

SPRING 2024
ISSUE 28
buw.wales



The

Messenger

ESGYN: Rising in Hope for a
New Generation
Mountaintop Ministry
Walking with Zimbabwe
and more...



Editorial

note

SPRING 2024



Wales is known for its mountains. As a young girl going on regular family holidays to Pembrokeshire, the Preseli mountains used to seem huge to me - until I visited Snowdonia in North Wales! I loved hill-walking growing up, and still do. My eyes have been opened to further reaches in recent years (now that I am married to an Indian husband, even my ideas of high Welsh mountains have been re-scaled!), but the mountains and hills of Wales will always hold a precious place in my heart.

Encountering God is often described as a **'mountaintop' experience**, and the Old and New Testament are peppered with stories of God's people meeting Him on mountains: from the Israelites meeting God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19), to the disciples seeing the manifest glory of Jesus on the mountain of transfiguration (Mark & Luke 9, Matt 17).

Mountains speak of grandeur, and experiences that are normally beyond our reach, but that we can occasionally attain to at special times and places. I believe God wants each of us to meet Him in 'mountain-top experiences', and that these can be less rare than we think. In this edition of the Messenger, we read of a few mountain experiences: Tim Moody tells us the story of 'Esgyn' (Ascend) on p.3 and how this was a kind of 'mountain-top experience' for the young people who came, and was inspired by the idea of the 'mountain' of meeting God. On p.4 we hear Nigel Cooke's story of an encounter with God's presence on a mountain in South Wales.

I believe that God loves meeting us on these 'mountains'. God calls us higher into the realm of His kingdom (Eph 2:6, Col 3:2, Isa 40:31), which is characterized by holiness, a life of victory, and a life of costly and sacrificial love - as Paul says, we are being taken 'from glory to glory' as we grow in Him (2 Cor 3:18). Yet, this Lord is the same Jesus who enters the **deep valleys of suffering with us**. My family have had a few valley experiences in the past year - the 'treasures of darkness' (Isa 45:3) found in these times have been immeasurably precious, as God has led us gently with his 'rod and staff' (Psalm 23:4).

In 'News Across the World' on page 6, we read how God strengthened our Ukrainian brothers and sisters through unimaginable hardship. In Zimbabwe, we hear of the 'valley' experiences of communities that are among the worst impacted by Climate Change (p.5), and yet are finding their eyes being lifted in hope as Christian Aid's partners do critical work in their midst. We also read of the opportunity to walk with them, both in a physical and symbolic way, as we raise support for our 2023-24 appeal through the WALK! challenge. **Whether you find yourself on the mountain-tops or in the valleys of suffering**, I pray that you would be encouraged by the various stories in this edition of the Messenger that pertain to both experiences. I also pray that you would know the beautiful reality of these words that speak of being lifted up in Him as we seek and wait on God... "But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles..." (Isaiah 40:31)

In Christ,

Sioned Graves (Missions and Communications Officer)

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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.



MISSION

to a younger generation

This year, BUW launched a new youth initiative: Esgyn! Starting with a youth weekend, Tim Moody gives us a glimpse of what that first Esgyn weekend looked like in February, and how God was at work through it...

In the Welsh valleys resides a residential activity centre, known as the Summit Centre (Rock UK), and this brilliant venue played host to the first - of many, we pray! - Esgyn weekends. Esgyn was built upon the belief that God wants to do something intentional amongst the young people of this nation, using the words of God to Moses in the burning bush as inspiration -

"I will be with you... This will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain," (Ex 3:12-15).

Believing God was very much at work in this generation, a small core team set about launching Esgyn. Voices from across Wales (in both Welsh and English languages) contributed to the vision, which led to us welcoming 32 young people from as far as North Pembrokeshire to South-East Wales for the weekend. And what a weekend we had!

On Saturday we enjoyed 6 hours of activities, including climbing one of the UK's largest climbing walls, archery, high ropes

and crate stacking. These activities gave the young people a chance to experience some things they have never done before and also allowed them to learn to work as a team. Whilst the activities were a tremendous amount of fun, they also helped break down some of the barriers young people often feel when mixing with new people. The true value of the activities was seen in the times we gathered together for the meetings. The first meeting on Friday was

understandably a little awkward (!), but as the weekend went on and the young

people got to know one another, it was amazing to see God working in this generation! The meetings included interviews with a team-member (including Centre instructors, and an interview through the medium of Welsh.) There was also bilingual worship, and the change in the young people was maybe most clearly seen here as more and more voices piped up as the weekend went on. There were short messages, looking at Peter walking on water, and encouraging the young people to consider how they can 'fix their eyes on Jesus'. Evenings included hot chocolate, movies, games, a bonfire, and (maybe!) some sleep!

Since Esgyn, we have heard stories of how the young people have engaged with their own faith journey, looking at how they can be involved in church, attend youth events, and even consider baptism! God is at work in this generation!

The next Esgyn event will take place on the 8th of June, at 'Momentum' in Carmarthen! (more information on p.7)

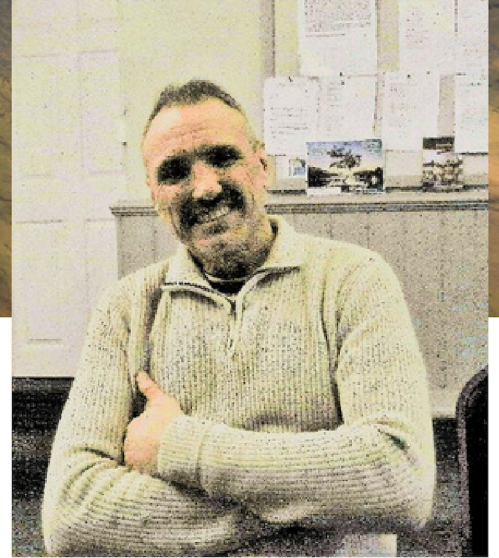
"It was amazing to see God working in this generation..."

"And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you..."



MINISTRY ON THE MOUNTAINTOP

Nigel Cooke tells his story of coming to faith, from rugby notoriety to an Easter encounter on a mountain which changed his life for good...



“When we meet for Bible study now, we’ll all sit around the table – so if someone comes in, they couldn’t tell immediately who was leading,” says Nigel – plasterer, father of four and lay minister of Nebo, Cefn Cribwr. “Though we are fewer in number than a few years ago, the fellowship among the fifteen of us has grown stronger!”

The testimony of spiritual growth has come through some amazing mountaintop experiences both for Nebo church (named after a mountain in the Bible) and for Nigel himself.

“I wouldn’t say I have a special ministry to rugby lads”, Nigel says, “but I was one of them myself – and probably the roughest around here for several valleys over! That means there is a relationship there that means I can share spiritual things with them.” Nigel, now in his fifties, can look back over several decades of his life where he wasn’t following Jesus, though he had always believed in God. He recalls the years when he would work, play Rugby, get drunk and look for fights on a Friday evening. “My skullduggery on the rugby field was notorious – I had a real reputation!”

But then one Easter, it all changed. “I was lying on my bed the day before Good Friday and I heard a still, clear voice say to me from nowhere: ‘What are you going to do for me tomorrow?’” He knew it was God’s voice, and early the next morning set off up the local mountain with one aim in mind – to put up a cross overlooking the valley. As it happened, Nigel walked past his brother’s home and for some reason he was out on the doorstep despite the early hour.

They went up together and after raising the wooden cross, they felt led to pray and thank God for what Jesus did at Calvary. “We sat there in silence after praying. Neither of us were what you’d think of as ‘religious men’ - but my brother started singing a hymn. There was this atmosphere, you know? Later, when we were walking back down the mountain, we looked back and saw these figures in white around the cross – and then they were gone.”

Two months later, his brother was suddenly stricken ill and died. “I can’t know... but I don’t think it’s coincidence that God led him to that Easter experience with me. I have to trust that God was leading us all on”.

There was this atmosphere... when we were walking down, we saw these figures around the cross

He felt he should go to a church and one Sunday, he turned up at a local chapel where he was warmly welcomed. “It was a small gathering, but it became something I did – just slipping in at the the back at first and then taking part. God led me there.”

A couple of years later and a change in circumstances meant it was time for him to move to Nebo in Cefn Cribwr village nearby. “The church had had a rough time with their

minister then, but there was blessing awaiting us as a family. My Dad started coming back to church for the first time in decades, and my wife.”

And then in 2021, Nigel was asked by the fellowship whether he would consider becoming a lay minister. “I’d actually had this growing stirring of a calling, had been praying a lot and had started going to preach at other Baptist chapels in the area too. The end of it was that I was ordained later that year. For me, now, it’s about keeping it real. We’re just ordinary people, but sometimes we can do extraordinary things. his church had been in a difficult valley season without a

“I want to reach people with the gospel”

minister and it wasn’t clear how on earth they’d get another one. Then God brought me along – and we have a real warmth between us now.”

He explains that his vision is quite simple; “I want to reach people with the gospel – that’s why I put some of my messages on Facebook and I will get people – harder men sometimes, people who have known me – responding or liking what I put out there. That can be surprising! And it’s the same when I now get asked to do funerals in the area. I tell people that I will pray and I will share the Christian faith and people will say they’re happy with that. I think we have a calling – and it’s to go out to people who are struggling, who are needy and to do that with the gospel.”



It was with high spirits that five of the BUW staff set off from the Llwyfan on a rainy afternoon on the 12th of March. Wearing bright red Christian Aid shirts against a stormy grey sky, the aim was to walk a few miles along the Towy to raise awareness for the 2023-24 Talents of Hope appeal.

Unfortunately, we had to redirect our path away from the river due to high floodwaters, reminding us of the realities of climate change that communities face across the world. Nevertheless, we successfully completed a collective 15 miles, with much laughter and fellowship. The aim of our walk in Carmarthen was to launch the WALK! Wales & Zimbabwe challenge, and to raise awareness for the **2023-24 Talents of Hope appeal.**

Talents of Hope, named after the *parable of the talents* (Matt 25:14-30) supports communities in Zimbabwe that are seeing God’s grace at work as they invest their ‘talents’ into climate-resilient forms of agriculture. Christian Aid are working with these

communities through the BRACK project in the Mutoko & Mudzi Districts of Mashonaland, Zimbabwe

Climate change has made life very difficult for farmers across the world. This is especially true in Zimbabwe, which has seen increased floods, storms and droughts, and is currently in an official period of drought. This is against a wider backdrop of poverty, with years of political instability, human rights violations and a suffering economy making Zimbabwe one of the poorest countries in the world. Through training in different farming methods, the BRACK Project in Zimbabwe has helped many families become more resilient in the face of climate shocks and economic hardship, as well as helping them diversify their... *(continued overleaf)*

“The BRACK Project... has helped many families become more resilient.”

A Challenge the size of Wales and Zimbabwe!

(cont. from page 5) ...income streams, making them less reliant on agriculture which can be so affected by extreme weather. One such farmer is Blessings Muzori (right) who is now lead farmer of her community, after coming out of a situation of nearly 'begging for food.'

The aim of our walk in Carmarthen that afternoon was to raise awareness for the BRAC Project, and to launch a wider campaign – **WALK! Wales & Zimbabwe** – which aims to raise support for the work in Zimbabwe. Running from mid-March to October, we are calling on those across the Baptist family - and beyond! - **to join us** in a nation-sized challenge as we walk the number of miles it would take us to cross the length of Wales and Zimbabwe - approx. 750 miles!

The challenge is simple... to **WALK!** This is a powerful way to physically and symbolically **'join our steps' with communities in Zimbabwe**, and to raise support for the work of Christian Aid and BRAC. We are calling on **churches, members, and communities** to join us in our mileage... this could look like an individual walk one sunny Spring weekend, a church group walk in a beautiful area nearby where you count your collective miles, or an ordinary walk that's turned into a prayer walk for Zimbabwe. However you choose to join us, every mile counts to meet our target!

Consider whether you can join the **WALK! Challenge**, by finding out more at: buw.wales/supporting-mission/appeals/walk-wales-zimbabwe/



A Challenge the Size of Wales and Zimbabwe: Blessings Muzori is among those helped by the BRAC project to become a respected member in a local business.

Welcome to BUW Family!



We are glad to welcome new names and faces to the BUW Family in 2023/24...

Firstly, welcome to Dorithy Evans, who was received as minister in Smyrna, Penyfai in 2023! In 2024, we extend a welcome to Anth Brown (top left), who along with his wife Helen, were formally inducted in Mount Zion, Cardigan in January. From the UK, but having ministered for 24 years in Canada, Anth is the second minister that Mount Zion has welcomed from Canada! Andy Settattree will also soon be welcomed to Hope Gobaith Llanelli, with an induction service to be held on on June 1. Another Llanelli connection: we were glad to welcome Elna Davies as our Office Administrator in December 2023. We pray for each one as they settle into new roles!

2024 Summer Conferences

Our English-language conference 'Momentum' will be happening in Carmarthen once again this year. Join us on the 8th of June for a 'dynamic' day for the whole family as we consider the living words of God in an ever-changing world! Details and booking can be found on our website at: buw.wales/momentum-2024/

Our Welsh-language conference will be happening in Pembrokeshire, from the 23rd - 26th of June, as we consider the theme 'Adeiladaf fy Eglwys' ('I will build my church'). Details and booking here: ubc.cymru/undeb-2024-sir-benfro/



Ukraine: A Church that grows Hope

Churches are pulling together in amazing ways two years on from the start of the conflict in Ukraine.



Igor Bandura, Deputy Chairman of the Baptist Union of

Ukraine, reports to the European Baptist Federation (EBF) how "God's power was renewed in us... over two years", during what has been both a fierce physical and spiritual battle. "In 2022, it seemed to us that we would not be able to hold out for more than a few weeks" Igor says. "But the Lord is holding us. Every day He shows His miracles again and again at the front and the rear.

One of these is the growth seen in churches across Ukraine. Igor's Baptist network have seen 10 new churches planted, 50 missionary groups formed, and 150 new elders ordained. Despite fear of shelling, the popularity of children's camps and daycare centres has increased, ministry to the military frontlines has continued, and thousands have come to faith. Igor claims that this could not have happened without the support of the church in Ukraine, and the prayers and encouragement of Baptist brothers and sisters across the world.

NEWS *the* from across *world*

Welsh Sisters - in Riga!

On the 5-8th of October last year, Ruth Davies and Eleri Jones represented the BUW among a hundred Baptist sisters from 30 nations in Riga for the 75th European Baptist Women United Conference. The theme of the conference was 'Unsurpassing Peace' from Philippians 4:7. For the first time this year, a President from the Middle-East was elected, Siham Daoud, and the value and influence of Baptist Women societies across Europe was seen afresh by those present!

Middle East: Light shines...

EBF reported recently on the pain and suffering, but also the beautiful experiences of Jesus' presence among Baptist brothers and sisters in the Israel-Gaza conflict. "We've faced... devastation, and an overwhelming sense of despair... Yet, in the midst of these trials, we get strength through our faith in our Lord... and through the encouragement of [our brothers and sisters in Christ]', wrote a Baptist leader. Some ministries have reported experiences of 'divine intervention - reports [of] Christ Himself appearing in person or dreams... to Muslim brothers and sisters in Gaza.' God is giving strength to many in the midst of a 'heart-wrenching' war.

Getting to know...

Rob Saunders



In this edition, we get to know Rob Saunders, and hear some of the story of what led Rob to Wales, and how he is seeing God working in Welshpool...

Thank you for chatting to us, Rob! So, how did you first find yourself in Welshpool?

I was born in Nottingham, grew up in Crewe and settled in Malvern, where my father was a Minister, and for a while it was the last thing I wanted to be!

After an Archeology degree and a short career in IT, I eventually said yes to the call of God, and my wife and I moved to Wales for me to begin training. I graduated in Wales and was ordained in England - I remember at Baptist College someone giving me a word of knowledge about an English and Welsh flag - this turned out to be very appropriate...

We found ourselves in Welshpool via my first full-time church in the Forest of Dean. While we were in the Forest we felt called back to Wales and specifically to Mid Wales. Welshpool Baptist Church knew about me from my training days, I knew about them, and God brought us all together! It was the clearest call to a specific people and place that we have ever felt.

Amazing! In what ways have you seen God at work in your story?

God was at work in the call here to Paradise. Sorry, I mean to Welshpool. From the initial meetings, to the provision of accommodation through the BUW, to grant funding, we could see His hand was guiding us all, although it was not a quick or simple route. Any sacrifice or risk on our behalf has always been exceeded by God's provision for us - there were easier paths

for our family to follow, but none of them would have taken us to a place and a church we feel so at home in.

I would encourage anyone who was considering a major change in their lives to trust in God's long term plan - never aim for short term success over and above the long call of God - in my experience he plays the long game, and so should we.

What do you believe God has on his heart for Welshpool, and for Wales in the years ahead?

For our church, I believe he is calling us to be a resilient, sustainable, vibrant and growing community of disciples who work in partnership with our community for the flourishing of God's Kingdom. Isaiah 12:3 tells us that:

"With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation"

That is a word for our joy-filled church!

For Wales - I detect a shifting of the tides, glimmers of hope beginning to blossom after years of faithful toil, even in a wider story of decline. I truly believe that God's Kingdom in Wales will grow bilingually, and that Welsh and English speaking Baptist churches (and others!) are being drawn together into something special. I am slowly learning Welsh in anticipation of the time when "every nation, tribe, people and language" will be welcomed into this future.

Diolch yn fawr, Rob!