

A TRUE CALLING FROM GOD

Edith Fox's
title

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It is good to read so many stories of growth and blessing in the church profiles in the pages of *Grace Magazine* month by month, and I rejoice in all these signs of the Lord's favour and working. However, it has been in my heart for some time that encouragement and comfort need to be given also to those who, from a human standpoint, are far from successes, indeed, whose ministries and work for the Lord appear to be almost unmitigated failure. I write these lines anonymously, not out of shame or a desire to hide, but to shield others involved in the story from being too easily identified.

In the 1970s I was sent out to preach from the Strict Baptist church with which I was in membership, and hoped earnestly that it would not be too long before the door would open also to a pastorate. A year previously I had been invited to speak at a small village cause which then had only four members left, all of them ladies and only one living still in the village. There was no other evangelical witness in the village, though there were a good number of believers who went to the nearby town to worship at Anglican, Baptist, Pentecostal and Brethren churches.

About two years after my first visit, the same four ladies called me to the pastorate, and my wife and I decided to accept. It was not possible for us to move to the village, as no rented accommodation became available, and it was not possible to purchase a house on the part-time salary from my secular job. Nonetheless, we lived only ten minutes away by car.

During the next two years, every home in the village was visited, and if someone was in, spoken witness to the gospel was given (not just an invitation to come to chapel); if no one was in, a piece of evangelistic literature bearing the name of the chapel was left. The surrounding area, including other hamlets, was also thoroughly visited.

The congregation grew, and so did the membership, reaching twelve, but all the new members, like the original ones, came from outside the village. No-one in the village was converted — though after about two years one elderly lady did make a profession — and all the other believers already living there, though wishing us well, continued to travel to the big town churches.

I continued the pastorate there for

two years, after my previous two years of ministering with increasing frequency at the chapel, and began in time to feel the weight of these words:

'Lo, these three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down; why should it use up the ground?' And he answered him, 'Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'

During the course of my work there, the church had to put one of the original members out of the church for a relationship which the church saw as adulterous, and two others left with her. After those four years of ministry there were thus eight members, all living outside the village. When every home had been visited, and all believers contacted, a final church meeting was held at which it was decided to disband the church, feeling that we had done all that was humanly possible in seeking to establish a Christian witness in the village. It would have to be left to the believers whom God's providence had placed as residents there, to form a witness within their own community, and we would seek to do the same in the places where we lived. Services were therefore discontinued, and the building handed back to the trustees; it is now a private home.

The period between my hearing God's call to the ministry, and to the closure of the chapel, was some five and a half years, and those who have obeyed a similar call will be well aware of the prayer, energy, hope, planning and expectation with which one steps out into obedience to it. My view of my future was now shattered; my sense of call was crushed; I queried even my state of grace. Was my whole Christian calling, both to the ministry and to salvation, a huge deception, and I neither a minister nor a child of God? There was a very very strong feeling that **God had let me down**. I had no full-time secular job to provide for my family and no sense of direction. I am writing this because I reckon there must be other ministers who have tasted a similar bitterness, and I would love to assure them that **they are not alone**.

The responsibility to provide for my family led me to search for full-time secular work, and a year later I moved some 240 miles away, still having no sense of direction in Christian service. I

was totally disorientated, though occasionally there was a sense of reassurance that God still had a purpose for my life and service.

Some four years after the closure of the chapel, when I was on holiday in the Olchon Valley, I began to hear God's voice renewing his call to the ministry. Unknown to me then, the Olchon Valley is where the Welsh Baptists are believed to have taken their origin in about the 1640s. My call had been submerged by the overwhelming events of some years previous, but now God began to repeat it, till in 1983 I was called to the pastorate of another Baptist church in an ex-mining village in Wales — a church where **all** the members lived in the village itself, and of that church I am still pastor. God had chosen well the place where he began to whisper the repeated call.

When failure and disaster come, questions swirl round in the mind for months and years, and some of mine have never been answered, and I suppose never will: was it a mistake to go to such a moribund church with a call that was primarily pastoral rather than evangelistic? Was it a mistake, rather, to leave? If we had stayed, especially after the purging of the church, would new life eventually have sprung up? Why, when, how did we miss the purpose and blessing of God? To quote C. S. Lewis: 'To know what **would** have happened, child?' said Aslan. 'No. Nobody is ever told that.'

All I can add is, that Job never got the answers to his many questions, and there is a strong possibility that we shan't either. *But, 'you have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.'*

For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.