

# A PHYSICIAN FOR ABERAVON

**GWYNN WILLIAMS**

THE unexpected arrival of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones as minister at Aberavon early in 1927 attracted considerable attention, the newspapers giving it prominent coverage. Clearly the event had a romantic element: here was a young man, with the prospect of a brilliant future in medicine before him, setting all that aside in order to become a minister of the gospel in one of the Forward Movement halls of the Calvinistic Methodists in the poor district of Sandfields, Aberavon. Poor the people of Sandfields certainly were: it was the time of the depression and many of them were unemployed.

Dr. Lloyd-Jones' first visit to Aberavon was during the last weekend of November 1926. The church secretary had heard of the young

doctor who was intent on preaching and had felt a strong urge to invite him to preach at Aberavon. Immediately, it seems, the Doctor fell in love with the place and the people, and felt definite guidance that this was the place to begin his ministry. He offered himself to the church, and when the necessary arrangements were completed he was inducted as their minister on February 3rd 1927. In January of that year he had married Dr. Bethan Phillips (grand-daughter of the Rev. Evan Phillips of Newcastle Emlyn), and together they came to Aberavon, forfeiting the high salaries of the medical world to live in the manse at £225 a year.

The cause in Sandfields had been started in 1868 when the members of Carmel Church began holding a

Sunday school in the area. The work grew, and in 1897 a hall was built, with plenty of ground nearby on which to build a chapel later on. By 1908 there was a church membership of 40, but then came a period of blessing and within two years the membership had increased to 90. This was the approximate membership figure when Dr. Lloyd-Jones came to Aberavon in 1927. By that time the chapel had been built, and in consequence the congregation had a large debt to clear.

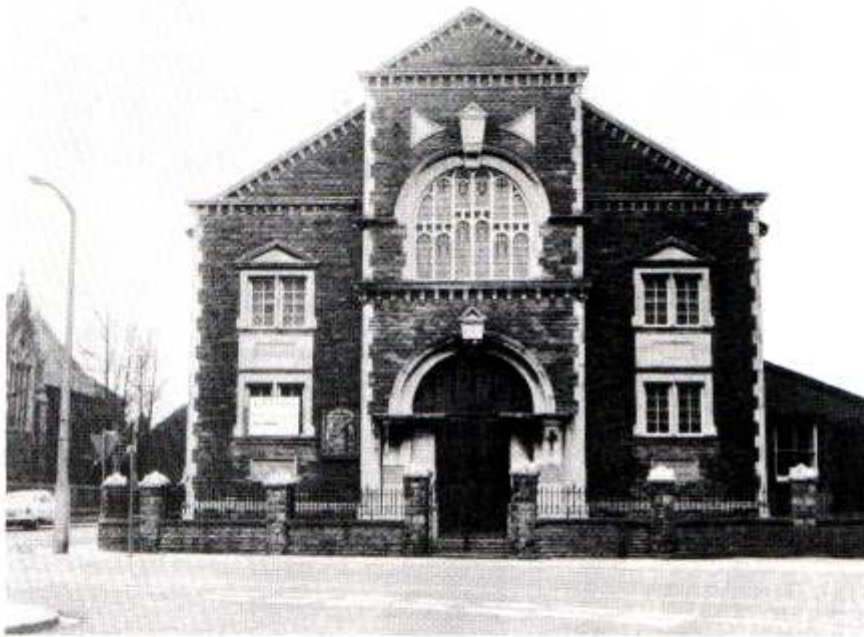
Immediately he came, the congregation grew. At first the motive was curiosity, but soon people came under the influence of the preaching and were converted, and the effect of this was to increase the congregation still further. In one eighteen-month period there was exceptional

*The Doctor aged 32*



*At the induction of Dr. Lloyd-Jones at Sandfields in 1927*





*Bethlehem Evangelical Church, Sandfields, Aberavon*

unction on the ministry, and the attendance was such that the chapel became too small to hold the crowd. So an annexe was added to the chapel building.

Following the arrival of the Doctor, other changes were made in the church. The drama group and the football team were done away with. The 'Band of Hope', which was associated with the Temperance Movement, also came to an end, for the new preacher believed that the only answer to the drink problem was real conversion, thereby creating a new man. They got rid of the stage that was in the hall: the minister wanted it chopped up for firewood to heat the chapel, but a compromise was reached and it was donated whole to the YMCA.

One thing that was not changed, however, was the men's meeting on a Saturday night. This had been instituted originally to keep men from the public houses, but now the meeting became an opportunity for men to discuss together the problems of the Christian life. Anyone was free to raise a question, and then everyone would make his contribution, the Doctor, of course, presiding and summing up at the end. The men used to go on an annual trip together, visiting places which have become an integral part of the history of Christianity in Wales, such as Llangeitho and Llan-doverly.

There were many conversions. Some who were already members of the church made a profession, confessing their faith before the congregation. Others from quite a different background turned to Christ—among them tramps, drunkards and boxers. It was the custom, when people made a profession, to receive them into membership immediately, but if they did not give evidence of perseverance in their new-found faith, they could as swiftly be removed from the church register.

One remarkable conversion was that of the church secretary. Although it was he who had first felt the urge to invite the Doctor to Sandfields, he was not a believer. Indeed, socialist politics were his life, and he had every prospect of a brilliant future. But he too came under the influence of the preaching and believed. The result was that he put aside his politics completely—an event which caused a real stir in the area!—and threw himself increasingly into the work of the church and the gospel.

In May 1938 the Doctor advised the church that he intended to resign as their minister at the end of July. The announcement was sudden and unexpected, and caused great sadness to the members. The reason for his resignation was his increasing physical weariness—the outcome of years of regular ministry, together with widespread travelling to preach in other parts of the country and overseas. Rest and a holiday were imperative before contemplating a future field of service.

Thus a great chapter in the history of the church at Sandfields came to an end.

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The author is the present minister of Bethlehem Evangelical Church, Sandfields, Aberavon.

*Minister and Church Committee, Sandfields, 1937*

