

Commitment and Care of the Man from The Ministry

(A transcription of the words in the Argus Article (1985) because the photo that we have of the article is very difficult to read.)

Annabel Hughes talks to Newport's mayor about his pioneering role in the Church.

The Rev. Cyril Summer's trinity of Christianity, Pacifism and Socialism has made him one of the most controversial Mayors of Newport for years.

His distaste for pomp and ceremony, His outspoken support for CND, his efforts to twin Newport with a town in the Ukraine have raised the eyebrows of his political opponents and colleagues and the public as a whole.

Yet anyone who has come into contact with Rev. Cyril Summers through his work as a Presbyterian minister will know that the media have only honed in on the newsworthy aspects of his Christian beliefs....that his broad-based humanitarian beliefs have long made him a pioneering figure in an establishment world.

And their respect for those principles brought many heartfelt tributes at a special social evening recently to mark his retirement from the ministry of the Presbyterian Church of Wales.

Ministers don't have to retire at 65, of course. The Rev. Cyril Summers feels the time has come, however, to let his enthusiastic young successors a free reign.

But he will always be remembered in Newport as the man at the helm of a unique – and successful community experiment.

Born and raised in Liverpool, he entered the ministry deeply concerned about the problems and needs of the underprivileged people ... the poor, the sick, the elderly.

"I'd been influenced to a great extent by my association with a Unitarian Church in a slum area of Liverpool, known as the Domestic Mission – basically a mission to the poor which tried to involve itself in the community and fight for better conditions."

He saw obvious parallels between Liverpool and industrial South Wales. When he took over Corporation Road Church in 1984 most of the congregation – about 50 regular attenders, lost in a barnlike 1,250 seater church – remembered the 'good old days' when a colourful character called the Rev. Roderick Jones – alias 'Uncle Roddy' – ran thriving church social clubs, organised concerts featuring some of the biggest stars of the day, and was able to pack the church to capacity for every Sunday service.

The Rev. Summers knew Uncle Roddy, too, from the time he'd visited Liverpool. "He used to wear a straw boater with a shoelace hanging from the back, presumably to hitch it onto his coat so that the wind wouldn't blow it away. As a fundraiser, he was the greatest 'beggar' I ever met."

By the 1950s however, the congregation had dwindled dramatically and the building itself was run down and dilapidated. The pillars were leaning at dramatic angles, the roof and the walls had parted company, the wind literally whistled through the pews.

"In high winds, the roof used to moan as if it was about to collapse. We had to decide whether we were going to demolish it or bolster it up – even though we didn't have the money for either."

They decided in 1963, to pull it down and church members worked on a rota basis stripping the interior until it was reduced to a shell for the demolition man. It was one of the worst winters on record, with inevitable fuel shortages.

But old folk found practical comfort from the church in the shape of bags of logs and wooden blocks and the spoils of the demolition work.

“Someone manned a circular saw in the place where the pulpit had been, throwing blocks down a makeshift chute for others to bag up at the bottom,” he recalled.

Following a special ecumenical workshop in July, church members from 11 countries became involved in the final clearance work and in laying the foundations of the new building.

Money for the project came from all kinds of sources. “I remember one old lady who called at the manse one day to ask what we were doing and later returned with a very handsome donation. I’d never seen her before - and I never saw her again. The whole future of the church at this point was at stake, so we set up house groups to discuss the position and organised a course of study on what the church is – and what sort of building a church requires.”

An architect was then called in to produce plans based on the ideas thrown up by the house groups and a revolutionary kind of community centre was soon in the making.

The whole idea of Community House, in fact, was to stop measuring a church’s success by the number of members and to concentrate instead on working with the community.

But, more than twenty years on, Community House is used by upward of five hundred people a week!

The downstairs games room and coffee bar – often manned by the minister, himself – is particularly popular with young people.

Volunteers working for MIND use the kitchen twice a week to provide lunches for the mentally handicapped while church members themselves provide lunches once a week for the elderly.

The main hall is used for everything from a NSPCC playgroup to a club for the blind. Upstairs rooms are also booked for a variety of activities including English classes for members of the Asian community.

“We don’t differentiate at all between believers and non-believers. The only criteria is that Community House is reserved for community projects,” he said. “And every group that meets there is represented on the Management Committee.”

To further their concept of work within the community the centre has, since 1969, employed its own community warden, who is involved in organising summer play schemes and schools work and has encouraged the growth of links between the schools and the old folk living in the neighbourhood who are now frequently invited along to their shows, Christmas celebrations and so on.

Since the setting up of the Manpower Services Commission they have also been running their own community service – offering painting and decorating work, gardening etc. The service has involved 22 people – plus two more community workers employed under an Urban Aid scheme.

“Even Sunday worship is unconventional with the youngster encouraged to ‘run the show’.”

Youth counselling has played an important part in the work of Community House, too. The thriving youth clubs offer 'positive recreations' to many youngsters, who've previously been in trouble with the police, or who've simply not made any mark in the world. Weekend camps are a popular feature.

"Community House is the only venture of its kind in Wales and we're very pleased with the way it's developed, although we haven't given it much publicity because we've been waiting to see it well and truly established."

Confident that his successors at Community House will keep up the good work Rev. Summers still had plenty of other interests to fill his retirement. With two months of his term as mayor still to run he hopes to tie up the twinning with the Ukrainian town and organise for a German contingent from Heidenheim to visit Newport for the fortieth anniversary of V.E. Day.

He also hopes to take up the invitation from the mayor of Hiroshima to visit the city on the anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb in August. He plans to devote even more time to the peace movement – and will continue, for the moment at least, to take services at Beechwood church.

His commitment to the community in general and the under-dog in particular is as strong now as it was in his youth.