

# For such a time as this...

There are few men who have a better grasp of the gospel situation in Wales than David Ollerton (chairman of Wales wide), and Stuart Olyott (Pastoral Director of the EMW). Both men have spent years visiting, encouraging and learning from churches throughout Wales. We caught up with them to hear what they've learned.

## How do you view our present situation?

**Stuart:** I think the average Christian in Wales is bewildered. They've lost confidence that by proclaiming the gospel, and praying for God's blessing on it, that very much is going to happen. People are far less confident to bring their unconverted friends to church, or even to invite them.

**David:** The amount of personal witness and the expectation in preaching is lower in this decade than I've ever known. If you were to ask, 'If you were to share the gospel with your next-door neighbour, do you have a high expectation they might become believers?', I think that answer would be 'No'. There's a crisis of confidence.

## What's caused this lack of confidence?

**David:** In the reformed community although we preach the gospel on a Sunday night, the gospel in a missiological sense has gone off the agenda: we've focused on ecclesiastical and doctrinal matters. In the hope of seeing growth in the charismatic community there's been a faddism: people have lurched from one latest idea to another, but the gospel has not been one of the fads. And we're still suffering the landslide of decline caused by theological liberalism which poisoned churches in every village.

**Stuart:** Forty-five years ago, most people in Wales had no regular attendance at any place of worship. But they still had some sense that even though they didn't go there, that chapel was theirs. They did at least have some form of exterior sympathy with Christianity, and it wasn't a taboo idea to go into a place of worship. The culture's changed vastly since then, and there's been a progressive de-Christianisation.

## What do we do about it? Can you give examples?

**David:** Often churches do not have meaningful bridges to unconverted people upon which the gospel can cross. In church planting in Porthcawl, every church member needed to have what we called their impact group. For one evangelistic supper I had

a whole table from my Welsh class. If I hadn't have gone into an unchurched community, I wouldn't have been able to have that engagement.

**Stuart:** I'd go with that. People who are in work have a terrific opportunity, but that opportunity is increased if we can lay on meetings that they are truly comfortable to bring their unconverted friends to. Several times a year we have meetings on a pre-announced subject that have no hymns, prayers, or readings. The series is 'If you could ask God one question...', and the question might be 'Why are so many kids becoming dysfunctional?' There are abundant refreshments, an open question time and plenty of time to talk.

**David:** Liz, my wife, teaches parenting. It's not a directly Christian course, but uses Christian principles. With another lady she wrote another optional session: looking after the spiritual needs of your child. Five ladies came on the parenting course. Because they'd been helped, and relationships had been built, they all came on the additional session. By the end, issues were raised about God and they all came on an *Alpha* course. They all made commitments, all were added to the church, and all have gone on with Christ. You've got a chain connection here. Their husbands – all five of them – started coming to church, then to *Christianity Explored*. Most have since made commitments to Christ. So, in that church, there are five couples, all of them in their early thirties, five sets of kids, and most of the men converted. The parenting thing was one of the links in a chain: a felt need was engaged, then the Christian relevance to that felt need, and then an explanation of the gospel.

## So, the evangelistic service is dead?

**Stuart:** I still think there is a place for a straightforward gospel service. Preaching remains God's prime tool for opening hearts, and all over the UK there are regular conversions in what people call 'old-fashioned Gospel Services'.

**David:** We have to do it in a way that is meaningful and accessible to non-church people, and not just Victorian religiosity. I'm not talking about hymns. Abandoning hymns and becoming just style, performance, band, noise and media presentation, won't help. I'm talking about the impersonal 'you sit in your pew and I'll sit in mine'. Warmth and relational credibility are integral and need to go hand in hand with the gospel. We need to move away from being austere and formalistic. The church is people, not an order of service or a building. We need to be enthused by the wonder of the gospel. You can go into some churches and it's a like walking into St Fagans! I don't think that helps the gospel.

**Stuart:** Yes. We need churches where folk get a real and sincere welcome, where there is a culture of hospitality, and where they are taught truth meaningfully from Scripture.

## What of the future?

**Stuart:** Some of our young people are of extraordinary quality and are the most encouraging Christians imaginable. They speak up for Christ, suffer horrendous ostracism or persecution, and yet remain true and steady. There are also fine young men training for the ministry, who are compelling preachers with godly lives, and very aware of the times in which they live.

**David:** Within Welsh speaking churches there are far more young people training for ministry than there have been for a whole generation.

**Stuart:** Yes, that's a major encouragement.

## So, things are looking good?

**Stuart:** I wouldn't want the article to breed any sense of 'We're doing ok', because I don't think we are doing ok. Even some of our strongest churches are not as strong as they believe, because of their age profiles. I preached at a 'strong' church recently, with an exemplary gospel minister. But within ten years it's hard to see how that church can have a full-time pastor. And just as importantly, I'm distressed that there are still significant communities in Wales where there is no gospel church. By any human measurement there's not much chance of things being done in the near future.

**David:** There are no evangelical churches in Builth Wells, Rhayader, Harlech, Dolgellau, Llandysul, Corwen...

**Stuart:** ...and there are places which have evangelical ministers – Blaenau Ffestiniog for example – where there isn't actually a gospel church...

**David:** ...and there's no gospel impact into the community.

**Stuart:** Exactly. But there are other places where there is a gospel church, but it's incredibly weak. We need gospel venture into these areas where there are no gospel churches. We need some means of helping weak churches. We've got to keep flagging this up. Without some spirit of adventure, I don't see how anything's ever going to get done.

## What role should churches play?

**Stuart:** The first step is the most important. Churches have to realise they have a particular responsibility to the hinterland. Paul founded a church in Ephesus, but it was the Ephesus church that did the evangelising round the Ephesus area.

**David:** I was in a small denominational church recently that has an evangelical minister. If other churches who share his values can't resource and commit and pray and visit, what will happen? Are there ten churches who, as well as supporting mission in Bosnia, will support mission into places like this? We have to work in that way. There's also an outstanding, committed young man in the congregation. What training does he need? Rather than dragging him to college, can he do theological education by extension? There is a great need for training people who are going to be tent-making and church planting. We don't do that terribly well.

**Stuart:** No, we don't. Frankly, that town should have had an evangelical church years ago. Evangelical churches within reach should take the town onboard.

Take a different example. How far is Pontyberem from Swansea, or Carmarthen? It's not any great distance. So those are the churches that should be saying, 'Surely here is a town with no significant gospel witness, we have to do something!' And they should not be content until they've been able to do something. Some-how we've got to breed that consciousness without imposing some form of disabling guilt.

If a church feels it's too small to start a plant, they can do what we did when I was in Switzerland, where we started satellite Bible studies. Some of those have since become churches, and some of those have remained satellite Bible studies, but at least there are lots of places that still have a gospel witness, and have had for the last thirty years.

But we must not stop praying for an awakening and a movement of the Spirit in the nation. That is one of our duties and delights. It's not our only duty, but it is nonetheless our duty: Scripture calls us to pray for the work of the Holy Spirit at this hour.

***By Stuart Olyott and David Ollerton who were talking to Mark Barnes,***

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