

## MORRIS WEST - AN APPRECIATION

The academic year of 1945-46 was very unusual and probably unique in the life of Bristol Baptist College. At the end of the previous year all the students except one had left to take up pastorates or to proceed to further study at Regent's Park College in Oxford. In October 1945 he was joined by a few other new students and, in what must have been a nightmare session for the staff, further students came at intervals throughout the year. The Second World War had ended, gradually people were being discharged from the forces, conscientious objectors were being released from the work they had been doing and those in reserved occupations were becoming free from restriction. Many who had been waiting for some considerable time to begin their ministerial preparation were now able to do so. I was the last to arrive during this session, entering College in May, 1946. More joined us in the following session as the trickle of students continued for several more months. We were, therefore, a very mixed community and, although not all that old in terms of years by today's standards, had reached maturity early as a result of the experience of one kind or another during the war years. When I arrived I quickly recognised that there was one person there who had great gifts, not only academic gifts but qualities of leadership, application and commitment to ministry. Morris West was one of those who had entered College at the start of the session and was, therefore, well-established when I entered. There began then an acquaintance which, over our student years and since, has deepened into a rich friendship and the respect I had for him at that time has grown as I have known him as a person, a scholar, a statesman, a theologian and a friend.

He brought into College with him a life enriched by the experience not only of working in wartime Britain but of being born and brought up in a Baptist manse. His father, W. E. West, was a highly respected minister who had been educated at Bristol. One of his pastorates was at the Old King Street Church in Bristol which was situated close to the Broadmead Church near the site now occupied by the British Home Stores. It was during that time that Morris was born, the third of three children. His elder brother studied medicine in Bristol and was a member of the College before going into general practice, while his sister entered the teaching profession and became a Head Teacher. Like his brother before him, Morris went to Taunton School where independence of mind was encouraged and developed along with a strong sense of what it meant to live in community, and so he was well-equipped for leadership in the College. At the beginning of the 1945 session all the students except one were in their first year and since the House Rules did not permit first year students to hold office it was not possible to appoint any officers other than the Senior Student. The office of Sub-Senior (later to become known as House Secretary) had to remain vacant. This technical difficulty was overcome by appointing Morris as 'Minute Secretary'! Later when he reached his penultimate year and so became eligible for office he was duly elected Sub-Senior.

If the Bristol tradition was to be carried forward into the post-war era, it was necessary for someone to receive it from Ken King, the remaining student, and hand it on to future generations. This was to be the task of the 1945-46 year and of Morris West in particular. Family connections with the College and a knowledge of many previous Bristol students fitted him for this task. How far he was conscious of it at the time only he can say, but as I look back on those years in Bristol it seems to me that the College owes a considerable debt to him in this respect. This concern for the tradition remained with him throughout his student days and continued during the years of his Principalship as well.

We all learned much from Arthur Dakin and Henton Davies and our learning was not confined to academic subjects. It was always the Dakin policy to encourage responsibility and self-discipline by allowing the maximum amount of freedom, but perhaps it was especially marked in that period because of the maturity of the students. The influence of Dakin on Morris, as upon all of us, can be seen by anyone who knew both. In no sense did he attempt to copy him; he has always been sufficiently independent to follow the dictates of his own heart and mind, but the directness and the lack of pretension that was characteristic of Dakin can be seen in him too.

The words 'able' and 'evangelical' have been key words in the Bristol tradition from the beginning. In 1946 four of us had matriculated and so began the University course. In those days all the teaching for the final two years was given in the Theological Colleges and so we shared all classes with those who were not taking a degree, as well as with students from Western College. The name 'West', though well down alphabetically, was always high on the examination lists. The change from the Sciences to Arts was successfully negotiated. Classical Greek and Hebrew were managed, perhaps not without difficulty, but with distinction; not without difficulty, because although there was a natural academic gift it was accompanied and enhanced by hard, long and conscientious work. We were both early morning workers and so were up regularly at 6.30 and even earlier during the revision and exam period, retiring to bed about 11.30. I suspect that Morris stayed up even later than this at certain times. The result of this was not only a good degree but a habit of work and study which has continued throughout his working life.

Yet there was always time for other things. Afternoons were used almost exclusively for letter-writing, relaxation and recreation. Football occupied one afternoon and training or practice another one or two. Squash, table tennis and, in the summer term, tennis and cricket found a place in his curriculum. At all of these, too, Morris succeeded. He had a good eye and fine co-ordination of hand or foot and eye. He was largely responsible, along with others, for enthusing those of us who were less enthusiastic so that out of about twenty-four students we were able to field a very respectable Soccer XI which nearly won the Bardsley Brash Cup for the

Theological Colleges (four of them!), gaining a draw on Bristol City's ground. There was even an occasion when we managed to find two - rather less respectable - sides to play a match on the Downs, euphemistically speaking.

The 'evangelical' was also well in evidence not only in his preaching, but in his work in the student team at Studley in Wiltshire and in his participation in student missions. This, as is well-known, has remained a part of his theological make-up.

When we returned to College after one summer vacation we discovered that Morris had met a girl at a BMS Summer School in the Lake District who was later to become his wife. By coincidence both our fiancées were called Freda, both were Yorkshire girls and they lived no more than six or seven miles apart. From then on Morris and I saw a good deal of each other during vacations as well as during College term. In fact we were together at the Headingly Test Match in 1949 when our degree results were published! By then Morris and Freda had married, in the January of that year.

All four of us who had been on the University course graduated in 1949. As a Regent's Park student I went on to Oxford, and by that far-sighted agreement between the Colleges, the other three also went on to Oxford as Bristol students. Thus the friendship continued. Morris' decision to continue study in Oxford was not made without hesitation. He believed he was called to the ministry and, as for all of us, this meant to a local Baptist Church. There was a certain impatience to get on with the work to which he felt called. Yet those of us who knew him well were always sure that his good sense would prevail and that he would take advantage of the opportunity which Oxford offered.

Life in Oxford was very different from life in Bristol. The educational methods and the whole ethos were different and adjustments had to be made. I chose to do Hebrew as my optional subject; the others chose Reformation History. This brought Morris into even closer contact with Ernest Payne than I enjoyed and there developed between student and teacher a relationship of mutual respect which lasted as long as Ernest Payne lived. To anticipate a little, when Dr Payne died in 1980 Morris was entrusted with all his papers, notes and diaries from which he produced his excellent memoir, *To Be A Pilgrim*. With encouragement from Dr Payne, he pursued his studies in church history and, within that general field, Baptist and Anabaptist history. We should not forget either the influence of Principal R. L. Child. Morris has often testified to his scholarship and kindness, not only when he was a student, but also when he returned to Regent's as Tutor.

Although he held no office in the Junior Common Room at Regent's, his influence there was strong in all its affairs and the same application to study and to recreation - he played Soccer for St Catherine's First XI - ensured that at the end of the two year course he emerged with a very good degree.

The questions he had faced two years earlier in Bristol now returned to plague him again. Should he take a pastorate, so fulfilling his call at once, or should he take the opportunity which was being offered to him of further study abroad? Again I think his friends knew before he did what his answer would be. It was right, and from a wider, denominational point of view it was essential that he should pursue his studies. Consequently, as we settled in churches Morris and Freda went to Zurich on a B.U. scholarship. His work in the University there, under Emil Brunner and Edward Schweitzer among others, concentrated his interests in Reformation History, nourished by living in the city of Ulrich Zwingli. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on the English reforming bishop, John Hooper. It was a fine piece of work for which he was awarded a D.Theol. with highest honours. Brunner is reported to have said of him, 'If only the British would send us more students of this quality'. So his place as a Reformation scholar was assured, though he never was and never has been content to be an expert in one narrow field of study. His interests have remained wide and far-reaching.

In 1953, after two years in Switzerland, his desire to start his pastoral ministry was further frustrated and delayed. Ernest Payne had left Regent's in 1951 to become General Secretary of the Baptist Union. One of his successors stayed only a short time and by 1953 a new tutor was being sought. Where else should they turn but to Morris in Zurich? So he returned to Oxford where his scholarly ability was quickly recognised and where he was brought into touch with many other scholars of all denominations. So far as Regent's was concerned, however, it was not just his scholarship which endeared him to the students; it was even more his personal and pastoral concern. Certainly he was happier to be working in a theological college helping to prepare people for ministry than he would have been in a university department. The opportunity to encourage people to reach their greatest potential in both academic and vocational studies was grasped eagerly. At the same time he took on responsibility for the smooth working of the institution and found much satisfaction in doing so alongside Principal Child.

Other opportunities also began to come his way. In 1952 the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches met in Lund in Sweden. While still a student in Zurich, Morris had attended as a youth delegate and so was introduced at first hand to the ecumenical movement, with which he was to become increasingly involved. Along with E. A. Payne, L. G. Champion and others he made certain that the British Baptist voice was heard and that our historic principles were understood and respected.

His continuing concern for evangelism is demonstrated by the fact that while he was still in Oxford he met from time to time with a group of those who had been students with him in Bristol to discuss the question of how best to proclaim the Gospel in and through the local church, leading to his editorship of *Evangelism and the Churches* in 1958. The first of the nine essays was his own contribution: 'Evangelism in the Early Church'.

After six years at Regent's Park the opportunity came for Morris to reach his ambition of pastoral ministry, the fulfilment of which had now been delayed for ten years. He saw the College through the retirement of Principal Child and the beginning of Dr Henton Davies' Principalship and then, in 1959, accepted a call to the pastorate of Dagnall Street Baptist Church, St Albans. Just how conscious was the hope or belief that he would one day return to teach in a Theological College I cannot say, but his friends were clear that this was the case and that, therefore, a period as pastor of a local church was indispensable to his future as well as being the fulfilment of personal hopes. But his pastorate at St Albans was not just a means to an end. As far as he was concerned this was what he had been called to do and now at last he was doing it.

For twelve years he exercised an important and influential ministry there. It was a church with a long history and a large membership. It had seen many notable ministries and it played an important part in the life of the city. It, therefore, made considerable demands on one who had so far had little first-hand experience as pastor of a local church. This did not prevent him from exercising a very effective ministry appreciated by many. It was an evangelical ministry in the best sense of the word. Based upon the exposition of Scripture, the gospel was preached with that vigour that arose out of personal faith and conviction. Always seeking personal decisions, it took full account of the needs of the world as it was and of its people as they were.

Through him the church extended its influence into Hill End Mental Hospital where he was Chaplain. Others would be able to write more authoritatively about the help he was able to give to both patients and staff but it is just as important, from the point of view of this appreciation, to record the effect this had on Morris himself. Here he learned at first hand the demands and the cost of pastoral counselling and proved himself both skilled in it and personally and spiritually strong enough to sustain it.

His own personal gifts and the fact that he was minister of an influential church meant that he became deeply involved in the work of the Hertfordshire Association, and of the Baptist Union to whose Council he had already been elected in 1959. In 1960 he wrote a small booklet for the Union on *Baptist Principles*, which has remained to this day a standard statement of Baptist beliefs. When the Union set up a commission to look into the organisation and function of the Associations, he was appointed Chairman. This involved a great deal of thought and time. The Report, benefiting from his wide understanding of Baptist history, was generally recognised to be an excellent piece of work even if some of its most important recommendations were not implemented then or since. Though he would be the first to say that the Report was the work of the whole commission, much credit must go to him.

As if all this were not enough, his activities in the city of St Albans led to other offices. He became President of the Rotary Club and even more significantly he was appointed Justice of the Peace,

bringing him into touch with still more aspects of modern life and stimulating an awareness of the needs of individuals in trouble and a concern for social justice. Remarkably, there was still time for theological reading and reflection on all the varied aspects of life in which he was involved.

As the time for Dr Champion's retirement from the Principalship of the Bristol Baptist College drew near, a committee was set up to consider the succession. Other members of staff were not on this committee but I should be surprised if there was a great deal of doubt as to whom his successor would be. Most people in the denomination, I judge, took it for granted that Morris West would be appointed. It would be surprising, too, if he himself had not seen this as likely. He had already decided not to apply for academic posts, believing that in some way his future lay in or for the Baptist Ministry. His affection for Bristol College and his sense of indebtedness to it meant that he was a natural choice as Principal. So he returned to Bristol in 1971 first as Principal-elect and then, the following year, to take up the Presidency of the Bristol Education Society and the Principalship of the College. His appointment was a particular joy to me since it meant a resumption of the deep friendship which had begun in student days but which had to some extent been interrupted as we had each gone our separate ways of Christian service.

Changes were already beginning to be made in the College. A Policy Group had been set up a year or two previously of which Morris had been a member. That group, after a realistic scrutiny of the College and its possible future role in the denomination, re-affirmed its usefulness and pointed in the direction of its becoming a resource centre for the South West of England, where it was held in very high regard. It also encouraged the policy of accepting students on Open Option, that is, students wishing to read Theology and qualified to do so in the University, but uncertain about their future vocation. There had also been some dissatisfaction with the syllabus for the London University Diploma of Theology as the academic basis for those not reading for a degree. Efforts were being made, in conjunction with the Anglican and Methodist Colleges, to devise a more appropriate syllabus and qualification which would take account of both academic and vocational subjects. At the same time relationships with Bristol University were changing as the Department of Theology, started in 1964, developed and grew in numbers of both staff and students. In addition to all this relationships between staff and students in the College were beginning to become less formal. It was into this changing situation that Morris came, using his own personal skills and personality to see the College through a period of considerable and accelerating change.

As Principal of the College he was accepted immediately by the University as Special Lecturer in Theology and within the Department of Theology he began to develop courses in Reformation Studies which have attracted a large number of students over the years. Several staff changes within the Department, including a

change of Professor, have taken place but the College has been able to retain its standing throughout, due largely to the regard in which the Principal was held. When, in 1979, the College celebrated its Tercentenary with radio and television broadcasts and the publication of Norman Moon's book, *Education For Ministry*, the University marked the occasion by awarding the Principal the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters. The Professor of Theology at that time, the Reverend Kenneth Grayston, presented him, paying tribute not only to the College's contribution to the academic life in the city, but to Morris personally for his scholarship and for his work in the World Church.

It is not easy to write an adequate appreciation of Morris' work in the College during the fifteen years of his Principalship and what I write will be selective and subjective. I have already written about the importance which tradition had for him and also about the changes that were taking place in the College. The two may seem incompatible, but 'when we talk about a tradition it is important to remember that we are talking not about something which is fixed and finished, but about something which is a process and therefore in continuous development...' This quotation is the opening statement in a paper read by the Principal to the College Brotherhood at the Annual Meetings in October 1986, entitled *The Bristol Tradition - Now and Then*. It sought to show how the Bristol tradition had been maintained and at the same time developed over the years. The paper was all that it set out to be and more: it could easily be recognised by those who knew him as an expression of the personal 'credo' by which he lived his life and steered the College. I can, therefore, do no better than use the five headings which he himself provided in writing an appreciation of his contribution to the College.

'Biblical conviction' is every bit as much a part of Morris' own Christian make-up as it is part of the Bristol tradition. Although his academic expertise was proven in the realm of Church History, his concern for the proper understanding and use of the Bible, both Testaments, has been paramount. It has shown itself in those New Testament courses he has taught in the College where he has demanded the highest standard of exegesis from himself and from students according to their ability. Yet it has never been scholarship for its own sake. Studying Corinthians has not been only a matter of discovering Paul's attitude to the problems in the church there. That knowledge had to be applied to questions in the contemporary church and society. Similar demands have been made in the Sermon Class where preaching had to be rooted in the Bible, but where the Bible must become the Word of God for today. All this has been central to his idea of preparing people for ministry and its importance has been underlined in his own preaching both in the churches around the country and in the College Chapel whenever he has preached at the weekly Eucharist or led the College community in daily worship. He has always encouraged students to think for themselves and not simply to accept other people's views, yet because of his rigorous standards this has never meant that people could make the Bible mean what they wanted it to mean.

Like judgment can be given to his concern for 'theological awareness'. He has never sought to impose his own theology on students but has insisted that they thoughtfully work out their own understanding of the faith in the light of their own experience. Favourite words have been 'reflection' and 'contextualisation': to reflect on scripture in the light of contemporary ideas, and on contemporary thought in the light of the scriptures and the tradition of the Church have always been essential to him and he has demanded the same from his students. Consequently modern trends in theology have been explored but they have never been followed simply because they were modern. They have always had to be tested against scripture and tradition.

Both biblical conviction and theological awareness have been surrounded and undergirded by 'evangelical zeal'. No-one can hear him preach or engage in conversation for long without being made aware of the Good News of God who revealed himself in Jesus as holy and loving and as reconciling the world to himself. All preaching must seek a decision of some kind from its hearers, a decision to commit life to Christ or to deepen that commitment or to work out the implications of it in activities and relationships.

But evangelism has never been understood narrowly in terms of verbal proclamation alone. Alongside it there has been a deep 'social consciousness' which has found expression in his continuing work as a magistrate, including his recent appointment as Deputy Chairman of the Bristol Bench. His work on the Bench brought with it involvement with the Avon Probation Service and he has served not only on its Main Committee but on the Divorce and Domestic Sub-committee and as chairman of the prison Sub-committee. All this experience he has brought into the life of the College. Social issues and political affairs have thus never been side-stepped but have been opened up in both formal classes and informal conversation. Moreover the area of practical and vocational preparation has been greatly enriched for students as he has arranged for them to gain experience for themselves in so many aspects of modern life - in the courts, education, industry, hospitals, the needs of the inner city, of ethnic groups, of disadvantaged people and much more. Upon all this experience he has demanded theological reflection so that it may be properly understood from a Christian stand-point.

All this work has gone on within what he called 'community commitment' and the word 'community' is another of those which have been frequently on his lips. It is in this area, perhaps more than any other, that former students, returning to College on Sabbatical leave, have noticed the greatest change. Such change had begun when he came to the College in 1971. In the fifteen years since it has gone on apace in what may seem small ways, but when added together these have made a significant difference to life in the College community. It would have been easy to allow this powerful tide of change to sweep the College whither it would. This was not Morris' way. The tide had to be controlled and its power harnessed to the purposes of the College in preparing people for ministry. So though the relationship between staff and students became more

relaxed this never diminished the respect in which he and the rest of the staff were held. The College was to be a learning community in which everyone shared, each acknowledging the skills and experience of the rest. Similarly the increasing number of women students and of married students, especially those with families who have become student ministers, was seen as providing an opportunity for a more mixed and varied community having at its heart the weekly Eucharist in which wives and, where appropriate, children were encouraged to share. In this community-building Freda West also played a significant part both by arranging regular meetings for students' wives and more particularly by assuming responsibility for all the domestic arrangements in the College and so involving herself in all aspects of its life alongside Morris.

Patterns of study have also become more varied as students have had to plan their work with College, University, family and church in mind. Again this has been used to encourage the kind of self-discipline required in later life. The Principal has also ensured that those involved in administration, library, secretarial and domestic work have all been seen as members of the one Christian community entrusted with the task of preparing people for ministry. A glance at the College photograph will quickly make this clear. So, although changes were necessary and inevitable, he has seen to it that they were used positively in the service of God.

It would leave a serious omission if I did not mention his concern that the Colleges should co-operate even more closely within the denomination. So when Mansel John, the tutor in Cardiff, died so sadly and suddenly, Morris offered Bristol's help in teaching his Church History courses. As a result a most helpful link was established whereby first Norman Moon and Morris, and then, after Norman's retirement, Morris alone spent a day in Cardiff teaching in the University there, whilst Neville Clark, visited Bristol one day a week to teach mainly New Testament courses.

All this might be thought to be sufficient work for any one man but for Morris there were always heavy denominational and ecumenical commitments as well. He was elected President of the Union for the year 1979-80. Two years later he was elected Moderator of the Free Church Federal Council. From 1982 to 1985 he also served as Chairman of the Baptist Union Council. For many years this has meant very frequent trips to London and yet the College remained his primary concern and has never been neglected.

'What more shall I say, for time would fail me to tell....'. To know and to work with Morris has been to know and work with a man of wide interests and deep insights, a man with a keen intellect and the capacity for hard work to match it, a man of vision who knows where he wants to go and goes there, a man of faith who neither parades it nor hides it, a man for whom the Christian Gospel means everything and who is determined to spread it himself and to help others to do the same.