

Welsh Baptist Polity.

III—LIFE IN A WELSH BAPTIST CHURCH.

TO describe life in a Welsh Church, in the style of Ian Maclaren's *Beside the Bonnie Briar Bush*, or Dean Ramsey's valuable work would require volumes. Daniel Owen has done excellently for Welsh Presbyterianism, and David Davies's *Echoes from the Welsh Hills* is unique and indispensable. Paxton Hood's *Life of Christmas Evans*, is generous and makes good reading, but is unreliable. Anyone desiring a delicious, dainty and true bit of writing on the subject, should read *A Valley in Wales*, by the Editor "F.T.L.," in the *Baptist Times* for July 19th, 1945. Well could he say that, "Among English folk, I find, there is a common misconception about these Welsh Valleys." Today the difficulties of the task of describing life in a Welsh Church are many. Variety of circumstance, time's constant and great changes are without end. Within the radius of two miles we have in the town and district of Llanely, seven churches averaging 700 members each, with another half dozen averaging 250 each. In Flintshire on the other hand, we find twenty churches with a total membership of 746. Then come the differences between the older, sturdier and well-established country churches of Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire, such as Blaenwaun, Rhydwlwm and Aberduar; next, the churches of the coal and iron districts of Glamorgan and Monmouthshire. Then there are the smaller and larger town churches, throughout the Principality, and the little congregations of the hill districts, zealous, faithful, and uncomplaining. In the latter, a minister turns up in a blue moon; Communion services are rare and irregular; dependence is laid upon local preachers and many a Sunday goes by without any preacher at all. Nevertheless, denominational literature circulates in their midst, and they never forget the claims of the missionary societies, Colleges and other "worthy causes." In one of these little churches, that the writer has known well for sixty years, a family succession of three generations has kept the divine fire burning under the altar. At first, the grandfather, then young, keen and vigorous, led the small company. He was followed by his son, a man of exceptional knowledge and mental power, who gave forty years or more to this service. When he failed and was called hence, his daughter, an experienced and well-equipped school teacher, well-read and musical, stepped into the breach. Thus it is that this little jewel

of a sanctuary, hidden away in the hills is never without its small company of humble worshippers paying tribute to the Lord God Almighty.

In the typical Welsh Church, the week's services consist of Prayer Meeting, Society Meeting, Band of Hope, Young People's Prayer Meeting, Singing School and Bible Class. Bible classes would be held during the winter, preparatory for the Sunday School Examinations, generally held in March. The Singing School met to rehearse the hymns, Anthems and choruses that were on the program of the Musical Festival or to train for the local competitive meeting or Eisteddfod. The meeting of the Band of Hope would be a composite affair, combining temperance instruction, catechising, and special preparation for the quarterly and annual meetings of the Sunday School. The Young People's Prayer Meeting had a distinct character of its own, and attended almost entirely by young men. It would be a rare occurrence for a sister, old or young, to lead in prayer at the service. The revival of 1904-5, however, altered all this, and taught the sisters to take their full share at these meetings. The Young People's Prayer Meeting would be conducted as a rule by an elderly brother and a deacon of the church, who would "understand" the young, and could bear with their weakness. He could talk to them without "preaching," lead them to the Throne of Grace and help them in their first "public" mutterings before their Maker. This task was a delicate one and the occasion memorable. Many a novice would "break down" while the intended prayers gave place to sobs and tears. Tears would adorn the faces of all at the meeting, and through all shone forth the angelic smile of that old "Father in God," the conductor. What tenderness and skill, what sympathy and knowledge, what patience and love were his! Little by little and step by step, the young would gather experience and strength, and would be called upon later on to "lead" in the adult Prayer Meeting.

The Society Meeting seems to be somewhat of a Welsh speciality. The minister has next to nothing to do at the week-night services. He certainly presides, in virtue of his office. None could imagine seeing anyone else in the Chair. He may proffer a few remarks occasionally and guide throughout: the Society meeting has no prepared programme or prescribed theme. After the reading of Scripture, prayer and praise, some reliable brother would be called upon to "open the meeting." "Openers" would have their idiosyncracies and special lines, but, as a rule, a sense of freshness was in the air. Generally the speaker would refer to the previous Sunday's sermons reproducing the "heads" and emphasising certain points. The meeting is then open, and anyone present may make his contribution. One

has heard a sermon somewhere and would share its riches with his brethren. Another had an argument with a fellow workman about a verse of scripture or a matter of doctrine and seeks the opinion of the pastor and brethren. A third has had a certain spiritual experience and invites an exchange of opinions concerning the same. Some well-known pastor has died and one after another would recall his sermons and sayings. A brother or sister has been called up yonder and the meeting will be turned into an informal Memorial Service. Candidates for Baptism are brought before the Church, and that society meeting will be marked with elation and joy. The meeting before Communion Sunday will be given to spiritual preparation for the holy event. Interest seldom flagged and there was never a dearth of speakers at this humble feast of fat things. And, let it not be forgotten that all who took part were but labourers, colliers, artisans, shop-keepers, farmers, with an occasional office-clerk or school-master.

Once in a while, the Church would have a young brother who was deemed destined for the pulpit. He had done well in the Sunday School examinations, had been a pupil at the Young Men's Prayer Meeting, had done his share at the Sunday School Quarterly and Annual Meetings, was faithful at the means of grace and of exemplary conduct and character. Having been duly questioned and his qualifications canvassed, he is solemnly "placed before the Church" and invited to preach at a week-night service. That meant a bumper congregation in the vestry and a sympathetic audience for the "test sermon."

The generous company has expressed approval and the young preacher is sped on his way and committed to the mercy of the neighbouring churches, the Association, the Union, the Colleges and the whole world. The Association names four churches where he will again give "trial sermons" and each will report on his case. Here some go under and are done for. The successful candidate will submit himself to the usual examination of the Association or Union, and will then qualify as a "local preacher" or for admission into one of our Colleges. All the tests are tests indeed, and many a good brother has failed to win through. Those that pass are sure of the benediction, sympathy and substantial help of the Church. Benefit lectures and concerts have helped many a Welsh lad to Grammar School and on to College.

THE SUNDAY SCHOOL

The service of the Sunday School to the whole of the Principality has been incalculable. It has not only kept the Welsh language alive, but has nursed and trained the young for the

Church, encouraged purity of life, helped to keep the Sabbath holy, furthered the interest of sacred music, and, through recitation and dialogue, has taught elocution and public speaking. Above all, it has given its disciples a fairly general and good grounding in biblical knowledge. For a hundred years, it was the School, College and University of the Welsh masses. Up to 1890 or thereabout, the Sunday School held its own and thrived in our midst, but it is to be feared that the coming of secondary, higher and technical educational facilities are telling upon its virility and usefulness.

In addition to the above products, the Sunday School has also produced a surprising store of excellent literature both in volume and magazine form. From 1826 to 1918, *The Teacher* (Yr Athraw) was printed at Llanrwst and Llangollen. The Sunday School Union published *The Sower* (Yr Heuwr), later known as *The Leader* (Yr Arweinydd). *The Sunday School Star* (Seren Yr Ysgol Sul), has rendered great service for many years and is still thriving. *The Sunday School New Testament*, in three large volumes, by the Rev. Robert Ellis (Cynddelw) has rendered much help. Since 1890, the S.S. Union has published a series of separate commentaries, on books of the Bible. By this they cover the whole of the New Testament as well as portions of the Old Testament.

In times gone by, catechising was much in vogue in Wales, and scores of catechisms were prepared to that end. These were used in the Junior classes. For the senior and adult classes the *School Theme* or "Pwnc Ysgol" would be provided. A day would be given to the public discussion of some Christian theme, maybe a chapter of scripture, a Christian ordinance, a point of doctrine or some eminent biblical character. The minister would be called upon to prepare a fairly full guide, with scripture references. Those pages would be printed and distributed in advance so that the "Theme" may be well understood. Sometimes neighbouring schools would exchange visits and even exchange programmes, so that these red-letter days became popular and important. The well-known *Titus Lewis's Catechism* is of sterner stuff and, for generations, was reserved for Senior Classes and adults, and especially for preparing candidates for baptism and Church membership.

THE WELSH BAPTIST ASSOCIATION

This institution has occupied a very important place in the life of Welsh Baptists, and has, during its course, developed a dual character. At first it was a consultative gathering in connection with which a single sermon would be delivered. From 1704 to 1733, one discourse; 1734 to 1778, two, as a rule. By

1787, we find three, four, and five. At Llanerchymedd, in Anglesey, in 1788, nine preachers held forth for the Master. After this and during the last century, ten and twelve sermons would be delivered, in the place where the Annual Meetings were held, not to mention another dozen or more in neighbouring churches on the first day of the festival. These great preachings called forth a number of strong men, men of zeal and enthusiasm, powerful orators, versed in scripture and masters of assemblies. On the other hand, a roll of sermon-tasters and untiring 'hearers' was developed, who would spare neither cost, time, or trouble in order to be present at these immense outdoor religious gatherings. Often two sermons would be delivered at the early six o'clock service, three at the ten o'clock meeting, two in the afternoon, and three again at the evening service. The morning and afternoon of the first day would be devoted to conferences, but the evening and the whole of the next day were consecrated to public worship and pulpit ministration. Today some of the associations give three days to their work, reserving the first to committee-work and a public meeting in the evening when Missionary, Sunday School, Temperance or some other kindred subject will receive attention.

During the years, the administrative side has grown apace. The more numerous associations, such as Carmarthen and Cardigan, Glamorgan East, and Glamorgan West, have arranged sectional organisations and Quarterly Meetings, dealing with local matters, but still working within the Association. The Denbigh, Flint, and Merioneth Association, the most widely scattered of all, with its 107 churches, draws from the three counties named and also from Montgomeryshire. Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Oswestry, and Chester has seven local unions, each with its own Officers and Committees. The parent Association has its own Missions (Home and Foreign), Loan Fund, Sunday School and Youth, Temperance and Purity, Deeds and Property, and Executive Committee, as well as sub-committees dealing with the recognition of ministers and speakers and Public Affairs, while its property is vested in a Board of Trustees.

A prominent feature, if not a peculiarity, in our Welsh churches is the sturdy sense of equality and independence that prevails everywhere. The "aided" church or pastor does not lose caste. A Welsh Superintendent would never think of forcing a pastor upon a small aided brotherhood. He may help and advise when asked, and not before. He would never expect to take charge of the supply list for a vacant pulpit. A minister or student negotiates directly with the Church concerning an invitation or "call" to the pastorate. At times this may have its humorous side, still, there it is. The fundamental principles of

personal liberty and responsibility, and Church independence must not be sacrificed. The Association knows its place, and the Union is but a bigger family. Officials are regarded as servants and not masters.

THE MINISTRY IN WALES

The story of the Ministry has its idyllic, epic, and tragic sides. During the early days the pioneers had to contend with poverty and discouragement. The land was full of superstition and ignorance: the ground was hard and persecution cruel. The courageous few rang out the glad tidings, planted churches, built sanctuaries, fought the drink traffic, and secured a successful system of education for the principality. They fought the battle of the poor and were largely at the back of the Trades Union Movement, in its more trying days. Then came the happier days of the Manse, the settled ministry, the large congregations and the thriving churches. The town and industrial district pastor would have his one church to feed and shepherd, while the rural bishop would have his two or three congregations to watch over, and, long before the days of bicycles and motor cars, his own humble nag or the lent pony of some kind farmer at his service. Shank's mare was always popular and useful and worked wonders. With all their humbleness and restrictions, those days are fragrant with happy memories. Many a little known minister would be like a prince among his people and long ministries were the order of the day.

During the last fifty or sixty years, a great change has come over the land. The young cannot see its effects and the middle aged can hardly appreciate its vastness and thoroughness. To the aged, it has appeared like the moving of a mighty avalanche or the invasion of some foreign power. Sixty years ago, the Christian Ministry was practically the only opening for a career for a bright or ambitious young man. A fondness for poetry, literature, books, learning, or public speaking ended in an invitation to preach, if the young man were of good character and "faithful at the means of grace." Under these circumstances the Church secured the services of a strong and virile ministry, and an efficient type of social and religious leaders. In the whole history of the Welsh nation, no period in its course will stand comparison in this respect with the nineteenth century. But the revolution of the twentieth century supervened. With the coming of national colleges at Aberystwyth, Cardiff, Bangor, and later at Swansea and the subsequent combining of all four to form the University of Wales, a new day had dawned upon the land. In addition to all this, the Intermediate Education Act of 1889 established about 120 Secondary and County Schools of excellent quality, mediating

between the Elementary Schools and the University Colleges. All were served by a system of scholarships that brought the labourer's child to the University, and often placed in his hands the golden key that opened to him the portals of the older seats of learning in England.

Today the revolution is, in a sense, complete. Welshmen are found in high office, as University College Principals and Professors, Directors of Education, Heads of Grammar Schools and Technical Colleges, Government Inspectors, Heads of Government Departments, Members of Parliament and Cabinet Ministers, Medical men and Veterinary Surgeons, Heads of Factories and business concerns. Many have taken to the Law, becoming barristers and judges; others are excelling in science or in art. In a word, the change effected in so short a period is bewildering and incredible. As a result of it all, the Christian Ministry is starved, handicapped, and depleted. In many of the walks of life mentioned, a thousand a year does not count for much. In the Ministry a fifth of that would be regarded as decent pay, while the minimum salary of an aided pastor would be £140 a year! Of course, the larger churches have their own standards of maintenance, but then they are a few in number, whereas the weaker and average churches are many. To anyone conversant with the problem, the facts are alarming. A devoted brother, in his zeal for Christ, may eschew flattering secular openings and abide in the Ministry, but the wan cheek and the anxious heart of his patient wife, with a growing family must tell upon the most devoted and courageous of men. At present, as stated, the minimum salary recognised by the Sustenation Fund Scheme is £140 a year. At present, however, the Baptist Union of Wales is engaged in collecting a further £100,000, hoping to raise the minimum to, at least £180. Is it any wonder that we have a serious dearth of ministers, and that the great majority of our brighter and keener youths are attracted to other vocations?

Had space allowed, attention should be given to sacred music in the Welsh Church and congregation. No service is complete without a number of hymns, and there is hardly a church in Wales, but that it forms part of the united choir that sings at the annual festival. For some years, the North Wales churches prepare and publish one programme which is renewed every year and therefore secures variety and freshness at the ordinary Sunday and week-night services. Some of the larger churches, in addition to this, take up the works of the masters, such as "St. Paul," "The Messiah," "The Woman of Samaria," "Judas Maccabæus," the "Elijah," etc. Baptismal services in the open-air, in a river or in the church "pool," used to be very popular at one time. Neighbouring congregations would meet and march together to the river-

side, singing appropriate and popular hymns. Welsh Baptist denominational literature could do with a lengthy chapter to itself. Even the *Association Letter*, first published in 1760, by the one association for Wales, has hardly missed a single year. At first, 1760-1790, it was one "Letter" for the year. To day, all fourteen associations issue, each its own Report. Here, all kinds of religious subjects are discussed and "Baptist Principles" are not forgotten. The annual statistics of the churches are religiously and carefully printed. Amidst all the changes, wars, lapses and times of depression, our churches manifest wonderful confidence in the future. None think that the end is near, but rather a sense of inevitableness, of the prosperity and immutability of the Church of Christ possesses the people. Ordinary members entertain unquestioning faith, and regard the coldness of the hour and the lapses of many as something temporary that must pass away soon giving place to greater manifestations of the glory of God. Never was the moral life of individual members cleaner or more beautiful than it is now. It must be sorrowfully admitted that the spirit and declension of the age has told heavily upon the Baptists of the Principality. Evidence of that can be seen in the smaller congregations and the reduced membership of the churches. That story is amply recorded in our denominational statistics year after year. Nevertheless Church funds bear testimony to a generosity and faithfulness that indicates love and devotion that cannot be gainsaid. The preaching of today may not have the same torrential eloquence of bye-gone days, but is certainly more intellectual and scholarly than ever before. Notwithstanding all that is gloomy and disheartening, there are signs and testimonies that the future is safe, that truth shall prevail, that the principles of the Prince of Peace shall prosper, and that Divine Love shall yet possess the hearts of the people of Wales and of the whole world.

E. K. JONES.