



THE WORD - ACTIVE IN EAST ANGLIA

Catherine Hutton

HOW THE WORD HAS CROSSED CULTURE, IGNITING MISSION

'We preach Christ and him crucified'. This message of faith was written in a mural at the front of the Methodist Chapel in Fylingthorpe where I spent my childhood years and first found faith. It was a message which was to become embedded deep within my heart as I absorbed it week by week, listening to the liberal sermons of the 1980s and wondering how the disconnect had happened between the focus on Salvation and just 'being good people'.

Fast forward 30 years and a move even further east than the North Yorkshire Coast and we arrive in Norwich where the power of the Word of God is very much alive and active. The power of the Cross to release people from their addictions and griefs and hang-ups is being spoken with confidence. This has required faithful ministers who have loved the Word of God and have trusted in his goodness even when faced with opposition and perceived cultural irrelevance, ministers who have seen potential and offered a home to new congregations which have been forming organically within our communities.

Sprowston Methodist has attracted people whose love for the Word has led them to a natural charismatic expression of faith and deep love for and belief in the power of prayer, often courting ridicule from other churches in the circuit

(of which I am the Superintendent). It is within Sprowston that we find the origins of our Chinese Heritage congregation, which had nested within Sprowston's hospitality for 12 years until the minister, pastor of the congregation and the superintendent looked at further opportunities to develop the work. A circuit church was about to be vacated on a site near the hospital and the university and the reins of stewardship and leadership were passed to Pastor Edmond Tsui and the Chinese Heritage congregation - which is now a church.

There are many cultures held among the people, both socially and geographically with around 12 languages being spoken. The unity is in Jesus and on 3 Sundays of a month the service is conducted entirely in Mandarin with Cantonese translation. The message is always centred on the Word and a conservative approach to scripture is maintained. There is an expectation that God will transform lives through his Word of Life and new converts are regularly made. Five preachers are currently in training, some in English & some in their native language. Along with Pastor Edmond, I help in the training; offering encouragement and advice as we would with any preacher. We have struggled to find evangelical preachers to be mentors for our newest recruits. These fledgling preachers are hungry to preach the Word of God, having seen the difference it makes to their own lives.

Hearing the preachers in Mandarin and with minimal interpretation, the joy and love for Jesus shines out and the soft praying tones of intimacy with which the congregation are led in prayer reduce me to tears. The Word is more incisive than the mere sense of hearing the words. Billy Wong whispered to me mid-sermon, 'Livian is speaking about the haemorrhaging woman and about reaching out in faith to touch and trust Jesus for all we need.' Billy was one of the founder members of the church in Norwich. He has since gone to glory, but was known in the community of Sprowston for his chip shop and for his faith. His own funeral was packed with a multinational gathering of people who loved Billy and all heard an evangelistic message.

It is through people like Billy Wong, Kit Holland and Livian Tan that the gospel message has been able to travel around East Anglia. Pastor Edmond Tsui regularly shares his story of faith with people he may meet as he spends time in the areas where Chinese people gather, or helping people as they negotiate health care or insurance claims. Edmond confidently shares the message of the death of Christ to save us from our sins and set us free from shame and guilt. This is followed with an invitation to service which is taken up. There is an evangelistic meeting most Mondays and a strong commitment to discipleship development through groups and preparation for baptism. We baptise up to 20 people per year and receive more



into membership through confirmation or by transfer from Methodist Churches across East Asia and Malaysia.

My own input is on the other Sunday as I preach and celebrate Holy Communion with Pastor Edmond. A good and thorough, biblically centred sermon is required of me. I have learned that repetition of a theme during a sermon is okay and culturally appropriate, having listened to the way testimonies are told within this community. It doesn't work to have long Bible passages on a Sunday, as we read them together, aloud. Short, pithy pieces of scripture work well, referring to further verses for context. I have learned not to use the same stories and illustrations I would use elsewhere, checking with my translator that the illustration will work. When the good news of Jesus' saving love is preached with conviction and depth, the people are still and quiet.

As the word finds its mark, there is no showiness. A quiet pondering and prayerful soul-searching takes place. The depth of faith is demonstrated in the amount of people - with busy and complicated lives - offering to take on roles of leadership and responsibility within the church. Wilson, a junior doctor is leading the international, English speaking service and training as a preacher. Livian is running a small business over at the coast, helping to establish a new congregation there and is training as a preacher. Our Circuit Steward, Kit is a nurse in a busy hospital department. All are giving service in response to the Word of Life. As we listen to Jesus and hear the Scriptures speak to us, we find that we are released into a new way of living. Kingdom priorities emerge and prayer becomes a way of life rather than a punctuation mark within it.

The Word speaks to every heart. Our youngest preacher is Steven, a second generation Christian who had to find his way to salvation in his own response to the Word. He has a specific burden to help the British-born Chinese to discover the truth of Jesus. He is working as our intern, speaking the love of God in Jesus to students at the University of East Anglia, the high schools and the Art College. He leads the student and youth ministry, with the wonderful gift of deep, personal faith coupled with fluency in three languages. His evangelism is gentle, allowing God's love to shine through as Steven speaks to them. Whether the Spirit stirs the mind or begins to work salvation in the depths of our being, I do not know. What is evident is that there is a desire for Salvation and a desperation among the people of Chinese heritage to find meaning and purpose in life. Steven's preaching is an important part of our mission. Even in the wider circuit, as he accompanies his mentor to preaching appointments, he is valued as he speaks the Word of God into the ears of our people for whom the gospel message has become ordinary.

I love how this piece of work is growing. It is ordinary, traditional church planting as we always knew it. What makes it fresh is the corporate trust in the Word of God and a firm belief in the God who moves mountains and who makes a way where there is no way. The culture that we cross is from World to Kingdom and we are workers in the same vineyard - our Master and Lord is King Jesus.

This church grew up in the care of the people of Sprowston Methodist, a church with good spiritual DNA and deep love for the Word of God. In the early days of the ministry among Chinese language

speaking people in Norwich and the surrounding areas, the Methodist people at Sprowston helped with English language, taught Sunday School and offered a place of welcome as the new church was established. I believe this was possible due to the shared love of Scripture and belief in the power of the Cross for the transformation of lives. As a community of faith, Sprowston Methodist had become discouraged and had lost its heart over the past decade. The memory of their heyday of charismatic renewal and big youth and children's work had become a whip with which they were beating themselves.

I have loved being their minister for the past 3 years. We have brought the Word into central focus, having a comprehensive programme for studies in groups and consolidated in Sunday pulpit ministry. Confidence is building. It seems that when we base our programme on the Word and come to the Cross with the deliberate intention of seeking transformation in Christ, Life is breathed once more into the bones of the church. A clarion call of 'Feed the people,' has announced the ministry I offer. Feed people good food - a hearty breakfast - and a good diet of scripture and watch the desire for mission and development ignite. Our prayer meeting is regularly attracting more than 20 people, and we are seeking God's heart through worship, the Word and listening for God to speak in prophetic ways. We are looking to the future with hope.

More than 30 years ago, the message hidden in the painted mural on the front wall of my home church was trying to be the focus of the people. Now, the mural has been re-plastered and painted over. The people who sat in front of it



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have learned that the message of Christ Crucified is one which is not to be twisted into incomprehensible words or made to fit the age, but to be taken out. The Word of Salvation is being taken out by the people of Bowthorpe Road in their evangelistic living. It is being taken out once more by the people of the Methodist Church in Sprowston. They will do it more and more as they have more to give.

I have learned that you can't expect people to give out what they do not have. The Word of God must be a rich vein running through our churches if indeed we are to proclaim an evangelistic message of Salvation to the ends of the earth.

Catherine Hutton is currently Superintendent Minister of Norwich Circuit. She lives with her husband Gavin and sons Joel and Aidan. Other than ministry, she enjoys Marvel films, camping, Zumba and a sparkly manicure.

