

# The Swiss Catholic Mission [part II]

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1983)**

Heft 1807

PDF erstellt am: **17.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-690149>

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## Enter the missionary from Zimbabwe

**Fr Joseph Scherer  
(1958-1967)**

AN experienced parish priest from Finsterwald in the Entlebuch, 58 years old Fr Joseph Scherer, offered his services to assist Fr A. Lanfranchi in his pastoral care for the Swiss in London.

He was somewhat short, heavily built, slow in his movements, but steady and firm like a farmer from the interior of Lucerne.

How could the two, who were like fire and water, have coped with each other? Was it providence, that the quickwitted southerner from Poschiavo had to make room to let the slow northerner from central Switzerland give stability and firmness to the Mission?

The dream of having two priests came to an unexpected end and Fr Scherer began his work of consolidation with great caution and unerring tenacity.

He disengaged himself from the duties of parish priest around the neighbourhood of St. Ann's – and the English hierarchy was delighted.

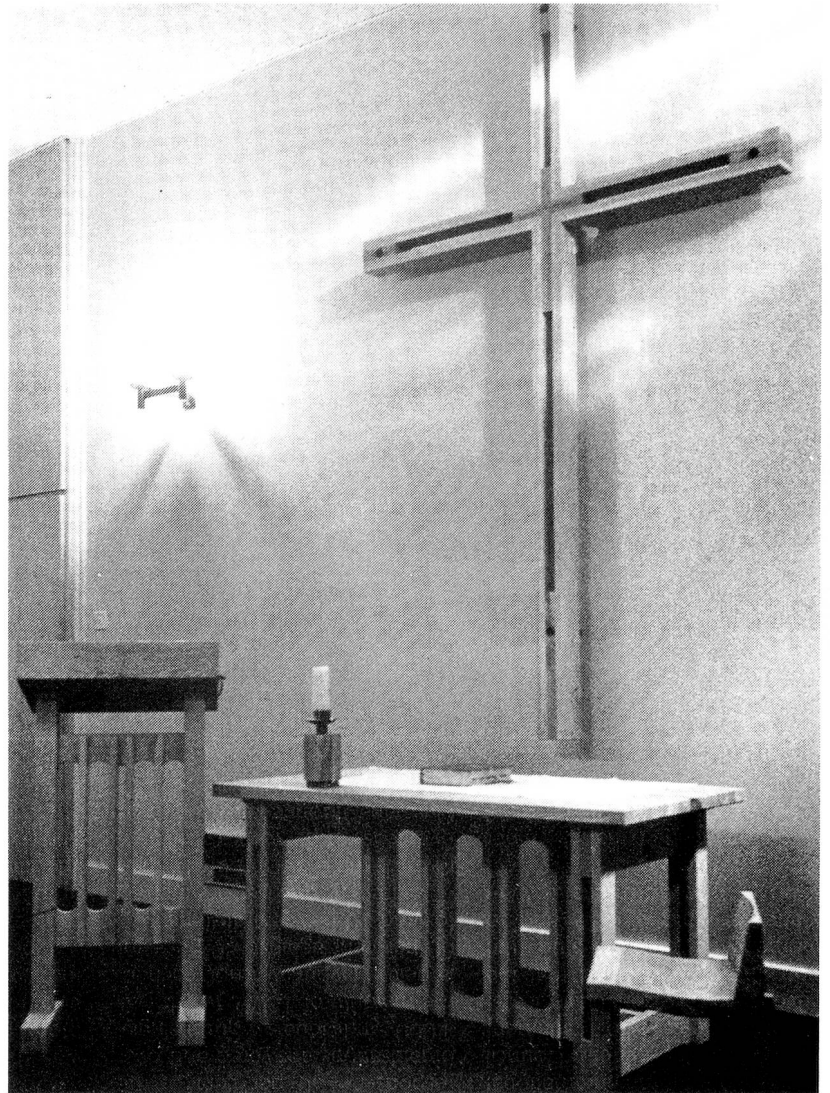
The young Swiss, who came in their thousands to England to learn the language, gain experience in industry and housework, and to get a taste of the world, attracted his attention.

They were the people who needed his fatherly care and not the residents, who were far better off in their local parish and were at home with the language and the customs of the English people.

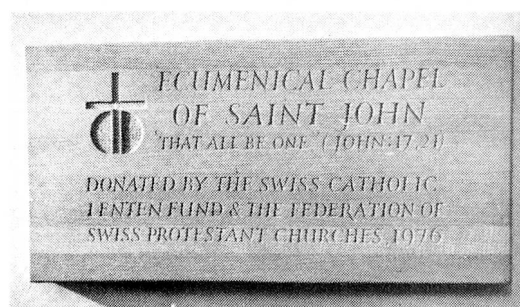
He reorganised the "Alpenrosen-Club", gave it a firm consti-

tution and then a place to meet in Westminster Ballroom. It became the "Swiss Catholic Youth Club".

The dance band of Charles MacGuigan, who Fr Scherer inspired to perform Swiss folklore and "Ländler", became a great attraction for the young Swiss,



*The new chapel*



especially when they felt lonely and homesick.

He changed the timetable to suit the young people, Sunday Mass was celebrated in the evenings, followed by entertainment and Swiss refreshments until 11pm.

He organised excursions into the countryside and to places of interest in London. With films and talks, he helped the young Swiss cope with the problems in a foreign world and inspired the older members of his club to become leaders and share the work of the organisation.

He found a young tailor, Bruno

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*Fr Paul Bossard and the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop B. Bruno Heim, in 1977*

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Frei, who became his right hand and has been a pillar of the Youth Club for two decades, to the present day.

With him, Fr Scherer discussed the programme and planned the pastoral work so that it never came second to entertainment. This sometimes led to a difference of opinion, but "Daddy" had to have the last word – after all, he was the parish priest who knew best, at least he thought so – and his sense of humour always prevented a breakdown in communication.

And the young people never resented his "paternal approach", in spite of the modern trends of anti-authoritarian education, which he abhorred like an invention of the devil.

Youth work became nearly a fulltime job and some of the resident Swiss were, at first, disappointed that he found so little time to visit them in their homes. But, slowly, they got the message and saw that it made sense. There is a difference between a Swiss Church and a

Swiss Catholic Mission, which helps those in need find the way towards integration.

The committee was happy that the chaplain gave the Mission a solid foundation and with the way he got on with his colleagues at the nearby cathedral by keeping his distance. They called him jokingly the "Teddy-Bear" of St. Ann's, who kept to his cave and fought for his youngsters.

But his greatest achievement was that he succeeded in capturing the interest of the bishops in Switzerland who began to appreciate the great work that was done for young people in London.

And they saw that it needed not only blessings and encouragement, but also financial help. So the greatest worry of the committee, to meet rising costs and carry the sole responsibility for the upkeep of the chaplain and the Mission, was solved.

Two members of the committee, Mr J.J. Boos and Mr Oskar Grob, were rewarded by the Pope for their outstanding service with the title of Knights of the Order of St. Gregory.

And, on his return to Switzerland in November 1967, after nine years devoted work, Fr. J. Scherer was awarded the title of Monsignor. This is how the Catholic Church shows its appreciation for faithful work well done.

### **Fr Paul Bossard (1967-1983)**

It was left to a missionary from Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) to bring the work of the Mission to an end.

When it was established in 1942, the members of the Eglise Suisse were assured that the Swiss Catholic Mission would not enter into unfair competition and foster denominational strife. Therefore, the chaplains saw it as their duty to cooperate as much as possible with the ministers and the consistory of the Swiss Protestant Churches.

The ice of mutual distrust began to melt and the first flowers of ecumenical cooperation appeared like a crocus on an alpine meadow.

With Rev A. Nicod, M. Dietler and U. Stefan, the new chaplain Fr Paul Bossard built a "Swiss

Church Association" in 1969. The programme of youth work among the Swiss was organised in mutual cooperation. Regular pastoral meetings fostered friendship and brought greater insight into the problems of young people in London.

The chaplain, with his protestant colleagues, even tried his luck with charter flights, £19 London-Zürich return.

The flights caused a few headaches, a few smiles and nearly a court case, but they also prepared the ground and the Swiss Protestants were offered the hospitality of St. Ann's Church when they lost their place of worship in June 1969. It brought Protestants and Catholics in London very close together.

In February 1972, St Ann's Church had to be closed down. It stood in the way of city planners who had great ambitions for Victoria Street.

What could the little church, with its leaking roof, do against big business? It was closed down, remained closed for eight years and, finally, it was pulled down with the other buildings around it.

A huge empty building site is still waiting for the builders to move in. The chaplain, with his Protestant friends and his Swiss youth, had to move out more than 10 years ago.

Cardinal Heenan offered him an old building at 48 Great Peter Street.

It had once housed the "Alpenrosen-Club" of Fr Lanfranchi. With great enthusiasm, the young Swiss began working, under the guidance of their chaplain, to put it in order and form it into a home for their club. Repairs were needed from top to bottom.

The local neighbourhood got involved too, and with it, the Inner London Education Authority. And so the Swiss became part of local activities.

The English were surprised that Catholics and Protestants worked so well together and so were the Irish. For quite a few years, the Swiss Club made two-week excursions to Ireland in horsedrawn caravans.

Once, there were as many as 75 young people who travelled through the Irish countryside in 15 caravans, displaying their Swiss flags, singing at the campfires and entertaining the public. But it was the ecumenical spirit which gave these ventures the real impact for the young people themselves and for those they met.

When the chaplain and his protestant colleagues suddenly found themselves without a church, a presbytery and proper accommodation, they found a home for the Swiss Youth Club.

The office and the accommodation came a year later, but the place of worship and Sunday service seemed to pose an impossible problem.

The dance hall, the bar and a conference-room had to be turned into a chapel with the help of the young people, who at first liked the idea and liked this kind of improvisation – but slowly they began to miss the atmosphere of a church or a chapel. Holy Mass or

an ecumenical service in a dance hall was all right for a change, but not for ever.

Who would finance a church or a chapel for the young Swiss in London? It was sheer madness to think or dream about it. But the chaplain was dreaming and could not help it. At the right moment, he jumped – and got permission to make his dream true.

The money came from Switzerland, from Catholic and Protestant sources. The permission came from Cardinal Heenan.

In February 1977, the Apostolic Delegate consecrated the new ecumenical chapel. It was dedicated to St John the Apostle "That all be one" (John 17/21). The Pope's representative had to use Anglican holy water for it since Fr Paul, as usual, had forgotten to provide for such minor details and his colleague at the nearby Anglican Church, St Matthews, was quick and only too pleased to step in.

The chapel was small but beautiful, thanks to three members of the Devon Guild of Craftsmen, Peter Tysoe, the artist in coloured windows, Alan Peters, the cabinet-maker, and Ronald Parsons, the carver.

It was a day of great joy. Everything had gone so well, the Swiss Youth Club was in bloom, Catholics and Protestants had a sign of ecumenical cooperation, built in stone and decorated in wood. So it should remain for many years to come.

But it was a "Mission" and the former "missionary" had to be reminded that success means fulfilment and that the mission has come to an end. The change of times was not so easy to accept, but it became obvious.

The world recession and England's membership of the EEC made it more and more difficult for young Swiss to find work. The club slowly lost its sturdy supporters and, without men, how could the au pair girl enjoy the usual dance on Sunday

evening?

And Swiss neutrality became such an inbred virtue of young people, that it was applied also to church service and worship. By 1981, the membership of the club, which had fallen year by year, reached such a low level that people became concerned about how to make use of the two religious centres, the Eglise Suisse in Endell Street and the Swiss Catholic Mission in Great Peter Street. Ministers stood before empty benches. What could be done?

The "Eglise Suisse" was more important than the supporting Swiss Catholic Mission – and a missionary should know it. The bloom of the ecumenical work must bear fruit or it dies. Can a Protestant minister give service to Catholics if they are in need? Why not?

So the Swiss bishops took the decision and gave instructions to hand the Mission over to the local Bishop, Cardinal G. Basil Hume,

of Westminster.

He blessed the decision and handed the chapel and the residence of the chaplain over to an Indian Priest, Fr Arthur Moraes, who has been given the task to start an Asian Mission, just as Fr A. Lanfranchi started the Swiss Mission 40 years ago. The Mission remains, but missionaries change.

On looking back over these 40 years of the Swiss Catholic Mission, we might be able to see a powerful movement, the bow-string stretched to breaking point, the heavy bow releasing its strength and the arrow hitting the target.

It was an excellent archer who knew how to make the best use of his tools. Who will give him a name? What name can we humans give to somebody who is beyond?

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*Charles MacGuigan's dance band became a great attraction for the young Swiss, especially when they felt homesick*