

OXFORD GROUP IN NATAL

HOTELS FILLED AT
UMKOMAAS

MANY SUPPORTERS

MOVEMENT ATTRACTS
DEEP INTEREST

(By Our Special Representative.)

Umkomaas, Aug. 25.—This little township, which is becoming increasingly popular as a seaside resort, is this week the centre of a remarkable gathering of people interested in the Oxford Group movement.

The Group began its activities in this country three years ago, and since then hundreds of people have fallen under its spiritual spell, while thousands of others are manifesting a keen interest in its doings. Already the Group appears to have vitally changed the outlook of many lives, and it is at present stimulating a deeper interest in a practical religion.

Who would have imagined, a few years ago, with attendances at Church services showing a steady decrease and the strict observance of Sunday as a purely religious festival fast disappearing, that a movement with Christianity as the basis of all its teachings, would suddenly arise, as it were, "out of the blue," and make a fresh appeal merely by the method of discussing religion in the light of every day experiences and in a language that can be easily understood?

The first message of the Oxford Group was brought to South Africa in 1927 by a Rhodes scholar named Dick Richardson, who, incidentally, was Captain of Boxing at Oxford. It was received with open arms, and, as a result, in 1929, a party of 19 men and women, under the leadership of Dr. Frank Buchman, the founder of the movement, visited the Union.

The interest then manifested was remarkable. Over 1,000 citizens attended a reception in Johannesburg. In Pretoria, where a meeting was held in the City Hall without previous advertisement, the hall was packed with 1,100 people. Two hundred, including the late Administrator of the Transvaal, were turned away. At the time one of the senior Provincial officials said he had never seen such interest at a meeting, even in the fever of election time.

House Parties.

In Capetown, Durban and Bloemfontein successful house parties were also held. After Frank Buchman's departure a team of 12 revisited the house party centres, where local groups were established. As an index to the effectiveness of the work, 22 groups met regularly on the Rand, while a combined meeting of Cape Peninsula groups numbered 500 people.

During last month a new Oxford Group team left England for South Africa. On arriving at Capetown it split up into two parties, one of 20 journeying to Natal, while the remainder set out for Bulawayo. The Natal party were accorded an enthusiastic reception in Durban, and on Friday left for Umkomaas, where a large house

Visiting this seaside resort on Saturday morning to obtain an insight into the work of the Group, I was astonished to discover that, with one exception, every hotel in Umkomaas was packed out with supporters of this new movement. Altogether there are over 180 Group adherents here from all over the Union—rich and poor, managers of large businesses, young men and women just out of school—all on the closest terms with one another. It is something entirely different from what I expected to find. This is no dull and serious religious gathering, but just a happy band of people trying to find the best way of serving God and their fellows.

It is impressive to find young men, who have done well on the field of sport, voluntarily attending meetings of at least 90 minutes' duration, four times a day, and perfectly happy to be doing so. Probably if anyone had suggested to them a short while ago that they would soon spend a week-end listening to intimate discussions based on religion they would have scoffed at the idea. A remote possibility has, however, become an accomplished fact. The major proportion of those at the house party are of the younger generation and not elderly people, as might be imagined.

Racial Friendship.

One of the most interesting possibilities of the movement is that it will make a valuable contribution to further racial conciliation between the Dutch and English-speaking communities of the Union. There is a fair sprinkling of Afrikaners here at the house party, some of whom have come from the Free State. Last year, when the Group was in Bloemfontein, great work was accomplished among many bitter racialists, who were made to see the folly of narrow racial outlooks.

The first meeting in the usual daily programme is held at 9 a.m. This is devoted to a "quiet time" and Bible study. At eleven o'clock the group divides up into different sections and personal problems, which various sects of the community are called upon to face, are freely discussed.

The afternoon session, which is usually the most important, begins at 4.30. There are three speakers, who talk on the governing principles of Christian life, with personal illustrations and experiences. The evening gathering is reserved for a general discussion. All the meetings are conducted by members of the team, who are fortunate in having an audience which is ever eager to absorb everything said. On Saturday afternoon the dangers and evils of selfishness were pointed out by three members, all of whom related the experiences, difficulties and faults of their past lives, and showed how, by means of this new faith, they had overcome their problems.

I found something almost uncanny in the manner in which groups of young men gathered for Bible study. It seemed to be as natural to them to pray together as it is usually natural to speak of trivial things. Humour, natural and spontaneous, broke out every now and then, but at the same time there was the deepest reverence. It is claimed that the movement holds out an appeal to every man and woman. Certainly, it is a proved fact that through its teachings many a sinner has been reformed and is now living a deeply religious and happy life. The many testimonials offered at the evening sessions are definite proof of this. One cannot help feeling, however, that it is mainly among people with a natural religious bent and a strong conscience that the work of the Group arouses the deepest enthusiasms.

The object and aims of the movement will be dealt with in another article which will appear in to-morrow's issue of "The Natal Mercury."