, her missions did not have reports about them published anywhere. In 1906, reports appeared in print about four of Sister Francis's missions. In two of these instances the reports emphasized the important role played by the story she told about what she had seen in Wales. She hoped and prayed that similar results would follow her efforts in New South Wales.

Through April, 1906, Sister Francis conducted missions in the Dungog and Stroud Circuit. Firstly there was a fifteen days mission in Dungog, followed by a ten days mission at Bandon Grove, which included an all-day meeting on Good Friday. She also preached at Chichester on Easter Sunday morning. A total of 63 people professed conversion, a mixture of children and adults, most being Methodists, but including Anglicans, Presbyterians and Baptists. At the close of the two main missions, a thanksgiving service was held at which converts had the opportunity to testify about the blessing that had come to them.

“For the reviving of God's work in the hearts of His people; for the backsliders that have been healed; for the prodigals that have come home, and for the sum of money donated to a worthy cause, the most hearty thanks it was felt were due to God, and as an expression of thankfulness, the congregation, with hearts overflowing with gratitude, sang, ‘Praise God from Whom all blessings flow.’”<sup>20</sup>

So much was this evangelistic work, and the general work of the Sisters of the People, held high in the minds of the C.M.M. leaders that the Rev. David O'Donnell advertised for ladies to be Sisters, and for young men to do country evangelism. O'Donnell worked for a short time at the Sydney C.M.M.<sup>21</sup>

Early in September Sister Francis led a mission at Singleton, commencing with a public welcome on Saturday night, the 1<sup>st</sup>. She made this meeting into a consecration occasion, to which there was a good response. The Sunday began with an early prayer meeting. A meeting for the Sunday School was held in the afternoon, after which “a large number of the scholars readily decided for Christ.” “The interest in the mission continued to increase, until people of nearly every denomination attended the services, some travelling for many miles from places in the country.” A second consecration meeting was held on the second Saturday, “which proved to be a season of even greater power and joy as the one held the week before.” “More than 100 names were given in by persons who entered the inquiry room. Some of these were members of the church, and active in the Endeavour Society, but many of them had never before taken a definite stand for Christ, and it is confidently expected that there will be permanent and blessed results, and an increased church members' roll. The Class and Fellowship Meeting is now better attended; a Junior Endeavour Society has been formed, and the spiritual condition of the church is much improved. Sister Francis gained favour with all classes, and she has endeared herself to many hearts here. Any circuit needing a special mission will do well to secure her services.”<sup>22</sup>

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20 *Methodist*. 5 May, 1906. page 3.

21 *Methodist*. 21 July, 1906. page 7.

22 *Methodist*. 21 September, 1906. page 10.

The impact of the Welsh Revival upon her work is not reflected in these two reports, about her missions at Dungog and Singleton, but there are stronger references to it in the reports which appeared later in the year, and, I believe, reflect more truthfully the content of her work.

After the Singleton mission, she moved up into the New England area, and led a mission in Uralla. This mission started on Sunday, 16 September, with the afternoon children's service. The first ordinary evangelistic service started that evening. The Monday evening service was badly affected by the weather, but this was the occasion when she gave some accounts of the display of Divine power that she had seen during the revival in South Wales. Many who wanted to hear this address missed out, because of the weather, and the noise of rain on the roof. 58 conversions were recorded, including children, before the mission ended.<sup>23</sup>

In October, information began to appear in the local paper in Casino, as preparations were made for her mission there. Her missions in Wellington, Orange and Armidale were mentioned.<sup>24</sup>

The ten days Casino mission started on 4 November, a Sunday evening. On Tuesday night, 6<sup>th</sup>, she gave an address on "The Welsh Revival." The paper report did not enlarge on the subject, but mentioned that Sister Francis had a very wide experience in mission work, in Auckland, and New York, as well as in Sydney. She is "a capable exponent of the Bible, as well as an interesting student of humanity." The local paper was published twice a week, on Tuesday and Friday.<sup>25</sup>

It was in the Friday edition, however, that a much longer and detailed report of the Tuesday address appeared.

"After the preliminary service of singing and prayer were through, Miss Francis stated that it was with no preconceived notion of visiting Wales that she landed in Liverpool in December of 1904, but as the daily papers in England were already in a quiver of mild excitement concerning the remarkable movement in Wales, she decided at all costs to visit the scene of spiritual activity. The first place visited was Cardiff, a city that had attained notoriety for its wickedness. On arrival the change in atmosphere was at once apparent. The chapels were all open, meetings were being held both day and night, and so great was the fervor of the people of all classes that business was sometimes actually suspended for days together in order to attend the revival meetings. At Swansea the movement was carried out on similar lines, the whole district being literally transformed by the mysterious operation of the Spirit of God. The spread of the revival did not wait for Evan Roberts, neither did it depend upon any particular human organization or agency, but seemed to spread like a prairie fire over every part of the country. At the churches themselves there was no constituted leadership, as we know it; sometimes there would be a dozen ministers of various churches present and yet not an attempt at leading. Human authority was completely awed in the presence of the Divine impulse. Men, women and children spoke from the heart as the Spirit moved them. Hymn books were rarely ever used, and yet the exalted state of the soul found continuous expression in the beautiful songs. In the dock districts, where it was not previously safe to walk at night unprotected, on account of the utter abandonment to vice, the reform was even more marked. The sailors and wharf-labourers and other frequenters of the localities were passing to and fro peaceably. In place of oaths and curses, robbery and free fighting, drunkenness and debauchery, the ear was now greeted with fervent spiritual talk or snatches of revival song. Prayer meetings were held in the mornings and at other intervals; men who were on the verge of suicide were strangely brought under the influence of God's Spirit and led to yield themselves to Christ. Critics from all parts of the world flocked to

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23 *Methodist*. 28 September, 1906. page 6.

24 *Richmond River Express and Casino Kyogle Advertiser*. 9 October, 1906. page 2.

25 *Richmond River Express and Casino Kyogle Advertiser*. Tuesday, 6 November, 1906. page 2.

Wales to prove to their own skeptical satisfaction that this was not merely an emotional wave of religious excitement. Reporters from the great daily papers were following every stage of the reform and devoting columns of space to their investigation, day after day, but the critics who came to ridicule in many cases remained to pray. The effect of the revival upon general conditions of life was most marked. Debts of long-standing were paid by the converted. The misery and destitution of years were swept away in many families; public houses which had worked great havoc in their neighbourhoods were left severely alone and had to close in consequence; crime very nearly disappeared in whole districts where formerly it was rampant. The people have been made happy and thrifty, contented with their lot in this life and blessed with a hope for that which is to come.”<sup>26</sup>

## 1907

Her career as an active evangelist was interrupted again for some time in April, 1907, because she had a “simple accident.” She was picking an apple for a young friend, when she wrenched her ankle so severely that it had to be put into plaster of Paris, and involved a rest of some weeks. The announcement, however, also mentioned that, according to the *Uralla Weekly Greeting*, in the Uralla Mission over 200 professed conversions had been secured. Also missions in Lismore and Ballina were announced for next July and August.<sup>27</sup>

The only other published references to Sister Francis for 1907 concerned a Mission she conducted at the Helping Hand Mission, which was an arm of the Central Methodist Mission situated in the suburb of Balmain. The report said that Sister Francis had been conducting missions for many weeks, and that her future engagements would run into the hottest months of the year. She had recently completed missions in Ballina, and in Manilla. These meetings had all been marked by spiritual power and decisions for Christ. Before that, she had led missions at Leichhardt, Kurri Kurri, around the West Maitland Circuit, Merewether, Hamilton, Campbelltown, Nowra, Orange, Wellington, Singleton, Uralla, Dungog, Armidale, Casino, Lismore, “resulting in the awakening of great social and spiritual activity and in the conversion of over two thousand souls.” The Balmain meetings would be supported by the Rev. W.G. Taylor, the Rev. A.J. Burt, and many members of the Sydney Central Methodist Mission. A season of spiritual awakening was “joyfully anticipated.”<sup>28</sup>

## 1908

In May of 1908, Sister Francis was leading a mission in Windsor and Richmond. Again, her lecture on the Welsh Revival was delivered early in the meetings in Windsor, and was repeated in Richmond on a Sunday evening early in May. An excellent report about this lecture appeared in the local paper, and the report was re-published in several other papers. The address and report followed much the same pattern as the one published in Casino, mentioned earlier. It was re-published in Bellingen, and in two of the Richmond River local papers.<sup>29</sup>

By 10 August she was leading a Mission in Coraki, on the Richmond River.<sup>30</sup> The later report said that the weather had not been helpful throughout this mission. “Sister Francis is a forceful and earnest speaker, never at a loss for a word, and makes her points with telling effect. Her lecture on the Welsh

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26 *Richmond River Express and Casino Kyogle Advertiser*. Friday, 9 November, 1906. page 5.

27 *Richmond River Express and Casino Kyogle Advertiser*. Friday, 12 April, 1907. page 4.

28 *Balmain Observer and Western Suburbs Advertiser*. Saturday, 28 September, 1907. page 5.

Revival was one of the best of the series of addresses she has given locally, and as she was personal witness of many of the thrilling and dramatic incidents connected with that Revival her discourse was alive with interest to her hearers.”<sup>31</sup>

But, a week later, whilst preaching in Armidale, she was “suddenly seized with illness during an earnest address.” A doctor was summoned, and she was forced to have a prolonged rest. This was her second visit to Armidale.<sup>32</sup>

## 1909

Her evangelistic work continued for a good part of the next year. By July she was in the New England town of Quirindi.<sup>33</sup> At the mid-year Quarterly Meeting in Parkes, the people decided to invite Sister Francis to conduct several missions in their Circuit from 10 October to 2 November.<sup>34</sup>

Before that, however, she was in Cootamundra, commencing a Mission on Sunday, 5 September. The Sunday night address was on God’s call to Adam – “Where art thou?” “The powerful appeal to professing Christians, backsliders, and non-professing Christians, will not soon be forgotten.”

The address on the Welsh Revival was, again, given on the first Tuesday evening. She “thrilled the hearers with a stirring account of Evan Roberts’s revival in Bristol, Cardiff and Swansea and other parts of Wales,” where many thousands were converted.

In the Cootamundra Mission, 50 names of possible converts had been taken in the first five days. Interesting cases of conversion took place. “In one instance five members of one household have surrendered to Jesus Christ. Amongst the converts are heads of families. On the coming Sunday she was to preach in Dudauman, and subsequent missions were to be held in nearby towns - Wallendbeen, Nubba and Stockinbingal.”<sup>35</sup>

The mission in Parkes lasted for ten days, and was followed by a campaign in Peak Hill, and Alectown.<sup>36</sup>

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29 *Windsor and Richmond Gazette*. Saturday, 9 May, 1908. page 14. Also, *The Raleigh Sun*. (Bellingen), Friday, 5 June, 1908, page 6. *Richmond River Herald and Northern Districts Advertiser*. Friday, 12 June, 1908. *Richmond River Express and Casino Kyogle Advertiser*. Tuesday, 21 July, 1908.

30 *Sydney Morning Herald*. Monday, 10 August, 1908. page 11.

31 *Richmond River Express and Casino Kyogle Advertiser*. Tuesday, 11 August, 1908.

32 *Sydney Morning Herald*. 7 September, 1908. page 6. Also *Maitland Weekly Mercury*, Saturday, 12 September, 1908. page 7.

33 *Sydney Morning Herald*. 6 July, 1909. page 5.

34 *Sydney Morning Herald*. Monday, 19 July, 1909. page 5.

35 *Cootamundra Herald*. Friday, 10 September, 1909. page 2.

## 1910

9 March, 1910, was a “golden” day for the Francis family. Laura’s parents celebrated their golden wedding. Because there was no hall sufficient for the purpose on the north side of the Clarence River, the South Grafton School of Arts was engaged for the occasion. It was a major social occasion for the district, and a very extensive report of the occasion appeared in the local paper.<sup>37</sup>

A few weeks later, Sister Frances was reported as conducting an afternoon Children’s Service as part of her Mission in Queanbeyan, and then preaching also at the evening service.<sup>38</sup>

By the end of May, she was conducting a Mission in the Central Western town of Molong. “Sister Frances is a very lucid and fluent speaker, her addresses have been highly appreciated, and she has undoubtedly created a most favourable impression during her brief stay in Molong.

The meeting on Tuesday evening was presided over by the circuit minister, the Rev. G. Read, who in the course of a few introductory remarks, expressed the hope that many who at present did not attend any place of worship in the town, would be induced to attend that church before the close of the Mission. He appealed to them to use their best endeavours to bring at least one friend to each of the meetings. There would be no collections taken, but at the end of the Mission a thank-offering would be taken, and the proceeds devoted to the Alexandra Home for the rescue of women conducted in connection with the Methodist Central Mission.

Sister Frances then gave a very able and stirring address. She selected for her subject, the third chapter of St. John, 16<sup>th</sup> verse. The speaker pointed out that God’s love was eternal and unchanging. Many people doubted His wonderful love, and looked upon God as a severe Judge instead of a loving Father, whilst others blamed him for every rough place that came across their path. Sister Frances went on to speak of the evil effects of drink, and narrated anecdotes illustrative of the splendid work carried on by the Methodist Mission in various parts of the Commonwealth. She stated that in one instance a girl after having had a dispute with her father left home. All attempts to trace her whereabouts proved fruitless, her mother then made a pathetic appeal to the speaker to find her daughter. After a long time Sister Frances discovered the young girl living a godless life in a city, and succeeded in restoring her to her parents. The wanderer was a now leading a Christian life, and occupying a prominent and useful position in New Zealand. If bad-tempered people were ready to forgive their children surely God was willing to forgive sinners.

The Mission will be brought to an end on Tuesday evening next.”<sup>39</sup>

At some stage towards the end of 1910 Sister Frances moved to Dunedin, to help with the Methodist Mission there, and returned very late in the following year, 1911.<sup>40</sup>

## 1912

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36 *Western Champion, and Parkes and Forbes Representative*. Friday, 22 October, 1909.

37 *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*. Thursday, 10 March, 1910. page 8

38 *Queanbeyan Age*. Tuesday, 26 April, 1910. page 3.

39 *Molong Argus*. Friday, 3 June, 1910. page 4.

40 *Sydney Morning Herald*. 30 December, 1911. page 4.

It was not long before she was preaching again. On the first Sunday in January, 1912, she was conducting the Christian Endeavour anniversary service at Rawson Hall, Miller's Point.<sup>41</sup>

Soon after the Annual Methodist Conference in 1912, the Conference's Evangelistic Committee met and decided that Sister Frances would be co-opted into leading Missions for the denomination. This occurred around the time when Dr. Chapman and Mr. Charles M. Alexander were holding missions in various parts of New South Wales. The Conference Evangelist was the Rev. A. E. Walker, helped by Miss Walker as a soloist.<sup>42</sup>

One of the first of these Missions led by Sister Francis was held in the St Mary's and Penrith area, and was extensively reported upon. The *Methodist* carried several brief reports about these meetings which stated the dates of the meetings in different places, that Christians were quickened, and that many young people professed conversion, but the main report appeared in the local paper.

The Mission started on Sunday, 19 May, in St Marys, until the following Friday, then at Orchard Hills and at Jamisontown for a few days, and finally a ten days' Mission at Penrith. "Our people placed a very high estimation upon Sister Francis and her work. Certainly she spared not herself, and was ever ready to do and to be anything that would advance the interests of the Master's Kingdom." Although the Mission happened suddenly, and not much time was available for preparations, several people prayed strongly for the meetings.<sup>43</sup>

The report in the local paper concerned meetings held in Penrith at the end of the Mission. It seems she conducted two meetings only in the little Jamisontown Church, which was at that time a Union Church. These were on Thursday and Saturday, 23 and 25 May. She started her Mission in Penrith the following day, with two "good sermons" on Sunday, 26<sup>th</sup>, and with an address to the children in between, in the afternoon.

"Each night during the following week earnest discourses were delivered to large congregations, and on Sunday morning a good congregation assembled." The singing was impressive, the congregation singing with a choir. The Bible reading was Romans 12, which was read in a very impressive manner.

"While announcing the notices the Missioner gave some interesting reminiscences of her work, telling of one mission she conducted in an out of the way circuit town to which many people traveled 50 miles. 100 people were converted and just recently she visited the same place after a lapse of three and a half years and found that only one convert had gone back. Many cynics asked today, 'Does Mission work last?' and she replied, 'Yes, if done properly; if church people were not in earnest about the matter, how could they expect the work to last?'"

The text for the sermon was "Christ is all, and in all." (Col. 3: 11.)

The preacher said, "These were not unfamiliar words, most of them had seen them on wall texts in homes. Many present at that service realized that Christ was all in all to them. Others were familiar with the words, but their hearts were not satisfied, as they had a longing to be able to claim their all in all in Jesus. He was willing to be all to everyone that would let him. Some believed in Christ as only a man who lived nearly 2,000 years ago. To them He was only an historical Christ. As Isaiah said they saw no beauty in Him that they should desire Him. Another class of persons knew Him only as a little Christ – a small Saviour. They knew Him only on Sunday; but when that day had

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41 *Sydney Morning Herald*. 13 January, 1912. page 10.

42 *Methodist*. 13 April, 1912. page 2.

43 *Methodist*. 15 June, 1912. page 10; 22 June, page 7; 29 June, page 3 and 6 July, page 11.

passed He was put in the drawer till Sunday came around again. She met such a gentleman on the steamer when returning from England, and asked him, 'Are you a Christian?' and he gave this remarkable answer – 'To such a question from many people I would answer "Yes;" but to you my answer must be "No," because I know perfectly well I am not the kind of Christian you would have me to be. I attend God's house, support the work, and encourage my children to go to Sunday School; but, at the same time, I know I couldn't do many things I now do in my business in Adelaide if I were a "real" Christian.' His idea was that it wouldn't pay to carry his religion into his business. Another class, the preacher continued, made Christ a living great reality in their daily lives; and He wanted to be all this to everyone of us, but thousands wouldn't let Him. Again, many felt that something more than mere conversion was needed – there was a need of whole-hearted consecration to God. Consecration simply meant to be full-handed serving one Master. Many served three masters – God, the world, and self. Conversion was one thing and consecration quite another. In conversion God presented something to us – Life. In consecration we presented to God – Ourselves. Consecration must be a definite act, as Paul showed in the lesson read a few minutes before; to present ourselves to God was only our reasonable service. Why should people be desperately in earnest about religion only when they came to their deathbeds? Several hindrances to living this blessed life were then plainly and lucidly pointed out in language that a child of nine years could understand. First, some people had never been really converted, but had only an outside religion. A beautifully apposite and effective anecdote by a prominent London minister was then related by the preacher. Another hindrance to higher religious blessing was that many had fallen from grace and were backsliders. Many had she met who had waxed eloquent on the prayer meetings and class meetings of the 'Good old times;" but how suddenly they became dumb when you asked about their present experience. Such were living really on stale manna, and must acknowledge their sins, repent, and return to Him. Many others were hindered from this higher experience because they thought it was not for them. They had been born with so many so many angles that they thought they would never be straightened out. She begged such persons not to limit the power of God who had promised to pour out His Spirit on all people – including the class she was now speaking to. Still others were kept from receiving it, because they put it too low, satisfied to be saved from death. Others were like the Rich Ruler, who came to Jesus and could not give up his idol – possessions and money. All who wanted to live an all in all life must give up their idols. A pathetic and eloquent appeal for higher Christian living and firm decision in obeying the call of God, closed a splendid sermon of forty minutes duration."

In the afternoon there was another children's meeting, and a great congregation in the evening listened to another appealing sermon on the question – "What think ye of Christ?"

"Many expected a sparse congregation on Monday night, owing to the holiday attraction, but the church was three parts full and Sister Francis spoke eloquently on the words, 'If any man thirst let him come unto me and drink. Telling and apposite illustrations were used, and at the close several persons signified their desire to lead a new life. A thank-offering was taken up and a liberal sum was raised to send to Sydney in recognition of Sister Francis's earnest, able, and laborious work.

A very successful service was held on Tuesday night to mark the close of the Mission, and was largely attended, and the proceedings were very enthusiastic. Many were sorry the Mission was over, and Sister Francis has so completely won the hearts of the people that on any subsequent visit she will have crowded congregations. Rev. C. Jones and a large staff of workers gave much assistance during the Mission, and the services of Miss Dennis at the organ were worthy of special mention.

The Mission was very successful, and a good number joined the church both in Jamisontown and Penrith."<sup>44</sup>

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44 *Nepean Times*. Saturday, 8 June, 1912. page 8.

By the end of August, a notice appeared that she was to conduct missions in the Weston and Kurri Kurri areas of the Hunter. “Very complete arrangements are being made, and it is expected that there will be large attendances at the various services.”<sup>45</sup>

## 1914.

In Tamworth, earlier in 1914, the newly appointed Conference Evangelist, Mr. Raymond Preston, conducted a mission, with good results. The circuit leaders decided to follow up this mission with another, and were able to secure the services of Sister Francis to conduct these meetings.

A little glimpse into the grace of God is seen in a snippet which appeared in the *Methodist* about a meeting she held at Borenore when on her way to Tamworth. It was called “a manifestation of God’s power.” “Only one meeting was held there, at which there were nine decisions, and among them some interesting cases.”<sup>46</sup>

She had previously held a mission at Hallsville, and had very good success. So, on this second occasion, the meetings were again started at Hallsville. Other meetings followed at Oxley and West Tamworth. “At West Tamworth we had some good cases of conversion, and quite a number of backsliders returned to the fold. As a result of the mission we will be able to report of fully 50 adult members of the church.”<sup>47</sup>

From there she went to the Canowindra Circuit in the Central West. She wrote, “A season of rich blessing at Cranberry and Lockwood. Many precious souls have been led to Christ and are rejoicing in knowing Him as their precious Saviour.” The weather, and lack of a moon at night, worked against these meetings, making it harder for people to come out after dark. Most of the converts were young people, one a Roman Catholic.

Sister Francis’s timetable for the year was full, except for the four weeks between 17<sup>th</sup> October and 14<sup>th</sup> November, wrote the Evangelism Committee Secretary. He said it is found to be more satisfactory to have Sister Francis in a circuit for four weeks rather than for a shorter period. From Canowindra she went on to Grenfell.<sup>48</sup>

Two articles of a very similar character and content appeared in two local papers to announce the coming of Sister Francis in order to conduct a mission. In the first instance, she was to conduct a ten days’ missions in the Grenfell Church starting on 26<sup>th</sup> July. This mission also included shorter missions in the Greenethorpe Church, and in the Cowra Road preaching place, to be held in a private home. The second article referred to a mission in the Molong Circuit, which was to follow the Grenfell Circuit mission. The two articles mainly contained biographical materials about Sister Francis’s life work to that point.<sup>49</sup> This was her second visit to Molong.

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45 *The Maitland Daily Mercury*. 24 August, 1912. page 2.

46 *Methodist*. 11 July, 1914. Page 3.

47 *Methodist*. 1 August, 1914.

48 Ibid.

49 *Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advertiser*. Tuesday, 21 July, 1914. page 2. and *Molong Express and Western District Advertiser*. Saturday, 25 July, page 8.

One more article appeared about the Grenfell mission, and is the only news we have about anything that happened in this mission. "Sister Francis's mission is growing in numbers and power. On Sunday afternoon in the Royal Hall she gave a thrilling account of her experiences in slum work in New York, and at night gave a telling address on "The Compassion of Christ." A large gathering assembled in the hall. Sister Francis concludes her Grenfell mission tonight in the Methodist Church. The highest results have been realized from the mission. Sister Francis commences a mission on Cowra Road at the home of Mr. Diprose on Thursday night, and another at Greenethorpe Methodist Church on Sunday next. Sister Francis has added to the number of her friends through her mission in Grenfell."<sup>50</sup>

## 1917 and After

The fact that Sister Francis experienced periods of ill-health, and also other periods when she undertook other kinds of work, is reflected in a small piece which appeared in mid-1917. "The many friends of Sister Francis in various circuits throughout the State will be glad to learn that she is in full harness again, and is assisting the Rev. T. F. Potts in the Glebe Circuit for a term of six months. Previous to taking up the work at the Glebe she conducted two successful missions in the Quirindi Circuit, when a number of precious souls yielded themselves to Christ."<sup>51</sup>

So far as I can gather, as time passed, Sister Francis restricted her evangelistic activities to the work she did with the Central Methodist Mission. She spent a lot of time and effort visiting hospitals in Sydney, especially at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, and it is for this work that she is best known. She died on 1 December, 1946. Her funeral was held at Wesley Chapel on Tuesday, 3 December, and was conducted by the President of the Conference, the Rev. Richard Piper. The address was given by the Rev. T.M. Taylor, son of the Rev. W.G. Taylor, who gave the following testimony. "I owe a great deal to Sister Francis, for she was my first class leader, and her deep spirituality, wise counsels and beautiful spirit left a profound mark for good on my early Christian life and character."<sup>52</sup>

## Resources for this paper

Initially, some documents were collected by Mr. Daryl Lightfoot some years ago, who was at the time the Archivist for the Uniting Church's Records and Historical Society, in relation to an inquiry by a member of the Starr family looking for family history materials. For this paper I have further researched copies of *The Methodist*, and am greatly indebted to the National Library of Australia for use of their TROVE website, giving access to old newspapers. A much shorter preliminary version of this paper was published in the *Recorder*, of the Uniting Church Historical Society NSW/ACT, mid-2014, entitled *Sister Francis and the Welsh Revival*. Sadly, for many of her evangelistic missions no account was ever published.

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50 *Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advertiser*. Tuesday, 4 August, 1914. page 2.

51 *Methodist*. 23 June, 1917. Page 7.

52 *The Methodist*. 14 December, 1946. Page 3.