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What is Happening to UK Assemblies?

2005

What is happening to UK Assemblies?

By Roy Hill, Bristol

The history of the assemblies of the Lord's people in the UK makes for the most part, exciting reading. Starting with the godly exercise of a few to meet together to worship and to remember the Lord Jesus in the breaking of bread in the way the early disciples had done, as recorded in the New Testament, the movement developed, in spite of early division, until there were, 100 years later, assemblies meeting in all parts of the country probably nearly 1800 of them, with as many as 100,000 members, in the mid 20th century.

One might ask the question, of course, 'What is an assembly?' and I am indebted to a description given by Norman Crawford in his book *Gathering Unto His Name*. 'An assembly is a company of baptized believers (Acts 2. 1), gathered unto the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 18. 20; 1 Cor. 1 9; 5. 4, etc.), who meet regularly in a particular locality according to the pattern found in the New Testament in Acts 2. 41, 42, and developed fully in such epistles as 1 Corinthians and I Timothy. Such an assembly is a spiritual fellowship (I Cor, 10, 16, 17), which is expressed visibly as they meet for the breaking of bread, prayer, collective testimony, the teaching of the word of God and the preaching of the gospel. They have been gathered together by the Holy Spirit (Mark 14. 13; Rom. 8. 14); their sole authority is the word of God (2 Tim. 1 16, 17), and they have the promise of Christ to be

in their midst (Matt. 18. 20). They are a residence of the Holy Spirit on earth, so they are a temple unto the Lord (1 Cor. 1 15, 16). The priesthood of all believers is exercised in worship, praise and prayer, and the gifts given by the risen Head of the church (Eph. 4, 8 13) have liberty to function under the control of the Holy Spirit (I Con 14. 23 40). There is a clear line of demarcation between the within and the without of an assembly and purity is maintained by a careful, compassionate and godly exercise of discipline (I Cor. 5. 1 13).

Such were the assemblies and their testimony in the 1950s but by the end of 2003 the number had reduced to around 1158 assemblies (705 in England, 195 in Scotland, 173 in N. Ireland and 75 in Wales) with perhaps only about 40,000 members between them a huge drop of 36% in assemblies and 60% in members in 40 years! But, alarmingly, in the last few years assemblies have been 'closing' at the rate of about one per week, and the numbers in some of those remaining are very few indeed. Some assemblies apparently just faded away. Some others, where there are usually larger numbers, no longer wished to be known as 'assemblies' and either joined evangelical groupings where they felt more comfortable, or simply became independent. Among the assemblies that remain faithful to the New Testament pattern of gathering (though some independent churches do, but do not wish to be known as 'assemblies') some have under ten in fellowship and that may include only one or two elderly brethren, and a number of faithful sisters. On the other hand comparatively few new assemblies are opening to offset this trend. This is possibly due to the fact that 1158

assemblies in a comparatively small geographical area is still quite a lot.

Many young people having been brought up in the assemblies have abandoned them and either now go nowhere, or meet with other denominational constitutions and gatherings where, in some, little regard may be given to New Testament assembly truths which were once held dear. Some would claim that they have access to better consecutive Bible teaching at which, of course, the assemblies traditionally had been best.

There are different patterns in different parts of the country, but should this current trend continue unchecked assembly testimony in some parts of the British Isles could disappear altogether by 2025 about 200 years after it begun!

The rightly cherished belief in the autonomy of each local assembly means that there is little shared information, so assemblies can disappear leaving believers in other parts of the country quite unaware of the critical nature of the situation. Ministering brethren seldom address the issue either because they are unaware of it, or perhaps because they fear they may be thought to be unfaithfully pessimistic. My understanding of the extent of the problem has come to light while updating The Assemblies Address Book which I publish. It was a depressing exercise. Is it really possible that assembly truth, extensively and expensively rediscovered, should disappear after just two centuries? Are present New Testament assemblies a two century phenomenon? We all need to challenge ourselves as to how we feel about this or do we not care, provided our

own assembly does not look like closing, just yet? Is part of the problem that in opposition to 'one man ministry' we tolerate an "any man ministry" where we allow the ungifted to preach and minister the word?

Is it due to a lack of pastoral care by elders due to the pressure of the days in which we live? The routes into the assembly used to be either by conversion and baptism of those who attended the meetings and by believers coming, from the denominations to join us because they saw in the assembly a simple adherence to New Testament truth and a love for the Lord. Now both these routes are severely clogged and in fact the opposite is true as people now leave the assemblies to go elsewhere!

Symptoms of the malaise can be seen in that our evangelical witness is often weak and ineffective. Some assemblies have not seen a sinner saved or a believer baptized for many years. It should of course be noted that there are thankfully many exceptions to the rule. We should be very pleased about that even if in some of these gatherings assembly distinctives are increasingly difficult to identify. So, should we resign ourselves to belonging to a declining testimony, "a day of small things", or do we feel that we have the truth that sinners and believers cry out for? If the latter, what should we do about it? Can we just say 'the Lord knows' and believe that aU we have to do is to hold the fort until He comes? We recall that we are urged by the Lord Himself to 'strengthen the things that remain, that are ready to die".

Firstly, we need to accept that there is indeed a problem, It is easy to maintain that there is not, in belief

that our local assembly will still be around as long as we live. Secondly, the problem needs to be clarified, Is it local, regional, national or international? What are the conditions that encourage the problem? Have we been too harsh in applying Scripture in a world that has grown increasingly careless in its attitude to God and His word? Or, is it because we have drifted in the direction of worldliness thus making it easier for people to leave and go elsewhere while, at the same time, making it more difficult for others to join us because they can't see where assemblies are very much different to the denominations because assembly distinctives are becoming fogged?

This matter surely warrants specific prayer at local level. Elders will ultimately be held responsible for how they have lost that which was handed down to them. Perhaps elders should consider meeting together with elders from other assemblies nearby to pray and to encourage one another. We need to practice assembly principles and to proclaim with scriptural conviction the distinctives of a New Testament church. We need to renew our efforts in the gospel perhaps a different time, different place, a different approach, more personal work on a one to one basis? Yet we must continue to proclaim the same message by word and example. It seems strange that in some areas maybe five different gospel meetings are held concurrently with less than twenty people attending each calling for five preachers, who may have left their own small assemblies. Could not one meeting be held with one preacher and over 100 attending? This would be a time of encouragement and unsaved are perhaps more likely to attend a large gathering rather than a small one. Is it beyond us to be

able to work together for the common good? Are we too intent on preserving our own meeting and reluctant to cede control to someone else, or even to share it?

When people are saved we need to teach them not only the fundamentals of the faith and assembly principles but also emphasize a love for the Lord and the vital importance of personal devotion to Him. This personal relationship with Christ is vital. Consecutive Bible teaching should be encouraged and the saints built up in their most holy faith. We must encourage hope. We are not dead at least not yet! Here and there is evidence of life as seen, for example, in the 'Reports Section' of this magazine. But let us avoid the snare of complacency, and instead earnestly beseech God to work for His own glory and our blessing. Let us share with each other the things He is doing abroad, at home, in our assembly and in our personal lives. Let us not stand accused that in our day and generation we lost, through carelessness, that which was passed on to us through our refusal to recognize and address a problem that is now staring us in the face.

There is yet time, but perhaps not much for the recovery and progress of assembly work in our country. We know from Scripture that times of revival are possible and that under the influence of the Almighty even 'very dry bones' can live. Clearly, the God who has done it before can do it again! But it starts with individuals!

In some places the need has already been identified and addressed and times of refreshment are being enjoyed. May that become the case throughout the land to the glory of God and the encouragement of His people. We read too of times of blessing and the increase of soundly

based assemblies abroad we want to share in that time of revival too! Don't we?

I know that in viewing the assemblies the Lord does not look at numbers in fellowship but at the spiritual condition of the assemblies, as, e.g., in the messages to the seven churches in Revelation 2 3. Nevertheless, I feel that we should be aware of these trends and be before the Lord to ascertain His mind about the matter as to whether this is important to Him or not.