

## The Revd Christopher Hamel Cooke (1921 – 2002)

Rector of St Marylebone 1979 - 1990



The Reverend Christopher Hamel Cooke was one of the outstanding parish priests of his generation; during the final decade of his ministry, when he was Rector of St Marylebone, west London, he turned this important church into a leading centre of collaboration between religion and medicine.

For many years a leading light in the Institute of Religion and Medicine, Hamel Cooke was aware on his arrival in London that the church he was taking over had a large, decrepit crypt, and also that Harley Street was on its doorstep.

With the strong support of a number of doctors, he raised a large sum of money to convert the crypt into a health and spiritual centre.

Today it provides facilities for a National Health Service practice, psychotherapy and counselling rooms, a lecture hall and a beautiful chapel.

Patients whose illnesses demand a holistic approach are offered under the same cavernous roof a wide range of medical, psychological, social and spiritual skills.

Regular healing services provide opportunities for prayer, meditation and, where appropriate, the laying on of hands. Educational work among doctors and clergy is another important aspect of the centre's work.

Christopher Kingston Hamel Cooke was born at Northfield, Birmingham, on November 29 1921. The end of his time at King Edward's School, Fiveways, coincided with the outbreak of war, so he enlisted in the Royal Artillery and served as a staff captain in France and Belgium after D-Day.

Feeling drawn to Holy Orders, he went, after demobilisation, to Corpus Christi, Oxford, and from there to Cuddesdon Theological College, becoming a curate at Roehampton, south-west London, in 1950.

By now he was firmly rooted in the Church of England's Catholic tradition, nurtured by its sacramental life and stimulated by its intellectual approach. He also had a strong pastoral sense, based on his love for people.

After three years at Roehampton, he returned to his native Birmingham as a curate in the large parish of Temple Balsall, where he had a particular responsibility for a daughter church at Balsall Common.

This occupied him for four years, and was followed by a two-year spell as Dean's Vicar of Lichfield Cathedral - a post which involved leading the services and made good use of his fine singing voice.

Hamel Cooke then moved to his first major parish charge, as Vicar of St Mark's, Coventry, where he remained for 10 years. Besides the high calibre of preaching and pastoral work he performed, he served as a hospital chaplain and as director of the Coventry Samaritans.

He returned to Lichfield from time to time to lend a hand with the music; and during his final years in Coventry he took a Diploma in Pastoral Studies at Birmingham University, where a course on holistic medicine had been established.

This proved to be a significant milestone in Hamel Cooke's ministry: thereafter, he worked closely with the medical profession and encouraged other clergy to do the same.

From 1969 to 1979 Hamel Cooke was Vicar of St Andrew's, Bedford, where he was once again chaplain of a large hospital as well. For five of those years he was also responsible for the neighbouring St Mary's church.

Notable, both at Coventry and Bedford, was his training of a series of outstanding curates. These included Richard Chartres, the present Bishop of London; John Moses, the present Dean of St Paul's; and Peter Berry, who until recently was the Provost of Birmingham Cathedral. All three testify to Hamel Cooke's lasting influence on them.

Appointment to St Marylebone in 1979 proved to be a fitting climax to Hamel Cooke's life's work. At first he was reluctant to move to London, but when he recognised the potential for developing a partnership between religion and medicine at the heart of the capital, he seized the opportunity. The fact that the church had a professional choir also gave him much satisfaction.

His three books - *Health is for God*, *Language of Joy* and *A Time to Laugh* - enabled him to share his insights and experience with others further afield.

His retirement was spent at Halford, near Stratford-on-Avon. There, a few days before his death on June 30, he was visited by the Bishop of London who bestowed on him the Cross of St Erconwald - a new award to honour those who have made an outstanding contribution to the work of the Church in London; Hamel Cooke was its first recipient.

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