Evangelical Dissenters and Wesleyan-Style Itinerant Ministries at the End of the Eighteenth Century

by Roger H. Martin

Itinerating as a form of Christian ministry in eighteenth and nineteenth century England is almost always associated with the Wesleyan Methodists, rarely with the Anglicans, and almost never with the Dissenters. This is not surprising. The Wesleyan circuit rider has long been lionized as the hero of the Evangelical Revival. He is usually portrayed as an impassioned and aggressive evangelist who saw the world as his parish and travelled thousands of miles on horseback to harvest a record crop of converts. In contrast, the evangelical parson or Dissenting minister is often characterized as a rather steadfast, certainly less glamorous, individual who limited his ministry to the more parochial concerns of the parish or meeting house. His role in the Revival, therefore, is usually perceived to be less vital than that of the Wesleyans.

It is true, of course, that the hallmark of Wesleyan Methodism was its high degree of physical mobility which, in an age of rapid social and demographic change, enabled its itinerant ministers to reach people in the fields and on the highways of Hanoverian England. But contrary to the stereotype mentioned above, it is not true that the other evangelical denominations—at least by the end of the eighteenth century—had remained entirely tied to a settled ministry. The purpose of this paper is to show that the itinerant thrust of the Evangelical Revival most usually associated with the Wesleyans, was never, even in the early years, entirely missing in the other evangelical denominations, especially those associated with Dissent, and that indeed, by century's end several Nonconformist itinerancy societies were founded which not only resembled, but could easily have rivalled many of Wesley's itinerant circuits. One of these organizations, the Village Itinerancy Society, founded at the end of the eighteenth century, is of particular historic interest because it illustrates not only the resurgence of a non-Wesleyan interest in itinerating, but also the very important contribution made by evangelical Dissenters to the general revival of religion in England.

169
The tradition of itinerating in the eighteenth century had its roots in the early days of the evangelical revival when men like John Wesley, George Whitefield and Howell Harris travelled the breadth and width of Britain, on foot and by horseback, to carry the Gospel message to a multitude sometimes appreciative but generally inquisitive. Then the Revival professed no party or denomination but was a truly pan-evangelical movement, and the itinerants who propagated its message preached a universal Gospel acceptable to all.¹ When the movement was divided by the so-called "Calvinistic Controversy" in the 1740s, it split into several theological and denominational camps, and although the practice of itinerating in England became for the most part the hallmark of the "Arminian" followers of Wesley, it was still evident, though to a lesser degree, among other evangelical groups. For example, the English Calvinists—ministers of Lady Huntingdon’s Connexion and those who called themselves Calvinistic Methodists—continued for a season to itinerate as Whitefield himself had done.² In the Anglican camp, men like Henry Venn of Huddersfield, John Berridge of Everton and even (briefly) Charles Simeon, later of Holy Trinity Cambridge, occasionally left their parishes on extended “Gospel rambles.” Even the Dissenters sometimes engaged in itinerant ministries. While it is true that the system of the Old Dissenters was predominantly pastoral and stationary, there was still a tradition of concern for the “dark corners” of England where gathered churches did not exist. Gifted brethren were occasionally ordained as itinerant ministers,³ and at least two Nonconformist seminaries—Trevecca College in Wales and Newport Pagnell

¹ William Seward, an early evangelical itinerant and an associate of Wesley, wrote in 1740 the following about an open-field meeting he had held in Wales: “I told them I did not desire them to leave the Church but to attend it closely—and that I only wanted to bring them to Jesus Christ and then if they were fully persuaded in their own mind let each remain in the communion which he was called. If he was a Churchman let him remain; if called a Quaker, a Baptist, or a Presbyterian let them remain so.” Cited in “Journal of an early Methodist,” 24 August 1740, Library of the University College of North Wales, MS Bangor 34 (Through the courtesy of J. D. Walsh.)

² In Wales, on the other hand, the Welsh Calvinistic followers of Howell Harris and Daniel Rowlands itinerated throughout the century. Cf. J. D. Walsh, “Methodism at the End of the Eighteenth Century,” in A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, ed. by R. E. Davies and E. G. Rupp, (London: 1965), I, 293.

Academy in Bedfordshire—encouraged their students to itinerate during term.⁴ By 1776, a group of evangelical Dissenters and Calvinistic Methodists had founded the Societies Evangelica which, along with Hoxton Academy, promoted the practice of part-time itinerating.⁵ Yet it must be admitted that during most of the eighteenth century, the practice of itinerating by non-Wesleyan evangelicals was the exception rather than the rule. Evangelical clergymen, concerned about the irregularities of itinerating, preferred to pattern their ministries on the accepted order of the Church of England and confined themselves to parish boundaries.⁶ The Dissenters, even those educated at Trevecka, Newport Pagnell and Hoxton, tended to settle in permanent churches once their formal education was completed and if they continued to itinerate, it was usually only on a very restricted basis. Throughout most of the eighteenth century, few Anglicans and Dissenters itinerated full-time.

There are at least two reasons why the practice of itinerating in the non-Wesleyan sector of the evangelical movement gained in popularity during the mid 1790s. In the first place, the social dislocations produced by the French Revolution in 1789, as regimes toppled and huge armies marched across the Continent, produced a very vocal yet often respectable crop of millennial prophets who began to predict that with the fall of anti-Christ (at first Papal Rome but later France itself), nations would be converted to “true religion” preparative to Christ’s Second Coming, and Christians the world over would be of one mind in a united and common cause.⁷ The immediate evangelical response to this phenomenon in both the Wesleyan and non-Wesleyan camps was the creation of a number of foreign missionary societies to help the millennium along.⁸ But it was not long before evangelical attention was turned to a more local concern for the “domestic heathen” in Britain itself.⁹ It was partly for this reason that the great non-

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⁸ For example the Baptist Missionary Society founded in 1792 and the London Missionary Society founded in 1795. The Wesleyans also had an active missionary operation although their society was not incorporated until 1813.
⁹ See Evangelical Magazine, March 1796, p. 120; July 1803, p. 282.
Wesleyan itinerancy societies and county unions came into being. The second reason for this non-Wesleyan resurgence in itinerating is more in the realm of speculation. Many of the key evangelical Dissenters of the period owed their own conversions to the itinerant ministries of Wesley and Whitefield. It is therefore very possible that as the Revival progressed, these people convinced their more reluctant brethren to adopt some form of itinerant ministry that reached beyond the confines of meeting house or chapel. Not surprisingly, as we shall see, the Nonconformist-dominated itinerancy societies that emerged in the 1790s were often patterned, almost in every detail, on the itinerant system used so successfully for over fifty years by the Wesleyans.

Whatever the reason for this renewed interest in itinerating, the response was everywhere warm. In 1795, the old Societas Evangelica, considered by its members “to have been upon decline for several years past,” was given a spiritual transfusion by evangelical stalwarts like the half Anglican, half Dissenter Rowland Hill of Surrey Chapel, London; W. F. Platt, the Congregationalist minister of Holywell Mount Chapel, London, and Matthew Wilks, the Calvinistic Methodist minister of Whitefield’s Tabernacle, also in London. Whereas the older society had relied on ministers in established congregations to give their spare time to the business of itinerating, the new society now proposed to take under its patronage “a certain number of Ministers, to be entirely devoted to itinerant preaching.” Almost simultaneously appeared the Village Itinerancy Society, of which we will have more to say, followed by the London Itinerancy Society in 1797, the Bedfordshire Union of Christians the same year, and many others.

The Village Itinerancy Society was perhaps the most

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10 Walsh, op. cit., p. 295.
12 Evangelical Magazine, March 1796, p. 119.
15 These organizations proliferated between 1798 and 1800. They are reported in the Evangelical Magazine for these years.
16 The following manuscript material on the Village Itinerancy Society is found in the archives of Dr. William’s Library, London. I would like to thank Dr. Geoffrey Nuttall, Librarian of New College, London for access to this material.
representative of the itinerancy societies established at this time and will therefore receive special attention in this paper as illustrative of the other organizations. It was founded in the Spring of 1796 by John Eyre, sometime episcopal minister of Ram's Chapel in Homerton, a suburb of London.\textsuperscript{17} Like many of his type, Eyre had a varied evangelical inheritance. At first an itinerant minister in Tavistock, Devon, he entered Lady Huntingdon's Connexion as a student at Trevecka College, moved on to Anglican orders after graduating from Emmanuel College, Cambridge, serving for a time as curate to Cecil and Cadogan, and by now was editor of the undenominational \textit{Evangelical Magazine} and Secretary of the similarly undenominational London Missionary Society.\textsuperscript{18} The simple purpose of Eyre's organization, as that of most of its sister organizations, was to spread "the knowledge of Christ among the poor, by preaching the Gospel, and teaching their children to read the Scriptures."\textsuperscript{19} As one of the Society's later minutes pointed out, it was to be engaged in "an important work, a work of the greatest mercy: it is leaving the 99 sheep & going into the wilderness, after that which is lost . . . a work [furthermore] of all others the most necessary [because] if not prosecuted with vigour, at least two millions of our countrymen will be left without the Gospel, that divinely appointed means of bringing men to the knowledge of salvation."\textsuperscript{20}

At first, the Village Itinerancy Society concerned itself almost exclusively with poor weavers in the Spitalfields section of London;\textsuperscript{21} but it was not long before itinerant stations had been established in Hampshire, Surrey and Sussex. It is very possible that the Society did not want to contend directly with the Wesleyans who already had a strong foothold in the more industrialized areas of England.\textsuperscript{22} Instead they chose the less populated counties to the south—the so-called "Methodist Wilderness"—where Wesley himself had never been very successful. The itinerant system em-

\textsuperscript{17} New College: MS 44 (Record of Formation); MS 41/2 (Letters): J. Eyre to C. Winter, 17 September, 1796 (Draft). Cf. \textit{Evangelical Magazine}, March 1796, p. 120; J. Waddington, \textit{Congregational History} (London: 1876), II, p. 68ff.

\textsuperscript{18} For Eyre's biography, see \textit{Evangelical Magazine}, June 1803, p. 225ff.

\textsuperscript{19} New College: MS 44 (Record of Formation).


\textsuperscript{21} New College: MS 44 (Record of Formation).

\textsuperscript{22} Cf. Walsh, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 296.
ployed by the Society, however, closely resembled that used by the Wesleyans. A large village, located in the most “dark and populous spot” of each county, usually became the base of operation for each itinerant. From here he would visit “as often as possible every hamlet and village with the word of life . . . establishing Sunday Schools or evening schools, according to circumstances.” Itinerant circuits were very ambitious, often covering many miles. William Church, a Society itinerant based in Petersfield, Hampshire, for example, would travel six miles to the outlying village of Priors-Dean on Monday returning to Petersfield that evening. The same pattern would be followed for Eastmane on Tuesday (five miles to and from), and Steep on Wednesday (another two miles). On Thursday, Church would walk to Harting (four miles), continue directly to Radford on Friday (ten miles from Harting) and then to Shotover Mill on Saturday (seven miles from Radford) before returning back to Petersfield on Sunday (ten miles) thus completing by foot or on horseback a weekly itinerant circuit totalling over fifty-seven miles, no mean achievement in an age when roads were poor. Other itinerancies sponsored by the Society were no less strenuous. Richard Densham in Warwickshire, on a “missionary tour” in that county, once preached seven sermons in one week to seven hundred people, riding over twenty-two miles in the process. Another itinerant in Surrey died of smallpox after preaching for the Society only three weeks.

Itinerant preachers were initially unordained laymen who, nevertheless, had to be “pious, able preachers . . . experimentally acquainted with the important truths of the Gospel” in order to qualify for appointment. A candidate offering his services to the Society had to be recommended to the Superintendent by at least one Society patron. The Superintendent would then examine the candidate “with the greatest circumspection and care, as to [his] religious knowledge, experience and abilities.” Upon approval by the Superintendent, the candidate would eventually be presented

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23 By 1803, the Society had centers in Haslemere (Surrey), Radford and South Harting (Sussex), Petersfield, Hambledon and West Meon (Hampshire), parts of Warwickshire, and at Bethnal Green in London.
24 New College: MS 44 (Record of Formation).
25 New College: MS 41/7 (Letters) W. Church to J. Eyre, 21 February 1797; MS 41/9 (Letters) D. Langton to J. Eyre, 22 May 1797.
26 New College: MS 41/68 (Letters) R. Densham to J. Eyre, 29 July, 1800.
to the Society at a special meeting and, if confirmed here, placed on trial for three months. At the end of this trial period, and if he had performed his duties satisfactorily, the candidate would finally be received into full connexion under a four-year contract, liable to removal, however, if he subsequently fell into "error." 28

The principal responsibility of Society itinerants in each county was to "gather in" the heathen population and then organize them into local societies under Village Itinerancy Society sponsorship. When a sufficient number of converts in each area were collected to support a church, the itinerants would then move on to a new location, "the design of the institution being answered, which is to raise churches, where Christ is not named." 29 In other words, Society itinerants would work in "dark parishes" preaching in and out of doors like the Wesleyans did until there were enough converts to support a permanent minister and church. 30 They would then withdraw to a new assignment. Board and travelling expenses were defrayed by the Society, and each itinerant received a salary usually not exceeding £20 per annum. Each itinerant was also required to send monthly accounts of his activities to the Superintendent stating where he preached, the numbers he had preached to, the encouragements or discouragements he had experienced, the progress of his work, and the expenses that he had incurred in the process. 31 The same pattern was followed by most of the other societies.

The internal organization of the local societies established by the Village Itinerancy Society roughly resembled the "cellular" organization of Wesley's connexion. Each local society established in the course of an itinerant's ministry would meet weekly for mutual prayer, encouragement and instruction. If the society grew to more than ten persons, it would often be divided into smaller groups resembling Wesley's classes. For each of these groups, a prominent layman would be appointed by the itinerant for a term of three months or more to preside over its activities. It was the responsibility of this person, as it was the responsibility of Wesley's class leader, to begin meetings with prayer, and to make enquiry respecting the experience and improvement of his colleagues, "speaking to each a word of direction or comfort, according to

28 New College: MS 44 (Plan of Society).
29 Loc. Cit.
31 New College: MS 44 (Plan of Society).
circumstances, and endeavoring always to do so by referring to some passage of Scripture.” Every month a general meeting of the larger society would be convened. Admission into this meeting would be limited only to those who “appear to the minister to have a work of grace begun in their hearts, and whose life and conversion are becoming their profession.” Like the Wesleyans, each member had to pay a penny or more per week subscription to his group leader.32

Besides the normal responsibilities incurred in forming and managing local societies, the itinerants were engaged in several other activities. Where possible, they founded Sunday Schools or evening schools which had organizational rules of their own. A master or mistress was appointed by the itinerant to superintend the instruction of not more than ten boys and girls in each school, preference for admission being given to the eldest applicants. Remuneration for this job was only two guineas per annum plus expenses and house rent. Scholars were principally taught to read the Bible, but they also learned to read tracts provided them by the Book Society until the Religious Tract Society was founded in 1799.33 Tracts were also distributed by the itinerants.34 The Religious Tract Society itself was in part born out of the hope that while itinerants could reach only a limited number of people, books, tracts and pamphlets, produced in large quantities and at popular prices, and placed in the proper hands, might themselves convert an even larger cross-section of the rural heathen population than the itinerants.35 The Village Itinerancy Society, in summary, was an organization whose importance far transcended the limitations imposed by its relative poverty. Between 1796 and 1801, the Society managed to raise the meagre sum of £1480,36 but the people it contacted and subsequently converted to evangelical principles far outweighed its poor endowment. By a conservative estimate, the Society could claim at least 520 converts and over 340 children attending its schools by 1803.37 This number was probably much larger.

Like many domestic and foreign missionary societies of the

32 New College: MS 44 (Plans of Societies in Each Circuit).
33 New College: MS 44 (Plan for Evening Schools in the Country Villages).
34 New College: MS 41/74 (Letters) R. Densham to J. Eyre, 2 October 1800.
35 See Evangelical Magazine, January 1801, p. 40f.
36 New College: MS 44 (Record of Accounts).
37 New College: MS 55/1 (Minutes) 28 October 1803.
period, the Village Itinerancy Society was ostensibly undenominational, professing to serve no particular sect or denomination. Society itinerants, themselves unordained laymen, were told by John Eyre to “endeavour to discountenance all bitterness and rancour between true believers, however different their notions or views in some non-essential points.” To one itinerant who was apparently over-solicitous about the type of church he was to establish in Petersfield, Matthew Wilks, Eyre’s successor as Superintendent and a Calvinistic Methodist, wrote: “As to the mode of government in the church over which you may be called to preside, it will be of comparatively small moment provided the Holy Ghost make you an able minister of the spirit, and your doctrine live in the consciences of your hearers. Thus commending yourself, they will be little concerned how you rule them, as mutual love and forbearance will then be the bond of your common union.”

In his apology for village preaching, William Kingsbury, a Congregational minister from Southampton, pointed out that “it is not our aim to make prosleytes to a party, by preaching about ecclesiastical any more than civil polities. It is not our wish to bring one man from the Church of England to become a mere, notional, formal, rigid Dissenter.” Rather, as Wilks and Kingsbury would have been the first to emphasize, the sole object of the Society was “to prove, in plain simple language, the truth of the Scriptures, to counteract the poison of infidelity, which has been so assiduously spread through the land [and] to show the inhabitants the misery of a fallen state, the odiousness and danger of vice, the gulph [sic] of eternal destruction which is before them, and to urge them to flee to Him, who alone can deliver from the wrath to come.”

In reality, however, the Village Itinerancy Society was interdenominational only to the degree that it was patronized by evangelical paedo-baptists and Calvinistic Dissenters and Meth-

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38 For example, the London Missionary Society in 1795 and the Religious Tract Society in 1799 later followed by the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1804 and the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews in 1809. See R. H. Martin, “The Pan-Evangelical Impulse in Britain 1795-1830; With Special Reference to Four London Societies” (Oxford D.Phil. Thesis 1974).


40 New College: MS 57 (Minutes) 4 August 1806.


42 Ibid., pp. 29, 31f.
odists and a handful of irregular evangelical clergymen. Prominent patrons included one or two Anglicans like Thomas Haweis, episcopal minister at Aldwincle, Northamptonshire, and John Eyre with whom we have already met, several Calvinistic Methodists and ministers of Lady Huntingdon's Connexion like W. F. Platt and Matthew Wilks, both of London, and a rather large number of Independents or Congregationalists, the most well-known being David Bogue of Gosport, George Collison of Walthamstow near London, and Joseph Hardcastle (a layman) also from London, who was Treasurer of the London Missionary Society. There is some reason to believe that at least some of the more catholic of the Society's founders might have welcomed Wesleyan and Baptist patronage, but these denominations, for rather obvious reasons, did not choose to join the Society. The Wesleyans, of course, were already a connexion composed principally of itinerant ministers, and even though some, like William Church, joined the Society after becoming Calvinists, there was little or no cooperation between the two evangelical groups. The Baptists initially gave encouragement to the Society and patronized some of its sister organizations at a more substantial level; but they too had their own itinerancy society by 1797 to which most of their money was directed.

If the Wesleyans and the Baptists were never realistically expected to patronize the Village Itinerancy Society, the Anglicans were, and their reluctance to join forces with the Dissenters proved to be not only the Society's greatest disappointment, but also an occasion for major friction. To many churchmen, especially those

43 "Irregular" was a term of opprobrium used by eighteenth and nineteenth century clergymen to describe fellow Anglicans who continued to itinerate outside their parishes. John Eyre, Rowland Hill and Thomas Haweis all fit this category.

44 Church says that in 1784 he was asked by Thomas Coke, the well known Wesleyan, to "engage in the work of the ministry" but instead spent ten years of his life "to little or no purpose." In 1794, he began visiting "poor outcasts of society in several workhouses" before joining the Village Itinerancy Society. New College: MS 41/13 (Letters) W. Church to J. Eyre, 15 September 1797.

45 The Bedfordshire Union of Christians, a sister organization, on the other hand, enjoyed the warm support of the Methodist New Connexion founded by Alexander Kilham. See Wesleyan Historical Society Proceedings, Vol. 28, p. 95.


not evangelical, institutions like the Village Itinerancy Society were highly suspect both ecclesiastically and politically. Samuel Horsley, Bishop of Rochester, for example, was concerned in 1800 with the "new conventicles . . . formed of one knows not what denomination," by "an illiterate peasant or mechanic" who bribes the poor to send their children to affiliated Sunday schools "rather than to those connected with the Established Church, in which they would be bred in the principles of true religion and loyalty." However, he was even more fearful of the Society's political motivations. "It is very remarkable," Horsley pointed out to his diocese, that "these new congregations of non-descripts have been mostly formed since the Jacobins have been laid under the restraint of those two most salutary statutes, commonly known by the names of the sedition and treason bill—a circumstance which gives much ground for suspicion that sedition and atheism are the real objects of these institutions, rather than religion." The charges of Horsley and his fellow bishops, evident much later in Lord Sidmouth's Bill of 1811 which attempted to put new controls on itinerant preaching, were disclaimed by Society patrons like John Eyre, who pointed out that his society and others like it had "rendered an essential service to the State, by turning the attention of the people from political debates to subjects of higher importance." William Kingsbury wrote similarly that "the religion of the Bible, which we teach, and which we wish to be more generally known in all our hamlets and villages, forbids every thing which borders on sedition and treason; condemns those who 'despise governments, are self-willed, and speak evil of dignities;' inculcates submission, subordination, and obedience to God; enjoins to 'honor the King,' and to 'pray for all that are in authority.'" So too, the bishops were assured that the Village Itinerancy Society only sent out its itinerants "into places where [church] services are seldom performed, or at uncertain hours, which the parishoners are not apprized of" and even then, like Wesley, exhorted their hearers "to attend the nearest church, when they could." Still, the Society continued to be vigorously opposed by most Anglican clergymen in ways not unlike the opposition experienced by Wesleyan itinerants. In 1799, Richard Densham

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48 Cited in Evangelical Magazine, April 1801, p. 161f.
49 Ibid., p. 164.
50 Kingsbury, op. cit., p. 29.
51 Ibid., p. 31.
complained that at Haslemere in Surrey, "the clergy are dissatisfied. I find, they endeavour to persuade the people that we not only want to establish a new religion but also a new government. . . ." 52 This kind of fear would often incite local mobs to do violence to itinerant preachers as Densham complained one year later after a trip to Rogate in Sussex:

Soon after I read my text they began to throw rotten eggs & make a noise to disturb the people & many of the more abandoned raised the dust by throwing it with their hands, etc. Soon after I began my sermon an egg struck me on the back part of my head and run’d down my back which render’d my situation unpleasant from the dreadful stench I endured all the time of preaching. . . . When I went to the public house one of the farmers who is the churchwarden came to me and wished me to desist from coming again as he thought there would be still greater opposition.53

and at Elstead:

The mob was large & outrageous & if possible worse than Rogate. All the people who were disposed to hear came into the field; but so violent was the noise that I got quite hoarse by endeavouring to make the people hear that stood round me. They had not only all kinds of rough music but they hollered with all their might so that my voice was almost drowned. They ran round the hedges like mad bulls or rather like incarnate devils.54

Like the Wesleyans, the lives of Society itinerants would often be in jeopardy from mob violence. For example, a Mr. Griffith had to leave Alton in Hampshire at the end of a sermon that he had preached on behalf of the Society "literally at the hazzard of [his] life." 55

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52 New College: MS 41/46 (Letters) R. Densham to J. Eyre, 5 June 1799. According to Waddington, the Society was opposed in Sussex by the Rev. Robert Hardy, Curate of Westbourne, Vicar of Stoughton and East Marsden and Chaplain to the Prince of Wales, who published a pamphlet entitled *An Address to the Loyal Volunteer Corps of Great Britain*, warning his flock against the seditious designs of the Village Itinerancy Society. See Waddington, op. cit., p. 73.

53 New College: MS 41/69 (ii) (Letters) R. Densham to J. Eyre, 7 August 1800. Densham was so unpopular in Rogate, that when he died in 1803 "the bells were rung for joy." See New College: MS 55/1 (Minutes) 28 October 1803.


The Evangelical clergy did not participate openly in this kind of activity. Some, it is true, attended Village Itinerancy Society meetings and appeared to be “very kind and candid.” But most were suspicious of the Society and its patrons. This suspicion, needless to say, was stoked by the need to fend off High Church accusations that clergymen, by cooperating with the Dissenters, were openly favoring sectarians who were busy destroying the Anglican establishment. Many Evangelical Anglicans, for instance, could remember the support that the Congregationalist David Bogue of Gosport, a Society patron, had given the French Revolution in 1789, and even though Bogue had long since disowned his former pro-French sympathies, most Evangelical clergymen still feared that the Society harbored too many anti-Church and anti-State radicals. So, too, order-minded Evangelical clergymen questioned whether they could patronize episcopally unconsecrated churches which the Village Itinerancy Society hoped to establish, even in those “dark parishes” where a Church of England chapel could not be found. Finally, by 1800, if not long before, the concept of itinerating had lost favor with most Evangelical clergymen who now saw themselves as respected benefic priests, and felt guilty about the fact that their forefathers—irregulars like Berridge and Venn—had, by their itinerating activities, built up Dissent at the expense of their own national establishment. It was principally for these reasons that the Village Itinerancy Society could never bridge the gap between Church and Dissent and became, by the first decade of the nineteenth century, a predominantly Congregational organization.

The Village Itinerancy Society’s evolution into a branch of English Congregationalism was slow and complex and hinged in part on the lingering doubts many evangelicals still held regarding the legitimacy of an organization that remained untied to a recognized religious body. The Society’s founding fathers, mostly laymen themselves, rather naively believed that what the nation needed was an undenominational and, by implication, unordained army

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56 See New College: MS 41/39 (Letters) R. Densham to J. Eyre, 6 January 1799.
57 In this regard, Kingsbury had to admit that some of the Society’s patrons had been “blamable for rash expressions and conduct,” but questioned whether “a whole religious body [was] to be condemned for the folies of individuals.” Kingsbury, *op. cit.*, p. 27fn.
of itinerants charged with the awesome responsibility of bringing God's pure word, undefiled by party or sect, to a "perishing multitude." With the millennium at hand, there was little time to be spent on either the luxury of a theological education or the formality of an ordination. But it was the very issue of ordination which quickly proved to be as difficult a problem for the Village Itinerancy Society as it had long been for the Wesleyans. Because they had never received a proper ordination, many of the Society's more conscientious itinerants began to have serious scruples about administering the sacraments to their newly won converts which in tum made their ministries highly questionable in the eyes of the public. Nor was ordination something that could be secured easily; it usually required some form of theological education and, most importantly, membership in a church. Not surprisingly, many left their itinerant ministries after one or two years to seek a permanent charge in association with one of the denominations or to enter a seminary preparative to proper ordination. The Village Itinerancy Society tried to overcome this problem by having its ordained patrons ordain society itinerants; but though performed by well known ministers usually representing several denominations, these ordinations were still looked upon with suspicion as being out of step with established practice and tradition.

To make these ordinations more respectable, the Society established a theological college in 1803, and this, perhaps more than any other development, marked the most significant milestone in the Society's institutional evolution into a branch of English Congregationalism. Since 1800, John Eyre had made repeated application to Dissenting academies near London to provide the Village Itinerancy Society with educated itinerants, but without much success since these institutions usually supplied ministers only for established congregations. The problem was eventually resolved when Eyre established Hackney Seminary and appointed George Collison, Congregational minister at nearby Walthamston, as its first Principal. Hackney was different from most seminaries

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59 Nuttall, op. cit., p. 19f.
60 Cf. J. D. Walsh, op. cit., pp. 286-287.
61 William Church, for example, was ordained in 1797 in an undenominational service performed by Eyre, Wilks and others. Cf. New College: MS 41/10 (Letters) W. Church to J. Eyre, 8 August 1797. Cf. Evangelical Magazine, November 1797, p. 474f.
63 See New College: MS 43/3 (i) (Letters) G. Collison to the Committee of
of the day in at least two respects. In the first place, its purpose was to train men specifically for itinerant ministries, not for stated churches as did the more established Nonconformist academies of the day. Secondly, its course of instruction was to be greatly simplified to meet a radically new situation. Instead of concentrating on the more traditional subjects taught at places like Homerton and Hoxton, such as Hebrew and Greek "in which they were never to speak or write," Hackney students were to spend the majority of their time studying "solid Biblical and theological knowledge," and English grammar, courses they would be called upon to use in their itinerant ministries. It was not long, however, before Hackney went the way of the other seminaries by raising the sophistication of its curriculum and by sending the majority of its graduates to Congregational churches rather than into itinerant ministries. When this happened, the academy and the society out of which it had grown, became recognized agencies of the Congregational church. Most of the other undenominational itinerancy societies of the period followed similar patterns of development.

It was only a matter of time now before the practice of itinerating within Dissent would once again wane. There had always been a small but vocal faction with the evangelical camp who were proud of the congregational principles of their Puritan forebears and had no desire to sacrifice these principles for what they considered to be the innovating and highly unorthodox practices of the Wesleyans. As the so-called "denominational movements" gained in momentum during the first decade of the nineteenth century, and the first Congregational and Baptist Unions were experimented with, this faction gained in strength and prominence, and the practice of itinerating within Dissent slowly gave

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65 The union of the various nonconformist seminaries discussed in this paper are interesting. In 1825, Hoxton moved to a new building in Highbury which in turn amalgamated with two older academies to form New College, London. In 1938, Hackney amalgamated with New College which, until 1977, formed part of the University of London. At the death of the Countess of Huntingdon in 1791, Trevecka College moved from Wales to England to form Chestnut College which today is Chestnut College Cambridge. Likewise, in 1850, Newport Pagnell Academy joined with Chestnut College and is now affiliated with Westminster College Cambridge.
66 In 1806 the Congregationalists attempted to form a denominational union but with limited success. It was not until the third decade of the nineteenth cen-
way, once again, to a predominantly pastoral and stationary ministry. Yet even though organizations like the Village Itinerancy Society would no longer play a major role in the ministries of a future generation of English Dissenters, their historic contribution to the spread of Christianity and the legacy they left behind for an approaching ecumenical age cannot be disputed. Perhaps the practice of itinerating will always be associated with John Wesley and his followers, but as we have seen (and as contemporary Wesleyans would have been the first to point out), itinerating as a ministerial form in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was as much a cross-denominational phenomenon as the Evangelical Revival itself.

tury that union was finally achieved. The merger of many Calvinistic Methodist and Huntingdonian congregations with the Congregationalists during the early years of the nineteenth century helped this union movement along. Cf. W. R. Robinson, The History of the Lancashire Congregational Union (Manchester: 1955.)