

Facing the Challenge

by **Dafydd Andrew Jones**



The Revd Dafydd Andrew Jones is Secretary to the Board of Mission of the Presbyterian Church in Wales. Ordained in 1970, he has served two pastorates in North Wales (rural and urban). He has served on various ecumenical mission committees in Wales, the UK, and internationally through the Council for World Mission.

Like many other European churches, the Presbyterian Church of Wales has experienced severe and escalating decline. Over the past 30 years, membership of the Church has declined from 120,000 to 50,000; and the number of full-time ministers has dropped from 423 to 116. This decline is seen equally clearly in rural, urban and industrial areas, in Welsh-speaking and

English-speaking communities alike. Initially, congregations were grouped into multi-church pastorates as a way of arresting the decline and maintaining existing patterns of church life. This policy proved to be financially viable, but it may have contributed further to the decline, and resulted in many dwindling and ageing congregations who meet in large buildings with high maintenance costs. Here, Dafydd Andrew Jones describes how a missionary strategy is being formed out of this situation, and how the churches have begun to develop new partnerships and resources for the future. Whilst it has not provided the Church with a "Quick Fix", and there have been disappointments, a growing commitment to new patterns of ministry and mission is emerging.

In 1984 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Wales agreed the setting up of a unit of two people, suitably trained and resourced, to help local congregations to discover new possibilities for mission in their communities. In rural areas, for example, multi-church pastorates encompass several differing communities which ministers serve within a maintenance framework. The challenge to the Church, whatever the context, was to change from a maintenance to a mission mode, from a defensive into a more open and confident posture. It required deep-seated change, nothing less than conversion.

Challenge

The Unit became involved in many areas of training for mission, using resources such as *Person to Person* with eldership training. By and large, hopes of

encouraging congregations to become involved in witness and service to their communities did not materialise. A subsequent review was to show that churches were not spiritually confident for the new emphasis. Hence the second phase of the Unit was developed with an emphasis on meditation, prayer and mission engagement. It was a challenge to the churches to reflect upon their mission calling, on prayer as a means of discovering God's will, and preparation for action. Not many churches took up the challenge, possibly because decline can be paralysing and encourages withdrawal from the world. However, in some areas churches set up parent and toddler groups, luncheon clubs and other activities which resulted in some interaction between church and community. In a few instances this has led to a renewed interest in worship and church life generally.

In 1991 a national consultation on evangelism was arranged which included workshops on personal evangelism, drama, street evangelism and youth evangelism. Representatives came from most presbyteries, and the event generated sufficient interest for similar annual meetings to be organised locally. These are attended by a cross-section of the church's life, reflecting not only an interest in faith-sharing, but a concern for the future of Christian witness.

New Opportunities

1989 saw the launch of another initiative aimed at promoting the shift from maintenance to mission: the "Strategy" (frequently misconstrued as a strategy to close buildings). It was an attempt at reviewing our church buildings, not only from the perspective of safety and repair, but also future needs. Returns from churches clearly showed that amounts spent on maintenance and repair comfortably exceeded that spent on mission and ministry. Valuable resources were being squandered on frequently large plants by increasingly declining congregations. Neighbouring congregations have been encouraged to unite, the redundant buildings sold, thus creating a Strategy Fund within each presbytery and the resources being released for mission. In some areas there has been much opposition to the closure of churches, often for reasons relating to past links.

Presbyteries have been asked to consider their future needs and identify areas of potential growth. In this way resources can be directed where the needs are, and a more systematic approach developed to church closure which does not deprive communities of a place of worship in an *ad hoc* way. Some redundant buildings have been put to community use, such as flats for needy people in both rural and urban areas.

Whilst the "Strategy" has been successful in rationalising buildings, eliminating wasteful expenditure, and creating a fund approaching £8m, churches are slow in grasping new opportunities for mission. Questions about *what* mission is, and how we

discern, act and plan for the future are being asked. New mission projects and appointments are emerging, not only on large "deprived" housing estates (where Church community workers have been in place for some years) but also in more lucrative areas. In both situations new worshipping groups are being formed and are being encouraged to shape their own indigenous liturgies.

Sharing Resources

The Church is experiencing a very serious shortage of ordained ministers, resulting in increasing numbers of pastorless congregations. By recognising the need for a Christian presence (not necessarily Presbyterian) in each community, congregations are forging links, and even sharing ministry, with other denominations. Shared ministry has thus become part of our life. Ordained ministers from other Free Churches serve our congregations within their neighbourhood. As our Church is a covenanted church in Wales, such a relationship is also possible with the (Anglican) Church in Wales. In Botwnnog, a rural community near Pwllheli, the Presbyterian churches have been served for a number of years by the Anglican priest who functions as a minister of our Church.

This arrangement means that the ministry of word and sacrament remains foundational to our worshipping life and provides representative Christian leadership in each community. The challenge, however, is to resist the temptation to use each other's resources as a means of keeping our own "show" on the road. By going beyond such thinking, we can start to confront the demands of sharing and witnessing to the gospel ahead of ecclesial and partisan interest.

Which Way Forward?

The Presbyterian Church in Wales is approaching the future fully committed to its emphasis on encouraging local congregations in mission. In 1997 the Church commissioned the Open University to conduct a 20% random sample of our churches

in order to identify strengths, weaknesses, resources and opportunities for mission. In this way the resources of the whole Church can be channelled to its mission according to priorities identified by the membership. It is too early to anticipate the findings, but it seems clear already that churches will need to focus more on families if they are serious about growth and renewal. This analysis will form the basis of our future planning for ministry and mission, and the enabling of a renewal in congregational life. Both the mission audit and the issue of stewardship seem to point us to a presbytery-based plan of action which will include liturgical renewal as well as training and equipping for mission – an emphasis we hope to develop jointly with the Anglicans.

Discussions are already in hand with three rural presbyteries (one in South Wales, one in North Wales, both Welsh-speaking; and another in mid-Wales which is English-speaking) to develop a local strategy for mission. The emphasis is on enabling the congregation to plan their mission and outreach, with the Church centrally providing the necessary support in terms of funding and training. This approach obviously requires the will and commitment of the whole congregation. It will also mean fostering a sense of belonging to the wider community in which the church is set, and a desire to become the new community in Jesus Christ. We will need to work with all those who are committed to sharing and witnessing to the gospel, and form communities of hope which are prepared to engage fully with the social, political and economic issues which affect the local community.

Clearly, we are being called to renewed faith and action, to face the challenges of today creatively and confidently. Perhaps this will lead us to dismantle traditions from the past in order to discern new possibilities, new partners and new vehicles for sharing faith, for witness and service. The future is always an adventure of faith, and the fact that we are living in exciting times is a cause for celebration and hope. ■