

LOVE IN ACTION

The story of
Wirral Christian Centre

By Paul Epton

Contents

Forward

1. Jonah and the whale
2. Back to Nineveh
3. The wonderful exploding church
4. A crazy scheme is born
5. The cradle to the grave
6. Hitting the roof
7. The right to speak, the chance to dream

Foreword

To sit in Paul Epton's office is an education and a challenge.

It looks out onto the car park of Wirral Christian Centre. All day long cars, mini-buses, indeed vehicles of all types, are coming backwards and forwards. What seems like an almost endless stream of people from the very young to those well advanced in years file in and out. It is no wonder. The service offered by the Centre is by any standards absolutely remarkable. In addition to housing a growing church, where some three hundred and fifty people attend on Sundays, there are all manner of activities calculated to outreach to the community. This book will tell you the story of the background.

It is a truly remarkable story. It has been my privilege to be a visiting preacher from the beginning of the Witness. Over some thirteen years, I have regularly spent time with Paul and his team and with the Church. The start was humble and challenging, but the trends were obviously there.

The pastor himself and his wife lived on one of the most challenging estates in the town. In time, a branch work was commenced in that very area. This did not simply consist of the traditional idea of an Evangelical Church, but sought to help to meet the very many needs of young and old in the area. This set the standard in some ways for the amazing enterprise of the purchase of the former Children's Hospital in Woodchurch Road. What has gone on since then, honoured by Royalty at its official opening, is a developing and ongoing account of a positive work of God.

To see youngsters in the Spina Bifida group and the nurseries, to witness old people happily sharing mid-day meals, to know that younger and older people find home and accommodation within the Centre, shows how this outstanding Christian ministry serves the town in unique and heartwarming ways.

You will be blessed and challenged as you read this book. I have to tell you gladly that this is not the end of the story. Almost unbelievably, apart from what is going on in Woodchurch Road, there is already the growing development in yet another former hospital building at Leasowe, some few miles away.

Here is a story of vision and the partial fulfilment of it. The word 'partial' is used advisedly. With a man like Paul Epton who has the stirring moving within his heart of the Holy Spirit, he will not be satisfied even with the colossal strides already made. The need is enormous and he will, under God, lead his team forward to greater and wider fulfilments of what God has laid upon his heart to do. The days are long gone when Christians felt it right only to gather from time to time in their introverted acts of worship, often to preach the Gospel to those who already have embraced it. 'Love in Action' truly demands that we understand that the Gospel is for body, soul, spirit, intellect, emotion, every part of us. Christ Jesus our Lord is in the business of making people whole!

This ministry is certainly being fulfilled at the Wirral Christian Centre and you will want to feel part of it as you read this amazing account.

Tom W. Walker

Chapter 1

Jonah in the whale

The angel was sitting quietly in the second row left, dressed in a double-breasted fawn gaberdine raincoat.

Of course I didn't know he was an angel. For one, he was well disguised - a gentleman in his early fifties, slightly greying, moderately tall and moderately slim, unexceptional in almost every respect. Following Cameron on to the platform of the tiny Elim church in Burton-on-Trent I hardly noticed him.

But then I wasn't in an observant mood. I had all the joy of life that a condemned man has on the morning of his execution. In my case the execution applied to my work; but the fact that it was my ministry I was about to lose, and not my head, brought me little comfort - as a pastor, my ministry and my life were virtually the same thing. If this was, as I suspected, the end of the road for my calling, I'd be hard put to throw myself into anything else. How could I even lead today's Sunday school anniversary at Cameron's church, let alone do anything else, when God had fired me?

Perhaps God hadn't fired me. Elim certainly hadn't. What if I was firing myself? I gazed over the angel's head at the forty or so men and women who had gathered to hear me speak, and reflected that seven days ago I'd been standing in my own pulpit in Birkenhead, telling my congregation - about the same number, in a larger but slightly more dilapidated building - what I'd wanted to tell them for months.

'I've had enough. I can take no more. I have done what I can do here at Birkenhead Elim, and now I am leaving. In my reading this morning God said to me that in seven days he will tell me where to go and what to do. As you know, I am taking my holiday this coming week. I'll be away next Sunday. The Sunday after, a fortnight from now, I will inform you what I plan to do. My resignation will take effect as from that moment.'

A shock had run through the assembly. For a few seconds there was total silence. And then one of the members rose to his feet, and looking to right and left, declared, 'If you leave, I leave!'

I gave him a level look, and he sat down again. The fact was, if Terry Dyson had left I wouldn't have had to. The man was an inveterate womanizer. He wasn't the most troublesome member of the church by any means, but he pestered the women constantly, and his departure would have resulted in a considerable easing of the stress on me as pastor. The rest of the congregation had looked uncomfortable, but no one else demurred, so I led and closed the service with my by now customary perfunction and went home to await the word of the Lord.

It never came.

The week that followed was sheer torment. Day after day, hour after hour, I was expecting a miraculous intervention. A telephone call from Elim headquarters telling me I'd been moved to another area. A letter offering me a new position. Somebody turning up on the doorstep and giving me a word from God. But nothing. On top of which I had to prepare for the Sunday school anniversary I'd promised to do for Cameron the following Sunday. I loved children and children's work, and I had held many successful children's missions. Usually I looked forward to them. But not this one - in fact, the more I prayed, the less prepared I felt, and the less I wanted to do it. My Bible might have been held shut with a padlock for all the inspiration it gave me. I felt like a man who had stepped outside the will

of God, a man without a future, a Jonah. I prayed, rd, prayed, read. Nothing.

At seven o'clock on Sunday June 20 1977, my wife Evelyn kissed me at the door, and I left for Burton-on-Trent. She knew how I felt, though we hadn't spoken much about it. I had a Bible stuffed with forced notes and a heart as empty as a beer can on a garbage tip. At a layby outside Burton I stopped the car and drank a cup of

coffee Evelyn's mother had put in a flask for me, tears rolling down my cheeks. 'Lord, I don't understand,' I said 'I just don't understand.'

Cameron's church, a corrugated iron building with a brick-clad front, sat up against a railway embankment at the end of a gravel cul-de-sac reached by taking a U-turn off the main road. I was early, but the door was open and I went in. The entrance hail, not more than twelve feet in length, led through a second set of double doors into the church, a simple square room with perhaps nine rows of wooden chairs broken by a centre aisle. On the right of the pulpit a door opened on to a minor hall, a tiny kitchen, and the vestry. There was a man in the kitchen preparing communion. I wished him a good morning, but the man, who had his back turned and was systematically wiping the tiny glasses and putting them into a wooden tray, took no notice. I went into the vestry and sat down on one of the three chairs to wait for Cameron.

I'd been at College with Cameron for two years. He came from Greenock, spoke in a broad Scots brogue, and was an astute player of Monopoly. I hoped that Cameron would turn up soon enough for me to talk to him before the service. We were the same age, and it would have been nice to unburden myself to him. I waited, staring at the wall, feeling wretched.

Finally, at two minutes to eleven the door burst open and in he came. He caught my hand, and shook it briefly before unpacking his briefcase.

'Sorry I'm late. Got held up at the last moment, you know what it's like.'

'Yes..,'

'Now, what do you want to do? Do you want to preach before communion, after communion... ?' He cast me a glance, then answered for me. 'I think it should be before.'

He made a swift mark on a sheet of notepaper, stuffed it into his Bible, and tucked the Bible under his arm. 'Okay, let's get out there. Shall we just have a word of prayer?'

The service proceeded predictably from the first hymn to choruses and the ministry of the word. Cameron commended me warmly for agreeing to speak at the morning service as well as conducting the anniversary meetings in the afternoon and evening, and showed me into the pulpit. What followed was little more than an academic exercise in sermon delivery. My lips moved, the words came out, but my heart felt like it was trapped in ice and my mind was just about everywhere but Burton-on-Trent. After twenty minutes I sat down again, and Cameron announced a time of free worship. One or two members of the congregation prayed out loud; the others, bent down in their seats, murmured praises and amens. After about five minutes the church went quiet. It was now, I realized, almost exactly the time that on the previous week I had told my congregation I'd received a word from God. Suddenly I heard a chair scrape, and glancing up almost involuntarily I caught sight of the man in the gaberdine raincoat standing erect in the middle of the congregation.

He began to speak.

The summons to Birkenhead had arrived on a cold day in February four years earlier, in the form of a telegram. I was at my desk in the small flat Evelyn and I occupied in Cannock when I heard footsteps in the concrete stairwell. Visitors at this time of day were a rarity, so I went to the door. Outside I was surprised to find a delivery boy, who thrust a slip of paper into my hand, nodded, and then returned at a canter down the steps.

The telegram read simply: Epton phone Chapman. Since Ron Chapman was the Field Superintendent of the Elim Churches my first reaction was to wonder what I'd done wrong. Evelyn and I were very happy. We'd been married less than six months. She was teaching at a school in Wolverhampton; I was a probationary minister at a growing pentecostal assembly. We were young, settled, and looking forward to starting a family and seeing God's blessing on our church. Life was really going well.

I threw on a coat and went out to the nearest payphone. 'Put me through to Mr Chapman, please.'

'Who shall I say is calling?'

'Paul Epton.'

There was a pause, then a voice said, 'Chapman speaking.' I supplied my name.

'Epton.'

'You sent me a telegram.'

'Ah yes. Now wait a moment. '

From the noise I heard I judged he was thumbing through a file, holding the telephone with his shoulder. Finally he said, 'Yes. You're going to Birkenhead.'

'Birkenhead?'

'Give Alex Tee a call, will you?'

'But..'

There was a blip as he put the phone down.

For a moment I stared at the receiver, dumbfounded. Then I put it back and marched home. The first thing I did when I got in was to throw my keys at the wall. As the ring had on it the church keys as well as those to the flat they made a substantial dent in the plaster before falling behind the settee. I sat down and brooded until Evelyn arrived.

'But why?' she wanted to know.

'You tell me, then we'll both be the wiser.'

'Can't you object?'

'No. Till next year I'm still probationary. I have to go where I'm sent.'

'But, Paul, we've only just moved in here. I'm committed at the school until July?'

'Yes, I know.' I sighed and took her hand. 'Well, all we can do is drive up and take a look around. You never know. Maybe we'll like it.'

On our next free Saturday we drove up the M6 to inspect our new territory. Whatever optimistic notions we had cherished about Birkenhead were quickly put aside as we emerged from the Mersey Tunnel into a wasteland of abandoned docks. I slowed down, and we crawled past street after street of tightly packed terraced housing, torn hoardings, half-demolished factory sites surrounded by rusting fences of corrugated iron. At one point, I don't remember where, we turned into a housing estate to see children running around literally in rags. Finally, lost amid the dereliction, we pulled up by the side of the road, switched off the engine, and listened to the rain beating on the roof. Both of us were in tears. It was like touring Hades.

On our second visit, to find a house, Birkenhead looked a lot brighter. But just when we thought we'd found the home we wanted, word came through from Headquarters that there were no funds available to buy it, and that instead we'd been found a flat on the Woodchurch estate. This lay in an unenviable situation between three tower blocks, and we arrived to find it already occupied-by lice and cockroaches. The lavatory was so

filthy that Evelyn's mother felt sick when she saw it, and if I hadn't gone over the floor three times with a scraper blade we couldn't even have begun to use the disinfectant.

After a pioneer mission with the evangelist Alex Tee I was left with a congregation of seven in the morning and fourteen at night, meeting in an old chapel sold to Elim the year before by a Welsh Presbyterian congregation who were too elderly to carry on by themselves. It was a grim building that dated from the late 1800s. Before it came into the hands of the Presbyterians in 1919 it had been a penny-a-day school, where one old penny had bought a child a day's education and a glass of milk. The fortress-like pulpit and the pews were all in pitch pine; the toilet was out in the back yard; and the central heating, which consisted of cast iron pipes running along the sides of the building, needed to have its coke fired boiler stoked late Saturday night and again early Sunday morning. I would dearly have loved to pass the responsibility on to someone else, but I knew that I had no alternative in pioneering a church but to lead from the front, and if that meant travelling four miles to stoke a boiler then it had to be done.

My vision for the church in the early days was twofold. First, like any young minister, I wanted a full church, and plied my strength to draw people in from the community outside. It was always uphill work, especially before July, when Evelyn was teaching in Wolverhampton and had to go back to Cannock on Sunday afternoons. We lived under constant stress. But stress was a good tutor, for in an area of high unemployment people breathed stress like air, and to be heard as a minister you had to breathe it with them. More than that, you had to try and bring them relief.

I had never believed in ministering only to people's souls. I'd picked up from my parents a strong conviction that love came down to practicalities. Christ didn't only preach salvation -he healed the sick, fed the hungry, stilled the storm. His love was love in action. I felt that if there wasn't found in the work of the church some parallel to the touching of the lepers and the paying of taxes with a coin from the fish's mouth, the church was neglecting its responsibility to those in need.

When I was a teenager in Lincoln this conviction had worked itself out in a Friday night coffee bar and a gospel group called the Advocates. In Birkenhead the needs were different. I started a Sunday school; then, noticing that there were a lot of lonely pensioners in the area, a luncheon club.

I was pretty much a one-man-band in both-teacher, chauffeur, cook and dishwasher rolled into one. I didn't mind. My concern was to show the love of Christ; and when Mrs Pritchett arrived at the luncheon club, my first truly smelly customer, I congratulated myself that the enterprise was at last serving its proper purpose. (As it turned out, Mrs Pritchett proved the effectiveness of love as a tool of evangelism, for she joined the church, and later even gave a hundred pounds to refurbish it. She also left me a tea set in her will.)

At first these schemes raised little interest in the congregation. Most of my members were cast in the traditional evangelical - pentecostal mould, perfectly at one with the idea of practical ministry but happy to leave its implementation to others. That didn't bother me, either. I simply got on with the job; in time the church came around to the idea of social involvement, and then I was able to delegate.

But if apathy was never a serious problem, something else was. For instance, no sooner had I announced my intention of starting a Sunday school than three of my fourteen members objected.

'You should have asked our permission,' they said.

I was amazed.

'Ask your permission? Why?'

'As members of the church.'

'But I'm the pastor.'

'A church isn't run by one man, Mr Epton. We should all have a say.'

'I'm not asking you to be Sunday school teachers. I'm doing the whole thing off my own bat.'

'We know that.'

'So what's wrong with me, the pastor, deciding to start a Sunday school?'

'It's the principle of who makes the decisions.'

Realizing this argument wasn't going to be quickly resolved I invited them to talk it over with me at the flat one evening in the following week. To cover myself I also invited Alex Tee, who played the part of a kind of elder statesman to the church. He told them bluntly that under Elim's directive no church had officers for the first two years of its life and that during this period the pastor's word was final. By the end of the evening my congregation had dropped from fourteen to eleven.

Significantly, those three people had come in from another congregation. Contrary to the opinion of some neighbouring ministers I did not encourage Christians from existing churches to join us, though I was glad to have a few maturer members in the congregation. When my prayers for God to 'send us some men' were answered by the arrival of a young Anglican businessman able to take over the neglected church finances, I had no hesitation in installing him as treasurer. So far so good-as far as I knew. But I started to run into serious trouble when the two years were up and we elected a diaconate.

At one of the first deacon's meetings, Malcolm Trent, who with his wife Ann made up by far the most vocal and progressive half of the table, proposed a fifth member.

'Marion Turnbull. I think she would make a strong contribution as a deaconess. And at the moment there's no doubt that she is seriously under-used.'

I knew Marion Turnbull. She was a young woman with many good qualities. But I had reservations about her fitness for this particular post. In respect of Malcolm's proposal it also concerned me that she and Ann Trent were close friends.

'I don't feel that Marion would be an appropriate choice.'

'She's willing to serve on the diaconate.'

'That's not what I said.'

'Pastor, she ought to be a deaconess. Nobody doubts that. I give her my full recommendation.'

'Then you can do it next year when the deacons come up for re-election. I'll review it then.'

'So you're refusing to nominate her?'

'I said I don't feel Marion, at this time, is an appropriate choice. Besides which it is not necessary to elect an extra member to the diaconate mid-term. Now do you mind if we get back to the business in hand?'

This episode sowed the seeds of division within the church. About a dozen people fell in behind the Trents, holding that Marion Turnbull was an ideal candidate for deaconess, and that her debarment from this post was due to no less than bloody-minded obstinacy on the part of the pastor. The matter was raised ad nauseam at deacons' meetings. Gradually the object of grievance spread to cover not just the deaconess issue but almost every initiative I took. When I preached, I was accused of preaching at my congregation; when I gave a word of prophecy, I was accused of prophesying 'in the flesh', to give vent to my personal opinions. In time I became literally afraid of taking the pulpit, because I knew that the group of malcontents in my congregation would construe my message as personal criticism. Sometimes I had trouble even preparing a sermon. I was fast developing a complex.

At the same time I had a nagging suspicion that serious moral problems had developed in the church. Terry Dyson was paying too much attention to the women; and while Charles Eliot, the delicately handsome young man I had made church treasurer, was scrupulous in both attendance and conduct, I could draw from him only the vaguest explanations about his life outside the church. The feeling grew on me that he was hiding something. Finally, after much prayer, and knowing full well that this could let me in for more criticism from the dissenters, I asked him to leave. Immediately I felt a deep sense of release and peace. Not long after, I got a visit from the local curate.

'Do you have a man called Charles Eliot at your church?' he asked.

'I did have-he left a few weeks ago.'

I wondered whether to tell the curate he'd been the church treasurer, and decided against it.

'I see. That's just as well.'

'Why?'

'Charles Eliot is an active homosexual. In the gay community he goes by the name of Queen Victoria.'

This was much as I had suspected. But it struck me now what a close shave we'd had -a press report that Birkenhead Elim had Queen Victoria looking after its finances would have finished us.

The end of that year, 1976, brought a brief respite. Natalie, our first child, was born on December 13, so we had a bright and cheerful Christmas. Also the numbers had begun to pick up in the Sunday services. But in the following spring two things happened.

The first began with the car. We'd already had the car vandalized twice. This time there were no visible signs of damage, but I couldn't get more than twenty miles an hour out of it even with my foot flat on the floor. It would run like this for a few minutes, then it would cut out and I'd need to restart it. On the salary I was getting I was loathe to take it to the garage, but I had no choice. I left it two days, then went back. -

'We've had it in pieces,' the mechanic said. 'Should be running perfectly.'

'But it cuts out every five minutes.'

'I know.'

'Fuel injection okay?'

'Exhaust?'

He admitted he hadn't checked the exhaust. When he stripped it down he discovered several pages of newspaper stuffed tightly into the silencer.

'You take the Express?'

'No, I don't.'

'Then I'd say somebody doesn't like you.'

That I didn't dispute. But I couldn't believe my opponents in the church were resorting to sabotage. I went home to tell Evelyn. Evelyn, however, was having her own troubles. As soon as I arrived she took me to the kitchen window that looked out on the small grass quadrangle behind the flat. Now that the weather was warming up she'd started leaving the baby out there to sleep in the pram.

'You remember last week I told you Natalie had been waking up when I put her outside?'

'Yes.'

'She's not just waking up-there's somebody waking her.' 'You saw it?'

'I saw a woman disappearing just as Natalie started to scream. Paul, she was deliberately shaking the pram to wake her up!'

'You don't know who it was?'

Evelyn shrugged and folded her hands. 'You tell me. I think it's several of them. You know why it's happening.'

I'd known when we moved to Woodchurch that our part of the estate was Catholic. Elsewhere in the city Catholics were among my best friends. Here sectarianism prevailed. We got on well with the families next door, but to the rest we weren't Paul and Evelyn Epton - we were Protestants. Leaving Natalie outside gave them another opportunity to tell us we weren't welcome.

We could probably have survived that pressure. But in March, 1977, we went with Alex Tee to the other side of the Wirral to hold a pioneer mission in West Kirby, resulting in the establishment of our first daughter church.

About twenty of our members, most of whom had been coming to us from that area, left to form the new congregation. In addition, four or five of the student members left at the end of their college term in June. Consequently the numbers at Birkenhead fell from seventy to forty-five in a matter of weeks. This in itself dented our morale; but since the losses left the group of dissenters intact it had the further effect of magnifying ill humour in the church. Marion Turnbull's cause was taken up again with a vengeance. I was forced back on to the treadmill of contentious deacons' meetings and unpopular sermons. In the end I simply lost my nerve.

About three weeks before I was due to visit Burton-on-Trent I gave in. I couldn't face Birkenhead any more. All I wanted was a reason for leaving, some acknowledgement from God that I was under excessive stress and had to be moved on. For a fortnight I drifted, not even trying to impose my will on the congregation, hoping against hope that God would give me a word. Anything. Just a word.

If I hadn't had such a strong aversion to using the Bible as a horoscope I would certainly have flipped it open and alighted on a verse at random, in the hope of receiving a 'message'. I had never done that, and had consistently discouraged others from doing it. Nonetheless I was relieved to find on the Sunday before Cameron's Sunday school anniversary that my daily reading came to Ezekiel 3:16: At the end of seven days the word of the Lord came to me

I clutched at this as a drowning man to a straw. Here at last was God's promise to direct me; within seven days I would receive clear instructions about my next move, and I would be free to turn my back on Birkenhead.

I told the congregation straight away.

Chapter 2

Back to Nineveh

How can I describe that moment when the man in the gaberdine raincoat began to speak? He had a clear, mellow English voice; an actor's voice. The pronunciation was smooth, the pace even, the feel for the meaning of the words easy and natural. He never once adopted the declamatory tone of a preacher, yet he gave his message the power that many men can achieve only through oratory.

All this, however, is a cumulative impression. What struck me like a bolt were his opening words: 'At the end of seven days, the word of the Lord came to me.

At that all the hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and I felt a coldness, like tiny icicles, tumbling down my back.

'Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to a wicked man, "You will surely die", and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood..'

There was just a hint of emphasis in that last phrase. I glanced at the man. He wasn't looking at me; he had his eyes closed and his hands at his sides. He went on without a pause, quoting, I now realized, the passage that follows Ezekiel 3:16-quoting it word for word, from memory. I looked down, doing a swift and abortive calculation of the chances that a man would know off by heart this obscure part of the Old Testament-beginning in the middle of a chapter-and read it off here, now, today.

'Again, when a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil, and I put a stumbling-block before him, he will die. Since you did not warn him, he will die for his sin. The righteous things he did will not be remembered, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the righteous man not to sin, and he does not sin, he will surely live because he took warning, and you will have saved yourself.

'The hand of the Lord was upon me there, and he said to me, "Get up and go out to the plain, and there I will speak to you." So I got up and went out to the plain. And the glory of the Lord was standing there, like the glory I had seen by the Kebar river, and I fell face down.

'Then the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet. He spoke to me and said, "Go, shut yourself inside your house. And you, son of man, they will tie with ropes; you will be bound so that you cannot go out among the people. I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be silent and unable to rebuke them, though they are a rebellious house. But when I speak to you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say to them, "This is what the sovereign Lord says." Whoever will listen let him listen, and whoever will refuse to listen, let him refuse; for they are a rebellious house.'

He sat down.

By now the tears were rolling down my cheeks. I shook so violently that I felt sure the noise must be causing a disturbance. But no one else appeared to notice; the service proceeded as normal, leaving me behind like a stray traveller, transfixed by the presence of God.

He had kept his promise. After a week of agonized, nearly despairing prayer God had shown me his love and mercy, and for that I felt immense, almost overwhelming gratitude. I had not, after all, fallen from God's purpose, the lines were still open, the instructions were still being relayed. But that said, what instructions was I receiving? Certainly not those I'd expected. Ezekiel's 'rebellious house' was not to be found in some distant land to which the prophet had yet to be sent. God was talking about the people Ezekiel had been struggling

with for years already. He was asking him-and by implication asking me -to do the hardest thing of all: to go home. Not even prophecy was enough to convince me of that. 'God,' I prayed, 'if you want me to stay in Birkenhead, I'll stay in Birkenhead. But, Lord, please, make it so clear that I will never doubt you!' From that moment until the end of the service I pondered how best to gain confirmation of God's word. The plan I devised was simple: as soon as the final prayer was over I would go to the man in the gaberdine coat and ask him a question. If his reply contained the word 'stay', I would take that as final and irrefutable evidence that God indeed wanted me to remain in Birkenhead. That one word, and only that word, would change my mind. When, a moment or two after Cameron had pronounced the blessing, the man began to make his way out, I rose as quickly as I decently could and stepped down from the platform. I intercepted him in the aisle. 'Sir, if I said to you "go", what would you say to me?' Even as I spoke I thought to myself what a peculiar question it was-like a riddle, hardly a promising opener for conversation. But if I'd surprised the man, he didn't show it. 'Young man,' he said drily, 'God has said "stay".' And with that he turned on his heel and walked away. Nothing else. He didn't say 'Hello, how are you?' or 'Why do you want to know?' Just the vital word: stay. 'He a friend of yours?' It was Cameron.

I shook my head. 'I was asking him about that reading from Ezekiel.'

'Is that what it was? It seemed so out of place. I almost stopped him.'

'Is he a member here?'

'Him? No. Never seen him before in my life.'

I glanced at the gaberdine coat vanishing through the double doors at the back of the church.

'Don't you think you should find out who he is?'

'Let's ask him.'

He touched my shoulder and guided me swiftly between the two blocks of seating, but the only person in the entrance hall was an elder, collecting the hymn books. We passed straight through to the steps outside-and stopped dead.

To our right lay the grassy embankment of the railway; ahead a wooden fence marking a more or less sheer drop of ten or twenty feet to the main road. The man's only avenue of escape was the dirt lane stretching away to the left, down which we had a clear view for at least half a mile.

It was empty.

The elder pushed his head out of the door.

'Looking for someone, Pastor?'

'There was a man in a fawn coloured raincoat, came out about five seconds before us. Did you see him?'

'He handed in his book.'

'Then what?'

'He went out,' said the elder, as if nothing were more obvious. But then he too looked around.

'Oh,' he said.

'Maybe he's around the side of the church?' I said to Cameron.

'You can check.'

But the area between the church building and the retaining fence contained only a dustbin and a few weeds. About fifteen seconds had passed now. There was no sign of the man. Not even a car. I crossed the lane and peered over at the main road. Two women were waiting by a bus stop beneath the bridge, but apart from them the pavement was deserted. I scanned the street, the bridge, the railway embankment, the front of the church, the land, turning almost full circle. The man in the gaberdine coat was simply nowhere in view.

Cameron came over, shrugging his shoulders.

'Nobody else saw him.'

'Are you sure there's no other way out of here?'

'The embankment. But he couldn't have climbed it in the time it took us to follow him out. And you can see for yourself what's in front of us. If he wanted to reach the bus stop the short way he'd have to fly

For a moment I was silent.

'He was only five seconds ahead of us. Isn't that true? I mean, he ought to have been in plain view the moment we stepped through the door?'

'But he wasn't.'

'Which is impossible, right?'

'Aye. True enough.'

'Which means...'

'Oh, come on!'

'Well, do you know any ordinary people who vanish into thin air? I mean, where is he?'

'You're telling me that man was an angel?' said Cameron, in a voice suddenly struck with awe.

'How do you explain it?'

'An angel. In my church!' he grinned at me, then slapped the fence post with his hand. 'I can't believe it- an angel, in Burton-on-Trent. At the Elim! Wait till the Evangel hears about that!'

He laughed out loud; but then a thought seemed to strike him.

'I wonder what he wanted?' he said.

'So what are you going to do now?'

I wiped my mouth with a napkin, and pondered.

'I don't know. All I know is I've got to stay.'

'Birkenhead sounds like a tough church.'

'It's not the church, just some of the people in it. But how I'm going to sort the place out I have no idea.'

'I suppose they'll be expecting you to go back with a resignation.'

'That's the size of it.'

Cameron took my plate, laid it on top of his own, and put the pile neatly in the centre of the table.

'Are you going to tell them about the angel?'

'Do you think they'd buy it?'

'They've got to buy the fact that God's spoken to you.'

'More likely I'll be accused of misusing the gifts.'

He smiled. 'A prophet is not without honour ... How about some coffee before we go to this afternoon's meeting?'

'Sounds great.'

He took the dishes away into the kitchen and returned a couple of minutes later with a silver pot, from which he decanted two large mugs of coffee. I stirred in the milk, then dandled the spoon idly.

'Do you have a typewriter here?'

'Yes. What's on your mind?'

'I've decided I'm going to put this testimony down on paper.'

'Good idea. It'll have more impact.'

'Also it means the congregation have a chance to verify the story.'

'How so?'

'You heard what the angel said, didn't you?'

'Aye, I did.'

'Would you mind if I gave your name and address, and invited my members to check the details with you?'

Cameron winked. 'Let's adjourn to the study.'

He stood over me as I fed a sheet into his Remington and typed:

From Pastor Epton to the members and friends of the Elim Church, Birkenhead.

June 21st

My dear brothers and sisters in Jesus, You will remember that on Sunday June 13th I made a statement to the church to the effect that I would be leaving you immediately after my holidays.

I reminded them of the Ezekiel passage I had read in support of my decision to leave, summarized the events of the week, then described in detail how God had ministered to me in the service that morning. I concluded firmly:

The confirmation of God's will in my life was such a MIRACLE that I have to give you all a copy. If you wish to confirm this account you may do so by writing to the Rev. C. Crawford, 77 Ash Street, Burton-on-Trent. May God bless us all as we rise up in prayer for a Holy Ghost revival for Jesus' glory.

I rolled the paper out of the machine, read the letter over, and handed it to Cameron.

'That should do the job nicely,' I said.

For the rest of the day I felt a peace of mind I had not known for months. I enjoyed the children's services, and there was a good response to my address at night. But driving home, with my letter on the passenger seat next to me, the new joy and release I felt in God's will was balanced by the fear of yet another showdown with my congregation. The fact that God had graciously affirmed his word did not make that task any easier. Like Ezekiel I was returning to a stubborn people, a rebellious house where warnings were ill received. Frankly, although I was now in no doubt as to what God wanted me to do, I would rather have left the fight for somebody else. I'd been mistreated and maligned long enough. I was fed up with it.

Evelyn received my news solemnly. I don't know what I expected her to say. In the event she said nothing, and when I had explained the story in full we just joined hands, quietly thanked God for directing us, and asked him to help us face our people and our future together. But we went to bed subdued. Even after seeing the angel, returning to Birkenhead felt like plunging into interminable darkness, and this heaviness of spirit was so strong the next morning that I had to take it to God in prayer.

'Father, please speak to my heart. You know how we feel about this place. If it is your will to stay here, we will stay. But give me some light at the end of the tunnel. Show me how long we're going to be here.'

Almost immediately God broke in and showed me a scripture -I Chronicles 29:26-27:

David son of Jesse was king over all Israel. He ruled over Israel for forty years-seven in Hebron, and thirty-three in Jerusalem

I almost heaved a sigh of relief. Here, miraculously, was the answer to my petition: Birkenhead Elim was my Hebron, and God wanted me there for another seven and a half years. But when I told Evelyn over breakfast I soon realized that seven and a half years, as a mother in Woodchurch was a long tunnel. She listened, gazing out of the window at the lawn where the neighbours had tried to wake the baby. Finally she nodded.

'Okay, I accept that. But if God wants us to stay here, he'll have to get us a new house.'

'A new house?'

'Paul, Natalie is six months old. God willing, we're going to have more children in the future. I can't bring them up here.'

'We've been looking for a new house since we came. On an income like ours we can't raise a mortgage.'

'If God can send you an angel, he can fix a mortgage. I'm praying for a three bedroom semi-detached in the catchment area of Town Lane Infant School in Bebington.'

I took a deep breath.' Amen' I said.

Only minutes later we received a phone call. It was the lady at the estate agent.

'Mr Epton, are you still looking for a house in Bebington?'

You could have knocked me down with a feather.

'Ah, yes, as a matter of fact Jam.'

'Well, we had one come on the market this morning, and it's a bargain. I thought you might like to see it.'

We grabbed our coats and literally ran out of the door. The property wasn't the most desirable I'd seen-in fact it was filthy and falling to pieces. It needed rewiring and replumbing; the bathroom was in an atrocious condition; and the glass in the French windows had pulled so far away from the frame that the previous owner had plugged the hole with newspaper. Nonetheless we fell in love with it. When the agent had shown us around, Evelyn stood at the top of the dusty, uncarpeted staircase and said, 'Lord, thank you for my new house!'

We followed the agent back to the office to discuss the possibility of buying.

'It's come on to the market at nine and a half thousand,' she told us.

'What could it fetch?'

'Probably eleven or twelve. Do you want to make a bid?'

I knew that under present circumstances there was no way I could run even to the asking price. If I hadn't been able to raise a mortgage on £7,000, I had little prospect of managing it on nearly £10,000. But I decided to take a risk. The odds on the owner accepting the sort of bid we could make were long enough that, if he did accept, we could take it as a sign that God would provide the money.

'Call the owner and offer him £9,300,' I said.

The agent looked stunned. 'But that's way below the market value.'

'I know. Try it anyway.'

Reluctantly she picked up the phone.

'Yes, hello, Colbrooks here. We have a buyer for your house who is offering £9,300. Will you accept the offer?'

She paused, twisting her pen around in her fingers.

'He's a young minister.'

Another pause.

'You're sure? Yes. Of course. Thank you, I'll tell him.'

She put the phone down, and smiled broadly. 'It seems that young ministers have something going for them. He's accepted.'

'Well. Praise the Lord,' I said, blowing out my cheeks, and suddenly feeling like the boy who, having climbed up to the top platform at the swimming pool, now has to jump off.

The following Sunday I ascended the pulpit nervous, but not as nervous as I'd been two weeks before. I could see Ann, Malcolm, Marion and the other dissenters sitting together. Malcolm had his arms folded. The atmosphere was so much that of a board meeting that I felt like calling them to order.

'I know many of you will be expecting me to give notice of my resignation this morning, as I myself expected to do when I last spoke to you. However, circumstances have changed.'

I glanced at the congregation, trying to judge their reaction. A few eyebrows had been raised. Malcolm had unfolded his arms and was sitting up straight, looking at me intently.

'I said two weeks ago that God had promised to give me directions, in the words of the prophet Ezekiel, "at the end of seven days". All that week my wife and I awaited God's guidance. We waited in vain. By Sunday I was

wondering if I had, after all, heard God correctly. But I want you to know this morning that at the service in Burton-on-Trent God did indeed speak to me, exactly as he had promised, at the end of seven days. He spoke to me through a brother - I decided not to provoke controversy by calling him an angel-in the very scripture which I began to read to you at our last meeting: "The word of the Lord came to me; Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak, and give them warning from me.

He read, as the Spirit prompted him, not just that verse, but the entire chapter-he knew it from memory.

'Friends, the tears rolled down my cheeks. I decided to ask God to confirm his word to me, and after the service I went to this brother and said to him, "If I were to say 'go' to you, what would you say to me?" "Young man," he replied, "God has said 'stay'." God has said to me: stay. Stay in Birkenhead. And the reason is that from this day he has given me a new ministry -the ministry given to Ezekiel in chapter three verse seventeen, to warn you, and to warn this town, to warn this region

'I assure you that I would not be staying here unless God had made me. But equally, I will not go unless I am told to. It is my belief that the new ministry to which God has called my wife and me through this miracle will last for years, not days. God wants to do a new work in this place. To those of you who have resisted this work in the past I say: be warned that God will accomplish his work. I urge you to read the passage that brother read to me. I urge you also to read the chapter following it, the judgements God pronounced on those who rebelled against him. Brethren, I trust you will no longer hear me, but God through me. Let us not stand in the way of God's purposes in this place, but pursue them for all we're worth.

'Finally,' I said, taking another leisurely glance around the congregation, 'I am aware that some of you will feel the need for a more reliable authority than myself on the matters of which I have just spoken. For that reason I have committed them to writing, and I invite you to check every detail with Pastor Cameron Crawford at Burton-on-Trent. You will find copies at the door as you go out.'

As far as I could judge, most of the faces in front of me registered relief. The worship that morning was more relaxed than it had been for months, and after the service several people said to me, 'Thank God you're staying-we believe it's right.' When I looked around for Ann and Malcolm, they had gone home.

There followed a short hiatus in my struggles with the church, during which I was able to concentrate on the new house, and the problem of raising a mortgage. In July I was telephoned by the Field Superintendent at Elim Headquarters.

'Paul, I got your letter.'

'Can you help?'

'I can't make any promises. But will you send me details of your joint finances, so we can make an assessment?'

'What do you want?'

'Everything you've got.'

I sent him a frill breakdown of our income and expenses. In a matter of days he was on the phone again to say he'd arranged the mortgage. Naturally, I was delighted. The mortgage, however, and especially such a large mortgage, left us with an onerous schedule of repayments and almost no money for food, let alone the badly needed repairs. I had no option but to refurbish the house myself. In the following weeks, and with some invaluable assistance from father-in-law and friends, I rewired and replumbed, installed central heating, built a garage, extended the kitchen, and altered the front and the rear. Once the previous owner came to visit and was so appalled at the state of the place that he offered me £25 to meet the costs of repairs. That paid our grocery bills for the week.

As summer gave way to autumn, and I started taking the old flak again at deacons' meetings, a message came through from Headquarters that we were to receive a visit in October from the American evangelist, the Rev. Dick Sandbach, who would be passing through Liverpool on his way south from Scotland. I drove in to Lime Street bus station and joined the crowd of nearly sixty people who had gathered at the bay, wondering how on earth I was going to recognize him. I needn't have worried: Sandbach was unmistakable. He had the sort of body that used to play quarterback in the college team and now can only be removed from a bus sideways. When he hit the ground he pulled his shoulders back, completely obscuring the petite blonde behind him, dropped his very ample chin in a terrifying smile, and strode towards me. Suddenly I was being crushed against his chest.

'Brother Paul,' he boomed, 'I have a word from God for you.'

At this every single person in the bay fell silent and gazed in our direction. Sandbach grasped my biceps and pushed me to arms' length, fixing me with his eye in case I should miss the gem that was to follow. After a suitably dramatic pause, he declared loudly, 'Every healthy body has a good bowel action!'

Mouths fell open around us. The blonde lady, who turned out to be his wife, turned bright red. I had a sudden intense wish to be somewhere-anywhere-other than Lime Street bus station, and stammered, 'Th-thank you, brother

Satisfied, Sandbach released me, clapped me on the arm, and resumed his smile.

His prophecy-for prophecy it was-soon came to fulfilment. It was becoming clear to me that the first objective in the 'new ministry' I had spoken of when I returned from Burton-on-Trent was evangelistic. The church was going to expand, and as a result of that expansion seven new churches were going to be founded in the area. We already had one daughter church in West Kirby; now, in November, we set about founding a second, this time closer by in Wallasey.

We hired the town hall for the crusade. But although we saw many conversions, I could not shake off a suspicion that the church had failed to move into blessing. As I prayed about this on the Friday afternoon God kept bringing one word to my mind: immorality. As in the Corinthian church of the New Testament, moral laxity was obstructing spiritual progress. He further showed me the young woman at the centre of the problem, and gave me a clear message for her.

I took her aside that evening.

'Caroline, God has given me a word for you. He is saying that you must stop sinning against God, and live in right relationship with your husband.'

'How am I sinning against God?'

'I think you know the answer to that.'

She scowled at me. 'I don't see as it's any business of yours, anyway.'

'If it affects the church, it's everybody's business. Besides which, it's your own welfare we're talking about, as much as anyone else's.'

'What I do with my life is up to me.'

'Then I must warn you, in God's name, that if you do not stop sinning, your sin will be irreversible in three months, and public in six.'

This final part of the prophecy made no sense to me. The implication was clearly that her immorality would get her pregnant, and yet I knew on good authority that Caroline, having given birth to one child, was unable to conceive any more.

Anyway she paid no heed. The mission attracted a substantial number of new converts, and these, along with a few members from Birkenhead, became the nucleus of our second daughter church. With the dip in attendance the dissenters again turned their attention to supporting Marion Turnbull's campaign for a place on the diaconate, which I again resisted. Christmas came and went. By the New Year I had almost forgotten about the prophecy God had given to Caroline. Then, in early March 1978, without warning the issue exploded.

I had called a deacons' meeting in the vestry of the church. It was a cold night, the gas fire had been turned on, and the skylight, which leaked during a rainstorm, was dripping condensation. We proceeded fairly quickly through the preliminary agenda -minutes, matters arising, general matters related to church life-and it looked as though we might get an early night.

'Any other business?'

The gas fire let out its familiar bronchitic wheeze. As usual, it was Malcolm Trent who raised his hand.

'Malcolm, if this is about Marion Turnbull...'

'It's not.'

I glanced at him, and leaned my forehead on my fist. 'Okay. Go ahead.'

'I wonder if we should address ourselves to the use of spiritual gifts within the church.'

'We have covered this pretty extensively before.'

'I have something else to add.'

I cast him a withering look.

'You know we've had our disagreements about the spiritual gifts, Pastor. But I think you'll agree that they're to be used for the edification and upbuilding of the church, isn't that correct?'

'Correct.'

'And misuse of the gifts is when they're employed to break up the fellowship, and to cause hurt and unhappiness.'

'So you've said.'

'It seems to me we need to look very carefully at the way we're handling gifts like prophecy and interpretation of tongues. When you give a prophecy to someone, it's more than making a prediction, isn't it? You're declaring something as God's will'

'Malcolm, we're skating around the issue. If you've got something to say, say it straight out.'

'All right, then, I will,' said Malcolm, suddenly severe. 'Caroline Gratton is pregnant. And you prophesied to her in the town hall in Wallasey that if she didn't stop sinning, her sin would be irreversible in three months and public knowledge in six. Now look what you've done to that poor girl. If you hadn't prophesied, it would never have happened.'

There was a stunned silence. Caroline's pregnancy was certainly news to me. But I was more astounded by the line that Malcolm was taking on it.

'Is that true?' said one of the other deacons.

Both Malcolm and Ann nodded firmly.

'Now let me get this straight,' I said slowly. 'You are suggesting in all seriousness that my prophecy to Caroline made her pregnant?'

'Yes we are,' said Ann.

'So the fact that she was sleeping with a man other than her husband is simply irrelevant.'

'Until you prophesied to her she was incapable of conceiving.'

'That can't be proved.'

'It's obvious,' said Ann forcefully. 'She was sterile. It was a medical fact.'

'Okay, let's assume for the sake of argument that she was in fact sterile. Does that make her immorality permissible?'

'What do you mean?' demanded Malcolm.

'I mean was it right for her to be committing adultery?'

'Not in so many words...'

'Yes or no?'

Malcolm gave a hint of a shrug, and looked away. I pressed my advantage home.

'So we agree that we're dealing with sin here. And if that is true, then we accept that God may use chastisement to produce repentance and bring a person back into blessing. Right?'

Most of the deacons nodded.

'Then I submit that with Caroline God first gave her warning in prophecy, and then, when she disregarded the warning, intervened miraculously to let her suffer the natural consequences of her sin. Matter resolved.'

'That's unfair!' cried Ann. 'Your so-called prophecy wasn't a warning. It was a curse.'

I buried my face in my hands for a moment, then looked up, bringing my finger down hard on the leather desk top.

'If you believe that, you're equating prophecy with voodoo.'

'It has the same effect. When you prophesy like that you bring bad luck.'

I shoved my Bible across the desk. 'Okay. You show me where the scriptures teach that.'

'Ananias and Sapphira.'

'Ananias and Sapphira were guilty of the sin of deceit. God judged them.'

'Not necessarily.'

'So you're saying that Peter was in the wrong?'

'I don't know. But Ananias and Sapphira would still have died even if he had been.'

That's stupidity. It's God who speaks in prophecy. If I tell the church the Mersey Tunnel's going to be flooded next week it won't happen just because I add a "Thus saith the Lord". My job as pastor is to hear God right. To

the extent that I do that, his word is proclaimed and prophecies are fulfilled. If Caroline Gratton is pregnant, it is through the will and purpose of God. I didn't dream it up as a kind of punishment. God told me, and I said it. Finite.'

Malcolm was glaring at me. 'I say you brought bad luck on her, and you're guilty of misusing the gifts.'

'Malcolm,' I said, meeting his gaze. 'You have charged me with misusing the gifts of the Holy Spirit. But I am now going to speak to you, because I believe God has given me a word.' I trained my finger on him, and went on in a soft, level tone, 'The word is this. You will leave this church. You will become a spiritual nomad, wandering from church to church, finding no place to rest.'

He looked away.

I closed my folder and slowly replaced my pen in my breast pocket.

'Does anyone agree with Malcolm and Ann?'

There was a general shaking of heads.

'Any further comments?'

I hoped that someone might have the backbone to tell Malcolm he was talking a lot of nonsense, and demand his resignation. Nobody did, so I stood up.

'In that case, let me say that I shall continue to use the gift of prophecy as taught in scripture. Whatever God puts in my mouth I will speak, regardless of what it is or to whom it is given. As for Caroline Gratton, I pray that this unfortunate event will serve to bring her back into fellowship with God. Meeting closed.'

A few days later Elim Headquarters were on the phone. Tom Walker, the new Field Superintendent, sounded perplexed.

'Paul, we've had a letter, from a Mr Joseph Randall. I believe he is a member of your church?'

'Yes, he is.'

'Any problems?'

'Problems?'

'Well, I may as well come to the point. It's a pretty defamatory letter, and the gist of it is he wants you thrown out of the church. I take it there's been an incident.'

'The "incident" is adultery. Joe Randall has been sleeping with a married woman in the congregation, as a consequence of which she is now with child. In some quarters the pregnancy is being blamed on me, for prophesying to the woman concerned that God would not tolerate covert sexual relationships in the church. We had a blow up about it at the deacons' meeting last week.'

'I see. So what are you doing?'

'Sitting on it. Hard.'

'Need any help?'

'It's nothing I haven't faced before.'

'Okay. In that case I'll pop a copy in the post-it's only fair that you see it.'

Seven days later I had two letters in my hand. The first, the one Tom had called me about, was so peevish in sentiment and so incoherent in style that I laughed when I read it. But the second I didn't laugh at. This had been written to Headquarters by Ann Trent -presumably in the wake of the deacons' meeting-and was directed not against my person but against my ministry. In cold, meticulous prose, and calling to witness certain supposed instances of the exploitation of the spiritual gifts and the abuse of my position as pastor, she built a damning case against me and demanded my dismissal. Tom clearly had no intention of acceding to her request, otherwise he wouldn't have sent the letter on to me. But the accusations stung, and I began praying more earnestly that God would release the congregation from the dead weight of a group who were now little better than troublemakers.

When Marion detained me the following Sunday morning with yet another turgid challenge over the abuse of gifts, I listened for a few minutes and then cut her off.

'Marion, I am very sorry. I know that, feeling as you do about my use of the prophetic gift, you will not be able to accept what I am going to say. But I feel that the Lord has a word for you. It is this: you will leave this church; furthermore you will leave this area; in three months you will be gone, and you will not come back.'

I got up from the dais where we had been sitting.

'I have nothing to add.'

That Easter I was booked to speak at a rally in Trafalgar Square. In spite of a rather bracing east wind the place was completely packed. A scaffold platform with a rostrum and P.A. had been erected near the National Gallery, and I was making my way to my seat at the rear of the platform when I bumped into Tom Walker.

We chatted, huddled in our overcoats. A few minutes before I was due to speak Tom leaned over and said, 'Paul, I didn't want to share this with you, but we've received another letter.'

He produced a cleanly opened envelope and placed it in my hand.

'You ought to read it. Though frankly it's much the same as the others.'

'Thanks.'

'Let me just say, if you want help, call on us, and we'll help. It won't be the first time things have gone sadly wrong in a church. And believe me-we can help.'

I nodded. This wasn't the best moment to be reminded about my problems at Birkenhead. And though I knew Tom meant well, and I appreciated his support, I couldn't bring myself to contemplate appealing to Elim to bale me out. That was like calling in the receivers. As I rose to take the rostrum I crumpled the letter into my coat pocket and asked God to honour his word to me by bringing his prophecies to fulfilment. On that, it suddenly seemed, the integrity of the new ministry I was struggling to bring to birth stood or fell. If they were fulfilled, my ministry would be endorsed, and I would know I was hearing God right. If they weren't, the charges levelled against me by Malcolm and Marion would be upheld and it was I, not they, who would have to leave. Without a doubt I would be leaving in disgrace. Thy will be done, I thought to myself, then surveyed the sea of anoraks and woolly caps amid which Nelson and his four lions stood like an island, and said, 'Let us pray...'

Within days of that rally Malcolm and Ann Trent had resigned from the church, and to the best of my knowledge never found another spiritual home.

Within three months Caroline Gratton had divorced her husband. She married Joseph Randall. They left Birkenhead Elim, and were later divorced.

Within a month Marion Turnbull, who held a responsible and highly paid job in medicine, accepted a nursing-teaching post offered to her while on holiday in South Africa. She never came back.

Chapter 3

The wonderful exploding church

'I think it's time we took stock,' I said.

Much had changed over the past year. First, and most dramatically, in the six months during which most of the dissenters departed a whole new atmosphere had descended on the church. For me this was like passing from winter into spring. At last I could mount the pulpit assured that I was going to be listened to and not criticized. Moreover, the congregation had grown steadily, and the diaconate, once such a thorn in my side, had now been restaffed, largely with converts from our early missions.

It was a deacons' meeting in 1979, and I asked one of the new deacons, Dave Lewis, to give a summary of attendance statistics for the last twelve months. He ran a hand through his sparse grey hair and picked up a sheet from the table in front of him.

'The numbers are deceptive. Comparing average figures for this month with those for the same month last year, total attendance-not counting the children-has fallen from ninety-eight to eighty-nine. But that doesn't take account of the new church founded in Runcorn last September. Allowing for Runcorn, we've actually grown quite fast.'

'But the numbers attending the morning service have risen anyway?'

'Thirty-four to forty-one. Also the giving has gone up substantially. Last year we were bringing in £88 a week; now it's £111, even accounting for the loss to the new church.'

I jotted the figures down, and contemplated them for a moment.

'Well-as concerns daughter churches, we now have three, and we look forward to seeing God fulfil the vision for seven churches in the area. How do we feel about the state of play here in Birkenhead?'

'We're growing,' said Billy Jones, another of the new deacons. 'The luncheon club is thriving. So is the Sunday school.'

'Are we growing fast enough?'

This time it was Mike Haynes who responded, a young man with a special interest in the church's youth work. He shook his head.

'You disagree?'

'We could expand a lot faster.'

'We're already bringing in a lot of non-Christians to the evening service,' said Dave.

'But they don't always stay.'

'What are you saying, Mike?'

'I think we're limited by our building. Not the size of it-we could accommodate almost twice the present number. The problem is the state it's in.'

'That shouldn't matter,' said Billy.

I waved a finger. 'He's right. It does matter. You remember when this church first opened there was an eight foot hedge across the front? I dug that out with my own hands, and landscaped the garden. Afterwards people came up to me and said, "I always wondered what was behind that hedge."

Billy laughed. 'I was one of them.'

'So you see how appearances make a difference. I think Mike's got a point.'

'That's fine, Paul,' said Dave. 'I'm sure we'd all agree the place is in a mess. It needs redecorating. That's not in dispute. But there's so much to be done. The question really is, where do we start?'

I uncapped my pen.

'Well, let's get down to specifics. If we make a list of the major problems-starting with this skylight . . .' I nodded at the bucket strategically placed to catch the drips, and winked.

'The church is freezing cold in winter,' said Mike.

'So we need a new central heating system. I could do without stoking that boiler, too.'

'And the pews.'

'Hard, you mean?'

'Not just that. What's that stuff they're painted with?'

'Pitch, I think.'

'It melts in the heat. That hot week we had in July, I tried to stand up for a hymn and found my trousers were stuck to the seat.'

I made a note, and said, 'Out with the pews.'

'Out with the platform and pulpit too.'

'Also general dilapidation,' said Dave. 'That entrance hall is like a tunnel. The whole place needs a coat of paint, inside and out.'

'Okay. That gives us something to be going along with,' I said, putting my pen down and tearing the leaf from the pad. 'Now how are we going to finance it?'

Dave looked at me in disbelief.

'Paul, that's going to cost thousands. Tens of thousands.'

'You'd rather not do it?'

'I want to do it. But where are we going to get that kind of money?'

'We don't need that kind of money, Dave.'

He leaned back, and put his hands in his lap.

'Explain this to me.'

'Simple. You just said we have eighty-nine adults worshipping regularly in this church. If only half of them are fit, that gives us a labour force of over forty. Very little of the work requires specialist knowledge or equipment, so we make a vast saving right away on man-hours. That means our main cost will be materials.'

'A new boiler isn't going to be cheap.'

'No, granted. But a lot of the other stuff will be.'

'And how do we make room for the other stuff? How do we get rid of the things we tear out?'

'Sell them. I'll bet you most of the items we remove from this building will find a buyer. That way we offset our costs, and reduce to manageable proportions the sum we have to raise from the congregation.' I cast an energetic glance around the meeting. 'What do you think?'

There followed only a moment's hesitation before people began to nod.

'Dave?'

'I suppose,' Dave conceded at length, 'that it could work.'

'You like the idea?'

'Yes. I like it.'

'I thought it was a good one. Now can I suggest, before we go any further, that we estimate our total costs, and try to line up some prospective buyers.'

Wearing a confident smile, I announced the scheme from the pulpit in the New Year.

'Last autumn the diaconate discussed the possibility of refurbishing the church. Before now we had refrained from beginning any major work on the building because of the expense. But the diaconate felt that this refurbishment, besides being long overdue, was also essential for our continued growth. So we have devised a plan. I am putting it to you now because if we are to go ahead with it, this work will need our wholehearted agreement and co-operation. It is no small undertaking. But that does not mean it is beyond us-in fact I feel as pastor that God is giving us a chance to try our faith, to prove that in his strength we can do what first of all seems hard if not impossible.

'The refurbishment needs our commitment in two areas. First, financial. We have done our costings carefully. Much of the expense can be covered by selling off items like pews and the iron in the old central heating system. But there will be a shortfall, and the total sum left for us to raise is £1,720. This can be covered if enough of us make pledges-I suggest a figure of £100 as a lump sum, or £5 or £10 a week for over ten weeks.

'The other commitment is in time. We can afford to do this job because, in short, we can do it ourselves. But we don't want to be living on a building site for weeks on end, so I propose that we start the work on Monday February 4 have a single Sunday service on February 10 and finish the whole job in two weeks in time for a rededication service on Sunday 17 ...'

'Two weeks!' I heard someone whisper. 'More like two months!'

But we managed it, or very nearly so. No fewer than thirty-eight members made financial commitments. We raised the money we needed, and on February 4 several members of the congregation took the day off work to begin gutting the church. They carried on late into the night, sustained by cups of tea from the ladies. Pews, piping, platform, pulpit and railings were each sold off as a job lot. We painted and carpeted the hall, installed toilets and a kitchen in the basement, illuminated the entrance hall with glass stripped doors, and put in a tarmac drive, rosebeds and a wrought iron railing in the grounds outside. By the time we'd finished the building looked practically new. The pews were replaced with blue polypropylene chairs; the old rotten

panelling was removed and every wall except the front-which we refurbished in oak-faced wall panels-was plastered down to the skirting boards. The pulpit was clad in rustic brick. Apart from some plastering and brickwork, and the installation of the new central heating, we did the entire job ourselves. Our only disappointment was that we didn't get the carpet laid in time for the 17th, forcing us to postpone the rededication service until the 24th.

The results of this labour of love were great thanksgiving, and a rather heady feeling of accomplishment. Birkenhead Elim had taken an important step -we had proved that with a balance of faith and committed action the nearly impossible can be brought to birth-and this effected a profound change in the consciousness of the church. Over the next two years we grew steadily in numbers; our involvement in the social needs of the area through the luncheon club and the Sunday school expanded to a point where we felt it necessary to change our name from Birkenhead Elim Church to Elim Christian Centre. And then a radical idea hit me.

I tried it out on Dave.

'Here we are, in the middle of one of the worst unemployment blackspots in the country, right?'

'Right.'

'And we're trying to organize schemes to relieve social problems, like getting food to the elderly, right?'

'Right.'

'And we're doing it all on a voluntary basis.'

'We can't afford to pay people

'No. But people could be paid for doing it.'

Dave frowned.

'Through the MSC,' I explained. 'If we could get the Manpower Services Commission to give us a Community programme for the luncheon club, we could be killing two birds with one stone. We'd still be helping the elderly, but we'd also be creating employment. There must be two or three new jobs in the luncheon club, surely?'

Dave's eyebrows slowly rose and fell as he pondered this proposition.

'Will the MSC play ball?'

'There's only one way to find out.'

But after discussing the idea with the diaconate, and making our application for MSC funding, we were turned down. Evidently we were too small an organization to receive MSC support-an irony, to say the least, in view of the fact that after two years every spare seat on a Sunday night was filled. I was thus presented with a double problem. Numerically we could not expand any further in the present building, and yet a major avenue of development was withheld from us as long as we failed to expand. It began to look like we'd have to move out of the old Presbyterian chapel, or we'd stagnate. The problem was: where on earth could we go?

I shared the matter with the congregation. Shortly afterwards, I was taken aside at an evening service by Geoff Green, an employee of Burmah Oil, and formerly a member of the Assemblies of God. When his church closed down in 1981 he and a handful of others had come over to us -a move that had turned out greatly to our advantage.

'Paul, I want to pick your brains on something.'

'Go ahead.'

'You know Mr Holmes and Miss Johnson?'

I did. Mr Holmes, a retired sea missionary and fluent speaker of Japanese, and his housekeeper Miss Johnson, had lived in the same house for so many years that they were practically inseparable. They had come to us with Geoff, and now that they were unable to cope living on their own they had applied to a local Sheltered Housing Association for accommodation.

'There's a technical problem. This society only provides for single elderly people, and because they have been such good friends in the past they will not allow them to live in the same building. Consequently they have had to move into separate homes several miles apart, unconnected by a bus route.'

'You can't be serious.'

'I've tried every way I can. They won't budge.'

'Can I do anything?'

'Not directly. But it's set me thinking about residential care. It seems to me that care for the elderly has to be on the basis of compassion and not legislation. You have to treat people as people.'

'I agree. What's your idea?'

Geoff grinned.

'Well, I'll come straight out and say it. I'm wondering whether God might be asking us to start a home of our own. Not for Mr Holmes and Miss Johnson in particular though I'd love to see them in a church home.'

I thought for a moment.

'You know, Geoff, you've got something there.'

'I'm probably being wildly impractical.'

'No. I don't think you are. I don't think you are at all.'

'You think it's worth considering?'

'More than that. I think it's worth some practical investigation. Geoff, can you keep an eye open for suitable properties? If something comes to your notice, get in touch and we'll go and have a look at it.'

I floated Geoff's idea at the deacons' meeting, and mentioned it to others, among them our solicitor Alistair Martin. Geoff and I met periodically, in the evenings or after services, to review progress. But although we inspected a couple of properties, both large houses, neither of them were suitable—one was too expensive, and in the other the Fire Department's requirements were so impractical as to make the conversion unworkable.

Yet despite the setbacks, the more I thought about the idea, the more intrigued I became.

'Paul,' said Alistair Martin over the phone one Monday morning, 'you must tell me if this is over the top, but I'm wondering if you haven't overlooked something.'

'Go on.'

'The Birkenhead Children's Hospital on Woodchurch Road. It was closed down by the Area Health Authority a few months ago. Nobody's shown any interest in buying it.'

I pushed myself back from the desk and looked hard at the Lowry print on the wall calendar, with its tiny puppet-like people, and huge, square factories.

'Are you still there, Paul?'

'Yes. I'm just thinking of size.'

'It is fairly large,' he conceded.

'Do you know if we can even make a sensible offer?'

'They might be willing to drop the price if nobody else is interested. And we can push the fact that we're contributing to the area's health care programme.'

'Okay-let's take a look.'

We went a few days later. Birkenhead Children's Hospital was a solid piece of Victorian architecture in red brick, with mock Tudor cladding under the gable ends and a broad ornamental porch above the main door, which had been set back from the road by a forty-foot space, now used as a car park. The site must have covered at least an acre of land, and it had attached to it a second unit of four flats facing out on to the nearby Brattan Road. A cursory inspection told me this wasn't God's choice for our residential home and Church: in a building this size the running costs alone would have been through the roof.

But when the next few weeks had yielded no suitable properties I was reminded of the Children's Hospital by Alistair Martin. Somebody had run into my car, and Alistair, a dedicated solicitor for whom no service was too much trouble, had come to advise me on my claim for compensation. Over coffee he listened patiently to my reasons for deciding against the hospital, then said simply, 'I wouldn't write it off so fast.'

'Alistair, if we bought that place it would write us off.'

'Not necessarily.'

'Come on-the fuel bills alone would be astronomical.'

He took a sip of coffee, replacing the mug on my desk.

'Okay, Paul. What are you reckoning on as the purchase price?'

'It's hard to say.'

'You think they'd give us the Children's Hospital for under a hundred and fifty thousand?'

'I say it isn't beyond the bounds of possibility.'

I got up and took a few slow steps around the room.

'That is interesting. On the other hand-even if they made us a gift of it, we'd still be struggling to cover repairs and maintenance.'

'The building's not in bad condition.'

'I know. Geoff and I inspected it pretty thoroughly. All the same Paul, I just hate to see you passing up on a lifetime's opportunity. Okay, the place is big. But think what you can put inside it.'

I had in fact been thinking about that for some time. Certainly the Children's Hospital had room for a lot more than a church and a residential home. Not only that, but once we were inside it we would be eligible for MSC

finding. Great vistas of possibility opened up before me, of a place where not just worship and evangelism, but the practical love of Christ could be demonstrated on a really big scale. Maybe -just maybe, if I could get the church to catch the vision too-such a dream could be realized.

'This is a facility,' Alistair concluded emphatically, 'with room for expansion in all sorts of areas. You can probably get in on favourable terms. Think of the future.'

Sitting down on my desk I inked again at the Lowry print, and gave a faint smile.

'Alistair, you could be right.'

'You'll give it some thought?'

'Scout's honour.'

But before even thinking about it, I prayed. I'd had enough experience in business to know that if this project wasn't God's will we'd go down like a lead balloon. Significantly, I was soon apprehended by a member of the congregation who'd heard that the Children's Hospital was for sale, and wanted to know if I'd considered it as a site for the home. Two or three others did the same, apparently unaware that I had already gone to see it. These and Alistair's remarks were enough to persuade me that I should go back and take another very serious look, and this I did, first with Geoff, then with Evelyn, and finally with the deacons.

We inspected the property inch by inch, notionally allocating a function to various rooms and blocks: church, offices, day nursery and dining facilities on the ground floor; residential home on the first; staff accommodation on the second. Then we gathered in the church vestry. We knew what an opportunity lay before us; we also knew the risk that went with it, and for that reason our discussion sounded a note of caution.

Dave asked me to outline the financial commitment.

'Okay.' I counted on my fingers. 'We have to meet two immediate costs. Purchase is the first. Then we have to finance alterations -pretty extensive alterations-to equip the building for a new function.'

'Will we get MSC support for that?'

'I hope so. We were turned down on our last application for a Community Programme. But the size factor will no longer obtain if we move to the hospital.'

'Presumably using the MSC will offset our costs,' said Billy.

'I anticipate that it will push them down to around fifty thousand.'

'For renovations?'

'And maintenance -at least until the schemes we propose to start become self-supporting. We break even on the residential home, for instance, when we get a certain minimum number of the units filled.'

'Which we hope will be as soon as possible.'

'Exactly. Though we're not leaving that to chance. Geoff

Green has worked out some pretty comprehensive schedules.

'And what happens if they fall behind?'

'They don't.'

'But if they do.'

'Then we've heard God wrong tonight.'

I paused, glancing around the room, then went on, 'In any event, we will need to go to the bank and negotiate a loan. I hope I can persuade Elim Trust Corporation to stand as guarantor.'

'Are we sure we can pay it back?' said Mike.

'We will be able to raise a certain amount through the sale of this building.'

'How much?'

'I don't know. Unfortunately the estate agent can't give us a valuation for the church. It doesn't lend itself to other uses, and it might not attract buyers.'

'So the slack has to be picked up by fund-raising in the congregation.'

'That's it.'

There was a short silence. We were suddenly aware of the future as a stretch of uncharted water, deep and wide, across which we were just about to launch in our small vessel.

Dave shifted in his chair.

'Do we have to take the entire site?'

'Not necessarily. What do you want to leave out?'

'It seems to me that if we can't see an immediate use for the Brattan Road area we might be wasting our money taking it over.'

'That's a consideration.'

'On the other hand,' said Mike, 'just because we haven't thought of a purpose for Brattan Road so far doesn't mean it isn't in God's plan.'

'What is God saying to us about it-that's the point.'

'Are they even separable?' asked Billy Jones.

I shrugged. 'We don't know. That depends on the Area Health Authority. At any rate there's nothing to stop us putting in a bid for the main building.'

'Then I suggest we do it,' said Dave. 'Make a partial offer. If they turn us down, they turn us down.'

There were nods.

'I agree,' said Mike. 'We're stretched far enough as it is. We can't be sure what we'll get for the building we're in. If we can make a saving on the purchase price I say we should go for it.'

'Okay. Anyone against?'

No one moved.

'Then the next question is how much are we going to offer?'

'Can we decide that,' said Billy, 'if we don't even know how much money we've got?'

I reached forward to pick up my notepad, and proceeded to tear off sheets and pass them round.

'Well, brethren, we know we are relying on God. Let's start by relying on him to give us a price. I suggest each of us writes down what he feels to be an appropriate offer for the property. Then we'll see what we've got.'

One by one we wrote in our figures, then laid the sheets in the middle of the desk. When all six were in I picked up the pile, reading out the numbers in order.

'Forty thousand. Thirty-five thousand. Thirty-five thousand. Thirty-five thousand. Thirty-five thousand. Thirty-five thousand.'

I smiled. 'So be it!'

But we prayed over and submitted this offer only to have it rejected. When Alistair told me, I deliberately pulled back from the whole enterprise for a few days and asked myself whether we hadn't made an error of judgement in considering the hospital at all. I decided we hadn't.

'We have two options,' I said at the next deacons' meeting. 'We can take this as guidance, and drop negotiations for the hospital. Or we can look again and submit a revised offer.'

Dave looked surprised. 'Haven't we already given it our best shot?'

'With respect, Dave, I don't think that is the question we should address ourselves to. We know we don't have the money. Even the thirty-five thousand is beyond us on any rational assessment. I believe we must decide whether God wants us to have this hospital or not. If he doesn't, fair enough. If he does, come hell or high water, we will find a way to get it.'

'I feel we should carry on,' said Mike immediately. 'I've been praying about this. I can't get it out of my head that the hospital's right.'

'Agreed,' said Dave. 'But if we can't afford it...'

He lapsed into silence. There was something in the nature of large sums of money that stretched the faith of day-to-day church affairs to its absolute limit. We all sensed the tension of it, but it was Bob Oldfield, our youngest deacon, who forced it out in the open.

'Then perhaps we made a mistake the first time round.'

'A mistake?'

'We decided not to go for Brattan Road. Well, suppose God wants Brattan Road in this new centre, and we didn't hear him because we were too afraid of the cost? Perhaps God meant it to be rejected so we'd go for what he really wants us to have.'

Dave folded his hands in his lap.

Mike nodded.

Steve Thornley, the fifth member of the diaconate, said, 'I think he's right.'

'I propose that we submit a revised offer,' Bob continued, 'this time including both the main building and the adjacent property on Brattan Road.'

I scanned their faces to see if anyone disagreed. When no one dissented I said, 'Okay, how much?'

'By my calculations,' said Mike, 'our absolute limit is sixty-five thousand.'

The number sounded almost unreal, like a late bid at an auction.

'Sixty-five thousand?' I said.

For a few moments the phrase hung in the air like an auctioneer's hammer, until finally I let it drop.

'Sixty-five thousand it is.'

Chapter 4

A crazy scheme is born

'And this time the Health Authority accepted. Not only that,' I said, touching the chairman of Care Trust, Lydon Bowring, lightly on the arm, 'but we knocked them down another £3,500 for deterioration between the purchase and taking possession.'

It was March 1983, and we had just taken over the hospital. The other man on the tour, Trevor Partington, pastor of Coventry Elim, gave a low laugh as we passed along the first floor corridor.

'Sixty-five thousand means you made the same offer for the main building and then asked them to throw in four flats for the same price?'

'Precisely.'

'You've got a cheek, haven't you?'

'That's what the estate agent said.'

'And what happened with the loan?'

'Headquarters sent Terry Broomhall down to take a look.'

'The property secretary?'

'That's him. When he'd filed a report I was called in to talk it over with the General Superintendent, Tom Walker. The Field Superintendent was there too; so was the accountant, Robert Miller. From them it went to the Executive Council.'

'I'm surprised they took the risk.'

'So was I. Terry looked so unsure about it that I expected a grilling at headquarters. But I couldn't have got more encouragement. Anyway, to cut a long story short, we now have £120,000 from the bank, guaranteed by Elim Trust Corporation. We're calling it the Wirral Christian Centre, because we have so many cross-denominational links now, and over such a wide area, that terms like Elim and Birkenhead aren't big enough.'

'So when do you move in?'

'As soon as possible. But we can't make any big inroads until we can get the MSC Community Programme running. That's under negotiation at the moment.'

'And what are you doing with your present building?'

'Putting it on the market. The return should go a long way to servicing our loan.'

'The market's slow at the moment.'

'I know. And an old Presbyterian chapel doesn't lend itself to many other uses.'

'So can you be sure of finding a buyer?'

'Jones, Chapman and Harland haven't promised us a quick sale. But they think they'll get one eventually.'

'What if...'

'If it all goes wrong? And the sixty-five thousand can't be recouped?'

'Yes.'

'Then we're in a mess.'

'Aren't you taking a bit of a risk?'

'Trevor, do you know how many times I have asked myself that question these last few weeks? Probably a hundred. Maybe two or three hundred. Yes it is a risk, and the worst thing is I'm the one left carrying the can. Believe you me -WI didn't think God was in this, I'd run. As it is, I'm already in up to my neck.'

We descended the stairs and walked back along the ground floor corridor past the room that was to become the luncheon club. Finally I opened a door and we stepped through into a large, dismal room where our shoes made footprints in the dust.

'And this, gentlemen, is the church of the new Wirral Christian Centre.'

The two visitors paused in the doorway, gazing slowly right to left. There wasn't much to see-like the rest of the complex it looked little more than a construction site. Nonetheless I pointed enthusiastically into the gloom.

'Offices. Creche. Toilets. Church recording area. Library. Entrance hall. Up there, another four accommodation units for the residential home on the first floor. In the centre, space for over four hundred seats, indirect spotlighting overhead, platform, wall to wall carpeting. Of course, you have to imagine that wall knocked out. Brick finish, plasterwork..'

By now Lyndon was laughing.

'You know something, Paul?' he said. 'Either you're a visionary, or you're insane. Nobody else would see possibilities in a place like this.'

'Nobody else has to. I'm no visionary-just a victim of circumstance. I have a growing congregation, and a small church building. What am I supposed to do?'

'So what's next-the National Exhibition Centre?'

I smiled broadly. 'Could be.'

'In that case,' he said, 'you're insane.'

A few days later Geoff Green turned up at the church office. I nodded from a desk more than usually loaded with paperwork, and gestured him to sit down.

When I'd poured the drinks I sat down on top of the desk.

'So what's on your mind?'

Geoff hesitated for a moment, then said, 'Paul, could you use an assistant?' Geoff's firm, Burmah Oil in Ellesmere Port, had now closed down and he was out of work.

He paused to let me laugh.

'What's the joke?'

'Geoff, if you asked me, I could give you a full time job as administrator, fundraiser, organizer of charitable appeals, front man, accountant, scheduler, and personnel officer all rolled into one. That's roughly sixty hours a week on almost no pay. If I were you I'd go for another job.'

'I know I could. But I feel the Lord wants me here. You know what this project has meant to me. I'd like nothing better than to be in on it from the start.'

'I was serious about the pay. You'll be working for a few pounds a week.'

'It doesn't matter.'

'You've got to live.'

'Paul, I've thought this one out carefully. And if I wasn't willing to sacrifice for the Lord's work, I wouldn't be worth hiring, would I?'

'No,' I said, laughing. 'You bet you wouldn't.'

'Does that mean you're taking me on?'

I shook Geoff's hand. 'With pleasure. Welcome to the firm.'

For a man just about to take a quantum leap down the wage scale Geoff looked extraordinarily happy.

'So what's my first duty?'

'How do you feel about managing accounts? That was your position in Burma, wasn't it?'

'Yes, though I'm not an accountant.'

'Think you can handle it?'

'I'll do my best.'

'Good. If you could swing it at Burmah Oil, I'm sure you can swing it here.'

'Anything else?'

'Well-our first objective is to get that home open.'

'I take it you've advertised for staff.'

'Not yet. But you're right-it's time we began thinking about it.'

'When do you plan to get the first resident in?'

I opened my desk diary for 1983 and flicked through it.

'We're nearly in April. Projected completion of the first phase is second week of May. Say seven weeks.'

'What do we need?'

'Principally a matron and a cook. If they're not in place we're grounded.'

Wirral Action, a YTS training organisation, moved into the Centre and immediately set about painting and decorating rooms for the residents. As good as they were though they were not quick enough and we had to call in private contractors to decorate many of the rooms.

Meanwhile Derek Ireland, a heating engineer at home from sea, co-ordinated work on the entire central heating system.

Unfortunately although the MSC office were ready to present our case to the Area Manpower Board, the Building Employers' Confederation-the body responsible for protecting the interests of the local building trade-decided to block it.

This decision had to be overturned. To persuade the BEC to overturn it I went with Barbara Harrison and the MSC area manager for a hearing at the BEC headquarters in Liverpool.

'Whatever you do,' said Barbara on the way up in the lift, 'remember that we're meeting with the top officials. Don't get on the wrong side of them.'

We were shown into a hall on whose panelled walls were hung portraits of every man who had presided over the BEG since its foundation at the end of the nineteenth century. A secretary gave us tea. When the three men arrived, hands were shaken, politenesses exchanged, and seats occupied on opposite sides of a large mahogany table.

The chairman didn't beat around the bush.

'We are not convinced, Mr Epton, that you are coming clean.'

'In what way?'

'That you are as short of cash as you say you are.'

'The MSC accept that we cannot afford to do the work without help from the Community Programme.'

'Perhaps so. But you understand that we have to make our own assessment.'

'Then take a look at our accounts.'

I pushed a folder over the glassy surface of the table, the contents of which the chairman glanced over briefly before passing them to the secretary.

'I'm afraid that doesn't prove anything,' he said.

'It proves we have zero finances.'

'Among your declared assets.'

I looked at him again to make sure this wasn't a joke. It wasn't; he was actually questioning my honesty. For a moment I fought back my indignation, then said in a level tone, 'Do you seriously think that I, as a church minister, would attempt to pull the wool over your eyes?'

'Anything is possible.'

'In fairness,' I said, 'if we had any hidden reserves we'd have used them long before now.'

'Mr Epton,' said the chairman in a distinctly "Friday afternoon" voice, 'there is only one matter of importance to me, and that is the welfare of the building trade employees. If you cannot demonstrate to me that this MSC scheme will not deprive contractors of work, the BEC will not approve it.'

'Okay,' I said, suddenly leaning forward on my elbows and brandishing an index finger, 'I'll do more than that. I'll show you that by failing to reverse your ruling you will be kicking your own members in the teeth

At the use of that phrase I received a sharp kick under the table from Barbara Harrison. But I went on. 'The conversion of Birkenhead Children's Hospital, involves much specialized work which Community Programme personnel are not able or qualified to do. Such work has to be given to outside contractors. However, it also has to be paid for, and if the MSC scheme does not receive approval, we will be left with an impossible financial burden. Consequently, your refusal will result directly in our closure-which will further result in the loss of very considerable work opportunities for your members. Now I can't believe that you are so obstinate, so stupid, that you'd take a course of action actually damaging to the interests of your membership. But I tell you frankly, gentlemen, that if the BEC turns us down today it will be doing nothing less than cutting off its nose to spite its face.'

This little speech produced a heavy silence, during which Barbara Harrison cleared her throat in the way people do when they are just about to cry. Eventually the chairman rose, and snapped his briefcase closed.

'Well, I'm going on holiday tomorrow,' he said briskly. 'You lot can decide.'

Then he walked out. Taken aback, the secretary and treasurer exchanged glances, then, after shaking hands with us, also withdrew, promising to get in touch with us the following week.

I returned to call the church to prayer.

Never before had we prayed so hard for God to overrule. For a week the congregation was in constant intercession. Many members fasted, some of them for three days; others stayed up praying from dusk to dawn. For me that spontaneous desire to see God's will done, so generously expressed in the effort of prayer, was a heartening testimony to the progress we'd made in the six years since 1977. The sheer motivation of the church astounded me.

A week later I was able to take the pulpit and announce that our prayers had been answered: the BEC, reviewing our case, had reversed their previous decision and were now backing our application for an MSC programme. The project was up and running within a fortnight.

The first resident moved in during the second week of May. A month later, we had fifteen. Pauline Chesterman joined us as matron; and with the help of Barbara Harrison, the local Community Programme manager, the starting date for our MSC project, now fully negotiated, was scheduled for July 4. If the Centre sometimes kept Geoff and me occupied from five in the morning till midnight, six days a week, at least it was up and running. On June 28 I took five days off for a minor operation (the surgeon agreed to perform it free as a contribution to the project). Leaving Geoff in charge, I went in for surgery at 8.30 am, returning home at noon to begin my convalescence. We were just finishing lunch when the door bell rang. Evelyn disappeared into the hall. A moment later, with a flutter of apologies, Geoff came through into the front room, looking like a hare with a pack of hounds behind him.

'We're in trouble, Paul.'

'What sort of trouble?'

'Mr Alder came this morning from the Fire Department.'

'I know. I arranged the appointment last month.'

'Well he says we'll have to close down.'

'Close down? 'Why?'' said Evelyn.

'Apparently we're in contravention of the fire regulations.'

'That's madness. I explained our proposals to him in detail before our first resident came in.'

'It doesn't count. Don't we have any right of appeal?'

'It's not a matter of appeal, Paul. We have to fulfil the requirements of the Fire Department as laid down during an inspection of the building, and until we do, keeping residents in the home is simply illegal.'

He paused, to take a deep breath.

'The one piece of good news is that he's asking for a second opinion before serving a closure notice on us.'

'Second opinion from whom?'

'His supervisor, a Mr Crimond. They're coming back tomorrow at ten-thirty.'

'I'll be there.'

'Paul! You're only just out of hospital,' Evelyn cried.

'I don't have any choice. Geoff-get on to Alistair Martin. We don't want to be caught out. You know-"wise as serpents"?''

Geoff nodded. 'Do you think there's a way through this?'

'If there is, we'll find it.'

Much of the following day's inspection was carried out in an ominous silence. Simon Dulac, the representative of the Social Services, said nothing, and Mr Alder, who had been very helpful when I originally contacted the Fire Department, seemed in awe of his Divisional Commander, a tall man whose face seemed at first sight to be made of something harder than ordinary flesh.

When we arrived back in the entrance hall Crimond said simply, 'You'll have to close.'

'Can I ask why?'

'Because the place is a fire risk,' he replied without looking up from the form he was filling in on a clipboard.

'But we're not making it any more of a fire risk than it's always been.'

'I'm not saying you are.'

'So why are you coming down on us now? Why didn't you close the place when it was a hospital?'

'As a hospital the building was Crown property. Crown property isn't subject to the requirements of the Fire Department-it could be built out of anything, and I wouldn't be able to raise a finger.'

'But now it's in private hands you're giving it the works'

He glanced up at me.

'You seem to be getting the idea.'

I looked over at Simon Dulac in the hope of eliciting support. But Dulac only smiled.

'Okay,' I said, 'tell us what needs to be done.'

'At a conservative estimate, you'll need to upgrade the doors-fill them with plaster board and seal them on both sides with fire-resistant material. No glass doors inside.

Everything self-closing. I also want you to place the firescreens and fire-doors in every corridor, upgrade the emergency light system, and install fire-detection equipment.'

'It'll cost thousands.'

'That's not my concern, Mr Epton.'

'You want to put us under?'

'I want,' he said sharply, 'to make sure that if this building catches fire maximum protection is afforded to the occupants, and to the men who have the job of fighting the blaze.'

'Fine. I understand that. But I'm not going to be able to put this stuff in overnight.'

'You can take as long as you like to make the alterations, Mr Epton. Meanwhile the people living here must be moved out.'

'As of when?'

'As of now.'

'That can't be done.'

'You don't have any choice,' he said, suddenly raising his voice.

I forced down the urge to shout.

'I can't relocate fifteen residents before five o'clock this afternoon. I have nowhere else to send them.'

'I'm sure Mr Dulac will help you on that.'

'Mr Crimond, you are asking for the impossible . .

But here Alistair Martin intervened.

'Am I right in saying that the Fire Department has to apply to a magistrate to obtain a closure notice?'

Crimond eyed him sternly. 'That's right.'

'And that the notice, once served, allows fourteen days for its terms to be complied with.'

'Yes.'

'So in fact there is no reason, by law, that the residents have to be moved today.'

At that Crimond's face set like cement.

'No. Not by law.'

There followed an awkward pause. I seized the opportunity, and adopted my most conciliatory tone.

'Can I propose a compromise here? I'm sure we all agree that it's in nobody's interest for the residential home to be closed down. It's not in the interest of the Social Services, to whom this building will be a valuable

resource. It is certainly not in the interest of the elderly folk already living here-Mr Dulac will confirm, I am sure, how distressing it is for an elderly person to be shifted from pillar to post by circumstances beyond his control.

'Now I believe that given fourteen days' grace we at the Centre could turn this thing around. We could, in fourteen days, introduce enough safety features to ensure the welfare of the residents while other work is carried on. That way, we could comply with the fire safety regulations, avoid causing inconvenience to the Social Services, and, most important, save a group of elderly people the unnecessary distress of removal and relocation. It would need fourteen days, during which the Fire Department would be willing to suspend its application for a closure notice. If, after these fourteen days, we have failed to achieve the work to the required standard, then fine-we close. Is that fair?'

I looked from one face to another.

'Mr Crimond?'

He nodded grudgingly.

'Fourteen days.'

'And you are willing to supply us with a definitive list of alterations to be made in that period?'

'That can be done.'

We shook hands coolly, then Dulac and the two fire officers departed through the partially restored entrance and crossed the small car park towards Woodchurch Road.

I turned to Geoff. 'Can we get on to the architects straight away, and ask them to let us have the plans for alterations?'

'I'll call them right now.'

'How soon does the MSC programme start?'

'Five days.'

'I could get some joiners on the job between now and July 4.'

'Good. Do it. I'll get the church moving too. We'll have to throw everything we've got at this one. And Alistair,' I added as we left the building, 'thanks-you just saved our bacon.'

For the next ten days volunteers from the church worked practically around the clock to complete the immediate alterations. With help from MSC workers we got the job finished under the deadline and I was able to call Crimond back to do another inspection. We passed. He gave us another six weeks to bring the entire building up to fire safety standards, with only one proviso -that we mounted a twenty-four hour watch.

The architects Mason and Richards had put together plans for incorporating the fire officers' requirements without destroying the internal structure of the building. These plans, which were approved by the Fire Department, presented only one problem -crippling costs.

For six weeks we laboured, often into the early hours, to meet the Fire Department's second deadline, ensuring finally that the occupied area was adequate and sealed off from the rest of the site.

When Crimond returned he said he wouldn't have believed the progress we'd made if he hadn't seen it with his own eyes. Dulac only said drily that he was satisfied with the measures being taken to guarantee the comfort of the residents.

We had only one demand made of us, by a representative of Building Control, who asked if we minded being monitored during the rest of the conversion programme. I had no objections.

'In that case,' he said, looking at the other parties, 'I see no reason why Mr Epton should not be allowed to keep these elderly people in residence, and develop the hospital according to the plans he has shown us. Does anybody disagree?'

Nobody did.

Over the next twelve months we worked flat out to complete the main building, carefully scheduling the programmes so that areas of the site could be sealed off and deployed as soon as they were finished. Evelyn and I paid a visit to Derek Green, pastor of the Elim Church in Chelmsford, for a briefing on the supervision of the day nursery - a job taken on by Linda Oldfield. By the end of 1983 a second MSC programme had been negotiated, to set up the luncheon club. The new club was a vast improvement on the old one. Being funded from outside, it could not only provide meals five days a week (the church based club I'd set up never did more than two), but also collected its clientele in a minibus, and even employed visitors to give the elderly help and encouragement in their homes.

A spin-off resulted from this project. With two MSC programmes in motion, and over fifty MSC employees on site, Geoff and I were able to form the WCC's own local agency under the umbrella of the Elim Trust Corporation. This organization, which we called the Elim Community Projects, allowed us the convenience of setting up as many schemes as we liked within our local area without having to apply through another agent. At first I ran it more or less single-handed; but then a businessman called Eddie Englebrecht arrived in Birkenhead, having just left Zimbabwe, with his Birkenhead-born wife, and, being unemployed, was able to play a leading role in the agency's development.

But although we took on extra staff as fast as we could afford to pay for them, and the elders of the church, recently convened in line with Elim policy, began to share the burden of leadership, most of the work still fell to Geoff and me. I quickly discovered that I had two full-time jobs -one as pastor, the other as administrator. At the same time as running an operation that was still heavily in debt and often staggered from one crisis to the next, I was trying to act as preacher, counsellor, evangelist, even District Superintendent for the Elim churches in the Northwest, Merseyside and North Wales.

Late one evening I arrived home to put on yet another hat-that of the family man.

Evelyn came to sit beside me on the sofa. I had my eyes closed and my head back.

'Are you all right, Paul?'

I nodded.

'I missed putting the kids to bed this evening.'

'They missed you.'

Turning a little and opening my eyes to look at her I said, 'Evelyn, are we doing the right thing?'

'You mean the Centre?'

'Yes.'

'What's up?' she said gently.

'I don't know. Sometimes I feel I'm pushing it along by myself. Like nobody else really knows what it's all about.'

'There's Geoff.'

'Yes, he sees the vision and I know you do.'

I squeezed her hand and put my arm around her, and for a moment we were silent.

'We've done so much these last few years. All the work on the Centre. The missions. Seven churches have grown out of the ministry in Birkenhead, two of them on the Isle of Man...'

'The vision was Fulfilled.'

'Yes. And you know me-I'm not one to complain at hard work. But the last few days, when the pressure's just gone on and on, I've felt sometimes that I'm losing touch with God. And if I'm feeling that, I wonder if I'm still the right man to be taking the work forward. I wonder if we shouldn't stop now. Not just for the church's sake. For our sake. For Natalie's, Gregory's, Victoria's.'

'Paul,' said Evelyn quietly, 'the family can get through tomorrow, if you can.'

I smiled at her.

'Thanks. I needed to hear that.'

She got up, took a biscuit from the tin on the coffee table, and came back to the sofa, breaking it in two. 'For you,' she said, sitting down.

'Paul, do you remember when we visited Derek Green in Chelmsford?'

'What about it?'

'I've been thinking of the Youth Training Scheme he'd set up. Perhaps we could develop one ourselves. That would take a lot of the pressure off you.'

'But we don't have time to organize it.'

'I'd do it.'

'As well as teaching? And the kids?'

'I'll give up my job at the school. Why not? I can be paid for running a YTS.'

'But do you know enough to set one up?'

She snatched the biscuit from my hand. 'Give that back, Paul Epton. You don't deserve it.'

'I was only asking.'

'Of course I know. I have been teaching for nearly ten years. I'm not stupid.'

'Okay. I apologize.'

But she didn't return the biscuit. 'And do you agree?' she said, holding it at arm's length.

I laughed. 'Yes. It's a great idea. I agree.'

Soon after that Evelyn resigned from the school to add to her already considerable contribution-in terms of general assistance to me and development of the decor -by bringing together the WCC's Youth Training

Scheme. Though small at first, the YTS did a lot to ease the pressure on other employees, and speeded the completion of the main building by the autumn of 1984. Attention then turned to the construction of the new church, and the renovation of the external buildings.

So far income generated by the various departments of the WCC had kept us just ahead of loan repayments. Making the alterations demanded by the Fire Department had hit us hard, and there had been some scary moments. On one occasion, when we'd already sold all our scrap iron and scrap lead (and for that matter everything else that was moveable), work would have had to stop had we not been able to take an old generator back to its manufacturers. That they paid us what we were asking for it was miraculous. But miracles like this guided us along the knife edge of viability -miracles, and an almost unbelievably smooth conversion programme.

That smooth running programme was like a hot summer spell that had to break, and I felt the first heavy drops of rain when Derek Ireland, the cheerful Liverpudlian with eyebrows that somehow reminded me of Paul McCartney, came to report cracks in the brickwork of Brattan Road.

'Cracks? Why?'

The whole place is built on infill,' he said cheerfully. 'It doesn't have any foundations.'

Chapter 5

The cradle to the grave

As it turned out, Brattan Road wasn't the only mishap in store for us. I called a meeting of the elders.

'What we have on our hands, brethren, is a situation of escalating costs,' I said, shuffling my papers into a neat rectangle before laying them down. 'Problems have occurred -both in the new church, and in the renovation of the Brattan Road property-which were not allowed for in the original coatings, and which are putting a severe strain on our budget.'

'As you know, the work on the church was too advanced to give to small contractors, and is being undertaken by Boskalis Westminster. To cut a long story short, their structural engineer has found weaknesses in the foundation which require the replacement of the present structure by large reinforced concrete blocks. In fairness, they couldn't have foreseen this. But the steel superstructure necessary for the church cannot be put up unless this job is done.'

'As for Brattan Road, the cracks discovered by Derek Ireland have been checked by a structural engineer, who has declared the building unsafe. We've already shored up the front. Rectifying the problem, apparently, will involve excavation, possibly to a depth of twenty feet, to find solid material on which to place a new foundation.'

The elders, two men who had born some of the weight of my responsibility over the past two years, and shared in the joys and sorrows of bringing the WCC to birth, regarded me with grave expressions.

'Can we project any figures?' asked Dave Lewis.

'Only roughly. Boskalis Westminster estimate the extra expense at around £50,000. How much we spend on Brattan Road depends on the extent of the work. I've been quoted something in the region of £10,000, which is less than the church, but of course on Brattan Road we have to take into account the loss of income incurred through delay.'

Bob Oldfield, a thoughtful man whose advice I never took lightly, said, 'How bad is it, Paul?'

'It's bad enough that we're running into major deficit.'

'Fatal?'

'Fatal if we let the situation spiral. We've already been spinning the thread pretty fine to meet the demands of the Fire Department. Put simply, if we don't start to boost our income now, we'll keep on going down and eventually become insolvent.'

'Surely one way of boosting our income is to reduce our costs . . .'

'What do you have in mind?'

'By putting together an MSC programme for Brattan Road, for instance.'

'We can look into it. But I imagine rebuilding foundations will take some more sophisticated input than we could get through MSC.'

'So we need income, pure and simple.'

'That's right.'

'Is there nothing else in the property we can sell?' said Dave.

'Not unless some past occupant hid gold bars under the floorboards.'

'That disused oil tank.'

'Derek's already sold it. Anyway, in terms of our present need it wouldn't have fetched much.'

'There must be something?'

After a pause Bob said suddenly, 'The X-ray equipment -the Health Authority left the X-ray equipment behind.'

'Does it work?'

'As far as I know. Wouldn't an X-ray machine be worth a bit?'

'If it was worth anything,' said Dave drily, 'the Health Authority would have taken it with them. It's probably prewar.'

That raised a gentle laugh.

'If it is pre-war,' I said, 'then we might be able to sell it as an antique. Anyway- Bob, do you want to look into it?'

Bob nodded. I made a note, and looked around the table.

'Well ... so far we have one old X-ray machine to sell. Any more ideas?'

There was a pause.

'Why not try the Council?' said Bob. 'It seems to me they'd be willing to subsidize this kind of project. We're helping to relieve social problems in Birkenhead. Couldn't we go to them and ask for a loan?'

'Or for an outright grant,' said Dave, catching the momentum of Bob's thought. 'They owe us one, morally.'

'Come to that, I think they owe us one, full stop.'

'Couldn't this be the answer, Paul?'

I leaned forward and rested my forehead on my closed fist. In my mind's eye I was seeing again that impassive smile Simon Dulac had worn during the fire officers' inspection. Since that crisis we'd had the chance to prove many times over to outside bodies like Building Control and the Social Services that our standards were impressively high. We built good facilities, and we gave quality service. But for some reason our contribution to Wirral's social care system had never been rewarded with financial support.

'Bob,' I replied. 'Believe me, I've wrestled with this one.'

'And?'

'And-I just don't think it would work.'

He looked incredulous.

'But we have a case.'

'We've had a case before. We've never wrung a single penny from the Council yet. Have we? Or is my memory failing me?'

Bob sighed. 'No, you're right. We haven't, but since we're in straightened circumstances it won't, surely, do any harm to apply.'

'Okay,' I said, reaching for my pen and scribbling a note to remind myself. 'We'll try. But frankly I think we'll need something else up our sleeve.'

This time the silence was longer. I knew that my coolness towards Bob's idea - a coolness which was well founded and entirely genuine - had shunted our discussion closer to the business none of us wanted to tackle: selling the old church.

The church was unquestionably our single biggest asset. We'd put it on the market as soon as we knew that Elim would guarantee our loan, and it had now been there for about a year. In that time there had been two serious enquiries, at least one of which could still result in a profitable sale. The irony of the situation now was that, although we needed the money, we were refusing to sell.

'Have there been any further offers?'

'Not since the last congregational meeting. The first person to express an interest-the woman who wanted to make the church into a dancing school-never actually made an offer, anyway. The spiritist medium is the only one who's named a price. I think we're agreed that he should be refused as a matter of principle.'

'Yes. We're agreed on that,' said Bob.

But Dave was shaking his head.

'Dave?'

'Yes, I agree, but...'

'The fact remains,' said Dave heavily, 'that the church is a considerable asset, and as yet it has no buyer.'

'So...'

'So ... I don't know. Something doesn't make sense. What are we supposed to do if we have no other answers?'

'Maybe we should try re-negotiating our loan,' said Bob.

I shook my head.

'Dave's right, Paul. We can't just sit tight and wait for something to happen.'

'Of course not. But re-negotiating our loan isn't the answer. I'm willing to do it, because it'll buy us time. But it won't solve our basic problem. At best it'll only postpone the day of reckoning.' Taking the discussion by the scruff of the neck, I went on, 'What we're talking about here, brethren, is money. We need financial input. A loan doesn't produce that, because loans have to be paid back. Nor does selling off surplus materials from the site, at least not in the quantities we need. We could raise capital by selling the church, but the church has no buyer. Humanly speaking, then, in terms of what we have discussed so far, we have a problem with no solution. What do we do?'

I let the silence make its point before going on.

'Here's my proposal. One, we pray. I mean serious prayer. We get the whole congregation praying for this specific need.'

'And then?'

'Then we shift our thinking on to a higher level. I think the time has come for a concerted fund-raising drive.'

Bob looked doubtful.

'Can we ask people to give any more than they're doing already?'

'We can ask people to give as much as God directs them to, Bob. But I'm not just talking about the church. We've called this new venture Wirral Christian Centre because our ministry reaches over the whole of this peninsula. Now I honestly believe that a regional, possibly a national ministry, cannot be sustained by one church alone. And with that in mind I think it's only realistic to give others besides ourselves the chance of sharing the financial burden of it.'

As I said that I wondered if I was pulling ahead too fast. I decided I wasn't, and leaned forward to plant my finger firmly in the middle of the desk.

'I have a vision for this ministry. This ministry is going to grow. And if it's going to grow, we must not have just the faith, but the finances to match it. That means we've got to start thinking in units bigger than the weekly church collection.'

'But we've never done fund-raising,' said Dave. 'How do we know it's going to work?'

'The same way we knew our plans would work when we refurbished this church. Put simply, it will work if God's behind it. We can raise ten million pounds like that-' I snapped my fingers -'if God's behind it.'

'We're not talking about ten million.'

'It doesn't matter, Dave-the principle is the same whether you're dealing with millions, hundreds, or tens. You can do it by relying on God. In fact you can't do it any other way.' I looked at him intently. 'Dave, the day may come when we are talking about ten million. Are you ready for that?'

He gave a flicker of a smile. 'You're going to turn this church into a multi-million pound industry?'

'I'm not turning the church into anything. I just go where the vision leads. We've got to be up to it, Dave. Are you with me?'

He nodded. 'It's okay, Paul. We're all with you.'

'Good. Now,' I said, flexing my arms and sitting up straight. 'decision time.'

The following day was spent in conference with Geoff, who was to mastermind the fund-raising drive. On paper he had a daunting task: no previous experience, and certainly no guarantees of success. At the end of the briefing Geoff stretched in his chair, then got to his feet and took a long look out of the window.

'I hope I can do it, Paul.'

'It's not you I'm relying on, Geoff. You know that.'

'Yes. I know. All the same.'

'The odds are against us?'

'I suppose that's what I mean. When you look at the thing close up.'

'That didn't stop David fighting Goliath. I think we've just got to put our backs into it. It won't be the first time we've worked hard. Anyway,' I added, 'now that your pay's gone up I expect you to work evenings and weekends.'

He smiled.

'I'll give it all I've got.'

'I know you will, Geoff.'

I stood up and walked to the door, but then paused.

'Oh, by the way, I wanted your opinion on something.' 'Yes?'

Taking a few steps back into the office, I said, 'How would you say Elim Community Projects is coming along?'

'In short, I'd say very well. We've made life easier for ourselves not having to apply to other agencies to get our own work done. And we're providing employment in the local area.'

'Do you think it could be repeated?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean could we do in other places what we're doing here?'

Geoff's eyes searched the room.

'I suppose so. I hadn't thought about it. But yes-why not? We could apply to the MSC to work in another area. If we wanted to, we could become a national agency instead of just a local one...'

'That's what I was thinking.'

'The only question is whether we have the organization we need to get it off the ground.'

'With Eddie Englebrecht we've certainly got the potential.'

'True.'

'And if we've got the potential, I think we ought to develop it.'

'You don't think

"What?'

'You don't want to wait until our financial situation has settled down a bit?'

'You mean until we know whether we're going to go broke?'

'That's being a bit blunt.'

'Geoff, if we waited for that day we'd be waiting until the cows came home. I say we should go for it now.'

Geoff's face broke into a smile.

'Okay. Then let's apply.'

'Good on you, Geoff.'

'On one condition-' he added, moving back to his desk. He picked up a stack of files and let them drop flat. 'You've got to do the negotiating.'

I winked. 'Understood.'

The next few weeks were taken up almost exclusively with the appeal. I don't know how I managed to find time to prepare sermons, do visiting, or perform any of the other hundred and one tasks that make up the daily round of a church minister. I would have loved to delegate my responsibilities, but there was no way of spreading the load. Still, the church responded readily to my request for concerted prayer, and supported me through that critical phase after the founding of the appeal, when, as after sowing a seed, we had no sign of results.

One Sunday I found Bob Oldfield at my side, wearing his characteristically cheerful smile. We sat in the front row beneath the platform.

'Paul, you asked me to look into selling that X-ray machine.'

'Yes. What's on your mind?'

'Two things. The machine could be sold-it still works. We might even get a decent price for it.'

'But?'

'But I wonder if we shouldn't make it a donation. We're asking people to give to us. Here's something we could give to others. There must be hospitals overseas desperate for an X-ray machine geared to paediatric work.'

'How much would it cost us to ship it?'

'I can find out.'

'Bob, that's a good one. That's definitely a good one.'

'Do you have contacts with missionary hospitals, Paul?'

'Not directly. But I'll get in touch with Elim's mission department first thing tomorrow.'

I punched him gently on the shoulder. 'What's the second brainwave?'

'A use for the X-ray room, if you haven't thought of one already.'

'Not so far. What do you want to put in there?'

'A recording studio.'

'A what?'

'An eight-track recording studio.'

'You're serious, aren't you?'

'In Liverpool, Paul, recording studios are serious business.'

'Okay-okay, let's talk it through.'

'I've got a friend called Ronny who could get me a lot of the equipment. I reckon we could do the structural alterations with a small MSC programme.'

'Have you costed it?'

'Roughly. I'd need a bit of capital put in, but not much.'

'And who could it cater for?'

'Young musicians wanting to do demos and who can't afford to hire a professional studio. I can see it being used for community groups. Plus it would be a resource for the Centre.'

I got to my feet, laughing.

'Okay, Bob. You've sold me on it. We'll put it to the deacons and the elders, but as far as I'm concerned you've got a green light right now.'

'Thanks, Paul.'

He rose and touched my arm.

'Did you make any progress with the Council?'

'We wrote them a nice letter saying what a benefit we are to the local community, and asking for a grant to cover the essential building.'

'And?'

'Well, I hate to say, "I told you so", but...'

'But it was like you said.'

'Yes.'

Bob shook his head. 'I can't understand that.'

'No, nor can I. I can see why secular institutions oppose evangelism. That's a direct conflict of interests. But with social concern you'd think we'd be on common ground with them. I don't know-I still find it hard to believe.'

'Well,' said Bob, cocking his head and staring at the floor, 'He who does not gather with me scatters

I sighed.

'Maybe. Anyway, I've got other things to think about right now.'

'The appeal?'

'I'm reviewing it with Geoff tomorrow morning.'

'Do you know how it's coming on?'

'Like a rocket that's still on the launch pad. We seem to spend our whole time pouring fuel in-you know -writing letters, making speeches. What I'm waiting for is the ignition.'

'Well, if there's anything I can do...'

I appreciate that, Bob.' I smiled. 'How about striking a match and getting the thing into the air?'

But when I asked Geoff to report on the appeal finances next day he was in a cautious mood.

'Fair to middling,' he said, waiting for me to probe him further.

'Has the campaign picked up in the last week?'

'A little. For instance, the Lord's given us the exact amount we needed for the increased mortgage liability after renegotiating our loan.'

'That's good news.'

'It's relatively good. We're making enough to keep us afloat, anyway.'

'Can you give me a breakdown of our income?'

He handed me a sheet, which I perused.

'We're seeing a steady stream of small donations. Quite a few interest free loans, too.'

'This is looking better than two weeks ago.'

'But it's not paying for the work on those foundations.'

'No, it's not.'

I frowned at the sheet. Geoff crossed his legs, then picked up the morning post and began to open it.

'Anything interesting?' I said, without looking at him. 'A gift of fifty pounds. And two bills.'

He tore open another envelope, and there was a short silence. When he spoke again his tone had changed.

'Paul -'

I glanced up.

'Look at this.'

'What is it?'

'Just look at it,' he said.

I took the letter and scanned it. It bore the letterhead of the National Children's Home, a charity for which we made an annual street collection. But this letter wasn't about the collection. Suddenly I struck the paper smartly with the back of my hand.

'They want to buy the church!'

'For use as a children's day centre. Beats the spiritist, eh?'

'You bet.'

'I presume we are going to accept.'

'Too right we are. Geoff, arrange for them to see the place. Find out if they're willing to make a firm offer. If they are, we'll accept it straight out.'

I let out a laugh. I'd always trusted that we'd be able to realize our assets when we needed them, but we'd had a long wait, and now that it had happened I had the sort of feeling a balloonist must have when his balloon, full and straining upwards, is finally set free. Like a landscape of houses and trees, our financial problems seemed to shrink and fall away. Watching them go made me dizzy.

'Should I set any time limit?' asked Geoff.

'No time limit. If they want to move in tomorrow, let them come.'

'But...'

'But what?'

Geoff tilted his head at the wall beyond which the foundations of the new church were being noisily excavated.

'Suppose next door isn't ready.'

'Geoff,' I said, regarding him gravely, 'you should know by now that a church is more than a building. If God sees fit to deprive us of suitable accommodation, we shall meet in a park.'

He didn't seem to get the joke.

'All winter?' he said.

In a matter of weeks contracts had been exchanged with the National Children's Home. The building was officially handed over amid much rejoicing on our last Sunday evening service, and for the winter of 1984-85 I transferred my office into my front room at home, and the congregation of Birkenhead Elim worshipped in a nearby hall owned by a small, elderly group of independent Congregationalists.

As winter set in, services at this venue became successively more bracing. The hall was equipped with large paraffin blow heaters, but these were too noisy to use during worship, so the hail had to be warmed up fiercely beforehand and then left to cool. By the end of the service, which was conducted in a fog of paraffin fumes, it wasn't unusual for the temperature to have dropped by twenty degrees. I often preached in my overcoat.

But the Congregational hail did have one great advantage over the old church: it was bigger. Consequently, although numbers had levelled off at the beginning of 1984, by the start of 1985, when we'd been in larger premises for a couple of months, the congregation had grown by twenty. And that in spite of the relatively inhospitable conditions.

The departments of the Wirral Christian Centre-the home, the luncheon club, the day nursery, and Evelyn's YTS project-continued to develop. So too did our application to become a national MSC agency. In fact the application provided a very useful and unexpected bonus in the person of Jeff Ridsdale, a management consultant, who, although drawn in to write a report on Elim Community Projects, actually gave a great deal of creative input, and agreed to remain available for consultation in the future.

Financially, with the sale of the old church the WCC started to look a lot more healthy. Gradually the money coming to us in donations, gifts and interest-free loans ran into tens of thousands of pounds, until the total deficit was reduced to £300,000. Funds now being freely available the construction programme proceeded apace. We soon had a request for the X-ray machine-from a hospital in Poland. The suppliers of the equipment agreed, at no cost, to strip down and reassemble the moveable head. The rest of the machine was dismantled, carefully colour-coded, and put into transportable units so that a church in Plymouth, who had kindly agreed

to pay for its export to Poland, could arrange transit. When it arrived at its destination it became, so we heard, the third most advanced X-ray unit in the country. Meanwhile we set up a small MSC programme to convert the basement room, and Bob, with a mixture of initiative and faith, set about building the studio.

In October 1984, taking a lunchtime walk down Woodchurch Road with Evelyn, I registered with surprise that the completion date was now in sight.

'Who are we going to ask to open it?' she said suddenly.

'Open it?'

'Yes. Cut the red ribbon and declare it open.'

'You know, I hadn't thought about that.'

'Don't you think we should have an opening?'

'Yes, I do. But who can we get to do the honours? The Mayor?'

'Maybe.'

'Who do you suggest?'

'What about one of the royals?'

'A Christian royal,' I said, then snapped my fingers. 'Got it. Princess Alexandra. She's a committed Christian.'

'You think she might do it for us?'

'She might. But how do we invite her?'

'I don't know. Write her a letter, I suppose. Her phone number won't be in the book, will it?'

I hugged Evelyn and wheeled around on the pavement.

'Then let's go back and draft an invitation.'

In fact, by writing to the Princess direct, we unwittingly broke protocol. Not that we didn't get a reply; we got a telephone call from the Lord Lieutenant of Merseyside. He wished to arrange a convenient time to visit the Centre, and turned out, when he came a few days later, to be a very personable retired officer of the Forces.

'You know,' he said as I showed him around. 'I have never seen anything like this. You cater for people from the cradle to the grave.'

'That is a very apt way of putting it. It is certainly our aim.'

A tidy smile appeared below the tidy grey moustache.

'And when do you hope to have your Centre finished?'

'If all goes well, by April. Do you think,' I began, 'that Her Royal Highness...?'

'That is not for me to say.'

'Is it likely ... But the Lord Lieutenant held out his hand.'

'I am grateful to you for giving up your time to show me the Centre. What I've seen has impressed me. I'll let you know within two weeks whether her Royal Highness can accept your invitation.'

His letter arrived on schedule. Gregory picked it up on the doormat and took it to Evelyn to open.

'Well?' I said.

'Fancy notepaper he's got, isn't it?'

'But is she going to come?'

Evelyn folded the letter back into its embossed envelope and put it down on the counter.

'Yes. Princess Alexandra is pleased to accept Reverend Paul Epton's kind invitation to officiate at the opening of Wirral Christian Centre. That means you'll have to write to the architect.'

'Why the architect?'

'Because members of the royal family visiting places like this have to be given the use of a new loo.'

'Daftest thing I ever heard,' I said, pulling myself up from the kitchen chair. Gregory was standing in the doorway. I ruffled his hair.

'How would you like that, eh? If everywhere you went you had to have a new loo?'

He giggled as I turned him about so he was facing the stairs.

'Sorry, you'll have to use the old one. Quick, clean your teeth before we leave for school.'

We watched him scurry away, then Evelyn said, 'Whose turn?' Since she'd started working on the YTS we'd needed two cars, and took it in turns to ferry the kids to school. Today, though, was going to be an exception. I asked her if she'd mind taking them two days in a row.

'Got an early appointment?'

'No.'

She looked at me quizzically.

'Just something I want to look at before I start work,' I said.

'Going to let me in on it?'

'Not just yet.'

We exchanged glances. We knew how to trust one another's silence by now.

'I see,' she said lightly. 'Well, if it's roses, remember I like the yellow ones. If it's chocolates, I like Terry's All Gold.'

I kissed her on the cheek.

'Better than roses or chocolates. See you later.'

Folding up the local newspaper and tucking it away under my arm, I headed for the car.

We moved into the new church in February. Thanks in the main to Evelyn's good taste, the interior, with its discreet lighting, dusky pink carpet and matching upholstery, was a minor masterpiece in design. The building seated nearly five hundred, had its own P.A., and could be divided into smaller units by means of moveable screens situated between the main body of the room and the two side aisles. Entry was gained by the main doors of the Centre through a passage that also led to the vestry and my new office.

As April drew closer, however, it became clear that the complex was very far from complete. We'd finished work on the first and second floors and also on the day nursery and the cluster of rooms a member of the congregation had ingeniously knocked through to form the luncheon club lounge. But Bob's recording studio and the buildings meant to house a small sports complex and coffee bar were still in chaos just a few days before the opening, and it took hours of devoted effort right up to the day of the Princess' visit to make them presentable. In the early hours of the morning we were still sloshing paint around in the basement. At dawn flowers had to be fetched from the Liverpool flower market, and the brand new toilet we were told to construct-much to Evelyn's delight-had to be given its final polish.

I hadn't realized either that the royal visit was a major security operation for the police. Each of the four hundred invitations had to be vetted, and space set aside not just for the thirty-strong press corps but for strategically placed plain clothes policemen. An hour before the Princess arrived armed guards were stationed on adjacent roofs, and sniffer dogs sent into the baptistry to check for explosives.

But in the end the occasion could only be described as deeply rewarding. To see every major dignitary in the area sitting in the new church, and hearing the gospel proclaimed by the General and Field Superintendents of the Elim Churches, gave me immense satisfaction, not just because I imagined such people to come only rarely within earshot of a preacher, but because at Wirral Christian Centre they were seeing the highest standards achieved for the highest cause. Not least, they were seeing a member of the royal family affirm those very values on which the work of Wirral Christian Centre had been built.

Much later that evening I was left in what suddenly seemed a very quiet church with Evelyn, Dave, Geoff, and Bob.

'Well, Geoff,' I said. 'Did you think your Mr Holmes and Miss Johnson would be the beginning of a project like this?'

'I can hardly believe it.'

'If you hadn't come along with your complaint about their treatment by the Housing Association, Wirral Christian Centre might never have happened.'

'Oh, I expect it would have happened,' said Geoff. 'God would just have brought it about some other way.'

'You've done a good job, Paul,' said Dave.

I waved the compliment aside. 'I deserve no more credit than the rest of you. We've all pulled together. And God's pulled harder than any of us.'

'Hey, do you know what?' said Evelyn. 'It's amazing, isn't it, what's actually happened since this church began. Do you remember that verse God gave you, Paul? The one about seven years?'

"David reigned seven years in Hebron, and thirty-three in Jerusalem." You're right. You know, it's almost exactly seven years since I read that. Seven years and seven months.'

'Which leaves thirty-three to go, eh?' said Bob.

'Don't!' said Evelyn. 'I'm only just recovering from Hebron.'

'I don't see where we can go from here, anyway,' said Dave. 'We've got our new church. We've got the residential home. We're on our way to becoming a national MSC agency. We've got forty young people swarming over us on the YTS schemes. I mean-what now?'

Geoff cleared his throat, looking at the floor.

'It could be,' he said, 'God wants us to do it all again. Twice as big.'

The silence must have lasted two or three seconds. Finally Evelyn said, 'Paul, is he serious?'

'Yes, he is. A few weeks ago another property came to our notice. The hospital at Leasowe.'

'Leasowe!'

'We went to look it over. It's suitable. And there's no doubt we could get it for a good price.'

Three faces showed disbelief one, Dave's, showed something close to horror.

'Paul, we've only just completed the work here in Birkenhead.'

'I know.'

'But you're now pushing us to take on something even bigger.'

'No. With respect, Dave. I'm not pushing. The last thing in the world I want to do is buy and redevelop another disused hospital. Especially one the size of Leasowe.'

'So why even consider it?'

'Because it could be that this is God's will. You know how it is. Sometimes God doesn't let you off the hook. He keeps on confronting you with something, until you have to do it.'

For a moment Dave couldn't find the words he was looking for.

'Paul, don't get me wrong. You have my absolute loyalty. But I believe there's a time for rest, a time to put aside business for the sake of spiritual growth . . .

'Dave, this isn't business. It's no more business than our first luncheon club was business, or the feeding of the five thousand was business. It's love in action.'

'All right. Business isn't the right word. I'm not criticizing you, Paul. I'm just saying that sometimes all this seems, well, a bit remote from the ordinary life of the church...'

'But there's no difference, Dave. This is the ordinary life of the church.'

'I think,' Bob interjected quietly, 'Dave means that having to think about a big organization like this can be a distraction from normal spiritual and pastoral concerns.'

I nodded. 'Okay. I concede that.'

'So how can they be held together?'

'The same way Moses held them together. The same way the apostles held them together. Out of necessity.' I made a gesture of resignation. 'The two are not incompatible. They're complementary. For instance, do you know what Princess Alexandra said to me this afternoon? We were taking tea with the residents when she turned to me and said, "Mr Epton, do make sure that all these people know our Lord.' That says it all. That's

the reason why we're in this "business". Okay, it sometimes goes way beyond what we're used to. But does that matter? Wouldn't it be far more suspicious if things stayed exactly the way we expected them to? Of course. What matters is the vision.'

Nobody made a response, so I went on, 'Let me share what's on my heart. I hope we're going to have Princess Alexandra back on Wirral soon. But not here. Not even at Leasowe. Those are just stepping stones. My vision is for a time when this new church we're standing in will be too small, when the facilities we're planning to provide for the community at present will be insufficient. I want this work to grow. And I want to build a church in this area that seats not five hundred, but five thousand...'

Chapter 6

Hitting the roof

In the autumn of 1985 I gave a nationwide group of Elim pentecostal ministers a conducted tour of WCC's operation, including Leasowe, over which negotiations were about to begin. Leasowe did not look impressive. Around the original system of buildings, like the Centre dating from 1914, new blocks had been added parallel to the road, giving the complex the appearance of a railway siding occupied by two rows of enormous carriages. It lay in the countryside north-west of Birkenhead, its exposure on flat land serving, if anything, to make it more of an eyesore.

As we passed through the building I outlined its projected uses, which were more numerous and more ambitious than those we'd planned for the Centre.

'The block to your left is earmarked as a day nursery. Leasowe's day nursery will be run on the same lines as the one you've already seen in Birkenhead, but it will be larger, with a maximum registration of sixty children.

'The area we are entering now will be developed as a hostel, a kind of half-way house catering for thirty young people in need of rehabilitation-from prison, from drug dependence, or from other difficult or problem backgrounds. This scheme has the full support of the Probation Service on Wirral, and will eventually employ eight full-time and four part-time staff, some of them trained counsellors and social workers. We also plan to extend the service by providing other facilities as funds become available-workshops in practical and creative skills, everything from playing a piano to filling out a CV.'

I held a door open with one finger while the group filed through and wiped the finger on my handkerchief.

'In Wirral as in all areas people sometimes find themselves homeless, and with this in view we hope to provide here nine homeless family units, allowing us to give short-term accommodation -probably up to three months -to those who need it. Incidentally, some of these units will also be available to ministers who are burned out and need to get away. I've booked my place already.'

'You can book mine, too,' said someone.

There was laughter, and I continued. 'Further on we come to our facilities for the handicapped. First, and most significant, there seems to be not just a local but a national shortage of nursing accommodation for handicapped people between the ages of thirty-five and sixty. We therefore plan to develop a housing system for this group. Originally we had thought in terms of fifteen units, but on the advice of the Area Health Authority we have decided to increase the number to thirty-five. The home will have communal areas, and, if we can negotiate the purchase of the land behind Leasowe Centre, a market garden, run on commercial lines, which will enable the residents to participate in society in a more meaningful way. For the younger handicapped there will be a handicapped play area including specially developed swings, slides, ramps, wheelchairs, roundabouts and so on.

'Finally,' I said, turning round and facing my guests, 'we hope that Leasowe will be able to make some contribution to relieving unemployment by developing what we call an unemployed resource centre. This will be unique on the Wirral, a facility providing a variety of workshops -music, drama, pottery, woodwork, metalwork and photography as well as a hundred and fifty seat lecture theatre, and training in job searching and social skills.'

The tour concluded, we drove back to the Centre, and the ministers took their seats in the church. Tea and sandwiches were passed around while I wrapped up the day's proceedings.

I'd like to thank you all for coming today. I hope by now you have a pretty good idea what's going on at Wirral Christian Centre. You can guess that this kind of ministry isn't a bed of roses. The decision to go ahead with the Leasowe project has come at the end of a long period of prayer and soul searching. For all the careful planning involved, it remains a venture of faith, and is not undertaken lightly. At this point, of course, you will think that having shown you all a good time and plied you with refreshments I'm just about to pass round the plate. Naturally, with Leasowe in the offing we have started a second appeal, and if you wish to make a donation I certainly won't tear up the cheque. But rest assured, contributions are on a strictly voluntary basis.

'Seriously, my reason for bringing you here today is to make you an offer. You may be wondering how all this is paid for. Well, it's not out of church funds - I don't have a congregation made up of millionaires. With the best will in the world Birkenhead Elim could not have met even a fraction of the costs involved in redeveloping the building you are in, nor could they finance the operations going on inside it, or take on a second scheme at Leasowe. Most of what we do is done with the help of the Manpower Services Commission. That means, simply, that government money is made available as long as we can find a worthy cause. Until recently we have been a local MSC agency - that is, one able to set up and operate MSC schemes of the sort you have seen today, within our local region. But as of October 1985 that agency - formally known as Elim Community Projects - has become national. In other words, we can organize schemes like the ones in progress here in any part of the British Isles. We can, if you would like, set them up in your church. I just want to make you aware today of the existence of that facility, and to say that should you be interested in making use of it, I will be only too glad to provide you with further details.'

Throughout the rest of 1985 and into 1986 WCC and ECP flourished like Jonah's gourd. So many ministers from various denominations responded with requests for MSC programmes that the number of people employed through Elim Community Projects swiftly ran into the hundreds. While we were trying to keep all this under control, negotiations began for Leasowe. Fortunately construction work on the Centre was now complete and we were able to persuade the bank to give us another loan, with the result that we took possession of the site in May 1986, and had the first MSC renovation project up and running a month later.

I planned to get Leasowe on its feet the same way as the Centre, starting each department as soon as I could, so that income could be generated to set against loan repayments and running costs. As with the Centre, the phasing of this procedure was all important, for even a slight delay in opening a facility could erode our income, and loss of income was no joke to someone walking the tightrope of financial viability. Consequently I was glad to see the day nursery open on schedule in October 1986, if only because it meant Leasowe was starting to earn its keep. In terms of administration, the new department could not help but encumber a system already stretched to its limit by the burgeoning Elim Community Projects, now expanding so fast that we'd had to set up regional offices elsewhere in the country. Geoff was working flat out. We seemed constantly on the verge of overreaching ourselves; co-ordinating the two organizations was like trying to move two lines of heavy commercial traffic along a narrow lane. Everything was fine as long as it kept going and kept to its own side of the road; but sooner or later there was bound to be a mistake, then the road would block up and the whole operation grind to a halt.

I shared some of these thoughts over lunch with Alistair Martin, who listened patiently, and then came up with an unexpected solution.

'Have you thought of incorporating WCC and ECP as companies?' he said.

'With shareholders, you mean?'

'Not necessarily. In fact I'm sure that wouldn't be appropriate. What you want is limitation by guarantee. Charitable companies where profit has to be ploughed back into the enterprise.'

'That's not a bad idea, Alistair.'

'It would bring into being permanent structures for the administration of your work. If you carry on growing the way you've been doing up to now, you're going to need that kind of organization. Once you've set up two companies, there's nothing to stop you setting up others as need demands.'

I put this argument to the elders. They backed it, and in January 1987, just a few months after our initial application, the two organizations became limited companies: Wirral Christian Centre Trust Limited, and Church and Community Projects Limited. By now the work of our national agency was so wide ranging (serving the Church of England, the Methodist Church, the United Reformed Church, as well as independent charities) that to drop the word 'Elim' from the title seemed only logical. There were, in fact, several non-executive directors on both boards who were members of other denominations. Executive posts were filled by people who had been working with us for a long time anyway: Derek Ireland became property director of WCC Trust Ltd, and Eddie Englebrecht managing director of CCP Ltd. Apart from the guarantors -comprising the three elders, and the Field, Missionary and General Superintendents of the Elim Churches-the only men with a role in both companies were Geoff and I. This was chiefly in the interests of efficient co-ordination. Geoff became Company Secretary; I retained overall control as chairman.

For the first six months of 1987 everything ran smoothly. The key department at Leasowe-the handicapped unit-opened as planned in April in spite of a last minute demand from the Fire Department that the roof space should be divided. It had to open, because we'd already taken on the staff: Health Authority regulations required that a full staff, adequate to care for twenty-five residents, be in place before a single patient be admitted; and Health Authority regulations being what they were, we had no choice but to comply. We weren't unduly worried. If demand was as high as they said it was, any losses would be quickly recouped.

The following weeks were taken up with a busy schedule of speaking engagements, which I didn't much enjoy, and tolerated only because they held out some prospect of furthering the appeal or preaching the gospel. To many of them I was a complete stranger; but when I arrived at a conference in the early summer I was surprised to find my reputation already in attendance.

'Pastor Epton?'

Looking at me solemnly was a young Elim minister with the sort of face one sees often at a conference but never speaks to.

'Would you have a moment?'

'Of course.'

'I made a point of listening to your address this morning. I found it very interesting.'

'Thank you,' I said, sensing that the word 'interesting' in his vocabulary bore a weight of unspoken meanings.

He went on, 'You seemed to be saying that social work is a legitimate form of church ministry.'

'That's right.'

'And so you would encourage your congregation to devote their time and energy to it?'

'I do. Practically every day.'

His look became more intense, as if, deprived of speech, the thoughts were piling up behind his eyes.

'You have problems with that?' I said.

'Pastor Epton, what do you think is the church's most important task?'

'What would you say?'

'Evangelism.'

I nodded. 'I'd go along with that.'

'And you can believe it, and still preach about social action?'

'Oh, I see,' I said. 'You're asking me why I'm setting up companies when I should be taking crusades, distributing tracts, and knocking on doors?'

'I don't understand why you proclaim the social gospel instead of preaching the Kingdom of God.'

'Because they're the same thing.'

The intensity returned, but this time it broke out in a volley of words.

'That's what the Salvation Army said. And the Methodists. I don't deny that they started out with good intent, as I'm sure you have, but in the end all the emphasis was placed on social work, and none on the preaching of Christ.'

I waved a hand to defend myself. 'Okay. Okay. Forget the term social gospel.'

'You can call it what you like.'

'I think you've misunderstood me. Look. I'm not against traditional evangelism. That approach has its place—perhaps it always will. The WCC has held I don't know how many evangelistic crusades. We've pioneered churches, built churches up. We've seen signs, miracles, healings, hundreds saved. All the classic indications that a church is doing what it's called to do. But—you can preach the gospel all you like, from the pulpit, on the doorstep, whatever—there will always be people who won't come within earshot of a pulpit, regardless how good your preaching is; there will always be people to whom the gospel, printed on a little slip of paper, means nothing. Do you see what I mean? People like that are beyond the reach of traditional evangelism.'

The minister opened his mouth, but I cut in before he could interrupt me.

'If the gospel is going to be heard in this country, it's got to be heard not just in what we say, but in what we do. The one thing people can't ignore is the practical expression of God's love. And who am I to preach to the dying, the imprisoned, the lonely old people and the single parent families, if I'm not prepared to show I care? Meeting someone's need is the beginning of evangelism.'

'But evangelism is never complete until the gospel has been proclaimed.'

'It's never complete until a person is totally transformed. I don't say to the folks at the luncheon club, "Here's a bowl of soup, but you're not getting to eat it till you've heard a thirty-minute sermon." Their bodily needs are just as important as their spiritual needs. By showing them the love of God in the form of food, shelter, friendship, respect, I'm saying far more than I could say in a whole day's preaching. If they want to respond to that and attend a service, or talk to me about Christ, that's their choice. Many of them do.'

'It's still a compromise.'

'All right. So Jesus compromised by healing the leper. He should have said, "Hello, sorry about the leprosy, that sure is tough, but I mustn't waste time on that so here's the gospel'

'But healing is also a sign of spiritual renewal.'

'Jesus didn't really care about the leper, then?'

'Yes, he cared

'But not about his leprosy?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Then healing is more than a sign. God heals because he wants to make men whole.'

'All right. But healing is a special case.'

'Nonsense. It doesn't make any difference. Turning water into wine, feeding five thousand people with five loaves and two fish, associating with tax collectors and prostitutes-all of those are signs, but they're also proof of God's care. Proof that made his audiences take Jesus' preaching seriously. You can't get away from it in the New Testament. Paul talks about doctrine and manner of life. James about faith with works. Christianity isn't the propagation of ideas; it's the effect of the whole gospel on the whole man-body, soul, spirit, personality, home, employment. The lot. For me that spells care for the community.'

'Whether or not it brings them to Christ?'

'Yes. Because if we are not involved in the community, we are not fully evangelizing.'

'The sort of thing you are describing is not evangelism.'

'So the Samaritan was wrong to assist the injured man? He should have passed by on the other side of the road like the priest and the Levite, in order to perform his religious duty?'

'I'm sure that by telling that story Jesus did not mean us to substitute good works for the preaching of the gospel.'

'No. He meant us to preach the gospel through our good works. "Go thou and do likewise

'But always to put the gospel first.'

'If I didn't think that social action furthered the Kingdom of God, I wouldn't touch it with a barge pole. But I believe it does further the Kingdom. By demonstrating that Christians can give an exemplary standard of care, I believe it carries the gospel into places it would never reach by other methods.'

'Such as?'

'Such as local authorities. Secular institutions who usually see the church as interested in the spiritual and nothing else. If we do work that they respect, they will work alongside us, and a bridge is built for evangelism.'

As I said this I saw again the smile on Simon Dulac's face, and wondered if I wasn't being too optimistic. I told myself I wasn't.

The young minister gave me a steady look.

'I think you're mistaken,' he said.

Driving back down the motorway I thought back over the debate. In the end I had won it by appealing to experience: we had been putting our respective ideas into practice for over eight years, and during that period, whereas my opponent's church, run on a policy of direct evangelism, had grown by only ten per cent or so, mine had more than trebled. He had no answer to that.

Yet something galled me that I could not quite put my finger on. However powerful my argument-and I considered it very powerful-the fact remained that social concern as it was worked out in WCC, what Dave Lewis had called 'business', seemed to exist in a state of unnatural pressure. Without a doubt this was a reflection of my own psyche, for the collection of organizations that had grown out of Birkenhead Elim were so young and growing so fast that I could not devolve my responsibilities as fast as I wanted to, and

consequently, though I assigned my duties as chairman to Mondays and Fridays, in practice I only began my church work in what any normal man would regard as his spare time. In short, I was feeling the heat. In a separate and distinct way I also felt the burden of leadership. But this was not, as is often the case, due to the fear of decision making or being blamed when things go wrong. Rather, I could not escape a suspicion that I had made decisions all too easily, and unwittingly pursued my own dream instead of obeying the will of God. I wanted very much the reassurance that I was seeing the vision clearly.

It must have been eleven by the time I got home. Evelyn had put the children to bed and was upstairs having a bath. She'd left me a note to phone Geoff, with 'urgent' written beside it, underlined three times. When I'd taken my coat off I made a coffee and then sat down by the phone.

'I'm sorry to be bothering you so late,' he said.

'No problem. What's up?'

'Paul, we're in trouble.'

'What kind?'

'Financial. I've just completed an up-to-date appraisal of our financial position and it's a lot worse than we had feared.'

'And?'

'We're facing a gross deficit of over £100,000.'

'How much?'

Evelyn, who was coming down the stairs, stopped halfway to look at me. I glanced at her and turned away again. Geoff repeated the figure.

'You're sure of that?'

'Yes, Paul.'

'But how?'

It was a pointless question, and I stopped myself.

'Okay. Thanks, Geoff. Can you make it tomorrow morning at six?'

'I'll be there.'

He put his receiver down, and I slowly replaced mine. When I opened my eyes Evelyn was standing in front of me, looking down.

'How serious is it?' she asked softly.

'A hundred thousand. It'll shut down Leasowe, that's for sure. WCC may survive t. I don't know.'

'Oh, Paul...'

'It's a bombshell, all right.'

For a moment we were both silent. Finally she took a breath and said, 'We can sell the house.'

I squeezed her hands, glanced down the hallway we had decorated a few months before, and shook my head.

'I could never do that to you.'

'No. If God wants my house, he can have it.'

I gazed at her, and a tired smile spread over my face.

'I know. And thanks for saying it.'

Geoff and I met in his new office at Leasowe early next morning. Looked at in detail the situation was no better. When Derek arrived we played around with a few makeshift solutions, but got nowhere. By midmorning I had decided to convene an emergency elders' meeting, and started phoning around to see if the elders could come that night. They all gave it priority, and at seven-thirty we assembled around the conference table in my office for the most critical meeting we'd ever held.

I led in prayer and then called the meeting to order.

'In view of the circumstances, brethren, I trust that no one objects to having Geoff Green present at this meeting. Geoff, as financial manager of WCC, obviously has the clearest view on the situation. Geoff, perhaps you could outline the financial situation?'

Geoff pulled himself up and hunched his shoulders over the table.

'To give the blunt figure, the gross deficit is approximately £111,000. Basically this is the result of a widening gap between income and expenditure on the Leasowe project. We've had to pay for roof space alterations as a requirement of the Fire Department, and also for full staffing in the handicapped unit. That steady outflow of cash ought to have been balanced by income from handicapped patients. But for the first three weeks after the unit opened no patients could be admitted because the alterations were in progress. Since they've been able to come in, we've only filled eight out of twenty-five beds. In other words, the unit is still nine below viability level.'

'What happens if we can't raise the money by the end of the month?'

'We'll have a lot of bad debts. By June 30 we will have trouble with our creditors.'

He pushed two typewritten sheets into the middle of the table. We all looked at them.

I thanked Geoff, paused, then went on, 'I want to point out, brethren, that we're not here as guarantors tonight. We're here as elders. That means we are looking at the problem not just in terms of practical solutions, but of spiritual oversight. From the purely financial angle I could wriggle my way out of this. I could go to the bank and extend the loan. I could manipulate a little harder. I know how to do it; I've done it before. But I'm tired of that approach, and I believe it would be a travesty if we managed to survive by relying on our wits. We're not in that game. If we are following the vision, if we are following God's will, then we can rely on God to bring us through. We go to God, or we don't go anywhere.'

'I agree,' said Peter.

Bob Oldfield nodded.

'Dave?'

Dave laced his fingers and stared at the blank notepaper in front of him. Finally he shook his head.

'I don't know, Paul. In a way all this seems to be the result of the business side of the church. I must be honest with you, there have been times in the last few weeks when I've thought about resigning from the eldership.'

'Dave, I don't think this is the time.'

But Bob cut in.

'No, Paul. It's just what you're saying. This is a matter of spiritual oversight. We wrestle not against flesh and blood; and if that's true, we've got to realize Satan's going to put us under pressure.'

'I'm just saying,' said Dave, 'that it's all very well to talk about meeting as elders. But frankly I find it hard to function as an elder when there is so much information, about different parts of the work, that never reaches me.'

'All right. But, Dave, don't you think that's a tension that all of us feel?'

'I can only speak for myself.'

'Dave,' I said. 'Let me tell you this. I don't think Bob and Peter will mind if I say that they have the same difficulty, and they too have been tempted to resign.'

Dave raised his eyebrows.

'The tension is real,' said Bob. 'But we mustn't let Satan get between us. If he does that, if we all throw in the towel, we're finished. We've got to stand together.'

No one doubted that Bob was right. I laid my hands palm down, on the blotting pad, and said slowly, 'I suggest this might be a good time to reaffirm our commitment to one another.'

All four men nodded silently. We stood, and I grasped Dave Lewis firmly by the hand.

'Dave, I say this not as pastor, but as your Christian brother: I am committed to you.'

'And Paul, as a Christian brother, I am committed to you.'

The declaration was exchanged solemnly between every individual in the room, and suddenly we found ourselves breaking into smiles. We had reached the top of the pass, and were ready for the descent. Buoyed by this sense of refreshment I drew my seat back up to the table.

'Now-what are we going to do about this £111,000 deficit?'

'Do we have any outstanding income?' said Dave.

Geoff flipped through a few pages of his folder.

'One of our problems has been a hold up on DHSS payments. Those will be worth nearly twelve thousand when they arrive. Also, there is a possibility of a loan coming in.'

'Fifty thousand.'

'That's useful. Loans have to be repaid. Still, in the short term, with that and the DHSS money, the figure we're looking at is £49,000 rather than £111,000.'

'Any chance of covering the deficit through the appeal?' asked Bob.

The file labelled Appeal Fund Replies 1987 was lying on my desk. I picked it up and weighed it in my hand.

'This is it. Two hundred letters, and basically they all say "no".'

Bob frowned and tapped the end of his pen on the table.

There was a pause.

'Forty-nine thousand,' said Peter softly. 'Well-if it's any use, I'm willing to give my house.'

An offer like that was proof, if proof were needed, of the maturity of the church. I was moved.

'Thanks, Peter. Evelyn said the same to me when I told her the news last night. I think we'd all say it; the problem is, in practice, it's only a gesture because none of us could free the capital before the end of the month.'

He nodded. 'Then I think at the very least we should be having a day of prayer and fasting.'

'We could make it a gift day,' said Dave. 'The congregation will certainly want to contribute.'

'True. Except that they're already giving up to the hilt.'

'Then why don't we ask people to give something particular. Like unwanted luxuries,' said Bob.

'Because we'd get a church full of old television sets,' I said, smiling. 'But that's okay. Only no clothes-we'd never get rid of them.'

'We'd better make sure we have a free Sunday,' interjected Peter.

I opened my desk diary. A few minutes' deliberation showed that the only feasible date was June 28.

'Pretty close to D-Day.'

'Nothing we can do about that,' I said, making a note. 'The other question is how we should handle it.'

Dave shifted in his chair.

'With respect, Paul, I'm not sure it's an occasion for a sermon. How would you feel if we each read a passage from the Bible-something that's relevant to the situation.'

'Sounds right to me.'

The others nodded. I made another note, and then paused.

'It's important to be positive here. At the same time I think we need some realism. Prayer is vital. But the fact is, if everyone in the congregation emptied their bank accounts we wouldn't be anywhere near solving our problem.'

'We might get five thousand from a gift day,' said Peter.

'More like two. Don't misunderstand me. I'm not disparaging it. But a gift day probably has more to do with our commitment as a congregation than raising cash.'

'So what else can we do?' asked Dave.

'I can think of a couple of long shots. Mary found the address of a trust fund this afternoon that might give us some support. Also, it's just possible that the Elim trust may guarantee extra borrowing. I'll arrange a meeting, anyway.'

'But you don't hold out much hope.'

'Frankly, no. Apart from that,' I said, 'the only thing I can think of is to go back to the Council for a grant.'

'Would they give us one?' said Geoff.

I let my gaze rest on the two framed certificates of incorporation for WCC and CCP that hung on the office wall.

'They owe it to us, Geoff.'

'Yes, but owing it to us.'

Geoff didn't finish the sentence. In the silence that followed I heard the familiar sound of a bus braking at the lights on Woodchurch Road. It seemed at the same time louder and more distant than usual.

'Well, I hope this money comes in,' said someone.

I looked down.

'It's got to come in. If we don't have another £49,000 available by the end of this month, Leasowe will have been one vast Satanically-inspired mistake. And since I will be the one responsible for the failure, the church will receive my resignation on July 1.'

Peter jerked upright in his chair.

'Wait a minute, Paul. The elders would have to approve of that...'

'No, Peter. As pastor I am the Moses in this church. Every person has his role to play, there are Aarons and Joshuas, but I carry the can. If Leasowe flops, I will have misled you all. I would have to resign.'

'Okay, but a moment ago we were talking about standing together. If you resign you're just leaving us to pick up the pieces.'

'There are other ministers just as capable as I am. Headquarters would assign you someone. The fact is, if I have seen the vision wrongly, I will have nothing left to give you. It's as simple as that.'

'Nothing would change your mind?'

'Perhaps, if I met a man in a fawn coloured gaberdine raincoat ... otherwise, no.'

Peter said nothing, but shook his head, his eyes cast down.

'However,' I added, allowing myself the ghost of a smile as I rose to my feet, 'I still believe that Leasowe is God's will. He will give us £49,000 within twenty days, and when he gives it to us, I'm going to start believing him for that five thousand seater church. Faith builds on faith. I'm not anticipating failure.'

Chapter 7

The right to speak, the chance to dream

Mark Redmond, a representative of the Borough Council, came to WCC in the afternoon of the following day. He listened as Derek Ireland and I outlined our situation, occasionally making notes on a large pad resting in his lap; polite, but clearly on his guard. When he'd taken down the details he asked me what I wanted the Borough Council to do.

'Ideally, I'd like them to give me a grant of £49,000. Failing that a loan, preferably interest free, to be repaid over five years.'

'I would advise you to apply for a loan.'

'Because..'

'Because you'll be far more likely to get it. Present policy being what it is, most councillors won't be anxious to give money away unless the cause is exceptional.'

'And what counts as "exceptional"?''

'I couldn't say.'

'But it's not a place like this,' said Derek.

'Perhaps.'

'We do provide essential services, you know. We do keep a lot of people employed.'

'I'd go for a loan,' Redmond repeated, smiling blandly, in a way that foreclosed any further discussion of our use to the community.

'Okay,' I said. 'How do we apply?'

'Not to the Council as such.'

For a moment he hesitated.

'I'd suggest the Economic Planning Committee. They deal with applications of this sort. If I remember correctly, they are due to meet next Monday. Do you know Alan Goldberg?'

'I think I met him last year'

Derek clicked his fingers. 'Short guy, not much hair.'

'Yes. If you phone him, he may agree to raise your application as an emergency item at the end of the agenda.'

'Would I be allowed to represent our case?'

'No. If Alan's willing to include you he'll delegate someone to make a report.'

'That's a bit haphazard.'

'That's the way it's done.'

'How do I know we'll get a fair hearing?'

'You can be sure that whatever you say will be considered in the making of the report.'

I was about to question this, but another bland smile stopped me.

When Mark Redmond left I received an unexpected visit from Beryl Preston, one of the two women who ran the luncheon club, who wanted to share a word the Lord had given her. Remarkably, this turned out to be almost exactly what the elders had decided the night before: we should be willing to sacrifice everything, even cars and houses, and the spiritual sacrifices of prayer and fasting should be made not just by the elders, but by the entire congregation. 'The Lord will provide all our need,' she said firmly. 'And I think the Lord is telling us to pray for more than the £49,000-if we ask, he'll give us another £100,000 so we can clear all our debts.'

By a miracle, when I phoned Alan Goldberg he agreed to put us on the agenda for Monday's meeting, and the next day, Wednesday, a Council official came to make a report on us. Behind the spectacles and the ubiquitous grey suit he gave an overwhelming impression of dryness, a man made of autumn leaves. His name was Norman Quentin.

'£61,000,' he murmured, his pen rustling over the paper.

'Of which we can recoup twelve.'

'Why June 30?'

'End of the month. It's then, if we can't meet our financial obligations, we could be in trouble.'

'And will that mean the loss of this building as well as Leasowe?'

'No. At forty-nine thousand we can keep going here. But Leasowe would have to be put back on the market, and in the long run-because a place like Leasowe will be hard to sell-that's a liability for WCC.'

He recorded this.

'Now, if you don't mind, we'll take a closer look at finances. I take it you've looked into extending your bank loan?'

'Our loan facility is already utilized. It's a fully served loan, guaranteed against properties here and elsewhere in the country. But because of the structure of the loan it can't be extended for a situation like this.'

'But you could provide security for a further loan of £49,000?'

'Seven senior members of staff who own their own property.'

'And will a loan of this size be enough to ... make the project viable?'

His pronunciation drew the sap from the word, as if it would be lifted on the wind and carried away.

'You mean, will the money just be swallowed up in existing overdraft repayments? The answer is no. Our longterm prospects are very good, and I can give you audited accounts to prove it.'

'The committee might ask,' he said, 'why, if your longterm prospects are so good, you've got into trouble now.'

'Then you can tell them that it is largely owing to misinformation received from the Health Authority.'

'Misinformation?'

'It was on their advice that we set up the handicapped unit at Leasowe. It was also on their advice that we doubled the capacity to thirty-five beds. Not only that, we complied with their demand that we should have full staff-full staff, mind you, for the entire capacity of the unit-on the payroll before the first resident came in. For three weeks it was impossible to admit any residents because essential conversion work was being undertaken for the Fire Department. Now we are told that demand was wrongly assessed, with the result that, instead of having to provide extra beds to house the handicapped, we are hard pressed to get enough in even to meet our viability level. In my opinion it would not be untrue to say that since the public services have got us into this mess, it is the least they can do to help us get out of it.'

The pen just carried on scratching over the paper; if Norman Quentin had any feelings on the matter, he was keeping them carefully concealed.

'Well, I think that should do,' he said.

But I wasn't going to let him get away that easily.

'There are some other facts of which the committee should be apprised. If Leasowe has to close, we are not talking about the demise of a little church project which has no consequences for the community at large. Facilities being built at Leasowe will provide employment for at least a hundred people. Our daughter company, Church and Community Projects, based at Leasowe, employs just under a thousand. Not only that. The construction work being undertaken is creating secondary jobs, important contracts for small local businesses, all of which will be lost if Leasowe closes. Besides generating employment, Leasowe is tackling Wirral's social problems. It is re-using derelict property. And it is attracting charitable funds to the Wirral from all parts of the country. Put simply: in scale, in quality of service, in ethos and orientation, the Leasowe project is a major asset to the Wirral. I think the committee might bear in mind just how much depends on their decision.'

'I will certainly make the committee members aware of your feelings, Mr Epton.'

I didn't take my eyes off his, and soon he looked aside.

'So what are the chances of our being given the loan?'

'I can't answer that.'

'You must have some idea.'

He shrugged.

'Like the Council, the Economic Planning Committee is divided along party lines. If you want to promote your case you'll have to lobby the party leaders . . .

Lobbying wasn't a prospect I relished. To curry favour with anyone ran against the grain of my instincts as a preacher, and to do it with politicians seemed not just unnatural but downright morally dubious. I almost wished Alan Goldberg had thrown out our request before it got to the committee. But, as Evelyn pointed out later, there was no argument against taking into the political arena an issue that should, in theory, enjoy all party support. And what party would not want to be seen supporting a venture whose aim was the improvement of life on Wirral? So I picked up the phone and got down to the tiresome business of ingratiating myself to those who held the reins of power on the Borough Council.

Since Wirral was a hung council these were three in number. With the Labour leader I emphasized the loss of jobs, with the Conservative the loss of regional prestige, and With the Alliance the loss of a sensible and well-managed caring institution. Miraculously all three assured me of their sympathy and support.

'So we won't have to sell the house after all,' said Evelyn. It was eleven-thirty at night; I flopped into an armchair, glanced at her, and smiled.

'It's been a fight.'

'Do you wish we could have raised the money some other way?'

'No, not really. In a way I'm pleased, because it makes me feel as if we're being taken seriously at last. It set me thinking of all those wild plans ... do you remember?'

Three years before we had been driving out for an evening appointment.

'Which road are we on?' Evelyn had asked suddenly.

'The M53. Why-are you looking for something?'

'I was driving down here the other day, and I saw a field. Yes, there it is.'

She pointed at twenty acres of fiat land to the right of the motorway.

'What's so special about it?'

'That's where the church is going to be.'

'This is Green Belt.'

'I know. But when I looked at it last time, I could see a five thousand seater church sitting there.'

I looked again. True enough, I could see the church. But in my mind's eye I saw not just a church, but a complex of buildings, with a school, sports facilities, office and living areas, a car park. I told Evelyn, and we laughed as the plot skimmed by us and fell behind. We'd been dreaming dreams. Three years later it felt as if those dreams were on the brink of realization. There would be a church; there would be a school. There would be an AIDS clinic. All kinds of things to which Leasowe was just the first step.

In church that Sunday I explained the financial problem, summarized the actions taken to meet it, and told the congregation that the elders had proposed a gift day for the end of the month. The whole church turned resolutely to prayer. On the Monday morning I arrived at my office to find a telephone message from Norman Quentin: the meeting of the Economic Planning Committee had been postponed until June 30-an annoying development, but, as he assured me when I called him, probably for the best, since it gave extra time for assembling the necessary documentation to present our case. For the next three days I pursued the so far fruitless trail of applications to trust funds On Thursday came the meeting I'd arranged with the guarantors.

I'd never held out much hope of a positive outcome from this, and from the way it started out it seemed that my suspicions were going to be confirmed. The guarantors, led by Brian Edwards from Elim Headquarters, arrived in the afternoon and made an exhaustive tour of Leasowe before retiring to the Centre for a buffet tea. In the middle of these refreshments -served to the sound of the meeting a visiting evangelist was holding in the next room - I was called away for a counselling appointment, from which I returned to find the guarantors embroiled in a discussion, not about the aims and function of Leasowe, but about what the buildings looked like. Persuading them there were better uses for charitable finds than dressing up the exterior paintwork took a little time, but finally the point was accepted, and pretty soon we came down to bottom line finances.

At this point something totally unexpected happened. Instead of dredging through my expenditures Derek Green said, 'Okay, Paul, tell us how much you need.'

The bluntness of the question surprised me, Remembering what Beryl had said to me the previous week I decided to be equally blunt in my reply.

'To deal with existing financial needs, and the projected financial needs until viability comes about in each of the units, we need £180,000.'

I waited to see if a fifty ton weight was going to fall on my head or if I'd get blown out of the room. Neither happened, and Derek Green looked around the group of guarantors and said, 'Well, that seems reasonable to me. Are we agreed to guarantee Paul a hundred and eighty thousand?'

To my utter amazement everyone nodded.

As a result of this I was able to go to the bank and renegotiate our loan. It wasn't a donation-every penny of the £180,000 would have to be paid back, with interest-but it gave us time to stabilize our income from Leasowe, and as such it constituted an answer to our prayers. It almost immediately made possible an expansion of our work, so that the luncheon clubs were soon serving over three hundred elderly people every day of the week, the day nurseries catering for over one hundred children and the gross employment figure for the two companies exceeding a thousand.

It was, in fact, exactly what I wanted, and since it was happening, I should have been happy. That I wasn't came as something of a surprises but, in fact, as soon as I stopped long enough to look at myself, I realized I was feeling terribly tired, as tired as I'd felt ten years before under the pressure of dissent within the church. The cause was different, but the effect, the numbing weariness of struggling against circumstances, was exactly the same.

wondered if now, ten years down the road, I shouldn't call it quits and let somebody else on the treadmill. Wonderful as the dreams were, to work the gigantic machinery by which those dreams were made real was a task for the very, very strong, and at that moment I felt anything but strong.

This mood followed me to the gift day, which in all other respects was a great successes, and seemed to gather strength as the end of the month drew near. On the first day of July -the day after the Economic Planning Committee met-a call came through from Norman Quentin. He was sorry, but the news he brought was not the news I'd been looking for: the Council had turned us down.

'Why?' Evelyn wanted to know.

I'd taken her away from the WCC for lunch, and we were sitting at the counter of a local cafe that carried its name, in cracked red and yellow paint, on a plate glass window large enough to give us a good view of the passing pedestrians. I had scooped up a forkful of macaroni, but suddenly didn't want to eat, and laid it down again.

'He said they weren't convinced we'd survive. Somebody put it into their heads that the operation was bigger than we could handle, and that if they put any money in, they'd lose it.'

'But who would say that?'

I shook my head, gazing out over the street.

'I should have insisted on representing us myself.'

'You mean Norman Quentin

'I don't know, Evelyn. The motion was backed by all - three parties. They said so over the phone. In the end even Norman Quentin said it.'

I pushed my plate aside.

'I don't know how much more of this I can take.'

'Paul, it's only the Council. What did you expect?'

'I suppose I expect a little co-operation. It's in their interest. I mean, I wonder what's behind it all. You bend over backwards to accommodate them, play the game their way, and when the chips are down they don't want to know. What's wrong with us?'

'We're Christians.'

'I suppose that's it.'

'No, Paul, it makes a difference. You know it does. And you have to admit it's not all one way. Remember that dinner where you were put next to the Mayor, and asked him to stop swearing? You can't take a stand on things without raising hackles, can you?'

I sighed.

'No, you're right. I'm just saying you can only put up with it for so long.'

'A lot of people rely on you, Paul.'

'There are other pastors to rely on.'

She laid her hand lightly on mine.

'So you're going to resign?' she said.

I didn't reply.

At the office my secretary had left a note of calls received in my absence; normally I would have picked up the phone immediately and returned them, but instead I sat and let myself become part of the stillness. So much had happened in this room. So many vital decisions had been made here. Somehow the silence carried the impression of all that, as though silence were a wax mould, pushed into a different configuration in the spaces variously made and occupied by men. I tried to picture the shape of the silence in the office, and wondered as I did so whether, besides receiving impressions, silence did not sometimes turn hard, so it could form, as well as be formed by, the life of the person within it. The silence here seemed like that. It felt like the rocky bed of a river, sculpted by the movement of stones, but at the same time resistant, unyielding, so that it guided the currents and decided itself the shape it would take. I was tumbling across it like water.

Suddenly, irresistibly, I felt the need of intervention, and reaching for my Bible did something I had since the beginning of my ministry forbidden others to do: I flicked it open randomly, and began to read:

*Do not gloat over me, my enemy!
Though I have fallen, I will rise.
Though I sit in darkness,
the Lord will be my light.
Because I have sinned against him,
I will bear the Lord's wrath,
until he pleads my case
and establishes my right.
He will bring me out into the light;
I will see his justice.
Then my enemy will see it
and will be covered with shame,
she who said to me,*

*'Where is the Lord your God?'
My eyes will see her downfall;
even now she will be trampled underfoot
like mire in the streets.*

*The day for building your walls will come,
the day for extending your boundaries*

I snapped the book shut.

The passage was so relevant, echoed so precisely, the pitch of my feelings, gave me such hope. But I had fallen on it by the wrong means, and therefore I knew that God could not be speaking through it; Geoff made no comment when I mentioned it to him. Half an hour later I left the Bible lying on my desk to go with Derek for an appointment in Ormskirk.

This was followed immediately by an interview with the church visitor, Thelma Lewis, but, as Mary was serving coffee, we were interrupted by a sharp knock on the door. It was Evelyn. The haste with which she entered the room told me something was wrong: her expression confirmed it. She looked like someone who'd been steeling herself for hours and was just about to jump off a bridge.

'Paul, what are you going to do?' she demanded.

'Do...?'

'About resigning.'

Mary and Thelma looked at me. I looked at Evelyn. I was scarcely able to believe she'd ask a leading question like that in front of witnesses.

'To be honest, I don't know,' I stammered, painfully aware of the other women in the room, and searching for a means of deflecting the discussion. My eye fell on the Bible.

'But I have had a very unusual reading..'

At that Evelyn's face went white.

'What was it?' she snapped.

'Micah 7, Verse 8, to the end of the chapter.'

'I've had it too!'

'Micah?'

'Yes.' I felt her fingers close around my wrist.

'Quick. You've got to come.'

We literally ran out of the room, down the corridor, and into the little office once used by Geoff and now the nerve centre of the YTS scheme. My first impression was of Beryl, standing on the far side of the room; she gave Evelyn an anxious look which faded rapidly into one of relief. Almost at once Mary and Thelma had crowded in behind and for a moment we paused expectantly, like a group of tourists waiting for a guide. Laid with the neatness of a museum exhibit on the desk before us was a leather bound Bible, open at Micah 7.

Evelyn picked it up.

'Do not gloat over me, my enemy', she read out loud, then glanced over the rest of the passage. 'What did it say to you?'

'It just seemed to fit our situation.'

'Yes?'

I hesitated, but suddenly decided to throw caution to the wind: the story was out now, anyway.

'That feeling that we're staggering from one crisis to another, that the vision is going to be shattered. I suppose I liked it because of the promise that some day, some time, it'll all come right. "The day for building your walls will come, the day for extending your boundaries." I had a little glimmer of hope there. Just a glimmer.'

'When, Paul? When's it going to come right?'

'I don't know.'

'Didn't you read the beginning of the chapter?'

'No...'

"The day of your watchman has come, the day God visits you. Now is the time of their confusion ... But as for me, I watch in hope for the Lord, I wait for God my Saviour; my God will hear me."

I snatched the book from her, devouring the words.

'When did you read this?'

'This morning.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I was going to,'

'But?'

'But I wanted to talk about it with someone else first. I shared it with Beryl.'

I looked at Beryl, who said calmly, 'Your wife takes your sermons very seriously, Pastor.'

Evelyn took her Bible, closed it, and laid it down again on the desk- Avoiding my eyes she said, 'I opened it at random, and started reading. I didn't tell you this morning because I know that's the wrong way to do it, and I didn't want to get a telling off. If Beryl hadn't pushed me into it, I wouldn't have told you this afternoon.'

In the rather weighty silence I realized I was missing my cue.

'Welt,' I said eventually. 'I have a confession to make. .

I read it again from the pulpit the next Sunday morning. On the gift day a week later we raised £3,500, on top of which we were given an outright donation of £2,000. The money from the DHSS came in, and pretty soon we had a steady income, above normal church giving, of £3,000 per week towards the Leasowe project. God hadn't sorted out our financial problems at a single blow; in real terms we were only just afloat, and needing every ounce of faith to get through another day. We had-and still have-no guarantee that we won't fold up. God alone knows what is going to happen. All we know is that God has his hand on the work, and that he will undertake.

After the gift day, however, two things happened which seemed to be significant of God's blessing. The first stemmed from a tragedy at Leasowe; one of the workforce dropped dead on site. Of course we were more than ready to offer help when his family asked for it, and this care resulted in a lot of serious questions being asked about Jesus Christ. I was privileged to take the funeral, and to see many of our employees at the service.

Second, Derek Green, who as a director had encouraged us to move forward, soon afterwards left a thriving church in Chelmsford for a joint position as pastor of a tiny church in Wallasey and managing director of the Trust. I told him before he came that he must have been crazy to make a decision like that, for the sacrifice was considerable. But sacrifice, stepping out in faith, is the beginning of blessing.

As for the passage in Micah 7, that acted as a mirror in which the church could see the unfolding of the vision, on a subsequent Sunday I referred to it in a sermon:

'I believe that God is inviting us to dream our dreams. I believe he has given us a vision to follow, and I know in my own heart that the programme of social action he has outlined for us will come to birth. We will have an AIDS clinic set up within five years, and a school and sports complex within ten. Our aim in everything is to show through our work that God is concerned with the full gamut of human need. To speak the gospel is vital, but we live in an age when speaking alone is not enough. The gospel must also be acted out in the form of concrete expression of the love of God for his people. As Jesus said, we shall be known by that love. But at the same time we are going to build a Christian community of such integrity, such quality, such authority, that society will have to take notice of it.'

I let my fist come down on the pulpit rail, a very conventional preacher's gesture in a very unconventional church.

'I believe, in the day we accomplish that, we will have earned the right to speak. But much more-we will have earned the right to be heard.'