



Against All Odds

Bethel Baptist Church
Tredegar
1868 – 2018
150 Years of Witness

Ron Harding

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Bethel Baptist Church

Tredegar

1868 – 2018

One Hundred & Fifty years of Baptist Witness



Preface

We are very grateful to Theophilus Matthews and Rev Gwynfryn Davies for their meticulous recording of the original history of Bethel which was published in 1968 to celebrate one hundred years of witness. So much has happened in the life of Bethel in the last fifty years that gave warrant to this update to mark one hundred and fifty years of Baptist witness in Tredegar.

In the preparation of this history of Bethel Baptist Church Tredegar 1868 – 2018 we have attempted to steer a constricted line of enquiry to determine the journey of faith that led to the establishing of Bethel. So much could be written about the tenacious acts of faith and dedication of brave ordinary people who, in the face of gravest persecution and financial hardship, have led to the freedom of worship that we take so much for granted. Many of the people in question covered such vast geographical areas and influenced so many people during infinitely diverse political changes that it is impossible in this small history to follow a wide line of enquiry.

There are many excellent detailed histories already in existence to which we would guide the reader's attention should they desire a more comprehensive picture of the establishing of the gospel in the vicinity. A list of some of these meticulous historians is included in the Reference and Further Reading section.

1 The Early Pioneers

By the time Bethel was founded and a chapel built, **Siloh**¹ Baptist was already established and had been thriving for one hundred and six years, having been first built in 1762. During those years Siloh had established several other churches in the vicinity and they too were growing, there were also several other independent churches active in Tredegar.

There were however Christians meeting in the vicinity for many years before this, though the records are scant, due partially to the passage of time but mainly because various acts of Monarchy and Parliament during the reigns of Mary, Charles I², Charles II³ and James II⁴ that rendered it illegal and imprudent for them to meet together. Many however, under great duress, continued to congregate but they were forced to do so in secret, numerous people were caught, rounded up and suffered the most terrible persecutions, torture and even death. Among them were many of the Anglican Clergy, the Established Church, who were evicted from their churches because, out of conscience, they refused to preach ‘The Book of Sports 1633’ (*Originally instated by James I for Lancashire but later forced on all the realm under Charles II*) and many of them were sympathetic to the doctrines of the reformers such as John Calvin.

There was a brief period of respite in the eleven years between 1649 – 1660 during the rule of the Puritan and ‘Lord Protector of the Commonwealth’, Oliver Cromwell. It was during this period that Parliament passed **The Act for the Propagation of the Gospel in Wales** (1650) and government appointed inspectors were elected to assess the preaching and behaviour of the Clergy in Wales. These Puritan officers evicted many of the clergy who did not hold true to the rule of scripture, or whose lives did not measure up to acceptable moral and ethical standards. According to E P Thomas (History of Siloh), two government officers were living in the ancient farmhouse called ‘Bedwlywyn’ just outside Tredegar on the mountain road to Bedwellty

¹ The History of Siloh Baptist Church – E.P Thomas

² Charles I Introduced the reading of the Book of Sports and married a catholic

³ Charles II Introduced the highly controversial Clarendon Code

⁴ James II Brother to Charles, he was the last English Catholic Monarch



Church, high in the fold of the mountain above Philipstown and these two officers were Baptists. This eleven-year period was a golden time for the Puritan Baptists and several Baptist churches were established in Wales. An officer in the Parliamentary Roundhead army was one **John Myles**⁵, who after the Civil war left the army and settled in Ilston on the Gower near Swansea and there, supported by The Act for the Propagation of the Gospel in Wales, established the first Baptist Church in Wales. John Myles was a prolific evangelist and in 1652 travelled up as far as Abergavenny establishing congregations in his wake.

He established churches at Hay on Wye, Llantrisant, Carmarthen and Abergavenny. While at Abergavenny or Llanwenarth (Govilon), he helped establish a congregation which was then led by William Pritchard. **Llanwenarth Baptist Church**⁶ was incorporated in August 1652 and they built their first meeting house in 1696 which though extensively modified is still in existence today, Llanwenarth is the mother church to many of the Baptist Churches in the South Wales area.



E. P. Thomas suggests the Christians of Sirhowy and the surrounding districts had nowhere to meet during this time and were travelling as far as Llanwenarth for baptism and communion.

In 1660 William Prichard and the church at Llanwenarth established a new fellowship at Abertillery and **Blaenau Gwent Baptist Church**⁷ was born. Blaenau Gwent was incorporated in 1696 and it is to this

⁵ The History of the Baptists - Joshua Thomas

⁶ The History of Llanwenarth Baptist Church -

⁷ The History of Blaenau Gwent Baptist Church - The Rev Clifford Thomas

church that the people of Sirhowy and surrounding district were then able to go for Baptism and Communion. One of the founders of Blaenau Gwent was one Roger Jenkins a member at Llanwenarth and a native of Gelligaer, who was baptised outside his house in Gelligaer as a witness to his neighbours.

According to **Powell's History of Carmel Baptist**, The Anglican minister of Gelligaer Parish Church, David Davies became convinced of the need for baptism. Davies was an unusual Anglican for that time because of his principles, he believed that he should not receive the tithe but rather live by faith relying only on the voluntary giving of the fellowship. "very few of the ministers of the Commonwealth Church understood and recognised the principle of voluntary religious support" The '**Old Church Book of Ilston**'⁸ near Swansea records that "*David Davies sent to brother Myles to come to Gelligaer, there and if judged worthy, to perform the ordinance of Baptism on him. Now we sent brother Myles and Brother Proud on the occasion, and brother David Davies was baptised at that time; and after this he came and joined us at Ilston and we saw that he was well endowed and capable for the great work of the ministry. We saw fit, with the help of some brethren from Hay who were present at the time to send him forth to preach the gospel to the world.*"

For about five years David Davies ministered from Gelligaer to St Brides evangelizing Glamorgan, many people were converted and many new churches were established. He also later worked alongside Walter Prosser and John Myles as evangelists to establish the Church as far away as Carmarthen.

It is believed that during the time the Gelligaer Church was being established that other Christians from Sirhowy, Bedwellty, Mynyddislwyn and surrounding areas covering twelve parishes, travelled to Blaenau Gwent to the established meeting place for fellowship. It is certain that the Christians of Bedwellty/Tredegar were members at Blaenau Gwent in 1741, before Siloh was built, because the record of members at Blaenau Gwent for that year is stated as 'Bedwellty

⁸ The Old Church book at Ilston – Brown University quoted by Joshua Thomas

71'. The geography between Gelligaer, Sirhowy, Abertillery and Llanwenarth is difficult in today's terms but in those far off days of mule tracks and sheep trails it was almost insurmountable but they made it in all weathers, against all odds, but this short lived golden period sowed the seeds for the future of the nonconformist church, but it would have to, once again, survive against all odds.

1660 saw the abrupt end of the commonwealth and the restoration of the Monarchy under Charles II and with him came a series of Acts of Parliament designed to compel people, nonconformists, to attend the Pro Catholic Anglican Church once again.

Four acts turned the world upside down:

The Corporation Act, 1661, which effectively banned nonconformists from holding any public office regardless of their qualifications.

The Act of Uniformity, 1662 made the use of the Book of Common Prayer compulsory in religious service. This resulted in over two thousand clergy refusing to comply with this act and as a result they were compelled to resign their positions and therefore their livelihood. This became known as 'the Great Ejection'.

The Conventicle Act 1664 forbade 'conventicles' (a meeting for unauthorized worship) of more than five people who were not members of the same household. The purpose was to prevent dissenting religious groups from meeting together.

The Five Mile Act, 1665 forbade nonconformist ministers who were ejected from their churches from coming within five miles of incorporated towns or the place of their former livings. They were also forbidden to teach in schools.

This terrible time put immense strain on thousands of ordinary people whose simple desire was to worship God in peace and security, but they would have to wait a while and survive against all odds before a better day came, and it would come eventually, but they were not deterred as they hung on to their faith.

A terrible time of persecution was unleashed, and many fled to escape it including Pastor John Myles of Ilston, mentioned earlier, he and some of the Ilston members fled to America to escape the persecution. It also meant that the mother of Baptist churches in this area, Llanwenarth, Govilon also went into hiding and had to meet in secret in peril of their lives.

The Rev Clifford Thomas in his **history of Blaenau Gwent Baptist Church** quotes an eye witness of those days, a man who died in Lambeth Prison:

“Harmless and peaceful people were dragged from their beds without respect for age or person. They were driven on foot twenty miles to prison and were compelled to run in the heat of summer, keeping pace with the soldiers’ horses till their feet were blistered, many falling from fatigue, to be driven forward again by blows. In Merioneth they were put into the cattle compounds for hours, while their enemies were regaling themselves in the inns with money stolen from their captives. Others were kept in prison for months and their cattle and sheep were seized and sold. Some were cast into prison and kept there without any offence being stated or any trial held.”

In **1688 came the Glorious Revolution**, which saw the overthrowing of King James II of England. This came about by a union of English Parliamentarians and the protestant, **William of Orange**. William's successful invasion of England with a Dutch fleet and army led to his ascension to the throne as William III of England jointly with his wife, Mary II, Mary was the daughter of the deposed King James. This union between Parliament and King gave birth to the Bill of Rights 1689 and ultimately to the long awaited **Act of Toleration 1689**. The Act allowed freedom of worship to nonconformists Protestants who dissented from the Church of England such as Baptists and Congregationalists as long as they rejected transubstantiation. Nonconformists were allowed their own places of worship and their own teachers. This was indeed a glorious revolution and a glorious return to sanity, but it went deeper, it opened the doors for the gospel to be shared and preached freely anywhere and it ultimately paved the way for the revivals that Wales witnessed.

The church at Blaenau Gwent Abertillery that had been started in Llanwenarth Govilon grew and it too became outreaching and church planting. One of the converts a native of Bedwellty, Sirhowy, **Miles Harri (Harry)** was baptised on the 1st Jan 1724 at Blaenau Gwent Baptist Church and was ordained to the ministry there in 1729. In 1731 he was appointed as assistant pastor to his brother John Harri and in 1732 he became the first minister to Pen-y-Garn Pontypool. He had a large vision which was to establish an Academy at Pen-y-Garn for the training of new ministers to spread the gospel further.

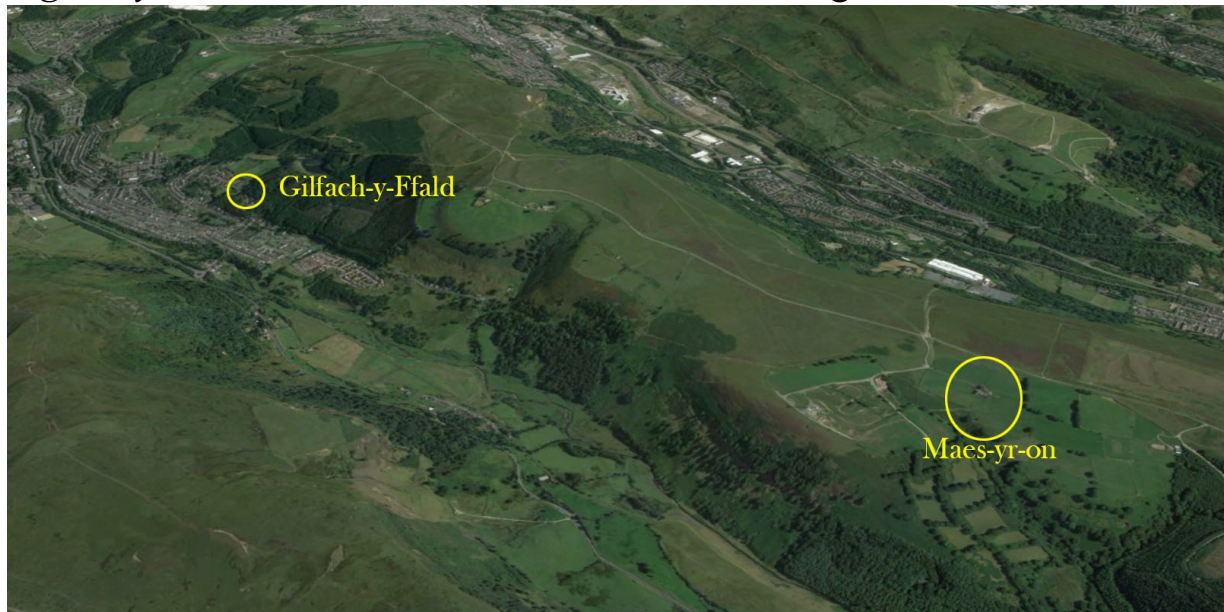
The Dictionary of Welsh Biography⁹, says of Miles Harri;

Miles Harry was probably the outstanding Welsh Baptist minister of his time, and a man of note in public life. His strong personality, vigorous mind and tireless energy made him widely influential. Religion was his primary concern, and for its propagation he spent his strength and substance. A popular preacher and powerful Baptist apologist, he was a liberal, independent thinker in theology, treading a middle path between High Calvinism and Arminianism. He established several new churches. He wrote countless letters to London and elsewhere in the Baptist interest. It was chiefly through his efforts that Howel Harris, when charged with causing a riot at Pontypool, was acquitted at the Monmouth Assizes in Aug 1739.

It was this visionary, Miles Harri (Harry) who gave the land of his ancestral home to the Christians of Sirhowy to build the first Siloh Church on the banks of the Sirhowy River by Pont Sirhowy (Georgetown) bridge.

⁹ The Dictionary of Welsh Biography – National Library of Wales

According to Joshua Thomas, before this time, just at the end of the persecutions of Charles II, there is evidence that in 1702 that local Christians met at Rhassau'r Mwyn somewhere between the top of Sirhowy hill and Beaufort. E.P. Thomas further speculates that they were there during the reign of Charles I and that it is certain that one William Thomas John a native of Llanwenarth and a member of Blaenau Gwent, held meetings in his house at Rassau until 1712. A Mr Llewellyn formally of Brynmawr, sometime in 1737 moved to a farmhouse called '**Maes yr on**' the hillside above Troedrhiwgwair and local Christians met there for worship, then between 1740 and 1745 they moved to a larger and more established place called '**Gilfach y Ffald**' on the hillside just below St James Park. According to the same writer *'some old people believed that there was a meeting house, a chapel with a graveyard attached.* There is no archaeological evidence for this



place at the present, perhaps time will reveal it. It was these tenacious courageous Christians who developed the vision and determination to establish a proper meeting house which eventually became the established congregation of Siloh on the banks of Pont Sirhowy.

All of these steadfast people, travelled long distances over difficult terrain and during precarious political times to deliver the gospel to this town. Most of these people are nameless in this world but have now reaped their reward in heaven. Some of them such as Miles Harri are relatively unknown but gave so much of themselves, their personal wealth and physical energy to build the church and this first chapel.

So, it was that through all these turbulent times, in 1762, the great day that so many of far off times had dreamed of, finally arrived. A space became available, the land donated by Miles Harri, but it was down to the poor people of the area to fund this massive enterprise, they were



truly men and women of vision. It would be another sixteen years before the valley exploded into the Industrial Revolution and the opening of the Sirhowy ironworks, but God had prepared the people of Siloh to meet the spiritual needs of the new world.

The Establishing of Bethel.

Forward 106 years and the establishing of Bethel Baptist Church

The small group of eighteen people who originally met together to worship first did so in 1864 but the chapel building was opened and dedicated to God in 1868.

It was thought that the first thirty years of the churches' history were lost having been destroyed when the first building caught fire but a document came to light in 2014 that records those **thirty missing years**.

An old trunk was found in the attic of number 5 Bethel Avenue by the occupants when they were renovating the property which contained the sermons, letters and personal items belonging to Rev T. Jermine. It was originally thought that Rev T Jermine was the second Minister at Bethel but it now appears that he was actually the fourth Pastor of the Church. Among the information found was a handwritten record of the original group of eighteen men and women who began the work which would eventually become Bethel Baptist Church.

2 Against All Odds

The original history begins with:

“As Church Street Baptist is the daughter of Siloh, Bethel the daughter of Church Street. For several years it had been thought that those members of Church Street who resided in the growing area of Georgetown could take a greater part in the work of the Kingdom if a church were to be established in that part of Tredegar”.

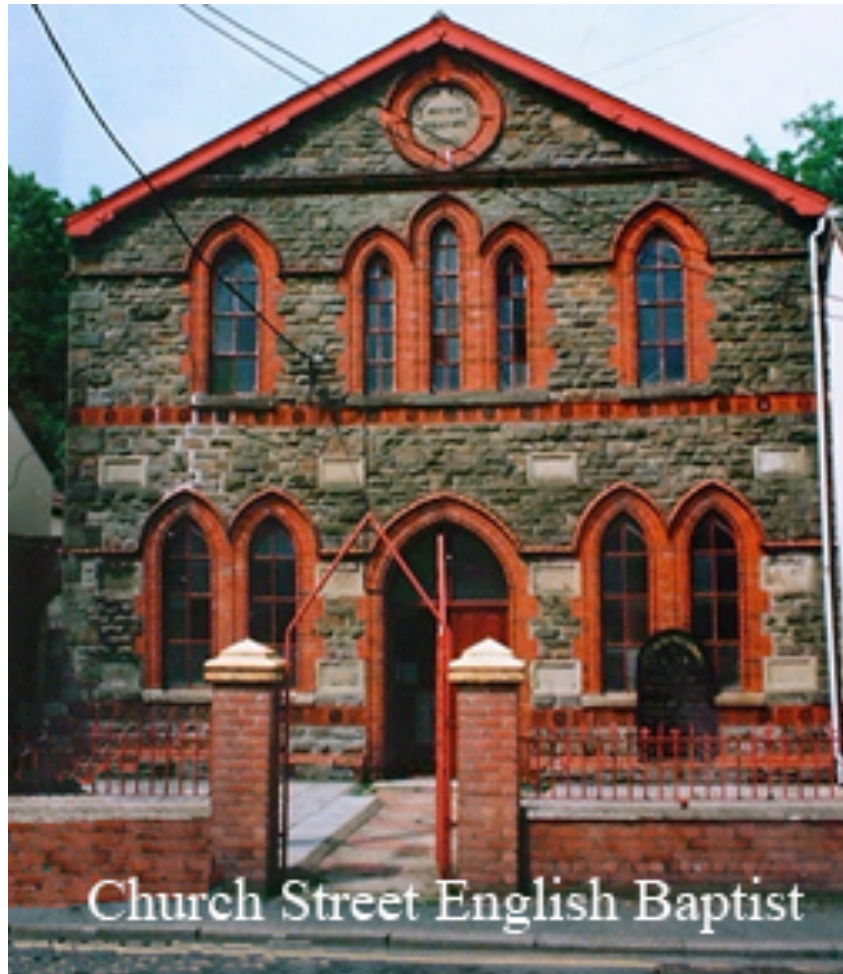
In 1864 their wish was realised; however, it came about in an unfortunate and unforeseen manner, yet we believe;

Rom 8 v 28 *‘all things work together for good to those who love God, who have been called according to his purpose,’*

The book of Acts records that dreadful persecution came upon the early burgeoning church driving them out from Jerusalem and into the surrounding vicinity. Acts, eventually records that God used this forced dispersal to spread the gospel throughout the region.

‘But the believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went’ Acts 8 v 4.

As sometimes is the case, there are splits in churches over doctrinal or peripheral issues and this it seems was the case here. During the Pastorate of Joseph Lewis of Church street English Baptist, eighteen members who had been among the most active



members of the Church were expelled from communion¹⁰ over a dispute. Whether justly or unjustly it is no longer relevant, but it seems that a dispute arose regarding the 'Temperance movement' the details of which are unclear. Sadly the differences proved to be irreconcilable and the eighteen members left the English Baptist Church. These eighteen-people had nowhere to go to worship but they still maintained a vision both to live and share the gospel hopefully in the Georgetown area of Tredegar. While they were considering their position they were accepted and joined with the English Congregational church, but this too eventually proved difficult because of their doctrinal convictions regarding baptism. From there they then took the difficult decision to make the long trek over the moor in all weathers to worship at **Beulah Baptist Church Rhymney** who at first accepted them into membership with open arms.

¹⁰ Letter on the journey of Bethel. The first thirty years - Rev T Jermine

Sadly, pressure was brought to bear from both the English and Welsh Baptist Churches in Tredegar making it very unpleasant and impossible



for them to continue in fellowship there. This, together with the dreadful journey through the stormy winter months, proved to be impractical. The group then met for a while for prayer in their homes one of which was one of the terraced houses in new estate of Llyswedog (Georgetown), at **17 Victoria Terrace.**

The only preaching and teaching came from the most remote of itinerant ministers because the aforementioned powers brought all their influence to bear both in and outside of the town in an attempt to stop this emerging group.



This only made them all the more determined and they gained the sympathy of the other denominations in the town and many of the townsfolk too. Eventually, an opportunity was offered to them and they moved to a schoolroom in **Mount Street** belonging to **Mr Rees.**

While they were at this venue Mr Rees helped them to incorporate as a church but held back all talk of building since they were eighteen at first, which, over two years rose to thirty seven..

Chapter 3. Pastors of Bethel

(Thomas MacDonald (1866-1868) 2yrs service

Eventually **Thomas MacDonald** a native of Pembrokeshire, a Cooper by trade (maker and repairer of casks and barrels) preached for them for almost two years and then **David Evans** the Schoolteacher who ran the Tredegar Company School, in the Town Hall, took over. Mr Evans Jnr, was the son of David Evans the former pastor at Church Street English Baptist who was pastor at Church Street English Baptist from 1847 to 1851. Unfortunately, he arrived at Church Street just before the Cholera epidemic broke out devastating many families. For a time, this had a revival effect on the remaining population and people flocked to church out of fear, but by 1851 they were leaving as fast as they came as the epidemic abated and sadly Pastor Evans resigned in despair.

Life in the mining communities was hard and extremely hazardous. Just a few months before Thomas MacDonald began to preach for this little group disaster struck in June of 1865, there was an explosion at Bedwellty Pits Colliery in which twenty-seven colliers died¹¹. Just one tragic account from among the twenty-seven devastated families was that of Mrs Morgan; she lost her two young boys Thomas and Edmund aged just fourteen and ten. Mrs Morgan just two weeks earlier lost her husband in another mining accident at Ty Trist and if this were more than can be endured she had a child who was expected to die of measles. The newspapers of those days are full of tragedies and hardship and the usual result of the inquests was 'fatal accident' no one to blame. Yet the same papers record very harsh judgements for seemingly petty crimes such as: 'Stealing a piece of wood or a lump of coal' 'damaging the grass belonging to the company' Young workers temporarily slowing down machinery to take a rest! Their Fine - One-month imprisonment with

¹¹ The Merthyr Telegraph Sat June 24 1875
The Old Trunk at Bethel Avenue

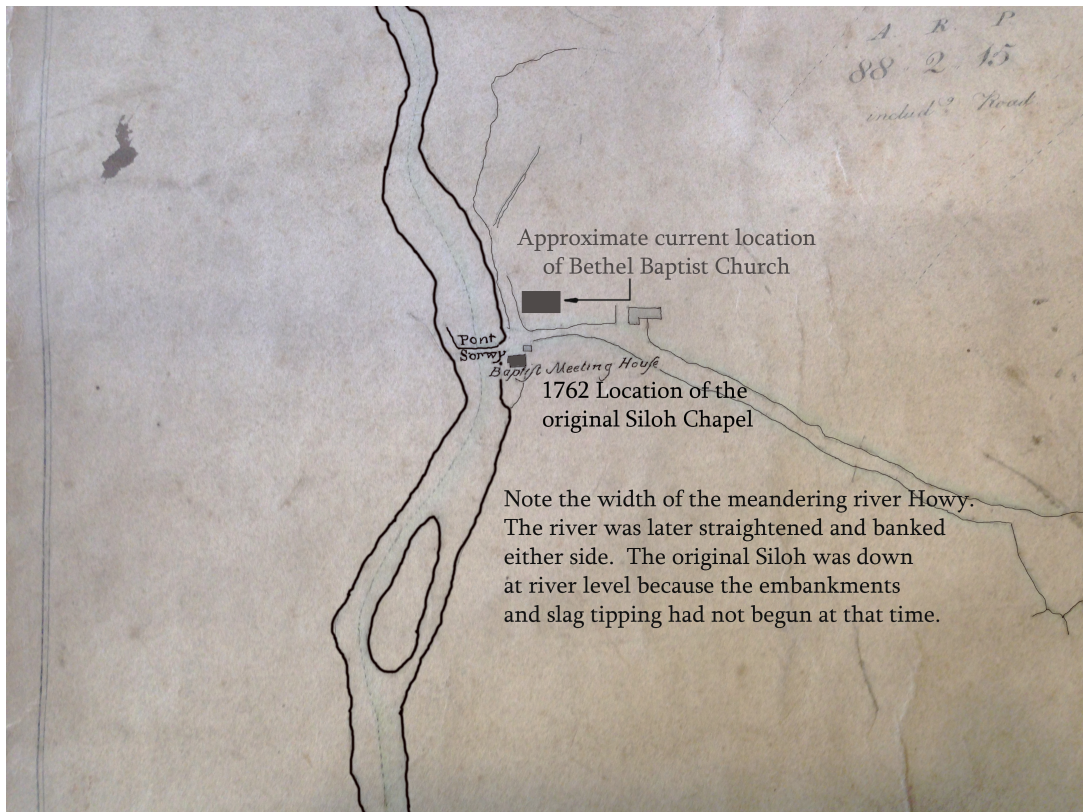
hard labour. **The Gospel was sweet to these ears**, giving hope and care, a church community where labourers could become Deacons or Elders or Preachers and where managers could happily become doorkeepers. Pastor MacDonald was an example of this, he being a Cooper, a barrel maker, by trade. A group of people who cared for each other and looked out for each other and helped the community around them too. A group who sought to look after children and to educate them in their Sunday Schools. Pastor MacDonald led this emerging group with a pastors loving heart and he set the standard for the future Pastors of Bethel.

(David Evans Jnr 1868-1872) 4yrs Service

David Evans Jnr was truly Bethel's first full time 'unpaid Pastor' yet still without a building, he also ran the Tredegar Iron and Coal Company School with some distinction. The record of Mr. Evans efforts had been lost until recent times and this is why Ebenezer Lewis is recorded as the first full time pastor. Clearly Mr. Evans was a man of great vision and tenacity, he oversaw the legal wrangling for the purchase of the land on which Bethel is built, he also oversaw the building of the church and this against the backdrop of the pressure this emerging Church was under from the outside influences. **Building the first Bethel** Pastor Evans, a tenacious man and a visionary, accepted the call to the pastorate of Bethel and the record states that their numbers grew, and they decided to look for a building plot to build a church. Several plots became available and they chose one, permission was granted, and they began the work of cutting the footings. As soon as the work became visible pressure was placed on the authorities from the previous sources and permission to build was withdrawn. The workmen were forced to down tools and the site was abandoned.

Undeterred they then sought permission from the Llyswedog (Georgetown) side of the river Howy which belonged to the Ebbw Vale Iron and Coal Company. The company immediately granted permission and the former complainants had no influence with the Ebbw Vale Company and thus could not prevent its completion. Ironically it was just metres away from the site of the original Siloh which was built around 1762. This building was severely damaged when the river Howy,

which frequently flooded at this point, overflowed severely damaging the original Siloh. It was reported that the remains of some of those interred in its graveyard were exposed by the flood and this resulted in



the building being abandoned.¹²

This land was the site that the visionary Evangelist Miles Harri of Llyswedog and of Blaenau Gwent Baptist Church had originally bequeathed out of his own estate for the building of a church. As a result of the flooding a new plot of ground was procured and Siloh was rebuilt in its current location of Bridge Street and was opened in 1806.

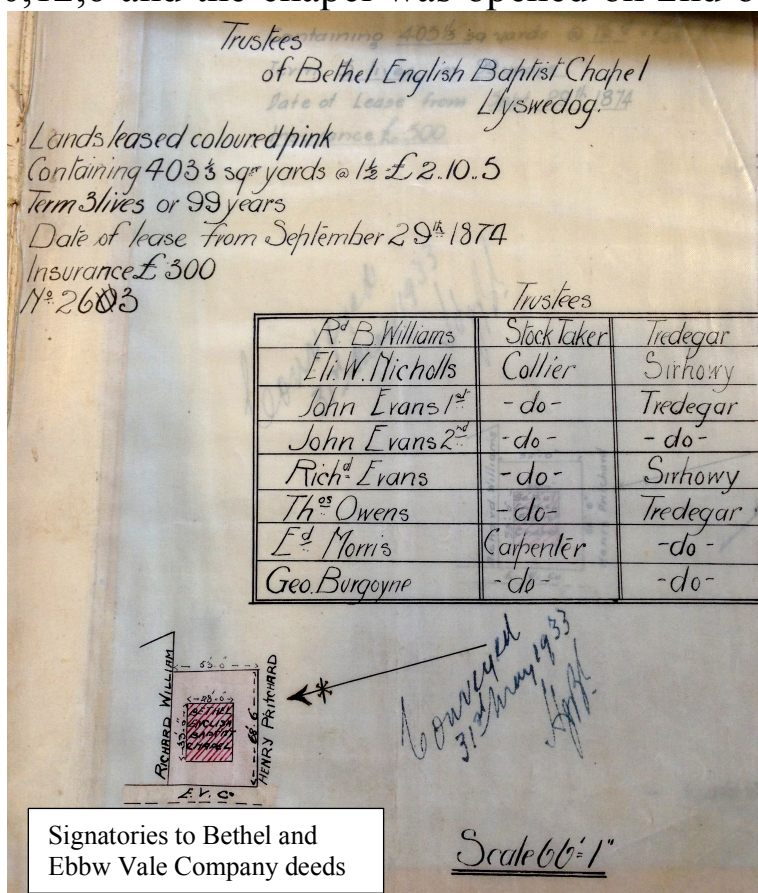
At that time, the new community of ‘Llyswedog’ which later became known as ‘Georgetown’ became home to many English-speaking migrants. The original eighteen were eager to meet the spiritual needs of the new mining community of Georgetown and were determined to build a chapel.

“they went to work in earnest, and soon their Bethel (House of God) was built. One of their members being in favourable circumstances to be able to find the cash on interest of course”

¹² Original Map – Blaenau Gwent Archives Old Company offices Ebbw Vale

They had by this time saved £60.12 leaving £260 to pay. The entire cost of building being £320,12,6 and the chapel was opened on 2nd of August 1868 which, taking their number and their circumstances into account was very commendable as there was;

“not one among them who did not belong to the working class” Pastor Evans resigned early in 1872 and at that time the church had grown to thirty-eight members with one hundred and sixteen in the Sunday school and nineteen teachers.



The strength and vision of this little group reflects the vision and resolve of Bethel even to this day. **Thank God however that bridges of friendship and brotherhood were rebuilt** in line with the scripture 1 Cor 1:10 *I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought*’.

By the time of Rev T. Jermaine people were given letters of transfer between Bethel and Church Street and Bethel and Siloh so harmony and acceptance were restored. Siloh also, on several occasions, kindly loaned their building and services ‘To our sister church at Bethel’ and we have shared many services over the years in perfect harmony. Siloh Church continued to hold services in Welsh while Bethel held its services in English to meet the need of the immigrants who were moving from rural England and Ireland for work in the coal mines and expanding

Iron Industry. Georgetown was a new and rapidly growing area and it was right on the doorstep of Bethel. These people “had a mind to work” and in order to keep cost as low as possible the foundations were cut by a few male members who came directly from their daily work to further work for their Master and Lord. Of those early dedicated men the following names are remembered¹³: - Thomas Owen, Richard Williams, Eli Nicholls, Henry Jones, John Evans, John Evans 2, Richard Evans, Edward Morris and George Burgoyne. As mentioned above these men were working class which can be seen from the Ebbw Vale lease, they comprised of colliers and carpenters but they were men of immense faith and vision.

At the time when the founders of Bethel set about their task, Tredegar was the centre of a crusade against the evils of ‘intoxicating liquor.’ This crusade had its birth in the simple cry of Mr Richard Rees who had earned the name of “Cheap John” as a result of his weekly cheap sale of various goods. He called on the workmen of this day to think hard on the way in which they were spending their money ‘for that which satisfieth not’ and the result was a temperance revival. Scores signed the Temperance Pledge and for several years it was looked upon as a great sin to enter a public house. Bethel was born in the midst of this temperance revival and its founders then were firm advocates of teetotalism.

Life and social conditions were still extremely hard and little improved in the world of industry since that terrible day in 1865 when twenty-six miners were killed at Bedwellty Pit¹⁴. Just twelve years later there was within a twelve-month period two more explosions at Bedwellty pit and a further twelve lives were lost. The fatality statistics throughout the coalfields were staggering and severely maimed were too many to record accurately.

¹³ Original document – Blaenau Gwent Archives Old Company offices Ebbw Vale

¹⁴ National Library of Wales – Archived Newspapers Monmouthshire Merlin

The recollections of Mrs Clark 1845

There is a record in one of the national newspapers circa 1939 of an interview with Mrs. Clark who lived at 51 Glyn Terrace.

Mrs Clark was born the youngest of sixteen children to Mr & Mrs Joseph Davies, a weigher at the Forge Works.

On her ninetieth birthday circa 1939 Mrs Clark clearly recalls events of eighty-five years earlier. She remembers reciting in Siloh Baptist church when she was just five years old and was still able, aged ninety, to remember her lines in both English and Welsh.

Mrs. Clark recalls Tredegar “before the Town Clock was built: when there were only two Constables to protect the town, before there were any passenger trains, when the Post Office was in a chemist shop and when Georgetown consisted of only one thatched cottage”. She recalls that the Police Station was located at the bottom of Salisbury Street and that offenders were placed in the stocks at the old Market House where the Town Hall School was held. She also remembers the building of the Temperance Hall. One of her brothers Mr. Daniel Davies became Chairman of Tredegar Council and was also the driver of the first passenger train between Tredegar and Newport, this was one of the first passenger trains in the world.

***Mrs. Clark remembers the building of the first Bethel Baptist** ¹⁵*before it was enlarged in 1876. She recalls being baptized in the Sirhowy River just opposite Bethel and claims to be the first female member of the newly built Bethel church.**

The First Bethel Chapel

The first chapel was built in the year 1868 and seated two hundred but within a few years a larger building became necessary to accommodate the numbers who came to hear ‘The Word’ being preached. In the year 1876 the chapel was re-built with seating for five hundred and forty, the work being carried out by a firm known as Whitehorn and Son. Once again in order to keep costs down, the members helped in a voluntary way and the new building was erected at a cost of six hundred pounds, including the addition of a gallery. The church membership at this time was seventy five and the Sunday School scholars one hundred and sixty.

¹⁵ A Newspaper article kindly given by Mrs Tuck

In four years the congregation doubled adding thirty-seven members and forty-four children. The members of those days must have really been determined to pay full heed to the injunction of the Divine Word ‘Forget not the assembling of your selves together’. *“What would the present generation be saying if, like our forefathers, we were called to worship in a building that had no heating system to warm the body, no organ to help put warmth into the singing of the hymns”*. The lack of these amenities did not in any way deter those early pioneers in their eagerness to meet in fellowship

3. The First Full Time Minister.

Rev. Ebenezer Lewis (1872 – 1879) 7yrs service



In 1872 the Rev Ebenezer Lewis accepted the invitation of the church to become its first full time minister. Mr Lewis a native of Landrindod Wells was brought to the Lord under the preaching of Pastor Stephen Price of Abersychan, Pontypool, he first began to preach at Hay in Breconshire. At the time of his call to Bethel Mr Lewis was a resident of Ebbw Vale and had previously lived in Brynmawr. Mr Lewis worked at his trade of boot and shoe maker and also served as a preacher throughout the district. Mr Lewis was an excellent preacher and an outstanding pastor and never spared himself in attending to the interests of the church and its individual members. On several occasions he stayed all night at the bedside of the sick thus enabling the family to take a rest. In coming to Bethel he received **no promise of any fixed salary**, yet he was never heard to complain about the very small payment he received. On one occasion, holding a few shillings in his hand, he said, “I do not know how I am going to manage to feed my wife and children, but the Dear Lord knows, otherwise He would not have called me to the work”. Thankfully today the church faces its responsibilities and does its best to provide a sensible secure salary so that the Pastor can concentrate his efforts on preaching and pastoring and not worry about where his next meal will come from. It was a view often expressed in those days that

the pastor should be kept humble and reliant on God, so they chose not to pay too high a salary. It was also true that they worked hard to pay off the debt of the building as soon as possible because debt was considered to be an unholy thing and should not be tolerated any longer than necessary.!



Rev Lewis came to Bethel from Ebbw Vale and the unanimous comment of our forefathers was that his coming had been a great blessing to the church. He was ordained into the pastorate at Nazareth Clydach early in 1854 and left in 1857. While he was there he completely supported himself by working at his trade as a cobbler. While at Bethel he

still worked every free moment at his trade to supplement his income to meet as best he could the needs of himself, his wife, two daughters and one son. He was a large and powerful man with a melodic voice who liked preaching in the streets and it resulted in many people becoming Christians. He and his family, on coming to Tredegar, first lived at 49, York Terrace. One of the deacons, Mr. Richard B. Williams, was engaged in building Nos 3 and 4 Bethel Terrace and on their completion the Rev Lewis and his family went to live at No 3. **Rev Lewis prepared his sermons in his study which also doubled as a shoemaker's workshop.** During his ministry, the church grew rapidly and the congregation soon outgrew the building. He was a selfless man, he worked hard at his trade and raised a considerable amount towards the future extension of the chapel. It is a wonderful story that tells how he surmounted all difficulties and never once failed in his mission of bringing other souls to the God he dearly loved and longed to serve. His only son, Thomas, grew up in his image and quite early in life declared he too would, one day, give his life to the ministry and become a Pastor. This he did and eventually held several pastorates with distinction. Thomas preached at Bethel on several occasions, the last

time being in 1918, just one year before ill health compelled him to resign his last pastorate at Leeds.

A report in the **Cardiff Times** dated **June 6, 1874** records that the Sunday School at this time numbered 160 children, it also highlights the strength of the non-conformist churches at that time for about 'three thousand children and adults took part in the annual Whitsun Demonstration march through the town. Below is the report of the day:

The Cardiff Times 6/6/1874

*DEMONSTRATION. On Monday afternoon the Nonconformist Sunday-school of Tredegar held their annual demonstration. A grand procession was arranged, wherein about 3,000 children and adults took part. A large number carried banners. Mr. and Mrs. Colquhoun were present in Bedwellty Park, and before them each choir rendered an appropriate anthem. The procession was headed by the Adulam School, which numbered 120, being followed by Penuel School, numbering 272, Primitive Methodist 285, Salem 135, Zoar 204, Elim 238, English Baptist 200, **Bethel, Baptist 160**, Saron 450, Presbyterian 172 Welsh Wesleyan 230, and Siloh, 540. Fifty of the latter number being inmates of the Workhouse. A tea-party was provided by each school, and in the evening meetings of a literary character were held.*

By the end of his pastorate in 1879 two hundred and twenty people were added to the church and there was a strong Sunday school comprising two hundred and seventy-one pupils and nineteen teachers. When Rev Ebenezer Lewis left Bethel, Tredegar, in answer to the call of the church, Bethel, Georgetown, Merthyr Tydfil, he left us very strong spiritually and it is said that many tears were shed when he preached to a full church on his last Sunday at Tredegar.

We often hear it said today that our forefathers were too stern and failed to bring little joy into life but this not supported by the facts. They were indeed strict in their faith and rigid in their discipline, but they also kept a good sense of humour and were quick to enjoy a good laugh. One story is told how, when Rev. Lewis was preaching from the text - "And now it is high time to awake out of sleep" - Romans chapter 13 verse 11 - found that during the course of his message, that four of the six deacons seated directly in front of him were asleep. This gave occasion for

much jovial banter in which even the four sleepers joined and when they were reminded what happened to Eutychus when he fell asleep when Paul was preaching they replied “yes but we did not fall from our seats”. Ebenezer Lewis, so it is reported, possessed a very powerful voice and used it to the full when preaching. We can therefore conclude that it was of no fault on the preacher that some of his deacons fell asleep. Those were the days of not only low wages, but also very hard work for long hours and so at the end of the week “while the spirit was willing the flesh was weak”.

Another very touching story told of those early days reveals the determination of the members to obtain the best for the services of God’s House. During the Ordinance of the Lord’s Supper the bread and wine were served from a china plate and jug and though the church bore a heavy debt it was felt that vessels more in keeping with solemnity of the service must be purchased. After much thought the deacons volunteered **to sacrifice their weekend joint of meat** and put the little cash, thus saved, into a fund until it accumulated sufficient for the purchase of the correct vessels for the service. We are made to feel very humble today in our church activities when we are reminded of those strong, robust, yet loving characters of the early days.

4. Rev. T. Jermine (1880 -1895) 15yrs Service



Only one year passed after the departure of Rev. Lewis before the church was led to call Rev. Thomas Jermine to the pastorate. Rev Jermine was native of Molleston, Pembrokshire. He studied at Haverford West college and upon leaving was ordained at Willenhall Staffordshire where he held his pastorate until 1869. After this he pastored a church in Saundersfoot from 1869 till 1874 and several other chuches in Evenjobb Powys and Gladestry until 1879.

While at Gladestry he received the call to the Pastorate of Bethel Tredegar. Rev Jermine accepted the call in 1880 and settled into number one Bethel Terrace.

Just two years into his ministry Tredegar became the centre of national focus due to the outbreak of rioting in the Irish population of Red Lion square (behind the Red Lion Pub) The Irish population was quite numerous and mainly centred around Red Lion Square. Like the rest of Tredegar's population, they were immigrants from all over the country. They were Roman Catholics and generally kept themselves to themselves retaining their culture. The riots began when two of their number joined the Salvation Army. This was intolerable to them especially when the Salvation Army band marched as was their method of evangelism, the Irish mob seized and beat some of them. The riots rapidly escalated out of hand and sixty special policemen had to be sworn in. 'The Cambrian News' reported that one of the Irish men was wielding a scythe 'inflicted such serious injuries against one of his opponents that the man's life is despaired of'. By the end of the rioting several Irish homes were literally gutted and the families rendered homeless. On the following Sunday the rioting again broke out and thousands of people were involved right up to Sunday night, the town was in the hand of the mob. It was also reported that two cases of Enfield rifles were found among the Irish group. The 41st regiment based at Cardiff under the command of Major Shirke were deployed and billeted at the town hall. By Monday the riot was quelled but most of the Irish homes were destroyed and the inhabitants forced to seek refuge in the workhouse and many of the survivors left the town immediately. By Tuesday the men went back to work in the collieries and the remaining Irish exodus continued.

It would take a sensitive man to preach to a congregation at a time like this and diffuse this malaise of religious animosity and hatred.

Such was the man that during this time he took up a missionary enterprise and went out to help build up the work of the Kingdom in other parts of north Monmouthshire also. The young people were encouraged to hold their own week night meeting and eventually they joined themselves to the 'Christian Endeavour Movement' becoming an asset to that body.

The 'old trunk' mentioned in the introduction that was found in the attic of 1 Bethel Terrace is a real treasure trove and 'Time capsule', it contains personal letters, sermons and highlights how hard these men worked to sustain the running of the church and supplement their meagre income.

Rev Jermaine's son was quite entrepreneurial in running a packaging business hiring out packing cases to Cadburys and recycling flour sacks to flour mills. There is an invitation in the trunk from Selfridges of London for Rev Jermain to attend their third anniversary.

Due to many removals from the district, the church membership declined for a time but again increased to eighty seven at the time Rev. Thomas Jermaine resigned. The Monmouthshire Merlin report of the annual Sunday School March on Monday 11 July 1884 states the number of the Sunday School was now 230.

South Wales Daily News 3/7/1894

Ten Years on, the South Wales Daily News July 3, 1894 records the Sunday School as numbering 337. It is also worth looking back to those days and the newspaper's records the following details of Tredegar's churches:

TREDEGAR. NEW MISSION Room. -The ceremony of opening of a new mission room built in Bridge-street for the use of the Ragged Sunday-school took place on Sunday, when Mr. R. Cope Morgan, London (editor of The Christian), officiated. The new room is centrally situated and commodious, and cost about £300, the builder being Mr. David Morgan, Tredegar.

*THE SUNDAY-SCHOOLS - Delightful weather favoured the annual demonstration of Nonconformist Sunday-schools which took place on Monday. Twenty-three schools took part in the procession, which, through the kindness of Mr and Mrs Harbidge, proceeded through the beautiful grounds attached to Bedwellty House, in the following order :- Primitive Methodist Troedrihwgair 120, Adulum Welsh Congregational 123, Welsh Wesleyan 256, Armageddon Baptist 130, **Bethel English Baptist 337**, Castle-street English Congregational 340, Mispah Ragged School 120, Primitive Methodist, Mount-street, 250, Bethania Congregational 120, Siloh Welsh Baptist 350, Pochin Congregational 50, Saron Welsh Congregational 300, Salvation Army 214, Primitive Methodist Vale-terrace, 240, Church-street English Baptist 500, Seion Calvinistic Methodist 150, Penuel Calvinistic Methodist 410, Park place Presbyterian 500, Elim Welsh*

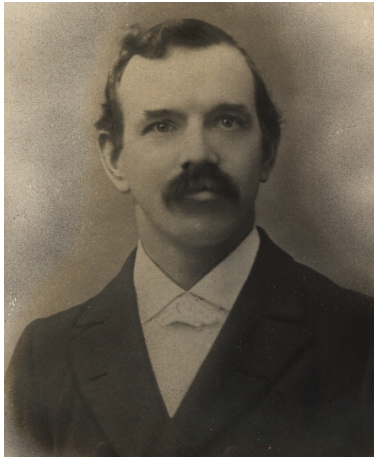
Congregational 220, English Wesleyan Vale-terrace 120, United Brethren 600, Salem Calvinistic Methodist 200, and United Brethren, Bedwellty Pits 127; total, 5,777. The procession was admirably marshalled by Messrs Richard J. Morgan, T. Jenkins (ironmonger), James Morgan, and Thomas Tuck. Mr J. Porteous Bell (Wigton Villa) performed the functions of secretary, while Mr Edwin Carter acted as Chairman of the committee.

A sudden and severe illness (probably a stroke) brought the end of T. Jermin's active ministry at the age of fifty-eight, this was a severe blow to the church, coming, as it did, at a time when there was evidence of a march forward in the life and activity of the church. During his ministry Rev. Jermine had inspired the membership to make every effort to clear an outstanding debt of eight hundred and forty pounds. All responded well to his leadership in this matter and this debt was cleared in the year 1896 - just one year after his retirement. At the time of his premature retirement on 26th May 1895 four hundred and twenty people had been added to the church. Rev Jermain remained at Bethel under the ministry of J.F Collier for some time and he held the post of honorary Pastor. He also held this office at Siloh Baptist for some time too.

Mr. Matthew Henry Matthews (1895)

During the time when the pastorate was vacant, the church decided to ordain Mr. Matthew Henry Matthews, a coal miner and lay preacher, in order that he could officiate at the ordinances. Mr. Matthews was approached and agreed on condition that this arrangement did not in any way delay the calling of a full-time pastor and he gave his services without cost to the church. Mr. Matthews was inducted into the Pastorate at Bethel on Monday 17th June 1895, several ministers took part and the meetings were attended by large congregations. (South Wales Daily News 19th June 1895) In a very short time the church was well prepared both financially and spiritually to call its next pastor who, when he came to us, found a very healthy church.

5. Rev. D. P. David (1896 - 1904) 8yrs Service



Rev. David P. David, a native of Llanelly Carmarthenshire, came to us direct from Aberystwyth College at the age of 27 (South Wales Daily News 13th August 1896) and started his ministry on September 3th 1896. At the time of his coming Bethel was being renovated and the seating and accommodation re-arranged. The chapel was closed whilst this work was in progress but **Siloh Church loaned their building for the Ordination and Induction services** which took place on Monday November 2nd. Clearly by this time all old wounds were healed between Siloh and Bethel and the bridges of reconciliation were complete, thanks be to God. They also readily came to our aid in making preparations for these services and the Rev. Peter Williams (Pedr-Hir), Pastor of Siloh, took full charge of the refreshments for the visitors who came in large numbers.

The first four years of his ministry were very successful and both pastor and people labored together in harmony. The latter four years the reverse was the case, the records do not state what happened. At the end of the first year of Rev. D. P. David's ministry the church membership numbered one hundred and sixty-two but fell to one hundred and twenty nine by the time he left us in 1904. This decrease was due to many causes beyond the control of Pastor and church and must have been disappointing for everyone. The year 1898 was a troubled year in the mining industry, it being the year of the miner's strike referred to locally as the 'Big Strike'. The strike began on April fool day and lasted approximately six months. The affect was financially devastating to the local community and according to the newspapers of the day the cost to the railway company alone ran to seven million pounds, a staggering amount in those days. Three thousand and ninety-five men were directly employed in the Collieries of Tredegar at this time

and almost every other industry or shop existed because of the coal industry. 'The depression' was far reaching and in common with other churches Bethel lost many of its members who moved to other areas in search of work. When the strike ended a few returned but most stayed in their new places of employment having made their homes there. Soon after commencing his ministry during the following January he was called to officiate at the funeral of Matthew Henry Matthews who had taken the place of pastor at Bethel for eighteen months. Some verses composed by Mr. Matthews were sung at his memorial service to the tune "Sphor".

In June 1904 for his own health and for the health of the church he made a request of the church to grant him three months leave of absence as he desired to visit friends in America and to make a tour of the churches. The request was granted, and Rev. David received best wishes from the church for a safe and happy voyage, but no one at this time had any idea that this would be the end of his ministry at Bethel. On his arrival in America he wrote a letter to Mr. William Hankins, the then church secretary, in which he stated he had decided to remain in America and therefore wished to resign as our pastor. In October 1904 the church held a ballot which resulted in the resignation being accepted.

In the year 1903 another debt was occurred when the school room was enlarged. Again, much voluntary work was done by the members in preparing the ground for building and together with the improvements to the chapel already mentioned the church was now well over six hundred pounds in debt which was not cleared until the year 1918.

According to shipping records, Reverend Davis left for America from Southampton aboard the St Paul on 27th July 1904 and landed in New York. It is not known where he went initially but he eventually became the Pastor of a Baptist Church in Johnstown Pennsylvania before returning to Wales just two years later in 1906. Reverend Davies was then inducted into the Pastorate of Mardy Baptist Church Glamorgan on Sunday 13th January 1907. This pastorate was also short lived because the following year on 28th and 29th of January 1908 Rev D P David was inducted as pastor of a new church plant in Fishguard Pembrokeshire.

It is impossible to say why D.P.David left for America, it may have been despair at the social conditions and the falling away of the members due to the depression caused by the strike. Whatever the reason just five months after his departure, in November of 1904, revival broke out in West Wales. This fire rapidly spread throughout the rest of Wales and it was estimated that at least one hundred thousand people were converted. The revival extended into Scotland, parts of Europe and America and by the end of two years it was estimated that as many as one million people were swept into the Kingdom.

8th Dec 1904 Evening Express

*Tredegar has been reached by the revival wave, and prayer meetings are held nightly in nearly every place of worship in the town. A remarkable meeting was held at Park-place Presbyterian Church (pastor the Rev. D. M. Rees). The whole of the congregation, composed mainly of young people, sobbed aloud at the cries of several young men and women calling aloud for mercy. The number of converts during the week in all the Churches might be roughly estimated at over 400, among whom are some of the **best known characters of the town***

On Thursday 28th January 1905, just across the river from Bethel, in Siloh Baptist Church, forty-eight people were converted and simultaneously in an open-air meeting at the town clock six more people were converted. Up until the end of February 1905 one thousand five hundred and twenty-five people were converted in Tredegar. The secular newspapers of the day record extraordinary events in the churches, meetings that regularly went on into the early hours of the morning and often recommenced the next day. They also tell extraordinary tales of moral reform that came as a result of lives that began to imitate Jesus. The newspapers of the day record that all over Wales the number of court cases were drastically reduced and in some areas such as in Tredegar and the Rhondda Valley there were **no cases at all to be heard**, the last time this happened was eighteen years earlier. Football, Rugby teams and other organisations such as theatrical societies were forced to close due to lack of interest. Public houses had to lay off staff before eventually closing altogether. These were remarkable days and the next Pastor of Bethel saw the church membership rapidly expand to the highest

numbers ever achieved to date at Bethel.

6 Rev. J.E. Collier (1905 - 1921) 16yrs service



John Edgar Collier a native of Rogerstone. We often hear it said that “God has His man for every time and circumstance”. This was certainly true when the Rev. J.E.Collier was led to accept the call to be our Pastor at the age of thirty two. Just four years into his ministry the town, which had flourished economically, was caught in the grip of economic depression. To begin with there had been a serious and long-running coal strike, miners from the Cambrian

group of pits having been out of work for over a year. Wage reductions were implemented in several other industries and that meant money was tight and prices for basic food stuffs soared. There was a fairly large Jewish community in Tredegar, many of the local shops and small businesses were owned and run by Jews. The Jews also owned most of rental property across the town and large numbers of tenants were finding it difficult to pay their rent. There was simmering anger in the area and the people began looking for scapegoats. As a result, the ‘well off’ Jewish community took the brunt of their frustration and anger.

On the night of 19 August 1911, a group of miners, after spending the evening in the pub, decided they had had enough. They had nothing and the Jewish shopkeepers – or so it seemed to these out of work miners – had everything. In a haze of alcohol-induced fury, a Jewish shop was attacked and ransacked. This very quickly escalated and by the time the police arrived, twenty Jewish homes and business were looted and ransacked, thankfully no one was seriously injured. The unrest quickly spread to the surrounding towns and Winston Churchill, then Home Secretary intervened and ordered troops to be deployed to quell the uprising. By the end of the week the riots that had spread to other towns subsided as quickly as they had began but it cost the Jewish community a conservative £16,000. Clearly these were anxious times and the circumstances prevailing at this time were certainly not encouraging but

it can be said with truth that, in the person of Rev Collier, God certainly had His man to deal with these circumstances. In a very short time he had the church again marching forward and progress continued throughout his ministry with us.

A report of the annual Sunday School marches in the Cardiff Times 25 May 1907 states that Bethel Sunday School was now 260 strong.



He came to us from Hay in Breconshire and remaining for sixteen years, never spared himself in the establishing the church in the 'most holy faith. During his stay with us Bethel enjoyed a time of peace and prosperity especially in the Spiritual part of its life. J.E. Collier was a true evangelist in his preaching and certainly maintained the dignity in the pulpit. His outstanding qualities as a shepherd of his flock won the admiration not only of his people, but also those of the whole district. They had watched him, week by week, making his rounds to counsel, comfort, and yes, very often to admonish. He was systematic in his visitations, every home receiving a visit at regular intervals and this gave

him the opportunity to take over the little problems before they had time to grow into anything serious. His interest in everyone, from youngest to the oldest, resulted in him getting to know us better than we knew ourselves. The church and its people became the one real concern of his life and no church could have been served by a better Pastor. He was a true shepherd and never sought to become anyone's pet lamb. Little did the towns folk know then that just three years after the Jewish riots, that seemed so destructive upsetting the natural order of society, a much more devastating storm was unfurling its fury across Europe and would engulf the entire country. By the end of this short four year period of madness almost seventeen million people would be dead and a further thirteen million casualties survived.

Bedwellty house houses a record, an incomplete record, of those brave men of Tredegar who with so many across Wales and the United Kingdom gave their lives between those fateful years of 28 July 1914 to 11 November 1918. on the far flung fields of Europe. Although this is not recorded in the original history of Bethel for this period of time, the cenotaph in Bedwellty Park records the names of over a hundred known men who gave their lives in the most horrendous circumstances. These brave men/boys, most of whom cut down in the prime of their lives, all represented Tredegar families. Bethel suffered in this period too several of the men from Georgetown, three of them from numbers 1, 3 and 4 Greenfield Terrace, friends who probably enlisted with eagerness the same day. Many of the young men saw it as a way to escape the drudgery of the hard life of the mining communities. There were many others too, from the Georgetown terraces.

John 15 "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."

But what of those who returned from war, scarred, physically, mentally and maimed in every way with little or no support. We are proud of them and that they won a freedom from tyranny for those of us in future generations, but undoubtedly the world changed, nothing would ever be the same again.

The Son, Jesus, bore in his body all of the terrible scars he received when he was winning salvation for those who believe. Thank God! He too changed everything forever!



Despite the best efforts of the enemy to bring us to our knees victory eventually came and during this extraordinary period Rev Collier worked tirelessly and Bethel's numbers grew.

Never once during the whole of his ministry was he a minute late commencing a service, being in his place ready to begin at the appointed time and thus not a single minute was ever wasted. During his ministry a new pulpit was built and a new organ purchased. Under his leadership the church increased in missionary zeal and the children of the Sunday School encouraged to make periodical collections for missionary work. On one occasion a child came to him saying that, on going around with her collecting card, she had been called a little beggar. He replied, "Now you are indeed highly honoured in that you are beggar for the

Lord”.

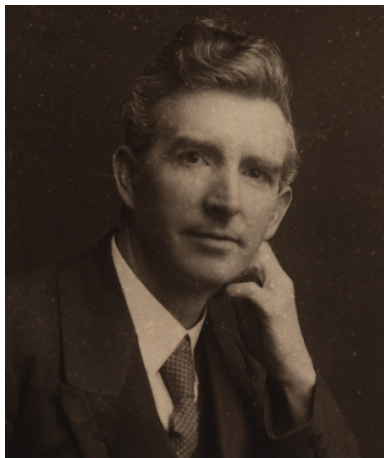
In the year 1920, the Monmouthshire Baptist Association held its annual meetings at Bethel on Whitsun Tuesday and Wednesday. The delegates were served lunch and tea on both days at Castle Street Congregational Church school room (kindly lent). Rev. Collier was at the helm in making the necessary preparations and, needless to say everything was done to perfection. In the year 1921, Rev. J.E. Collier accepted a call to the Baptist Church at Chepstow and left Bethel in a very strong spiritual position with the membership increased to two hundred and thirty five. Rev Collier ministered at Chepstow very successfully for a further seven years,.

When he noticed any member becoming lax in attending the means of grace, he visited such in his usual tactful way which left one feeling a sense of shame that such a visit was ever necessary. There were many who remained faithful to the Lord and the work of His Church, who readily admit that Rev. J.E. Collier took a great part in bringing them back to the “fold”, at a time when other forces were putting pressure in the wrong direction. We will revere his memory to the end of our earthly pilgrimage and will continue to praise God for such a man. On



Palm Sunday 1949 our former Pastor, Rev. J.E. Collier preached at Bethel and on Monday a tea was given in his honour. After the tea a service was held at which he gave a stirring address on his fifty years as a preacher and servant of the Lord. He intimated of his desire to preach in all the churches where he had held pastorates and after Bethel it was only left for him to preach at his first church in Hay. It was arranged that he should take the services at Hay on Good Friday 1949 but he was suddenly taken ill and passed to his eternal reward on Easter Sunday aged seventy six. He therefore preached his last sermon at Bethel and just failed in his desire to preach at Hay where he held his first pastorate. He was a true man of God whose fragrant memory we all cherish.

7. Rev. E.D. Tegryd Phillips. (1923 -1928) 5yrs service



In the year 1923 the church was led to call Rev E.D. Tegryd Phillips to become its pastor. He came to us from Chapel-of-Ease, Abercarn and found the good work done by Rev. J.E. Collier had become consolidated by a hard working deaconate who had followed the methods of our former pastor.

The general economic climate in Wales was in steady decline. In the mid-1920s unemployment among coalminers rose from 2% in April 1924 to 12.5% in January 1925 and to 28.5% in August. The south Wales coalfield, more dependent upon exports than the other British coalfields, was the worst hit. The aftermath of war saw a steady decline in the demand for Welsh coal. New fuels such as oil rapidly slowed industrial growth in the coal industry which had previously steadily grown for 150 years. Subsidised mining abroad had a devastating effect in Wales, the depression reversed the rapid immigration and resulted in Wales losing 390,000 people between 1925 and 1939.

God always has the right man, Once again despite current economics and depression Bethel continued to grow. Rev Phillips was an outstanding preacher and, coupled with this, he maintained the standard already set in pastoral care. Pastoral care has always been Bethel's hallmark not just

the work of the Pastor but the whole church has always been a caring church and always ready as best it can to meet needs not only of its members but others in the community who are in need. It can be said of him that he was a pulpit giant though physically of small stature. He came very close to the old time Welsh preachers and certainly thrilled his hearers when he broke into the “Hwyl”. The congregation at Bethel grew rapidly during his ministry and on many occasions there was revival fervour in the services. During his five years at Bethel he saw membership grow to the number of two-hundred and ninety-seven, this being the highest in the history of Bethel. As a young man he met with an accident which left him lame throughout his life, but this did not deter him from making regular calls on members and keeping a lively interest in every branch of the church.

In the year 1924, the roof of the schoolroom collapsed and this led the church to decide on certain structural alterations resulting in the schoolrooms being rebuilt.

Rev Phillips was involved in the ceremony for the unveiling and dedication of the Tredegar War Memorial on Sunday December 14th, 1924. The memorial was erected to remember those brave young men of Tredegar afore mentioned, who gave their lives in World War1. Sadly, many more young men of the town have given their lives in subsequent wars. At the ceremony he read the immortal words of Jesus: **“Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”** John 15:13. Rev Phillips also believed the words of the Apostle Paul “For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son ‘while we were still his enemies’, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son.” Romans 5:10

In the year 1926 there was again trouble in the mining industry when most of our male members were without work for several months. During this time the chapel needed repair and re-decoration and Mr John Meredith, one of our members, was encouraged by Rev. Phillips to organise the work on a voluntary basis which he did with great success. In this way the entire work was completed for less than forty pounds, against an estimate of three hundred and twenty pounds submitted by a local builder. For six days each week for one month, from 9am to 10pm, Mr Meredith and

his band of workers kept at it and each day received a visit from our pastor who came with words of encouragement. Those who were still at work and not troubled by the ‘miner’s strike’, provided the means for some of the ladies of the church to prepare lunch and tea in the schoolroom. In this way the work was speeded up, many hours saved as members had no need to return home for meals. Mr Theo Matthews recalls, some of us still look back with joy on those days when “the people not only had a mind to work” but brought to the work a correct attitude and spirit.

Mrs Phillips was also a wonderful blessing to our church in that she entered into the work wholeheartedly, sharing with her husband in every call made upon them. She was in many ways an accomplished lady and we remember with special thanks the wonderful work she did with the children and young people. Our Sunday School Anniversaries attracted people from a very wide area and our church became too small to accommodate the crowds. Some who were trained by Mrs Phillips continued to use the talents they learned at that time.

Rev Tegryd, as he is affectionately remembered, was holding the pastorate at Caersalem Church, Aberbargoed, when he was called home to his Eternal reward. We are certain he heard his Master say “Well done thou good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord”.

8. The Years Between (1928 – 1930)



The short time between 1928 and when the Rev E.D. Tegryd Phillips left for Aberbargoed and 1930 when Rev E.J. Evans came to us, was an exceptional time with the young people of the church and we were certainly blessed with the fruits of Rev and Mrs. Phillips’ labours. The Young People Fellowship each Tuesday evening was attended by upwards of two hundred. Many great speakers who came to our meetings were so impressed that they asked to be invited again and several visited us many times. This great work among young people bore its fruit for, in the year 1929, three young men successfully passed

the Lay Preachers' examination of the Baptist Association and served not only Bethel, but the surrounding churches. One of these was the late Rev. David R. Oliver who went on to full time ministry. He informed our deaconate that he felt called to dedicate his life to the work of ministry and the deacons in turn replied that they had fully expected the call. At the time, our pastorate being vacant, the late Rev W.J. Evans L.T.S.C. of Carmel Church, Sirhowy, came to assistance of our brother and prepared him for the entry into Spurgeons Baptist College. He satisfied the candidates committee of this college and started his studies in September, 1930. At the end of his college training he accepted the call to the pastorate of Woolaston Baptist Church, Northampton, where he did excellent work among the young people. He held further pastorates at Hendon, Broadstairs, Canterbury and Cirencester. He was only privileged to remain at this latter church for two years when he was suddenly called to the Church Triumphant on Sunday, 1st May 1966. During the years of the war he served as Chaplain to H.M. Forces in North Africa before suffering a breakdown in health and returning home for a rest. When the war ended he entered again wholeheartedly into the work of the church and it came as a great shock to us all when he passed away suddenly at the age of fifty-five.

The churches that Rev D.R.Oliver pastored are still Evangelical and progressing strongly to this day and each of them are accessible on the internet. The following is an extract from his first pastorate at Woolaston.Soon after the Rev Oliver arrived he reported that it was "essential to revive the spiritual life of the church" His fellow members obviously agreed and set about arranging a mission campaign for the Easter of 1936. This proved to be very successful and 24 people were baptized soon after it took place.

9 Rev. E.J. Evans (1930 - 1957) 27yrs service



On the first Sunday in July, 1930, Rev E J. Evans commenced his ministry at Bethel, having accepted the unanimous call of the church, coming to us from the Baptist Mission Church at Pontymister. No man was ever called to the pastorate of any church to be met by such unforeseen difficulties in the first year of his pastorate. In April 1931 we were all shocked to find our church building severely damaged by fire caused by a faulty hot air central heating system.

This fire was noticed in the early hours of the morning and although promptly dealt with, it caused serious extensive damage. For several months during the work of rebuilding, services were held at Georgetown school, the late Alderman Alfred Barrett, O.B.E. having conveyed our appeal to the authorities for its use. Permission was given on condition that we made ourselves responsible for seeing the rooms were put back to their usual order in readiness for school on Monday morning. Our young people undertook this work and when the time came to return to our



church building a letter was received from the Headmaster thanking us for the splendid way in which everything had been looked after and put back in its proper place.

While we were thankful for the temporary accommodation afforded we were now left with difficulty in bringing the church back to its standard and facing up to another heavy debt. It was during this rebuilding that central heating was installed and this was a great improvement on the old hot air system which, most agreed, was the cause of the serious fire. Added to this difficulty a number of our young people left us to find employment in other areas during the Industrial Depression of the 1930's. 1st September 1939, a date never to be forgotten: Nazi Germany invaded Poland and as a result on September 2nd Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain declared Britain at war with Germany. No one could have envisioned then that 61 countries would eventually be caught up in the fighting, involving 1.7 billion people equal to three quarters of the world's population and after it fifty million people would be dead and hundreds of millions injured. Due to these devastating and alarming circumstances the church membership fell to one hundred and twenty by 1957 yet despite these extenuating circumstances a strong spiritual fervour still remained among those who were left.

Pastor Evans had the unenviable task of steering the church through this very difficult time, dealing with the challenging rational of the daily escalating War and the tragedy of mass local and national bereavement. Mr Evans was equal to this task and was Bethel's longest serving Pastor and those of our older members who still remember him always talk of him with glowing affection.



In the year 1949 a further debt of over six hundred pounds was incurred by necessary repairs and renovations. Loans, free of interest, were obtained from the members and even the Sunday School children came to our aid, this debt again being cleared during the ministry of Rev. E. J. Evans. A lesser man would have given up under such sudden and adverse circumstances, Rev E. J. Evans remained loyal to Bethel and no one knew of his personal struggles. He remained with us for twenty seven years, retiring in 1957. He was an excellent preacher and very sound in doctrine, refusing to compromise scriptural truths as was becoming quite popular among some other post war preachers. For his first sermon in Bethel he took his text from the Book of Judges, chapter 3 verse 20, "I have a message from God unto thee" and this was the mark of his messages during his twenty seven years as our pastor. He has served the church in many ways since his retirement and for his unstinted service the church remains greatly indebted to him. Great difficulties were experienced and overcome during the years 1930 -1957, but spiritually the church was kept to a very high standard - "Praise be to God"

In 1952 Rev. E. J. Evans received the honour of being elected President of the Monmouthshire Baptist Association and delivered his Presidential address at the Annual Meetings of the body held at Bethel on Whitsun Tuesday and Wednesday 1953 taking his subject "The ultimate triumph of Christ and His Kingdom". The delegates to these meetings were entertained to lunch and tea on both days at the assembly rooms at Bedwellty House, loaned to us for this great occasion. Much help was given in this part of the work by our Sisters and Brethren of Siloh Church.

10 Rev. O M. Gregory (1965 - 1967) 2yrs Service



In 1965 a call to become our pastor was extended to Rev Owen Gregory who, at the time was lay Pastor in charge of Pen-y-garn, Pontypool, one of the three oldest Baptist churches in Monmouthshire. He was inducted and ordained at Bethel on Thursday, 9th September 1965, the ordination being in the hands of Rev Emlyn Stephens, Secretary of the Monmouthshire Baptist Association. Rev O. M. Gregory only stayed with us for two years and returned to college on 2nd October 1967. Mr Gregory was a family man with two young children. During his short period at Bethel Mr Gregory left his mark by rejuvenating the youth group and reorganising the Sunday School. He introduced separate classes of different age groups with suitable age related study materials. This attracted many youngsters and the Sunday School flourished and grew. He had a heart for youth work and the youth group formed and interrelated with youth from other churches. Some of the young converts of those days are still with us today and they are now in their seventies but they still speak of Rev Gregory with very deep affection. Upon leaving college Rev Gregory was suffering with ill health and moved to Daisy Hill, Queensland, Australia where the climate suited his condition. Whilst in Australia he pastored at both Baptist and Presbyterian churches and became the director of 'Lifeline Northern Rivers'. Lifeline is a crisis support centre similar to the Samaritans in the UK but with a much broader scope helping with

counselling, drug addiction and homelessness. He made a return visit to Wales around 2012 and on at that occasion visited Bethel and was delighted to see his work had not only survived but was flourishing. Rev Gregory passed into glory on 26th June 2014

On Monday, 6th November 1967, the infallible Word of God was preached in Bethel by the Rev. W. J. Morgan of Tongwynlais. The impression left by his sermon and the impact of his personality on all those present was such that a church meeting was convened at which it was unanimously agreed to invite him to accept the pastorate of Bethel Church. It was with great joy and thanksgiving that we received his acceptance and Rev. W. J. Morgan commenced his ministry on Sunday, 7th April, 1968.

11. Rev W J Morgan. (1968-1976) 8yrs Service



The Rev W J Morgan came to Bethel from Tongwynlais at a time when religion was in general decline nationally, most congregations were ageing, and some local churches had already closed their doors.

The minutes record that W.J. as he became affectionately known preached at Bethel and immediately the entire congregation were taken with him and desired to give him a call to the Pastorate of Bethel.

Rev Morgan was inducted into the pastorate of Bethel on Thursday 28th March 1968. The Charge to the Church was given by the Rev. Gwynfryn Davies, Tredegar. A new blessed and exciting eight years was to unfold.

The effects of a post war modernized worldview and the constant attacks from some of the clergy who were denying the fundamental truths of the bible made religion seem unattractive and irrelevant. A generation who had lived through the hardship of the war years and before that shared the history of being treated as chattels by the masters of industry were not

sure that there would even be a tomorrow, now had the ability to realise their dreams. This was the free-thinking swinging sixties where all norms were challenged and work was plentiful. High employment and good wages meant that people aspired to all forms of materialism hitherto undreamt of for the working class. Education, is emancipating but until then it had been largely the province of the privileged. For the first time working class Tredegar families saw their children achieve their aspirations and leave the town headed for the universities, never to return to the town.

The fundamentals of Christianity and its relevance in a modern progressive society were being questioned. In short, it seems we had no need of God anymore, we thought we had outgrown God and were encouraged to believe the “God is Dead” viewpoint and that science could prove that God was no longer relevant or necessary.

Ironically the author of the statement ‘God is dead’, the German atheist, Friedrich Nietzsche was actually lamenting the passing of more certain times, of days when the King was on the throne and God was in his heaven and there was order. He wrote:

“God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? That which was the holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? With what water could we purify ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we need to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we not ourselves become gods simply to be worthy of it?” He wrote this work in 1882 just 32 years before the unleashing of the effects of godlessness in the horror of The Great War.

W J Morgan was called to Bethel “**for such a time as this**” **Esther 4v14**. This challenge was immense and needed ‘Divine intervention’. That Divine Intervention came in the early seventies. WJ as he became affectionately known was from another generation, he was extremely old fashioned, he dressed like an undertaker in pin stripe trousers, he wore a waistcoat and white shirts with detachable collars and a trilby hat. The church was old fashioned with hard wooden pews and an antiquated pedal organ and the ageing congregation sang 18th century hymns. Despite the conditions being the exact opposite of societal norms



conducive to attracting people, WJ attracted people! His sermons were dynamic, authoritative, intrusive and challenging. When he spoke, he thundered theatrically, and many people said, “**it seemed as if God were speaking directly to me**”! His preaching had a profound effect on the youth of the town, the very last people one would have thought would have been drawn to Christianity especially in these archaic, unconducive conditions but it certainly did have a profound affect.

There were many conversions and baptisms of all ages but particularly among the unchurched youth of the town. Many young people abandoned their former ways of living and met for prayer on a Friday night and after the meeting often went into the town centre to share their faith on the streets and in the pubs. On several occasions, they engaged with large crowds of teenagers and invited them to come to chapel to find out more from WJ. Many of them turned up to a crowded chapel on Sunday night much to the surprise of the older people in the church. They came, they listened, and many were converted. Some of the young people were encouraged to preach and share this vision in other local churches and venues. For a period, the young people met on Sunday at 5:30pm for prayer before the evening service and prayed for friends and relatives many of whom came to the Lord. There was at least one occasion when something quite special happened in that pre-evening service meeting when God seemed to come so close that they did not want to leave the prayer meeting and prayed right throughout the service, **‘God came near’!**

Surprisingly the church minute book for this period records the usual mundane issues such as need for a new boiler and painting the church etc but it only records fifteen baptisms. It is hard to say why the dozens of other regular baptisms were not recorded. The only record that even alludes to this extraordinary time was an interjection in the minutes which states “We the diaconate thank Almighty God for the preaching of the truth of his word which is infallible and his arduous work for Jesus Christ and his church at Bethel. The pastor suitably replied saying that the last twelve months Bethel has greatly improved as a prayer minded church” Clearly there is a need to evaluate the critical events of the church at the end of every year and to record the outcomes. So much happens in the life of the church apart from the day to day running of it.

As mentioned earlier Bethel sent out many people to preach in the local churches from Deri to Ebbw vale and from Trefil to Cefn Forest. The gospel was preached in many places some for the last time because they are no longer in existence. For several months many of the church congregation met after the service at Bethel and transferred to the old Anglican church of St David’s and held a gospel service there in the

village of Troedrihwgair.

There were many humorous moments during those years and one sticks out, WJ was preaching with his usual zeal and punching the air theatrically as he always did. He gave a thunderous roar and out came his false teeth which coincided with one of his arm swinging moments and he hit his teeth right across the chapel. It did not deter him, he kept on preaching without them!

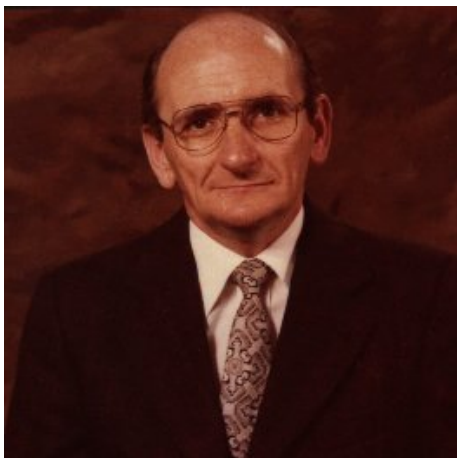
It came to a point that by the end of the services we did not wonder if anyone would be converted but how many! There was always a sense of anticipation. Similar things were happening locally in other churches in Merthyr, Pontllanfraith and the surrounding areas and it is now clear that it was happening nationally too. Some of Bethel youth often joined with the Merthyr Christians for fellowship and worship. This mini revival lasted a few years but sadly, gradually, came to an end and many, but not all, fell away. Some of those who left at that time did eventually return, some up to thirty years later and thank God are still going on and others often talk of it hoping that those days may one-day return.



WJ was an amazing evangelist but was not so strong on teaching Christian doctrine, this need however was adequately covered by some of the deacons and their families. Two families in particular are worthy of mention, Molly and Eddie Wareham and Phyllis and Bill Smith, they opened their homes, at some cost, and they would feed the young converts and encouraged personal prayer and bible study.

WJ was an Arminian Evangelist with a charismatic Pentecostal background. When WJ accepted a call to Bethel Baptist Oakdale he left the church numerous and prosperous and hungry for teaching. He had fulfilled his Evangelical calling and grew the church numerically now the church was ready to grow further and diversify spiritually. This need was met by the Rev Alan D Watkins who accepted the call to Bethel in 1977.

12. Rev Alan D Watkins (1977-2000) 23yrs service



Rev Alan Watkins was born in Skewen Swansea and came to us from his first pastorate at Bethel Baptist Baseleg. Mr Watkins was a brilliant reformed teacher who left the church reeling with his first sermon which was from Ephesians 2 v 10... **‘For we are God’s handiwork’**. With this first sermon the whole emphasis of the church doctrine was challenged and the greatness of God’s work in the redemption of humanity was revealed in stark reality. Mr. Watkins was as quietly spoken as W.J. was loud, and his physical stature was also the exact opposite of W.J. but he was a giant when it came to expository preaching. The church had not been exposed to this type of Calvinistic reformed theology except from the Rev Bruce Powell of Castle Street Church who helped out during the interregnum between WJ and Rev Watkins. Rev Powell always preached leaving us wanting more because it was clear that there was so much more to know. In Mr Watkins we had our own ‘well of knowledge’ and he taught the church how to grow up. He revealed scripture as if it



had never been read before, Paul's letters became personal letters, rich and pregnant with truth.

During this period, it was felt that the Baptist Union was losing direction spiritually and Bethel seceded from membership of the union. Sadly, as sometimes happens, there was a difference of opinion and several of the church members felt that they owed a loyalty to the Baptist Union because of their association and help over the years, sadly these members left to go elsewhere. Thanks to God that after a period, though their position remained the same, their friendship was rekindled.



Until now the wives of Bethel's Pastors have barely been mentioned but when the church called Mr Watkins we had the added bonus of Mrs Watkins who became affectionately known by many as Aunty Doris. During their long ministry most of the youth married and became parents. Mr and Mrs Watkins adopted three fabulous children and also worked with the adoption societies to help other childless couples to become parents too. Many families are very grateful to them, both inside and outside Bethel. During their Ministry, the church grew and became a more family orientated church and attracted many families and children.



Mr. Watkins was a Baker Confectioner before entering the ministry and he put it to good use in evangelism. During his Ministry the church introduced outreach social events based around a meal with a speaker and they were often held in venues outside the church, in the local schools and Brynbach Park, right in the heart of the community.

The family ethos was also fostered when the church opened a Mother and toddlers group which was always very well attended and for some of the parents and grandparents it was their first link with church.



During this time the fabric of the church was altered and modernized and in keeping with tradition the work was carried out by the members. The old wooden pews were removed and replaced with upholstered ash framed chairs, perhaps because the sermons were longer and needed greater sustained attention.



While the church was being renovated services were held at the James Street Community Centre, formally known as ‘James Street Primitive Methodist Church’.



The work continued undiminished and the church became more involved with local care homes and regularly took the gospel to the older forgotten generation who were, and still are, very appreciative. For many years we held services every Sunday in Greenacres home for adults with



Wendy Andrews

special needs. The residents became close friends, almost family, and they genuinely loved the Lord and really looked forward to the services. We mutually loved going to visit them too. Government policies changed, the home was closed, the residents were moved into smaller individual homes and from time to time over the years they have attended many of our seasonal services. Wendy Andrews 'highlighted', is very faithful and she still attends Bethel every Sunday without fail. Wendy often vocalizes her opinion on the preacher at the end of the service and she is very perceptive!

The Sunday School grew at this time and became very strong, it was so large that it became necessary to hire two 'Red & White' double decker buses to take the children on the annual Sunday School trip to the Gower



seaside resorts of Langland and Caswell bays. These were great days and the church was very family orientated. Some of the children of the young people from WJ's days have recently become Christians thirty years on and still remember with affection Uncle Alan and Aunty Doris.

At this time a visiting preacher of Polish origin came to Bethel and struck up a friendship with one of our deacons Steve Knapik who was also of Polish decent. A kernel of an idea emerged, and they met together with

some men from other fellowships and shared a vision to reach out with the gospel to their ancestral country of Poland. There were very few reformed churches in Poland at that time and their vision was to start a theological seminary to train pastors to evangelize Poland. They met



Polish Pastors and Bethel Deacons meet for the first time

with a few interested Christians in Poland who were eager to do the same and together they formed the 'John Laski Trust Fund' (*John Laski was a 16th Century reformer*). A few of the Polish Pastors then came over to Bethel to share their vision and the work began to emerge. As a result of the visit it emerged that a local Polish lady had links with an Orphanage in Legnica and she highlighted the poor state of the fabric of the Orphanage.

The reason for the poor conditions was historic. In 1939 the country had been ravaged by both the Nazi's and the Soviet Union and in 1952 it was eventually annexed by the Soviets when it became the Polish Peoples Republic. The City, indeed the country, had been bled of its resources by the Soviet Union's annexation which continued until the fall of the Soviet Communism in 1992. Legnica was one of the last bastions of the Soviet occupation because the Soviets had the main base of their Northern Group of Soviet Army stationed there, the Russians even called it 'Little Moscow'. Just five years later in 1998 some of the Bethel group led by Steve Knapik, made a visit to the Orphanage and

observed firsthand the conditions and realized that they could be much improved with some simple acts of kindness and financial help. During this visit they also made links with the Special School that some of the children attended. This in turn led to a visit to the local high school and to the observation that they had all suffered from the financial stranglehold of the Russian occupation. This link continued to develop over the next twenty years with remarkable results as we shall see later.

In 1993 The church was stunned and saddened by the news that Mr Watkins became gravely ill suffering with bowel cancer and after many operations and treatments, sadly he was forced to retire. Concerned with his welfare the church, after a lot of legal wrangling with the Charities Commission, bestowed him and his family the church Manse but the charities commission rules stated that the church had to agree to repay the money for the house to a separate account until the debt was paid off. The Money, when repaid, can only be used for a building project as stipulated by the Charity Commission. More sadness hit the family when in 2016 Mrs. Watkins (Aunty Doris) also fell ill with cancer and sadly passed away. She was loved and remembered by many children in the town whose lives she had influenced. Mr. Watkins now widowed, still attends the church and is affectionately known by some as ‘Archbishop Watkins’ as a term of endearment and respect.

(2000-2002)



Bethel has always had a strong prayerful diaconate and carrying on the traditions handed down over the years this is still the case. Some of today's ageing deacons were the youth of WJ Morgan's days. During this interregnum the deacons met early every Saturday morning (and continue to do so) both to pray, plan and share in the pastoral duties of the church. The church continued to grow during this period and still held outreach events. We are grateful to a pool of men who came and preached during this period and a special mention must be made to the church secretary Clive Jones, who took on the bulk of the work and to

this day shares in the teaching ministry.

Society underwent many radical changes at this time and there followed a rapid period of change largely because of the relaxing of Sunday trading hours. Many families went shopping on Sundays and almost every club and sporting event was held on a Sunday which meant that the Sunday School suffered and dwindled numerically very quickly.

It was going to take a fresh view and rethink about how to tackle a rapidly changing secular society. Society became, and still is, very insular, pubs and workingmen's social clubs are closing weekly and other cultural gatherings such as the Orpheus have found that its members are ageing and not being replaced and the same is true for the local Thespians and societal clubs of all sorts. Homes are becoming social Islands. "Loneliness is an island in a sea of people" Ralph Waldo Emerson
These changes needed to be faced and a strategy put in place to reach the **'Home Islands'**.

The next Pastor was radical in many ways and helped us to face some of these issues.

Rev Chris Bochniak (2002-2009) 7yrs Service



In 2002 Bethel gave the call to Chris Bochniak, an American of Polish descent and a native of Chicago Illinois. Chris and his wife Renee came to this country as missionaries, partially funded by International teams and partially by their home church in Chicago. They originally came to assist another American pastor, Rev Wade McLennan at Galbalfa Baptist Church Cardiff.

Chris was inducted into the pastorate of Bethel in 2002. He had an immediate effect and soon embarked on many major building projects. His background was in the construction industry and he brought his practical approach to building into the detail planning of the spiritual life of the church. He instigated 'planning programs' for

the future direction of the church and activated the setting of targets to achieve these plans. He also initiated Deacons retreats, the diaconate met away from the church for fellowship and to explore possibilities and ideas. At these meetings all the various organisations of the church attended, made presentations, and evaluated the years activities.

During this period at Bethel the Government passed legislation that every public building must have disabled facilities and to provide access and egress for the disabled to and from the building. Chris was just the man for the task, he reveled in practical projects, no job was too big. During this period an extension was added to the side of the church incorporating modern toilet facilities with access for the disabled. A boiler room was also added and a new efficient heating system was installed with twin boilers which for the first time in Bethel's history heated the church quickly and adequately. A new storage facility was also added to cater for the expanding ministries and the old pastor's room at the rear of the church was gutted and completely refitted with modern industrial style catering facilities capable of catering for large numbers of people. The upper vestry was also floored over making a huge storage area for long term storage. The old pulpit was also removed and replaced with a large raised stage and the pulpit was replaced with a moveable lectern. This opened up the useable space and meant that the baptismal pool was now visible enabling everyone to witness believers baptism. Finally, a sound system was installed, a loop system for the hard of hearing and a screen at the front of the church with a projector to augment singing and visual effects.



In an attempt to reach the insular community, the church embarked on another new venture and opened a coffee bar café in the town at Castle Street, it looked very professional as did all of Chris's projects. It ran successfully for a while but unfortunately the venture ran in to problems due to a shortage of full time manpower and escalating costs.



The youth work that was small at the time grew very rapidly and still continues today. A puppet ministry was developed to engage children and regularly held events in many of the local schools. The same team also held a summer 'Holiday Bible Club' outreach

week that drew many children from the locality. The Sunday school revived and was held at a different time which was during the morning preaching service, this proved very successful.



A new initiative entitled ‘Christianity Explored ‘was introduced, which was held in a church members house, away from the traditions of the church building. This venture too proved to be very successful, people who never attended to church joined it and several committed their lives to following Jesus and were baptized, the first being the plumber who installed the new heating system in the church.



A men’s breakfast was also established on a Saturday morning and that too drew men who would not normally attend church.

A knitting group for ladies was initiated , they met on a Wednesday morning and socialized while they provided hundreds of quality knitted garments for the poor and for war torn countries.

The association with the Polish group mentioned earlier in Rev Alan Watkins ministry led to a visit of several people from Bethel to Poland

which further resulted in an unexpected link with a children's orphanage at Legniza. The Orphanage at that time was in a very poor state of repair due to the collapse of communism and as a result, the orphans suffered from the simple lack of facilities and tender loving care. Over the years one of our deacons Steven Knapik, also of Polish descent, formed a link with this Orphanage in Legniza. Moved by their overwhelming needs and poverty he began collecting items and money which he began to distribute on a regular basis. After sharing their story and plight, the church also became involved and several members visited the orphanage with a view to providing help. The link with the orphanage generated further links with a school for children with special needs and yet another link with the high school that the orphans attend.

The garments that the ladies knitting group produced were also gratefully received there and helped to begin to transform the lives of the children. The link with this work was to continue and grow as again will be seen later.

In short, Bethel was an exciting place to be but there were so many changes and they all came in a short period of time. The church needed to step back and evaluate because there was little time to take stock. Chris had endless energy and he had many dreams, he was the man for that time and he changed things that may otherwise have taken years to accomplish. Unfortunately, not everyone could sustain that level of commitment because at that time most of the congregation were in full time employment with very demanding jobs. We are grateful to him for having made all of these changes and for setting all of these programs in place and much of it still continues to this day.

It was once again time for change and by mutual agreement Chris offered his resignation and it was accepted but he set the tone and the path for the future and for that we are very grateful. Chris and Renee left Bethel in 2009 and moved to Merthyr Tydfil where Chris continued to use his skills as a builder and caretaker transforming the fabric of 'Hope Church'. The newly formed Hope Church took over a very large redundant church building in the centre of the town and Chris and Renee took on the task of renovating it. The task was huge, and he has managed

it with his usual undaunted zeal and endless energy. They have since gone on to work on a water project in Africa which they accomplished and have again returned to Merthyr ready for the next call of God. He was a man for the time and we wish them God's blessing on all their future efforts.

(2009-2011) Clive Jones



Once again, the deacons met as before and were again grateful to that pool of men who helped out with a special thank you to Clive Jones and the late Rev David James Morse

Clive Jones who is the Church Secretary and church Organist also took on the role of teaching Elder though at that time Bethel did not have a recognised body of Elders. Clive assumed the role of preaching and teaching with the same dedication he had in his former job as Headmaster of Georgetown School. We are very fortunate to have such an accomplished preacher/teacher and we acknowledge these outstanding gifts. Throughout that time the deacons took on the shared role of pastoring and maintaining the church. Thanks to God the church continued to grow and was outreaching in this two-year period.

Rev David James Morse.



A special mention to the late Rev David James Morse who helped us during the interregnum. Rev Morse was a spiritual giant, a former missionary to Peru, South America. He was an Old testament academic, we were very privileged to have sat under his ministry and particularly to have had the aid of his guidance and experience. If there were Apostles today Rev David James Morse would be as close as it is possible to being one. He was a unique preacher with a sensitive pastor's heart always full of compassion and sound advice. David entered his rest with "Well done good and faithful servant" on Sat 29th March 2014 and was joined by his loving wife Anne on 28th December 2017.

This was a time to evaluate, consolidate, recharge before once again launching out into the ministry. Whoever came next would have to have some special qualities to meet all the complex demands of a valley church that had undergone such rapid changes and had attracted such a diverse group of people. Once again, 'cometh the hour cometh the man' as seems to be the norm, while we made plans God made choices.

Steven Carter (2011-2017) 6yrs Service



We were introduced to Steven Carter a former Pastor and full-time worker with SASRA (The Soldiers and Airmens Scripture Readers Association). He also previously held four pastorates. Rev Steven Carter



accepted the call to Bethel with retirement in view within four years. This plan was mutually agreeable to both parties because the church needed a short time of stability and consolidation before moving on again in ministry.



Induction of Rev Steven Carter Saturday April 9th 2011

On Saturday April 9th, 2011 Rev Steven Carter was inducted into the pastorate of Bethel. A full church listened intently to the charge to the church by the Rev Selwyn Morgan of Barry.



Steve, a printer by trade felt the call to full time ministry in 1971. He studied at Belfast Theological College and graduated in 1975 and immediately became assistant Pastor at Carey Baptist Church Reading which proved a most valuable experience. He then accepted the call to the Pastorate at Bethel Evangelical Church, East Hanningfield in Chelmsford where he served God for eight years until 1986. He left Bethel Chelmsford in 1986 when he accepted the call to the pastorate of Exmouth Evangelical Church, Devon where he remained for four years until 1990. In 1990 he took up the Pastorate at Et Leake Evangelical Church in Loughborough where he served God for a further five years until he left in 1995. His ministry calling then took a very different direction when he became a full time worker with SASRA.

We at Bethel Baptist Tredegar gave the call to Steven in 2011 and were expecting four quiet ‘caretaker’ years, however while most people tend to slow down and sit back as they approach retirement, Steven

began his ministry with ‘both feet running and with immense stamina.’ He was a man of immeasurable energy and truly was “All things to all men”. As a Bible teacher he was unparalleled, being systematic in his teaching and theology and always relevant and current. As a man, he was very much a man of the people, Steven integrated with people of all ages and at all backgrounds. Although slight in stature he had immeasurable energy and passion for life. Steven would cycle with some of the men in all weathers and all times out of real personal friendship and in order to understand their needs and to make it possible to communicate the gospel. He lifted weights with some and played table tennis with others, while always making time to visit almost all the church systematically. Despite this rigorous schedule he never failed to prepare very thorough, detailed and practical sermons.

We are also very grateful to Clive Jones the Church Secretary for sharing in the ministry with Pastor Steve. The church grew in every way, many people were converted and baptised.

New people regularly attended the services and people who had not attended church for years were restored to membership. The mission statement of the church was ‘**To know Christ and to make him known**’ and as one of the many ventures to achieve this, the church published a newspaper titled ‘**The Good News Paper.**’

Many of the church members had their testimonies, their personal journeys of faith in Jesus Christ, published in it. Each of them a different story, a story of real life issues, most of them as complex as any other families issues but they found that they were really helped to

overcome all obstacles because of their faith in Jesus who said “*Listen, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” *Matthew 28 v 20*

Tredegar & District Community

September 2013

Bethel Baptist Church

GOOD NEWS PAPER

ALL CHANGE?

Steven Carter

Dear Reader,

A year ago we produced our first newspaper, since then inevitably much has changed. Locally, we are aware of changes on the Heads of the Valley road, as bulldozers and heavy machinery bear witness to the building of another dual carriageway. There are also changes afoot for some Tredegar pupils, who in September began the commute to the new college site in Ebbw Vale. For some the economic climate has brought changes leading to a 'tightening of the belt.' Perhaps this past year has seen changes in your life, some for better some for worse?

This newspaper contains true stories of local people who have



experienced the greatest change a man or woman, boy or girl can ever know. Its the change from despair to hope, from death to life, from mere religion to a relationship with God. It is a change that enables them to live life as it ought to be lived. It is

a change that enables them to face death with peace and confidence.

I invite you to read, reflect and join us at some of the special meetings we have arranged in order to discover more.

Please note that among the stories you will find an advert concerning the work of 'Christians against Poverty'. If you or a friend have financial difficulties, remember that there are people available to help, in total confidence.

Finally don't forget to let the children know about the colouring competition on [page 4](#).

Yours warmly,

Rev. Steven Carter

A HUGE SIGH OF RELIEF

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HENRY OLONGA FORMER ZIMBABWEAN TEST CRICKETER

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NO MORE WALKING AWAY

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I USED TO BLAME GOD

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ONE LIFE! WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT

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Aided by friends from Swansea the church members delivered four thousand newspapers to every house in Tredegar, and this pattern was repeated every year throughout Steven's time at Bethel. The Youth group continued to grow and several of them committed their lives to following Jesus. The Christianity explored course diversified and several of the older people of the church participated in it. This resulted in many of them re kindling their faith and becoming church members and it was a particularly joyful time when one of the older men who attended it became a Christian at age eighty-five. Soon after he too was baptised and shared his story of his journey to faith in Jesus to a packed church.

To supplement and follow up on this the ladies held dinner events with a speaker and invited the ladies of the town, these were always very well attended and attracted ladies from diverse backgrounds. The men also held similar events but with a sporting theme, some famous and infamous sportsmen spoke at the meetings and told their stories of how Jesus Christ impacted their lives. In Mark's gospel Jesus said to his followers, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all people so the outreach events were held away from the church in various venues, places such as Bryn Bach Park, the Rhyd Hall and the Mark Williams Snooker Centre, they were always well attended and the gospel was enthusiastically delivered by sportsmen who clearly loved God. The men also held several quiz nights and a regular table tennis event that again attracted a diverse group of men. Partially, as a result of these events several men and women started attending the church regularly and followed that by attending the 'Christianity Explored' course. They eventually became Christians and were baptised by Pastor Steve. In order to strengthen their faith, they also enthusiastically attended a Discipleship explored course too. During the ministry of the last three pastors the 'Mother and Toddler' group flourished. This group was the first link for many people who had never previously had any association with church. Some of the parents brought their toddlers along to the morning Sunday School and started their own journey of faith.

The youth groups were very strong at that time due to the youth leaders zealously giving their time to take the teenagers on outings to a variety

of venues and youth camps. They also studied the Christianity Explored course and several of them committed their lives to Jesus Christ and were baptised.

During that time the church underwent some fundamental changes, the church became a registered charity and as a result had to formulate a Constitution to comply with the legal requirements of the Charities Commission. The Diaconate spent many hours over the period of a year to formulate this document and get it approved by the Commission. The diaconate also took advantage of the time to redress something that should have been dealt with during the foundation in 1868. The bible recognises the differentiation between the roles of Deacon and Elder and as a result it was recognized by all the church that Clive Jones fulfilled the role of Elder and therefore he was 'set apart' for the role of Elder.

As pastor Steve neared his agreed retirement time the church was strong and flourishing and it was the vision of both the pastor and the leadership



team to begin the process together of looking for a new younger man to

pastor the church. It was planned that Pastor Steve was to help us find a future pastor who could work alongside him for a period to help ease a new younger pastor into the role. That was the plan, however God had another plan. Sadly, in January 2016 the church was devastated to learn that Pastor Steve was diagnosed with multiple Myeloma, a type of bone cancer. Pastor Steve underwent a prolonged period of radical treatment and thank God is making progress and enjoying some quality of life. He eventually retired on 31th March 2017 joined by a packed church for a social evening when he was made an honorary Welshman and presented with his Welsh rugby jersey. We are so grateful that Pastor Steve was well enough to help us in our deliberations regarding the search for the next Pastor of Bethel and so to the future.

We are also grateful to God for all his hard work at Bethel and so pleased that he is currently in remission and has a good quality of life. Pastor Steve was well enough to preach at Bethel once again on the last Sunday of December 2017. He preached a very encouraging and practical sermon on 'Hope' from Lamentations 3 v 21-23.

In to the Future

Trystan Hallam (2017-)



Rev Trystan Hallam was inducted into the pastorate at Bethel on Saturday 1 April 2017. Trystan came to us from Eglwys Efengylaidd Gymraeg Caerdydd (Welsh speaking church at Cardiff) where he held a joint pastorate with the Rev. Emyr James.

It has to be noted that on a human level, the prospects of attracting Ministers to come to a valley



town like Tredegar are quite slim as we discovered in our search for the current pastor. Several men came and were impressed with the church and the warmth of the fellowship but none of them it seems were attracted to come to Tredegar.

God always has the best plan and the right man for the job. Trystan was settled in a well-established church in the capital city of Cardiff, in a



pastorate that many would aspire to. Yet he felt the clear call of God leave that position to minister in the valleys and thankfully God led him to Tredegar. This meant uprooting his family and his two

young children Ellis and Siwan, and to find a Welsh school to continue their education.

Trystan is a young man of 37 and since joining us a year ago he has proved to be both an outstanding preacher and a compassionate pastor whose experience is well beyond his years.

This year, in August, Bethel will be celebrating one hundred and fifty years of Christian Witness and it is planned to hold a series of events to mark this historic occasion.

As we are looking to the future we are very encouraged by the passion and energy of the new pastor Trystan Hallam. Since his induction Pastor Trystan has continued in the footsteps of his predecessors, his expository ministry and his ability to deliver the word in a contemporary manner make him an outstanding exponent of relevant theology. Soon after his arrival he watered the seeds that had been sown by his predecessors and had the privilege of baptizing several people and restored several more.

On Sunday 15th January Trystan preached to a crowded church which included the two former Pastors Rev Alan Watkins and Rev Steven Carter.

The links with Legnica Poland continued and were strengthened during the pastorates of both Pastors Chris Bochniak and Steven Carter. In the early months of Pastor Trystan's ministry, we were very encouraged to learn that due to the years of tenacious and dedicated hard work,



financial support, practical help, love and many visits, the Orphanage at Legnica has been transformed from a rundown foreboding place to a modern bright happy home. Some of the staff and children from the Orphanage and school have visited Bethel in a cultural exchange. Due

to Steve Knapik's efforts the local Welsh Schools donated their GCSE Art work to the orphanage and they have transformed the living conditions of the children's home. There is now more than a link between us, it is now a 'bond of love' and it continues to grow.

As a direct result of this bond of love that goes beyond mere 'paint and concrete' a new and surprising opportunity has emerged. The original vision was to establish and support a reformed church. It was then hoped that it would eventually become a seminary to teach and encourage future pastors.



As a direct result of the love and support which saw the orphanage transformation it drew the attention of the Mayor and Civic Council who have been very appreciative and supported all the efforts. The Mayor has become a personal friend to those who have dedicated their time to this project.

An application was made, independently of our group, by Paul Eager, an American missionary to start a reformed Evangelical Church in Legnica. Not only was the application approved but a very large building was



Inside the newly emerging Church and Seminary

donated by the council which was more than sufficient in size, to house both a church and a seminary and this was granted FREE of charge! There are no bills for the rent, or Government tax, this amazing generosity was donated by the City council largely because they observed first hand ‘Transforming Love In Action’ during the last twenty years. Through the skillful efforts of Steven Knapik monies were raised both in Bethel and other local organisations to be used for the development of the building and help support its first Pastor. Some of our church members have also gone out to Legnica to help out practically in the renovation work and to work alongside other missionaries working in a summer school.

At the time of writing we received an email from Paul Eager full of encouragement at the progress made in Legnica which now has a Pastor and further a new church plant in Lubin:

“We are so thankful for God’s continuing work in our lives and those around us. We are so thankful for your prayers and support. During this Christmas season especially, as we, with thankfulness, reflect on God’s gracious and merciful plan for our salvation, rejoice with us in all He is accomplishing!”

Roof and Renovation - *The roof on the Lubin Baptist Church is going on! We've been wanting and praying for the roof to be on before winter and we're thrilled that the part over the sanctuary will be done. We praise the Lord too for His provisions for the continued renovations in the Legnica Church building. Due to some logistics, we've had to step back a little and wait for further instructions, but many of the rooms have been or are almost completed.*

Endurance - *We want to run the race He has given us here in Lubin and Legnica for His glory. At times, in our humanness, we grow weary, body, mind and soul. And yet, God continues to help us keep our eyes on Him. Though I feel we fall too many times, He is with us, helping us, picking us up, and enabling us. To Him be the glory!*

Joy - *It's been a joy to be a part of two church plants. One (Lubin) is now "on its own" although we still would like to see a pastor shepherding the fellowship. The second (Legnica) is growing and has been meeting every Sunday afternoon for Bible study/worship for a whole year.....*



Thank God for this amazing work which is already spreading, we are so grateful to God for giving us the opportunity to be a part of it.

In 1864 a small group of eighteen men and women struggled and labored against many odds to establish a church in Georgetown and eventually saw its birth in 1868. So too a small group of dedicated Christians struggled against all odds to establish a Church in Legnica Poland. Thanks be to God, this year, 2018 we celebrate Bethel's One Hundred and Fifty years of Christian witness in Tredegar and we also celebrate One year of Christian Witness in Legnica Poland

As we look forward to the future at Bethel we also look eagerly towards Poland to see God working out his plans there too.

'Be still and know that I am God' Psalm 46 v 10

References

1. The History of Siloh Baptist Church.....
2. Charles I. Although he was a Protestant, he believed in the divine right of Kings to rule and frequently ignored the will of Parliament especially when he married the ‘Catholic’ princess Henrietta Maria of France. He sought to enforce High church principles and introduced the reading of the controversial and divisive ‘Book of Sports’ in every church in the realm. His religious policies, coupled with his marriage to a Roman Catholic and his defiance of parliament, led him into conflict with the largely Puritan Parliaments of Scotland and England and culminated in English Civil War. This led to the fall of the Monarchy and the rise of the Commonwealth under the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell. Charles was tried for high treason and beheaded in January 1649.
3. Charles II. At the end of the eleven-year period of the Commonwealth 1649 – 1660. Parliament invited Charles II to restore the rule of the monarchy. He was crowned King at Westminster Abbey on 23 April 1661. Charles’ English Parliament passed laws known as the Clarendon Code, they were designed to restore the position of the re-established Church of England. The pendulum had swung again, Charles actually preferred religious toleration, but Parliament forced him to agree to the implementation of the Clarendon Code which is mentioned on **page 4**. The Clarendon Code effectively ended any possibility of the Anglican Church and Nonconformists coming together and paved the way for a period of severe intolerance of Nonconformists and Catholics alike. At the time of his death in 1685 Charles was received into the Catholic faith.
4. James II. Ascended to the throne on the death of his brother Charles II. James was a Roman Catholic but was sympathetic to Protestants and Non-conformists. James was in favour of religious liberty which, like his brother, set him at odds with Parliament. Parliament colluded with his protestant son in law

William of Orange to invade England with his Dutch Army. After a few successful minor battles which became known as the ‘Glorious Revolution 1688’, James II was deposed and William III and his wife Mary II, (James daughter) ascended to the throne and became joint Monarchs. Parliament then passed the ‘Bill of Rights’. This curtailed the power of the monarch and increased the power of Parliament. It also made it illegal for a British King or Queen to be a Roman Catholic or even to marry one. Finally, a light began to dawn during their reign. In 1689 Parliament passed the long awaited ‘Act of Toleration’

“The Act allowed freedom of worship to nonconformists who had pledged to the oaths of Allegiance and Supremacy and rejected transubstantiation to Protestants who dissented from the Church of England such as Baptists and Congregationalists but not to Catholics, Nonconformists were allowed their own places of worship and their own teachers.

Between 1691 and 1710 some 2,536 dissenting places of worship were licensed.

5. A History of the Baptist Association in Wales: From the Year 1650, to the Year 1790: Joshua Thomas. An extremely thorough and masterful work available Free as a PDF document or edocument at: <https://play.google.com/books>
6. The History of Llanwenarth Baptist Church. Llanwenarth is currently the oldest Baptist Church in Wales. There is a brief history on their website, but more information is available by contacting the pastor. <http://www.govilonbaptist.org.uk>, or by visiting the Blaenau Gwent Archive at Ebbw Vale old Steel works offices. The current pastor is Rev. Dr. Peter Baines
7. As stated, in 1660 Blaenau Gwent Church was planted by the Llanwenarth Church but it was not until 1715 that they had a building to meet in. For fifty-five years it met in homes and in the open fields and sometimes during the times of persecution in secluded, cold mountain tops. One of them a lady known as ‘Nest Llewellyn’ opened her house in Cwmtillery to them and on

several occasions she was brought before the judges to ‘*answer for her crimes*’ but she would not be deterred. Sadly Abel Morgan, the very capable pastor of twenty years, left in 1711 to join his family in Philadelphia. The journey was long and arduous, it took about twenty-two weeks and during this terrible time Abel Morgan lost his wife and his son. It was at this church that ‘Miles Harri’ the benefactor of the land given to Siloh, Pont Sirhowy was baptized and became assistant pastor to his brother John Harri. *Sources Joshua Thomas, Jonathan Davies and The History of Blaenau Gwent Baptist Church - The Rev Clifford Thomas which is available at the Blaenau Gwent Archive at Ebbw Vale Old Steel works offices. There is a very brief version on their website: <https://bgbchurch.weebly.com>. The current pastor is Rev Jonathan Foreman.*

8. The Old Church book at Ilston is currently located at Brown University though it is not open to public viewing, extracts of it were obtained and quoted by Joshua Thomas in his History of the Baptist Church in Wales. . This was the site of the first Baptist Church in Wales formed towards the end of the Cromwellian period of the English Civil War. Pastor John Myles, a graduate of Brasenose College Oxford who is quoted (See page 2) as being the Evangelist that began many of the early Baptist churches from Abergavenny to Carmarthen. During the Cromwellian period he was one of the ‘Tryers’ who were sent out under the Act for Propagation of The Gospel in Wales. He then formed Ilston Baptist Church in 1649 and served as its Pastor until 1662. After this great work he and most of his congregation fled the country for America because of the severe penalties such as the removal from office and income and the persecution that came after the restoration of the Monarchy for those who would not adhere strictly to the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. ‘Against all odds’, he founded these churches and then like the Pilgrim Fathers took refuge in the New World. He took with him the church book of Ilston, which as stated is now in Brown University. Whilst in America, Massachusetts, he continued with the same unabated zeal for the Kingdom of God and founded the Township of Swansea named after his hometown here in Wales and

together they formed the First Baptist Church of Swansea where he served for twenty years. Having escaped the fire back in Wales he found himself right in the heart of it again when native Wampanoag warriors burned down his church and home. He removed to Boston and there became a leader in the Baptist church for several years. Returning to Swansea he led the congregation successfully until his death in 1683. During all this time he and the Swansea church from Wales grew and over the next one hundred years established many other fellowships as far afield as Canada and Honduras.

<http://www.firstbaptistinswansea.org>

9. The Dictionary of Welsh Biography – National Library of Wales.
The History of Siloh Baptist Church, Rev E.P. Thomas
10. Letter on the journey of Bethel. The first thirty years - Rev T Jermine.
11. The Merthyr Telegraph Sat June 24, 1875. The National Archive is open online to all and is a treasure trove of information.
<http://newspapers.library.wales/>
12. Original Map – British Steel Museum Old Company offices Ebbw Vale. The Gwent archive is also housed in this building, but the museum contains considerable amounts of information currently being documented and filed. The staff are all volunteers and extremely helpful.
13. Copy of the original document of the Lease between the Ebbw Vale Company Estates and the officers of Bethel dated 29/9/1874
14. National Archive of Wales ‘The Monmouthshire Merlin, and other newspapers, some of them containing tragic and detailed graphic accounts
15. A newspaper cutting given by Mrs Tuck. Unfortunately, the Newspaper name and date are no shown.

