



KEAM ROAD CHURCH OF CHRIST

20 KEAM ROAD
BAYSVILLE
EAST LONDON

THE MACEDONIAN CALL - Acts: 16: 7 – 10

By Thelma Lothian

HOW IT ALL STARTED:

In 1952, the Churches of Christ were fairly strong in the Transvaal (now Gauteng). The missionaries in Johannesburg and Pretoria got together and decided it was now time to branch out and evangelize other parts of South Africa.

Two men volunteered their services for this important task. They were Don Gardener, an American missionary, and Les Blake, an early convert in the Turfontein church.

Their first choice was the busy industrial town of Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha). The two men travelled down to Port Elizabeth to find accommodation for their families. Their efforts were blocked as there was none available at the time.

But the Holy Spirit was at work here, as it was in Acts chapter 16: 7 - 10! Their next choice was East London, a town 300km further east along the coast. Here they found homes for their families and prepared to relocate. They arrived in East London in mid-May.

It was at this time also decided that John Hardin and family, assisted by Eldred Echols, should move to Port Elizabeth to start the work there. They arrived in Port Elizabeth on the 12th of September 1952. The first service was held in the basement of the City Hall on the 14th of September 1952!

(Acknowledgement for parts of this information - Bessie Hardins' book, "Give Me This Mountain.")

EARLY DAYS

Don Gardener's first contact in East London was with Dick Voogt who had heard about the Church of Christ through a radio broadcast from Lorenzo Marques (now Maputo) in Mozambique, a neighbouring country.

Dick was a member of the Salvation Army but was eager to know more about the Church. When he heard the Gospel preached, he and his wife, Winnie, were baptized into Christ in accordance with Acts 2: 38. They remained faithful members of the Lord's Church until they passed on to their reward.

Many names stand out from those early days: Cyril (Squeak) Crossley and his wife, Milly, Wilson and Tippy Crossley, Enid Petzer, Jimmy Petzer, Eddy Petzer, Ray and Muriel Schult, Bert Butler, Vida Moss, Jock Murdoch, Alec and Mavis Kriel, Dot Lieberum, Des and Thelma Russell.

In mid-1954, the Gardeners returned to America and Les Blake to Turfontein. Ray Votaw and his wife, Thena, then took over the work in East London. Ray, Thena and their three girls were a lovely family. Ray was a great teacher and preacher and was invited to speak at many gospel meetings in South Africa. Thena was a friendly and hospitable Christian lady whose door was always open to everyone.

By this time, the Church was meeting in a renovated building at 89 St. George's Rd, Southernwood. It had a good size auditorium, a classroom block and a home for the preacher, which was quite adequate for those days.

MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF THE EARLY CHURCH

In April 1956, I was working at the O.K. Bazaars, Oxford St. I worked at the fabric counter and there I met Tippy Crossley. She was a quiet, friendly lady and we started talking about church and spiritual matters. My problem was that Roy was Baptist and I was Methodist and this was a problem for both of us. One day Tippy suggested that Roy and I go with her to the church where she worshipped. The following Sunday night we went along with her, more out of curiosity than anything else. After the service, Tippy and her husband, Wilson, invited us to their home for tea.

We were so impressed with the friendliness of the people and the hospitality of the Crossley's that we agreed to meet with the preacher, Roy Votaw, the following week for an informal Bible study.

On the 4th of May 1956, I was baptized in a tank outside the church building. There were wooden steps leading up on the one side and then going down into the water. On that same day, an elderly, grey haired lady made her way up those same steps and down into the water. This lady was the mother of Wilson and Cyril Crossley, Thelma Russell (Crossley) and Phyllis Hodgkinson (Crossley).

John Harden, an American missionary and well-known song-leader, was visiting the Votaws at this time. Ray invited Roy and me over for tea and between these two men they convinced Roy of baptism for the remission of sins. Roy was baptized the following Sunday, 11th May 1956. Roy was zealous for the Lord and soon wanted to start preaching. Under Ray's guidance, Roy became a preacher of the Word and remained so until his death in 2014.

My mother, Una Havernick, was also taught by Ray Votaw and baptized in 1957.

Mommy had a friend, Eleanor Baisley, whom she had met in the Frere hospital. Through Mom's influence, Eleanor was brought to the Lord. She had two sons, Basil and Pat. Basil and his wife, Irene, had four children whom they taught well and the entire Baisley / Engelbrecht families are faithful members of the Lord's Church to this day!

SOWING THE SEED

This is how the Gospel spread in those early days. Each person who obeyed the Gospel taught their family and friends, with the result that the church grew rapidly. Each one was eager to tell others of the "*pearl of great price*" that they had found.

It only took one lady (Tippy Crossley) to invite another lady to hear the gospel for many souls to be saved! Never, ever underestimate the power of evangelism through friendship in sowing the seed.

HOSPITALITY – MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE PEOPLE

Ray and Thena had people in their home on Friday nights. We would play games, sing songs and have a good time. Young and old together, there was no separation of age groups.

One family stands out in my mind from those days and that is Squeak and Milly Crossley. They were not a wealthy family, but Milly invited folk to their home many Sunday nights. She would make sandwiches or scones, sometimes vetkoek. Simple, humble things that everyone enjoyed. No-one expected elaborate cakes or fancy food because it was always about being together and fellowship.

LAST WORDS

In 1957, we moved to Grahamstown. Later the Votaws returned to America. Leonard and Marguerite Grey replaced them. Leonard was a powerful preacher and teacher and under his guidance the church grew and was strengthened.

Many have passed on to their reward; many have moved to other towns or countries. Sadly, many have fallen away.

In May this year, 2022, the Church of Christ in East London will celebrate 70 years of worshipping and praising God in spirit and in truth.

To God be the glory!

Thelma Lothian
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