

ROBERTS, WILLIAM JOHN (1904-1967), Methodist minister and ecumenist

Name: William John Roberts
Date of birth: 1904
Date of death: 1967
Gender: Male
Occupation: Methodist minister and ecumenist
Area of activity: Religion
Author: Alun Roberts

W. J. Roberts was born 7 December 1904 at 22 The Square, Blaenau Ffestiniog, Merionethshire, the eldest of three children of William Roberts, slate quarryman and his wife, Ellen Jones. His grandfather, William Roberts, Maentwrog, also a slate quarryman, had been a prominent Wesleyan lay preacher who, during his last years, published a collection of his sermons with the title *Cyfraith y Ty* (1905).

W. J., the name by which he would become universally known throughout his life, was educated at the Ffestiniog County School between 1917 and 1922 when he passed the Senior Certificate examination of the Central Welsh Board with distinctions in Latin, Welsh and Geography. He briefly tasted the teaching profession before deciding, in 1926, at the age of twenty-one, to train for the Methodist ministry, following the path already taken by two of his uncles, Thomas Gwilym Roberts and Evan Roberts. After spending a year at Menai Bridge in the Beaumaris circuit, he entered Handsworth Wesleyan Theological College from where he graduated in 1930 with the BA degree of the University of Birmingham.

His first post-graduation ministry was at Bethel chapel, Llanberis where he served for a year. However, because of a shortage of opportunities in Welsh-speaking chapels at that time he felt obliged to move to the English-speaking cause, going, in 1931, to Ammanford in the Llanelli and Carmarthen Circuit. In 1935, he ventured into England, serving for a year as assistant to Rev J. Wardle Stafford, one time president of the Wesleyan Conference, at St John's, Chester before spending the next eleven years in south-east Lancashire, successively at Kearsley Mount chapel in the Bolton circuit, the Methodist Central Hall and Monton Methodist church in the Eccles circuit and Brunswick Methodist church in the Pendleton circuit. The diaries that he kept during those years give a good insight into the full and varied life of a Methodist minister, offering occasional glimpses of national events from his perspective.

He, like many others at the time, considered the Munich settlement in 1938 'hard on Czechoslovakia but some such settlement inevitable to avoid imminent war'. On 3 September 1939 he cut his morning service short 'without address to allow members to return home to hear Premier's broadcast at 11.15'. His consideration for his congregation was also demonstrated during the blitz on Manchester in the following year. 'Heavy attack on Manchester area. Carried on Kearsley service until it became impossible'. The diaries also show his leisure interests, stamp collecting (briefly), and particularly walking (he never learned to drive a car) and there are references to his strong friendships with some of the giants of Welsh Methodism, such as E. Tegla Davies and D. Tecwyn Evans (neither of whom ever drove a car either).

In 1943 he married Maria Beryl Evans, daughter of David Evans, author of the popular hymn 'O! ganu bendigedig' (Tegla gave them his latest book *Dechrau'r Daith* as a wedding present). Beryl was an immensely supportive and caring companion to W. J. throughout the rest of his ministry. They had two children, a son and a daughter.

In 1947, having received several invitations from circuits as far scattered as Pembrokeshire and North Yorkshire, W. J. decided to move to the English Midlands, to Hill Top, West Bromwich, where he remained for three years before returning, after a quarter of a century, to Chester. Until 1957 he ministered to the Methodist Central Hall, City Road where, apart from his other duties, he acted as chaplain to the popular Cestrian Male Voice Choir which brought him into contact with some of the leading artistes of the day. His capacity for hard work remained undiminished as he once revealed in a letter to a friend in 1956: 'Life is so crowded that many a week passes by without any opportunity to do any serious reading at all. This week is going to be typical. Tomorrow I shall be spending the afternoon in camp taking a Padre's Hour with the men. In the evening I have a leaders' meeting at my church, followed by a Garden Party committee, and finishing up at the Youth Club. On Tuesday I have a long Education Committee which will take up all the afternoon, with a Fellowship Meeting at night. Wednesday afternoon and evening and we have our Circuit Rally and we shall be having a hymn-singing festival in the evening instead of the usual speaker. It should be a good evening and the remaining days of the week are equally crowded'. Throughout his life he was an avid reader, indeed collector of books. One of his most treasured acquisitions was a first edition of Charles Wesley's *Hymns for the use of Families and on Various Occasions*.

In 1957 he moved to St John Street where he became superintendent minister of the Grosvenor Park Methodist circuit, in which position he excelled as a preacher, a pastor and administrator. He was a prime mover in the establishment of the Chester Clergy and Ministers' Fraternal to promote unity among the Christian churches locally. He described the first meeting in 1958 to a colleague. 'It was largely a talking shop. We sat there for two solid hours and decided upon nothing, but I think we all felt that something worthwhile had happened. For the first time in Chester Anglicans and Free Churchmen had met in this way for fellowship, and I can't tell you what an achievement that is'. During his time in Chester W. J. was prominent in the wider public life of the city, serving, for instance, as a valued member of the Chester City Education Committee representing the Free Churches.

His departure to Bramhall, south of Manchester, in 1962 was greeted with much regret by many, not least the countless members of his churches who had received home visits from him over the years. W. J. was a legendary visitor. Indeed, on his arrival at Bramhall Methodist church he rejoiced in the discovery that his new visiting list contained the names of four hundred members! Sadly his ministry in Bramhall was, within three years, blighted by illness, to the dismay of his wide circle of friends. Rev Leslie Davison, one-time president of the Methodist Conference, for instance wrote of his shock at hearing the news, 'for I have always thought of you as a dynamo of energy which would never stop'. Although W. J. strove valiantly to fulfil his responsibilities as best he could, he finally died, in harness, on 22 April 1967 a few months before he had been planning to take early retirement at Rhos-on-Sea.

Although virtually the whole of his ministry had been spent in England, W. J. remained faithful to the Welsh cause throughout. He regularly visited churches in the Principality to preach in Welsh and English, but his greatest contribution was in the energy and vision he brought to the cause of ecumenism, of which, as has already been noted, he was a powerful advocate. During the 1950s he undertook studies of the strength of Methodism in Wales, publishing his findings in *The Methodist Recorder* and elsewhere, and urging the importance of the Welsh and English-language districts working more closely together. As he once wrote to Dr W. E. Sangster 'It is high time that Methodism in Wales began to think of itself as one family. It is only as a unity that it can take place alongside the other denominations in the Principality'.

As joint secretary of the Standing Committee for Methodism in Wales, established in 1957 to further closer co-operation between the English and Welsh causes, he actively promoted the establishment of area committees throughout Wales with the ultimate aim of unifying Methodism while accepting that this goal would take some time to achieve. His zeal and industry were, however, recognised in 1966 when, to his great pleasure, he was made a life member of the Welsh Assembly, Y Gymanfa Gymreig, the supreme representative body for Welsh-language Methodism. Given W. J.'s commitment to Ecumenism it was fitting that during the 1960s he acted as convenor of the committee for Anglican-Methodist Conversations in Wales, to which body he brought an extensive knowledge of ecclesiastical law and polity in the Anglican Church as well as his own. One of his obituarists would observe that bishops came as frequently as ministers from the Principality to see him at Bramhall during his illness. At the time of his death W. J. continued to serve as a vice-president of the Council of Churches of Wales and it was fitting that the president of the Council, the Bishop of Bangor, gave one of the addresses at the second of the funeral services held on 27 April 1967, at Ebenezer Methodist Chapel, Blaenau Ffestiniog. After the service W. J. was buried at the town's Bethesda Cemetery. His wife joined him in 1980.

Author

Dr Alun Roberts

Sources

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Personal knowledge

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