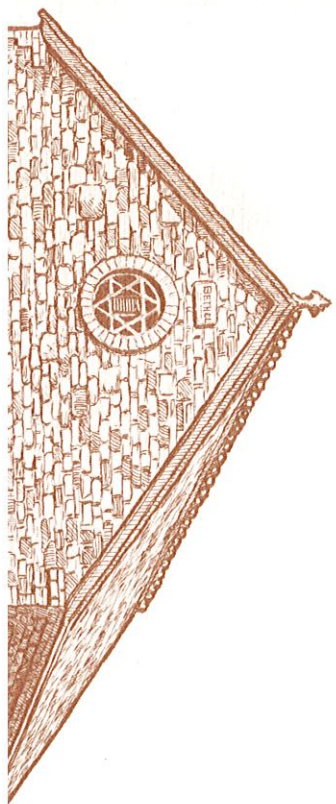


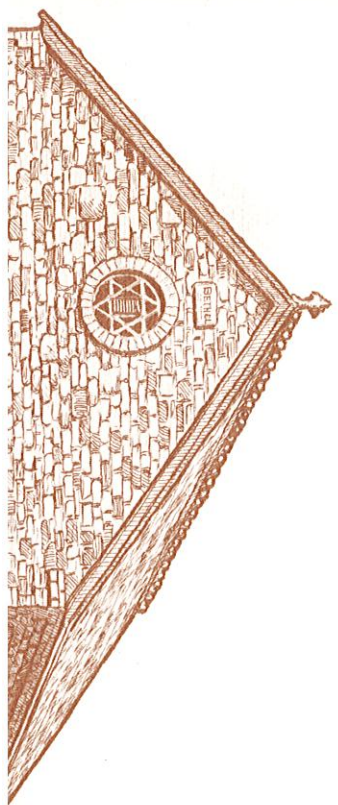
A HUNDRED YEARS
AT BETHEL

A Brief History
of Bethel Baptist Church, Pontyclun
1876-1976



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PART ONE Foundation and Revival 1876-1913

If you approach Pontyclun along the fast main road from Talbot Green, you will see on your right hand, alongside the railway line, a row of Victorian terraced cottages. It was in one of these late in the summer of 1876 that Bethel Baptist Church had its beginning.

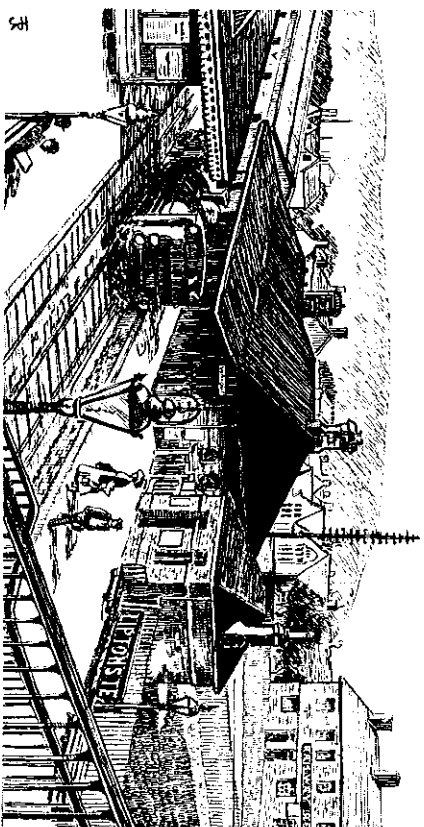
Of course, there have been many changes since then, and in a way the story of the church follows quite closely the course of life in general in the area.

Before 1876, Pontyclun was a very small village indeed, just a small part of the present main road, with School Street and Ely Street adjoining — but it was beginning to grow. Like much of South Wales, industrialisation was gathering pace in the locality, resulting in inevitable changes.

Before that time, and stretching back for hundreds of years, the centres of what little population there was in the area, were in places like Llantrisant and the little villages around the Vale of Glamorgan, with the Manor Houses of the wealthy situated in the midst of scattered farmsteads. One intrepid Englishman, recording an extensive walking holiday in Wales in the late 1700's, describes how he left Hensol Castle, where he had stayed overnight with Lord Talbot, to make for Llantrisant, and writes:

“you enter on a road which carries you from the track of English conversation and polished inhabitants, but nature growing wilder as more retired amply recompenses. The banks of the Elwy about Chapel Talygarn are pleasingly grown about and the character of the river, that of quiet and rural beauty.”

From earliest times, it was recognised that the area was rich in minerals, particularly coal, iron and lead. These are known to have been worked spasmodically from Elizabethan times and maybe as far back as the time of the Roman occupation. Certainly there is mention as early as the 1660s of mines in the vicinity of Pontyclun itself. But it was during the early years of Victoria's reign that mining began in earnest. In those days, newcomers began to settle throughout the district — Iron miners from Cornwall, Colliers from other parts of Wales, and more importantly for Pontyclun — railwaymen.



With the growth of coal mining in the Valleys to the north and the consequent need for better transportation, the rail systems began to come into their own. The Taff Vale Railway built a line linking the Rhondda with the Bristol Channel in the 1860s; the Ely Valley Railway completed a section from Penygraig to Pontyclun in 1862; and lines to Pontypridd and Cowbridge were operating by 1865. These lines all formed a junction at Pontyclun, where a busy station, named Llantrisant, and extensive rail yards were added. By 1876 a busy goods and passenger service was operating through the village.

Other industries also began about this time. The Llantrisant Gas Works was built in the 1870s and the Ely Tinsplate Works (situated by Capeners Building Yard) began in 1872. The manager there for many years was a Mr. Arthur Eastmond, who was a Deacon at Bethel 1904-36. The Cardiff Navigation Collieries also sank mines at Coedcae and Lanelay about this time.

While these things were happening, God gave vision to a christian man, Charles Highton, to begin a Baptist cause in the village. At that time there was no place of worship in Pontyclun itself. The area had been traditionally Anglican by persuasion, but the previous decades had seen the growth of nonconformity throughout South Wales.

The Baptists themselves had roots going back many years. In fact there is record in the mid 1600s of the Rector of Llanharry being dispossessed of his living during the rule of the Roundheads. A contemporary noted that "one Howell Thomas, and one Thomas Joseph, both anabaptists, occasionally held forth in his church during the usurpation." Apparently they were colleagues of a John Myles of Illston, who was leading a Baptist cause in Llanharan during those times.

At first there was no building for worship, and Mr. Highton and the little group of worshippers met in a room in one of the Great Western Cottages. In a short while this became too small for those who came, but a Builder just completing a contract on the railway, offered to leave his shed for them. This was gladly accepted and fitted out for services.

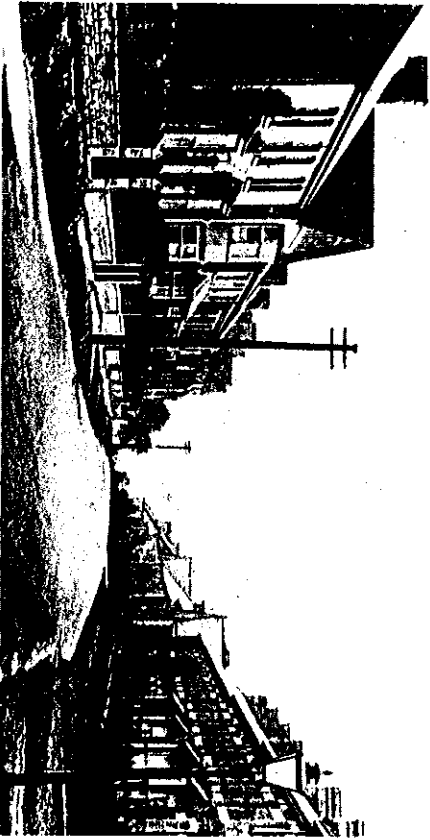
In 1878, the National School was opened in School Street, and Church of England services were held there under the direction of the Vicar of Llantrisant, until the Parish Church was built in 1895.

By the early 1880s Rev. Highton and the members saw the need to have a building of their own, and it came to their notice that land on the main road was available for leasing. Mr. John Cory, a

leading Christian Businessman was approached, and kindly agreed to lend money for the building. When he died the church was left free of debt in his Will. The Foundation Stones of Bethel, the home of the church for over 90 years now, were laid on 14th May, 1884 and the church opened later that same year. At the same time, houses were built along the main road and Lewis Street followed around 1895.

The remaining years of the last century saw an extension of the village on both sides of the railway. Along with this expansion came other non-conformist churches; Tabernacle Welsh Independent in 1892, the Methodist Church in 1899, and later, Hope Presbyterian Church in 1910.

Very little is now known of those early pioneering days at Bethel, but they laid a foundation for a spiritual work which has continued unabated for a century. A plaque on the wall inside the church, unveiled by professor Edwards of the Baptist College Cardiff, on the occasion of the Jubilee in September 1926 has this inscription: ‘... to the memory of Rev. William Charles Higton, who founded the above cause in 1876, and ministered here until he died on 15th June, 1894’.



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Just before the turn of the century the Rev. Jonah Jones was settled as Pastor. During his term of office the congregation grew, and numbers of conversions were recorded. He had the reputation for being a very loving Pastor and friend, and it seems that wherever he went, in the village, there was always a group of children around him (one or two are still around today!). It was often said of him that if a member was not in church on Sunday, he was in their living room on Monday. After a fruitful period of ministry his health deteriorated, and he was compelled to retire in 1903.

The following year, the church called the Rev. John Elias to be Pastor, and he continued to build upon the ministry of his predecessor. The early years of the 20th century saw a remarkable moving of God's Spirit in many of the churches of South Wales. Although Pontyclun never figured centrally in the revival, the years 1904 to 1906 were very wonderful for the Fellowship. Numbers of people were converted at that time, through the services and as a result of Open Air meetings, and on Sunday's people had to come to church as much as an hour early, in order to be sure of their seats.

There were occasions of outstanding Bible Teaching ministries, undertaken by leading preachers of the time — R. B. Jones, W. S. Jones, Professor Chance and Tom Phillips. The visits of R. B. Jones from Porth are remembered in particular. He was a typical Welsh orator, whose preaching moved the congregation very deeply. He used regularly to be seen with a black overcoat with an Astrakhan collar. He would often use the same text (for example 'Thy Kingdom come') with a different emphasis each night of a week long series.

Sundays were very busy. In those days there was a Prayer Service at 10.00 a.m. followed by the Morning Service at 11.00 a.m. Sunday School was at 2.30 p.m. and the Evening Service at 6.00 p.m. was often followed by an Open Air service at 8. It seemed

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that people were singing and openly praising the Lord wherever they went. On one Sunday in particular a service was held at which 20 young men and 18 girls were baptized. The Bible Class for Young People was something of a highlight, with one side of the church packed with young people keen to learn more about the Lord.

This time of revival blessing was followed soon after by one of the severest economic recessions the neighbourhood had known. The lot of many was very hard indeed and their faith severely tested, but the experiences of fellowship and helping one another during those difficulties, were a clear indication of the solid work God had done in many hearts.

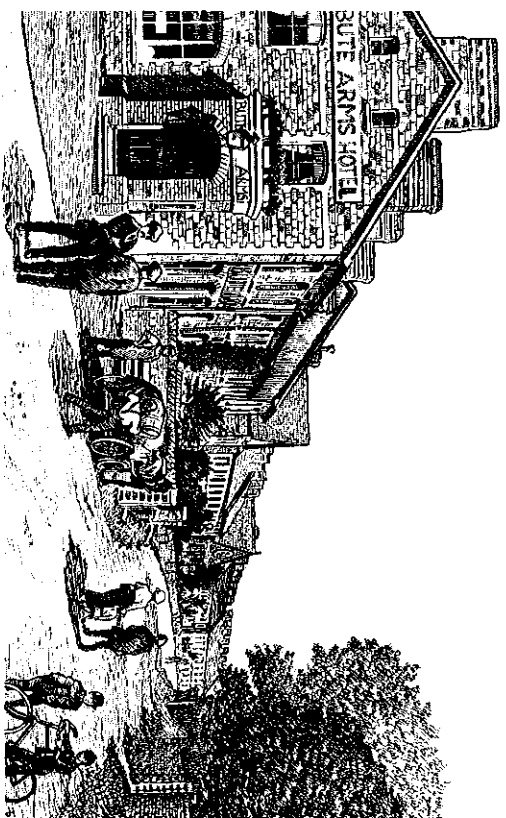
The work among children always held an important place in the life of Bethel. Since the opening of the railway, it was customary for a number of Sunday Schools higher up the Valleys to come by train to Pontyclun to use Maesyfelin Farm fields for their treats. On those occasions they would often use the Bethel Church premises.

Bethel's own children also enjoyed similar treats. On Whit Monday, after the Sunday School Anniversary, the church would march to Brynsadler and Talbot Green, with the Sunday School Banner waving in front of the procession. Tables would be laid across the Big Seat and down both sides of the Church for the children to have food after, and then down to Maesyfelin for games and races. This happy event continued like this for many years — and it never rained! Some can still remember those early days and the happy family spirit that obtained, with all working very hard to give the children a happy day.

Regularly in those days, the Sunday School would take the children on an outing to Barry. The children would be taken on a number of Brakes (large open traps pulled by one or two horses). When the Brakes were going uphill, the children had to jump

down and walk beside, and then climb back on again when they reached the top! Happy days!

One of the leading Sunday School Teachers of the time, and a Deacon, was Mr. George Stephens of the Timplat works. From 1912 he formed a Choir which used to produce a Cantata every Christmas to crowded congregations. The central part of the platform still in use today was crowded with children, and in the front was a large chimney pot, out of which another timplat worker, Hubert Warburton, emerged dressed as Father Christmas with gifts for the children. (His sister is Mrs. Kempster, our oldest member.) He was also a gifted singer, and his brother-in-law, Mr. Frank Kempster took part with some outstanding monologues.



PART TWO

Times of testing 1913-1934

After the building of the church, and the years of revival blessing which saw the establishment of a thriving spiritual fellowship, which by 1913 had 85 members, and a flourishing children's and young people's ministry, came times of severe testing.

First there was the Great War of 1914-1918. The Fellowship along with the whole village was greatly affected. As the war dragged on, more and more young men entered the Armed Forces. A number were to lose their lives, and many, though surviving the war, did not settle back in the village but sought a livelihood in London or the Midlands or abroad. After being as it were on top of the mountain, the church experienced the darkness of the valley. By 1922 the membership was only 25.

Towards the end of the war, the Rev. John Griffiths who lived in Llantrisant Road, was called to the oversight of Bethel in conjunction with Carmel Baptist Church, Llanharan, and assisted financially by the Baptist Union. He continued till 1921, but the arrangement did not prove very successful. The question of financial support was becoming increasingly difficult, and because of the transport situation in those days, it was almost impossible to visit very regularly.

Another time of testing came as the village was affected by the nationwide depression. As the years passed, unemployment became a severe problem, and at one time only one man in the fellowship had a job, and every works in Pontyclun was shut. It had become impossible to afford the support of full-time ministry. By and large the services were becoming better attended, but often there was not even enough money to pay the preacher for the day.

More than once the Deacons sought to meet the obligations of the church out of their own pockets.

Adequate supplies for the Sunday Services was a continual problem. For a while a Mr. Jones from Cardiff assisted regularly with the preaching, and another layman, an out of work miner, used to walk from Tynant to take services twice a month. During this period Dr. Edwards of the Baptist College was extremely helpful, sending students to minister, and often coming himself to take monthly communion.

In 1926, the church invited the Rev. John Bryant to minister, and this arrangement, which seems to have been greatly appreciated continued for 2½ years. By the end of his ministry the membership stood at 46.

In the late 1920s a Mr. David Jones helped with the ministry, regularly walking from his home in Penryrch, and in March 1929, the church invited the Rev. J. A. Jones to the oversight, on a part-time basis, and this continued until the end of 1930.

The village itself saw considerable enlargement during the years between the wars, and development of services. Roads were improved and new ones, particularly joining Talbot Green to Tonyrefail were opened. The period also saw the erection of Council housing; from 1924 in Miskin Road and Clun Avenue, with later additions in Clun Crescent and Heol-y-Coed. From 1920, electricity began to be laid in, and in 1925 electric street lighting was installed. That same summer, Bethel went electric too! The same year the Rhondda Tramway Company commenced a 'bus service from the Rhondda to Cardiff via Pontyclun.

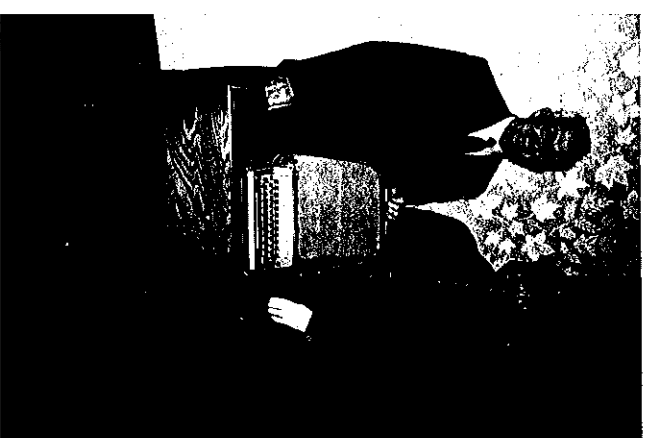
It was during these years that alterations were made to the inside of the building. Originally the pulpit enclosed the whole platform area over the Baptistery, but in 1918 it was altered by a Mr. Corbett to its present decorative arrangement, with twisted maroon ropes

and brass books. At first, too, the communion elements were laid inside the Big Seat which was built right across the front. Later, the central part was cut away, so that members could observe the Ordinance better. The present Communion Table, made at the Ely Joinery, was purchased in 1931 for the princely sum of £4 10s., and the pulpit chair was donated in 1934 by Mrs. Old in memory of her husband.

When Bethel was first opened, the building was heated by means of coal-burning stoves, placed one on each side of the Church, with their doors open during services to give maximum heat. The members later decided to give a shilling each a week to provide another stove for the vestry for weeknight meetings. In 1934, a full central heating system was installed and radiators throughout the Church, fired by a coke boiler placed in the vestry. This boiler was kept alight at weekends by the menfolk of the church, operating on a rota basis. It was lit on Saturday evening, filled up at about midnight, and checked again very early on Sunday! This arrangement continued right through to 1959 when the present gas-fired system was installed.

During these difficult years, the church was at a low ebb. Economic restraints, lack of active young men and many years of irregular pastoral oversight had weakened the life of the fellowship. A slow and steady drift away from the foundation truths of the pioneers could be noticed by the discerning. Had it not been for the faithful and often sacrificial service of the small band of Deacons and Members, the work might have eventually closed. But with God nothing is impossible.

PART THREE Growth and Extension 1934-



During the 1930s a figure begins to emerge, in the pattern of God's Will, who was to play an important part in the Growth of the church — the local postman, Idris Jones, quietly joining the members at the Wednesday Prayer Meeting as he dropped his empty mail-bag in a corner of the vestry.

Mr. Jones was known to Bethel through regular visits as a local preacher, and was also organist at Tabor Baptist Church Llantrisant. But late afternoon work made attendance at his own church very difficult and Bethel was so handy.

In March 1934, the members at Bethel invited him to conduct their monthly communion services, and he was soon endearing himself with the warmth of his fellowship and ministry. The following year, he was called to the oversight, undertaking at first one Sunday a month and later two, with mid-week meeting. During the

years that followed this bond of fellowship developed into the call to take up the ordained ministry.

This came in 1941, and he graciously accepted the challenge. On 27th November, the building had not seen so many people in a long time. The pews were packed, friends and ministers tramped in and bustling ladies prepared overflowing tables in the small vestry. It was the day of the Ordination, an event chaired by Rev. Ingram of Llanharan.

Speaking on behalf of 'pastor Idris', his ex minister, the well loved and respected John Evans of Tabor, Llantrisant, touched on two essentials in a believer's life and which he had observed in Mr. Jones — faithfulness and spiritual growth.

The ordination was carried out by the Rev. Gomer Jones from Ebbw Vale, who considered that God was beginning to answer the many years of prayer for a pastor, and all glory must go to Him. Amen to that, but surely God had already begun to answer years before when the empty mail bag was first dropped in the corner and a quiet figure bowed his head with the others in adoration and prayer.

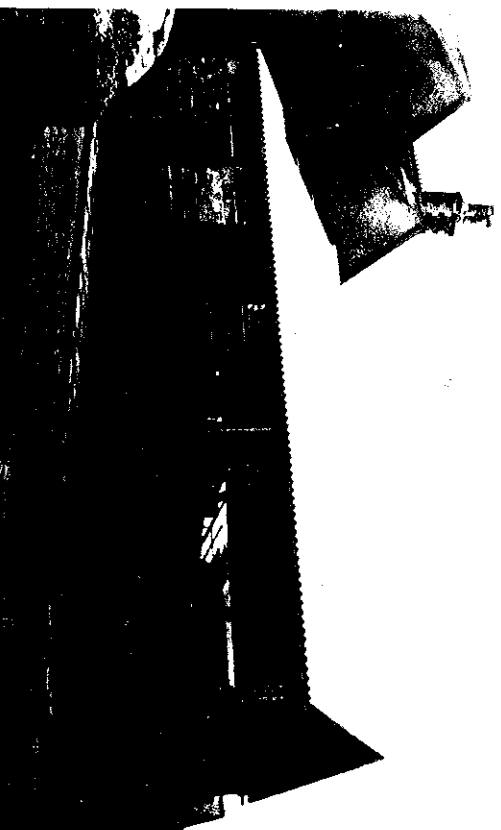
When a church calls a minister, it is often doubly blessed with the minister's wife. Unpaid and often unsung she can be, under the Lord's hand, a means of strength and encouragement, and this was especially true of Mrs. Jones. The finances of the church were not yet able to support a full-time ministry; the postman's rounds had to continue alongside necessary ministry work, and this is where the wife has to play her part. That part was faithfully and effectively played throughout the thirty years that followed. Many of the Sisterhood in particular will remember her for the role played there.

During the war years, quite a number of people from the Services stationed in the area came to worship, and a number of them were

converted. After Sunday evening service, the churches of Pontyclun held community hymn singing at the Tabernacle Church, led mainly by Mr. Percy Jones assisted by a small string orchestra. The village also welcomed numbers of evacuees from England, and quite a few came to Sunday School. Each child was presented with a Bible (many had never had one). The afternoon meeting of the Sunday School Anniversary was taken by evacuees during those years.

After the war, in July 1947, the Rev. Idris Jones hung up his mail-bag to devote himself full-time to the ministry, the church then being in a position to pay him £2-15-0d per week! The membership and activities were growing, and the young people in particular responded warmly to this father figure who possessed the qualities of approachability and understanding. The seeds then sown bore fruit, under God's grace, which still flourishes in much of today's active members.

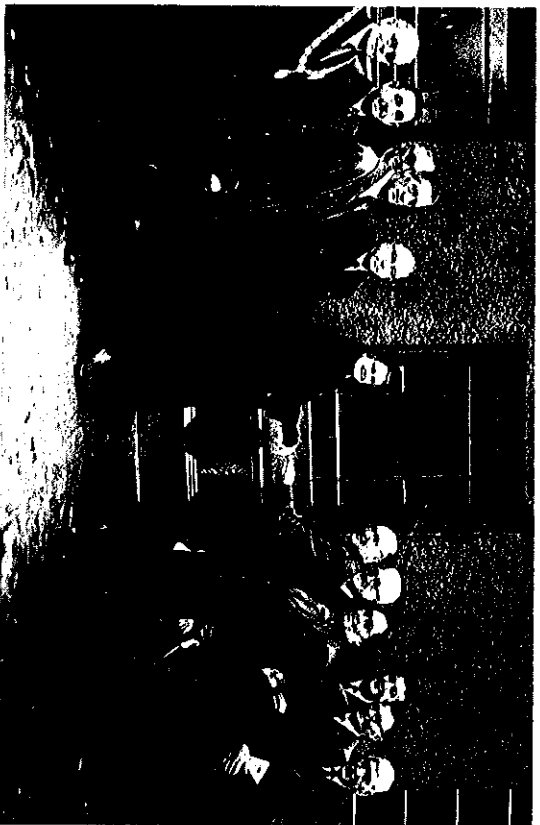
The energy and enthusiasm of youth were soon channelled into a project vital to this growing work already cramped for space. An extension was needed.



The Schoolroom Building Fund was commenced in June 1948, and an early encouragement was a gift bequeathed to the church of £100 from the late Mrs. Evans (of the Thomas & Evans Grocery business). Members contributed a penny a week and the Sunday School collected 'ship' halfpennies, and a loan from the Baptist Union made up the overall cost of nearly £1,000.

A surveyor drew the plan and, with the very generous and expert help of a local builder, Mr. Bob Edwards, the young people of the church together with many friends from the village built the present schoolroom, kitchen and cellar. It was quite a venture of faith, and needed zeal and much hard work.

Evenings and Saturdays were devoted to the work, with each member playing their part, encouraged by the Pastor, who took off his jacket too. As someone said, looking back nostalgically and with gratitude "I've seen it raining all round the district while work was going on, and not a drop falling on us". The winter months, however, tested their fortitude when the wall blocks were



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so frozen that many of the Sunday School children helped by thawing them around open fires, so the work could continue. Even the older members played their part in cleaning and repainting the windows, purchased from the winding house in Coedely Colliery! Saturday, 20th November, 1954 saw a tired but very relieved congregation gathering for the Opening Ceremony. Mr. Osbourne Elliot of Gorsemon was handed the key by the oldest church member Mrs. Evan Rees.

It was a day of great rejoicing, because much had gone into the work, and much blessing was expected in the future. And much has been accomplished through this facility in the years that followed. The ladies in particular can vouch for that as they prepared food for the many functions in the church, especially those who remember the frustrations of earlier days, when the little vestry ever failed to enhance culinary skills!

In January 1963, the Rev. Idris Jones felt it was time to retire, after 28 years of continuous oversight. For sometime he remained, until another was found to take his place. The need of a manse had to be resolved before considering the call of a new minister. No. 13 Lewis Street, which runs alongside the church, was ideally placed, and owned by one of the senior members, Mrs. Kempster, who graciously allowed the sale to take place.

In January 1964, the church settled as Pastor the Rev. William Adams, a young Scottish minister, who had worked among the blind, before training at Swansea Bible College. He was a single man, but marriage was near at hand, so the purchase of the manse in April 1964 came at just the right time in the economy of God. He and his bride were able to move in after the marriage, and take up their work together.

Bill Adams was a keen sportsman and youth worker, and extremely well-grounded in the scriptures, and under his short ministry the

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church flourished. During his period of office, he encouraged the establishing of a Girls Life Brigade Company, and shortly afterwards a Company of the Boys' Brigade was founded.

Deep down in his heart Mr. Adams felt he would like to serve the Lord in China, a country no longer open to missionary work. South Korea took a growing part in their hearts, and in December 1966 he and his wife entered missionary service, in a ministry to children.

Again Rev. Idris Jones was asked to take up oversight until another could take his place. This he agreed to do, and with the help and encouragement of a growing congregation (in 1967 the membership was 84) the work continued with purpose during the 18 months that followed.

In June 1968, the Church called the Rev. Stuart Brockett to become the minister. Mr. Brockett had felt the call of God to full-time service some years previously, and from South Africa he went to Canada to train at the Prairie Bible Institute. There he met and married his wife Nadia, and after training they settled in Sussex, where for some time Mr. Brockett engaged in extensive evangelistic work in this country and Europe. This was his first pastoral post and he settled happily into Lewis Street with his wife and four children.

Mr. Brockett's deep concern for and experience in evangelistic work was an important aspect of his ministry at Bethel, and with the help of some of the younger members, he sought to extend the outreach of the church to the neighbourhood. He also conducted or arranged campaigns in Pontyclun and Llanharry.

He was also a gifted Bible Teacher, and exhortation to praise God in worship and at all times, marked much of his ministry at Bethel. His wife Nadia, will be remembered for her gracious spirit, and the faithful work she did among the women and children.

During these years, three Bethel members entered into spheres of christian ministry. In 1968 Mr. Fred Newcombe became Pastor of the Pentecostal Church, Tipton, Staffordshire. The following year Mr. Graham Brown entered missionary service with the Christian Literature Crusade, and in 1973 Mr. David Maund was approved by the local Baptist Association and took up a lay pastorate with the Upper Rhondda Group of Baptist Churches.

Accepting a call from Gabalfa Baptist Church, Cardiff, in 1973, the Rev. Stuart Brockett and his family left Bethel and once again the faithful but now ageing Idris Jones stepped into the Breach. It was to be the last time he would be asked to don the ministerial mantle. His wife, Lucy, became seriously ill, and having lived long enough to see a new Pastoral family settled in Bethel, she went to be with the Lord in December 1974. Pastor Idris, deeply missing the companionship of his wife lived to see the commencement of the Centenary Meetings in the church, but on Friday, 24th September, 1976 he was taken ill and a week later he went home to Glory. He was faithful to the end in his Love for the Lord.

Our present Minister, the Rev. Edward Slade with his wife Madeline and their three children, came to Bethel in October 1974. Previously he had the joint oversight of two churches in the Midlands, one in Birmingham and the other in Dudley, before taking up this appointment.

Prior to their arrival, the church had decided to purchase another manse, and the opportunity came in November 1973 for the sale of the existing manse in Lewis Street, and the purchase of the larger property at 44, Llantrisant Road. This house underwent considerable repair, and modernisation, largely through the efforts once again of the Bethel young people and their leaders, and was just completed in time for the new pastoral family to move in.

So a century in the life of a village chapel passes. In compiling a brief history like this, there are masses of daily routine items, and

many important gaps in our knowledge of the past. Inevitably there is the glossing over of the many blemishes and failures common to any fellowship of God's people. There must be, too, the passing over of many characters and circumstances locked up in the memories of those still in the fellowship, without which no church would ever have continued so long and so faithfully.

There is also the risk of the unconscious tendency to exalt the church, to the neglect of its glorious Founder and Head, the Lord Jesus Christ, without whose sinless Life, and sacrificial Death, and glorious Resurrection, the church would not exist!

The entire praise and glory must go to the Triune God, who, with such poor human material as ourselves, can work out His purposes on earth.



2 WORD from the Pastor



I count it a great privilege to be at the end of such a long history of faithful, often sacrificial service for the Kingdom of God, and to be the Pastor of Bethel when this history comes to be written.

At best, a pamphlet recording a church's history is an unsatisfactory thing, with the twin pitfalls of either exaggerating the past achievements, or omitting the important and sometimes unnoticed contributions of many. Our forbears were not Supersaints, but ordinary men and women like ourselves, who had come into a living experience of Jesus Christ as Saviour and sought to make Him their Lord and glorify Him during the momentous times through which they lived. The 'ups and downs' of the past socially are reflected in the history of the church, but in the midst of it all the Lord Jesus continued to say 'I will build My Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it'.

There is always, of course, the temptation to look at the past through rose-tinted spectacles, and so maybe call our own faults and weaknesses into too sharp a focus. I expect they had their disagreements, their difficult characters, their discouraging times, but they kept on. And we in our time must do the same. On these foundations we build *our* history, as we are led and directed by the same Holy Spirit. The promise to Joshua is a key phrase for us, 'As I was with Moses so I will be with you, I will not fail you . . .'



Bethel
Today

and
Tomorrow



MINISTERS OF BETHEL

1876-1894	The Rev. Charles Highton
? -1903	The Rev. Jonah Jones
1904-1913	The Rev. John Elias
1918-1921	The Rev. John Griffiths
1923-1926	Pastor Jones (Lay Pastor)
1926-1928	The Rev. John Bryant
1929-1930	The Rev. J. A. Jones
1935-1963	The Rev. Idris Jones
1964-1966	The Rev. William Adams
1968-1973	The Rev. Stuart Brockett
1974-	The Rev. Edward Slade