

Representatives from the Church, politics, industry and the Third World met in London this weekend for the 50th anniversary of the Moral Re-Armament movement (MRA). A service of "thanksgiving and anticipation" took place in St Margaret's, Westminster, yesterday. Among those present were Cardinal Franz Koenig, former Archbishop of Vienna, and Bishop Gordon Wheeler, retired Bishop of Leeds.

ASKING what Moral Re-Armament is, apart from the people it has touched, is a bit like asking what a wave is, without the water.

It can best be described as an invisible catalyst, a movement founded on a simple philosophy which has exerted an amazing influence on world events.

The name "Moral Re-Armament" conjures up images of stout campaigning matrons determined to bring back the birch and disinfect San Francisco. But such associations could not be less descriptive of MRA.

The movement was founded before World War Two by Frank Buchman, an American of Swiss descent, as a means to bring about changes in society at every level. MRA has never had signed-up members or a structure of committee. It is made up of people who have been touched by its basic philosophy and who try to put it into practice.

Its basic nature was described by Mr Michael Smith, one of the full-time MRA workers based at London's Westminster Theatre, "We see MRA as a living organism which looks outwards," he said. "It has often been described with the old cliché - we are not about getting people

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into a movement, but getting movement into people."

Another worker, Mary Lean, explained the simple philosophy which underlies MRA. "We aim towards honesty, purity, love and unselfishness in our everyday lives," she said. "There is also a daily search for God's guidance through the practice of a 'quiet time'." These aims are accompanied by a belief in the existence of objective moral principals and an urge to help society rediscover them.

On the level of international relations, MRA played an important part in reconciling the nations of Europe after the last War, and in the peaceful resolution of conflicts which accompanied the independence of African nations.

What MRA actually did was simple enough. It brought people together, sat them down, and let them make their own peace. An idea of almost naive simplicity; but one which worked.

The focus for many of these meetings was the conference centre at Caux in Switzerland. A former hotel, it was bought after the War with pennies supplied by Swiss families determined to see peace.

It was at Caux that Hans Bockler, President of the German Trade Unions shook hands with George Villiers, President of the French Employers' Federation, who had spent time in a concentration camp. It was also



● MRA conference centre, Mountain House, Caux

Peace on the agenda

at Caux that former Resistance worker Irene Laure overcame her hatred of Germany and set out to build bridges between the scarred people of Europe by organising speaking tours.

One of the best-known by-products of MRA initiative was the Alcoholics Anonymous programme which now helps millions of people around the world.

Today, MRA is still keeping its finger on the pulse of world events and needs. This summer's conference programme at Caux includes conferences on health care, change in the cities and men, money and morality.

MRA's British conference centre at Tirley Garth in Cheshire is a hive of activity. Recent events have included conferences on the National Health Service, and urban community life.

Operations in this country look to the Westminster Theatre as their centre, though staff based there see their role as enablers rather than controllers. Books, videos and other educational materials can be bought at the theatre, and it is there that the MRA magazine *For a Change* is produced. The theatre itself is used for top quality productions with wide appeal and a

"moral" core.

Most of those connected with MRA weave it into their normal working lives. It does not involve a lifetime commitment; some are touched by it, then move away, but few are said to forget its lure. There are 16 residential centres in Britain, where volunteers work full-time for MRA. They are financed entirely by donations from supporters.

The movement does not teach religious dogma, and members are encouraged to remain fully committed to their own Churches. As Mary Lean explained: "Sometimes in the past, some individuals may have felt MRA was a substitute for their church life. But now there is a universal recognition of the need to work in and with the established Churches."

Relations with the Vatican have been turbulent. At first all was well. On the first anniversary of the launch of MRA, the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* headed its report "The supremacy of spiritual and moral values for the peace of the world."

Vatican suspicions developed, however, due to fears that MRA's ecumenical outlook might lead those Catholics involved to weaken their commitment to the Church. In 1951 the Holy Office gave a warning to Catholics: that clergy and nuns should not take part in MRA meetings without its permission, and that the faithful should not take on any position of responsibility within the movement.

But Catholics continued to go to Caux, and the following year Mgr Fischer, Dean of the Cathedral of Strasbourg, wrote: "The first thing that strikes us in Caux is the nagging of our conscience. I believe that outside the religious orders, there is no place on the face of the earth where so much prayer goes up." According to a biography of the movement's founder, published by Garth Lean, differences arose through a misunderstanding on the part of the Vatican that MRA was a "secret society".

By 1960 Cardinal Tisserant, the Dean of the College of Cardinals, was said to have let Frank Buchman know that a new attitude to MRA was on the way. The relationship with Rome continued to improve. Some 10 years later it is said that Cardinal Ottaviani remarked: "There was a misunderstanding, but it is now over." These days, fears have calmed and Cardinal Koenig of Vienna is one of MRA's most staunch public supporters.

The newly published biography of Frank Buchman describes the formation of the "Oxford Group" in the early 1930s which paved the way for the launch of MRA. Buchman said these undergraduates believed: "that if they fully committed their lives to God they would, in the future, see transformation in social and national affairs around them."