



The Messenger

No 24

Summer 2022

www.buw.wales

Ministry in the City
All change?
Moving on from Covid

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After two years of lockdown we are seeing the church re-emerge. Some chapels are re-opening, church programmes are restarting. Some chapels have taken the difficult decision to close. Although it is with sadness that we see this we are able to rejoice in what God has done through them over the years. We are also able to pray for those who have been released to serve God in pastures new.

If we are not careful we will see 'Lockdown' as a digression rather than part of the story. Lockdown for many of us meant learning to use digital technology in a way that we were not familiar with. That is not the lesson that I will take away. The lessons that I will take away are the relearning of ancient truths about fellowship and worship. In a Zoom meeting I saw peoples' faces, we interacted with each other, we prayed for each other, our churches, our communities, the world. We explored the Bible together learning from each other's insights and experience.

We learnt that you could worship without music, a necessity for some as the quality of the speakers they were listening through did not make the music a particularly worshipful experience.

I hope that we learn those lessons and do not just go back to the way things were (the way things were had led us into decades of decline). The lessons are a challenge to every church leader, to every congregation. How do we change what we do to keep the interaction and participation of all? How do we redesign our buildings so that we do not spend the service seeing only the back of the heads of our fellow worshippers?

I am retiring later this year but I look forward to a new generation of ministers leading us into new pastures, new experiences of worship and to a God who is able to bring new treasures out of his store-house.

Steve Wallis, BUW Outgoing President



Mission notes - all change?

The pandemic is, hopefully, finally receding into the past, but it's slowly becoming clear how some of its effects may remain with us for good. This includes things like working from home, changed shopping habits and loneliness not to mention the millions now suffering from long Covid. It would be surprising if we didn't see continuing effects on our church lives too after one of the largest shocks to our way of life and doing things in decades. Let's be honest with ourselves – a lot of us are tired and are still trying to recover from these experiences.

Our recent survey of churches across the Union (and thanks to everyone for your responses) has helpfully shown us some of the patterns and trends. A larger number of churches than ever before (20 at the last count) have decided to close this year, after a dip in 2020 and 2021, and many have told us they think the future is uncertain. This is reflected nationally, with many media outlets reporting on the modelling done by John Hayward at the University of South Wales which shows that at the present rate of decline many denominations (including Welsh Presbyterians, Congregationalists and the Church in Wales) will be gone by the mid 2040s. While our rate of decline is slower than this, overall, statistically, we are following a similar path. But at the same time, every situation is different; some noted in our survey that 'things are on the up with us' while others have been experimenting with different ways to meet and to reach out to their community (see the 'news' section on our website for several examples of this from Llangefni, Knighton and Cwmcarn).

This openness to change is surely a wise response to changing times.

Many of us - including people from almost 50 churches across both wings of the Union - have benefited from the input on the Ethos and Explore courses run with Cam Roxburgh. The point of this has not been to give churches a simple list of steps to follow but to focus on the heart; what is the church here for? What are the basics of life together as we follow Jesus? We have seen how it is from these central questions that mission flows out into the community, village or town. All of this is long-term – not a quick fix!

So we're delighted to say that Cam has agreed to work with us on the next stage of the journey, as we look to start taking small steps over the coming years to put what we've learnt into practice. We will be meeting together once a month over zoom, learning from Cam and listening to each other's stories as we try out a few new things in our churches. If you're interested but unsure and would like a chat about the course, please email simeon@ubc.cymru or carwyn@ubc.cymru

It seems unlikely that the future of Christian witness in Wales will involve full chapels as in days gone by; but the church has always been at base a group of believers, committed to each other and to the Lord Jesus, and sharing the good news with those around them. That much hasn't changed.

Carwyn Graves (mission officer)



'I wasn't looking to leave my work here' says Rosa over coffee in a café in the village of Tonteg on the outskirts of Cardiff. 'I think I had expected that I would stay here until I retired, to be honest! This is where we live as a family - we feel part of the community.' But God opened a different door, in the first instance through the bicentenary celebrations of a chapel a few miles away in the city centre.

Calling

Rosa was invited to preach at the end of 2021 as part of the celebrations at Tabernacle in the Hayes, Cardiff and decided to challenge the audience by asking what kind of church would be there in another hundred years' time. But after that service Rhys ab Owen, one of the deacons, contacted Rosa to see whether she would be willing to meet the church officers for a conversation. The church wanted to do more to reach the community, was looking for a new minister and wanting Rosa's views as a result of the work in Tonteg.

'I was happy to have a conversation with them, of course', said Rosa, 'but for me there was nothing more than that to it. But when I was there with them, listening, I suddenly felt God stirring something inside me - what was stopping me from going to them as minister?'

Another meeting was organized, and was accompanied by an unexpected dream Rosa had that seemed to confirm her growing sense that it would be OK for her to leave Salem. 'And the questions the deacons in Tabernacle put to me were so good when I met with them! They clearly want to discern God's leading, and were emphasizing that the church must serve the people around in the strength of the gospel and not just act as a social club - although I appreciate the fact that they love and enjoy each other's company!'

They followed the normal process of meetings and sermons to test the calling, and by the time of the vote Rosa hoped that the church would call her. Hearing then that the result of the vote was unanimous seemed to be another clear indication of God's leading in the matter. As Rhys ab Owen, put it, 'We are delighted that God has led Rosa to be the 11th minister on Tabernacle. The whole congregation is looking forward to an exciting new chapter.'

Stepping forward

What did she think would be the biggest challenge, we asked Rosa over coffee. 'Well, although I have learnt Welsh and have served as minister for a Welsh-language chapel, there are things about the culture I haven't understood yet! And the language question is a big one for a church like Tabernacle in Cardiff city centre. How can we reach the communities in the city through and not despite the fact that we are a Welsh-speaking church?'

She stresses that the vision for the way forward will be for the church to pray and discern together. 'But there's a lot of potential in terms of our location in the city centre, and the needs there. No other nonconformist denomination has a church in the centre now at all. So is there a way we can keep our doors open all week, perhaps? Offer something very different - a quiet sanctuary in the heart of the city's bustle, and invite people to pray?' Whatever the century ahead, the next years of Tabernacle are full of potential. May God bless their work!

Rosa Hunt's induction as minister for Tabernacle, Cardiff will take place on Saturday 17 September at 3pm (Welsh-language service). All welcome!



Laying down new foundations...

For decades now, when a church cause is wound down, the practice has been that the WBUC sells the church building. But the effect of this in the long term is that we have sold assets - sometimes at a relatively low price - and missed opportunities for mission and the future in so doing. 'It's a bit like selling the family heirlooms,' said Helen Wyn, Corporation Officer. 'It can make sense in the short term, but if you want to think about the generations to come, surely there's a better way to use the property?'

As a result, members of the Corporation have developed a new strategy, which requires a potential assessment to be carried out on all eligible buildings.[1] Ideally, when a church considers closing they will inform the Union in advance, and the Corporation can assess the missional and commercial potential of the building - with the missional side always taking precedence. 'Due to factors of all kinds, we may be able to retain no more than one in ten sites in the end,' explains Helen Wyn, 'but the key thing is that we will no longer sell anything eligible without first assessing the potential in detail.'

The potential that could be identified is very wide. On the missional side, there is the hope that it will be possible to hold on to some buildings for new Christian work there in the future - whether in the form of a church, or some alternative community-focused missional use. Another option is that a building can be leased to another church that is currently homeless, or even to a local community group who want to use it for choir practice, playgroups or similar. Of course, careful consideration will need to be given to the situation locally to ensure that we do not compete with other local churches but invest instead in those areas where there is the greatest benefit in doing so.

Some buildings also have commercial potential - depending of course on their location and the nature of the building. 'We are currently exploring the possibility of creating homes for local people in relation to some sites (whether it is a chapel house building or possibly a chapel building) in the future,' said Helen Wyn. 'And some places - from being placed on the right lease for a period of years - may be able to pay not only for themselves but also start contributing to the urgent need to fund Christian work in our country in the future.'

Members of our churches in the past have generously contributed to the construction of these buildings, and a way of honouring that will also be to try to make good use, as best we can, of some of them into the future. This is therefore a long-term vision, which will hopefully contribute to the continuation of Baptist Christian witness in communities up and down our country.

[1] Not every chapel building is eligible - that is a legal matter that depends on who the church deeds state as being the ultimate legatee amongst other factors.



News from across....

The Baptist Union of Wales

Two days' reunion!



Three years since the last in-person conferences, it was fitting that both days of this year's conference united the various parts of our Baptist family in Wales. Friday 24th June saw the historic induction of the Revd Dr Densil Morgan as joint President of both our language wings, while Saturday 25th (held in partnership with SWBA, BMS and the Baptist College) was a fully bilingual day with over 150 people from every part of the country joining together for a day of listening to God's voice together.

"I wouldn't want to belong to a denomination where everyone was expected to toe a specific line with no opportunity for honest and conscientious disagreement.... and our Declaration of Principle allows us this freedom," said Densil in his inaugural address, emphasizing the ties that bind us together while maintaining the sovereignty of each local church. We heard from our overseas workers and new ministers about some of the green shoots that have been appearing of people willing after the pandemic to change and try new things, within a context that is rapidly secularizing.

This could be a sign of God's work among us, a theme that was also woven through Saturday's day of 'prayer, picnic and party'. Sessions on hearing his voice through each other, history and the global church went deep, while others gave children young and old (!) the opportunity to "play football blindfolded, do the macarena, silk painting, craft as well as singing, enjoying ice cream and worship. It was a grand day out!"

Welcoming Misha to Pendref Baptist

At the beginning of September, Misha Pedersen currently a student at Cardiff Baptist College, will become the next minister of Pentref. Steve Wallis the present minister will be staying in membership and is looking forward to welcoming Misha and is excited about what God will do in the next stage of his work in Newbridge.

Every new minister builds upon the work of the past while bringing new ideas and new ways of doing things. Steve says that the church is sure that Misha will bring a fresh approach while being sensitive to those things which are precious to a congregation that has worshipped at Pentref for decades. "We are all looking forward to what God will do in our midst through the new minister."

Misha is excited about her call to the church. "The welcome I have already received from the church has been very moving. I look forward to continuing to build relationships in and around the church. I am impressed by the work that has been done by Steve and the church in and



First Anna Chaplaincy

With an ageing population and loneliness a challenge for so many, older people's ministry has never been more crucial. The aim of the Anna Chaplaincy (run by the Bible Reading Fellowship) is exactly this, and Revd Maggie Rich is now one of the first 'Anna Chaplains' in Wales. "When I saw something about this in an email, I realised this was what I had been waiting for," Maggie says. "In our ministers' meetings in Newtown we had already identified that there was almost nothing for older people. Each of the churches has its own particular community focus and this was right for us."

After training, Rads and Monts Association agreed that they would hold the license as that gave opportunities to extend beyond Newtown. Maggie's vision is to talk to interested churches to encourage people to become "Anna friends", who will support elderly people around them. Rural isolation is a major issue in Mid Wales and in Maggie's words, "this is our opportunity to reach out, to listen to people's stories and to walk alongside people who need to know that they are precious. It's an exciting opportunity to show God's love."

Autonomy through agriculture

African Methodists have welcomed a \$3.5 million gift to promote agriculture within its churches in order to become more financially independent. "The goal of this whole program is to develop financial self-sustainability in our annual conferences in Africa," Roland Fernandes from the Methodist church explains. "It provides a way for us to accompany farmers as they strive to support themselves and their communities. It extends our efforts to connect the church in mission through care of the creation and sustainable development."

Projects supported by the initiative include rice farms and beekeeping in Liberia; fish farms in Ivory Coast; maize, cassava, and livestock in Angola; and pigs and market gardens in Mozambique. This initiative is part of a wider shift in the development and Christian mission landscape towards self-sustaining ministries across the Global South that are not dependent on western funds or tied to western mission aims.



Ancient underground city uncovered



An underground city has been discovered in Midyat, modern-day Turkey, that is believed to have housed tens of thousands of Christians fleeing Roman persecution. The Director of the archaeological dig, Gani Tarkan, explains how the area was first built as a hiding place. "As is known, Christianity was not an official religion in the second century. Families and groups who accepted Christianity generally took shelter in underground cities to escape the persecution of Rome. Possibly, the underground city of Midyat was one of the living spaces built for this purpose," he continued. "It is an area where we estimate that at least 60-70,000 people lived underground."

Another archaeologist on the dig is reported as saying, "Such underground cities provided security for people, and they also performed their prayers there. They were also places to escape. Cisterns, water wells, and sewer systems have been in existence since that period." Tarkan and his peers continue to find relics, murals, places of worship and tunnels on a regular basis as their excavation work continues, all of which seems to confirm the idea that this place fulfilled a similar function to the Roman catacombs on a larger scale.

Left: the modern-day city of Midyat, above ground.

And from around...
The World



Ten minutes with... *Andrew Ware*

There are people of all sorts in our churches, all with different stories of how God has worked in their lives. This time, we're meeting an active member of one of our churches in West Glamorgan....

Good to meet you, Andrew! So how did you come to be a Christian and end up where you are?

Well, I was brought up in a Christian family in Skewen, my mother being a congregationalist and my Dad a member in the Salvation Army. I grew up with a foot in both churches, but as a teenager I started going to a youth group at another church, and it was through that really that I came to faith in Jesus. After that my work took me to different places, and I ended up going to a range of churches. But since returning to the Neath area I have been involved in Aion Baptist for coming on 20 years now.

You are a Professor of Computer Science. How does your professional life fit into your faith?

I am involved in research into AI or artificial intelligence, which involves getting computers to imitate human thought and language. One of the things that means is that I work with students from many different nationalities and backgrounds, and that gives you a wider perspective, I think. As you travel the world and meet people in places as different to here as Pakistan and Vietnam you realize that people have the same basic needs and aspirations everywhere.

I was preaching on Jesus and the Samaritan woman recently – Jesus and she both had a need for real water; that was something that united them. I see this in my interactions everyday with students; a lot of them haven't discounted God, it's just that they haven't even thought about him! Being in a University environment has really helped my Christian life and made me see how important it is that we have open and honest conversations within churches about big topics and listen to where people are coming from.

You're also very involved in church life. Could you tell us a bit about that?

I became associate pastor at Aion Bryncoch ten years ago now. The thing that really excites me is the idea of the church being impactful within communities – the gospel really does have the power to change lives. I love seeing the church being energized to be the church outside the church itself. For me, meeting together on a Sunday is about being equipped for being out in the world the rest of the time.

How can we pray for you and Aion Baptist, Andrew?

I think as we come out of Covid we as a church do have this desire to be outward looking. In response to that we have been advertising for an outreach worker for schools and colleges – please pray for the right person to come along to work with us.

Thank you.

THE MESSENGER is produced three times a year by the Baptist Union of Wales. However, viewpoints expressed in this magazine should not be taken as representing the Union's official stance on any given matter. Registered office:

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