

## **“It’s still wick!” - One American’s View of Ministry in the United Kingdom**

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In Frances Hodgson Burnett’s beloved classic *The Secret Garden*, the “common boy” gardener Dickon observed after examining a branch from an apparently dead tree, “It’s as wick as you or me,” which the adventurous but spoiled and previously sheltered girl Mary Lennox could not understand. Dickon went on to explain that although the tree *appeared* to be dead, there was indeed still life inside. I see this comment, and indeed the whole story, as a beautiful metaphor for our ministry here in Great Britain. Many people feel that England is lost; there are less than 2% “Evangelical” Christians, i.e., those who truly follow the Jesus Christ of the Bible. My wife and I are completing our second assignment here in England, and we can with great joy report that England is “still wick” – God has not abandoned the land of our Baptist fathers, the origin of the Pilgrims that brought their fiercely independent but Biblically-based faith to America four centuries ago.

We first came to the UK in the summer of 2004, a year after I retired after 31 years in the chemical industry on the Texas coast of the Gulf of Mexico. I was made aware of the American Interim Pastors Ministry the Monday after my retirement as I listened to a Christian radio interview with Charles McComb, head of this ministry, and John Singleton, then with the Northern Baptist Association of the Baptist Union of Great Britain (“BUGB”). Chuck is also a retired engineer who became aware of the need for an interim pastoral ministry while he was in England constructing a chemical plant. I had been teaching and preaching and going on short-term foreign mission trips for many years, and was developing skills and gaining experience in a Pastor-teacher role in my home church, The Lighthouse Baptist Church, in Lake Jackson, Texas.

Our first assignment was as the seventh interim pastor at Thornaby Baptist Church in the northeast of England. It was a wonderful experience; the people were so gracious and so receptive to our ministry there, and we saw some real spiritual growth amongst the congregation. The frustration is that we serve for a short six months, as we’ve heretofore come into Britain on a visitor’s visa. That situation may change in the future, but we will not address that here. The objective of the ministry is to help strengthen the church and build it back up to the point they can employ their own British pastor once again and move forward in God’s plan for them. We saw that happen in Thornaby, as there was just one more interim after us and they were able to do just that. That church is growing and still penetrating the very difficult culture and traditions of that region of England.

We returned to England in January of this year (2008) as the first American interim at St. Paul’s Baptist Church in Skegness, Lincolnshire. Skegness is a small (~18,000 off-season population) resort town on the North Sea coast of the Midlands. St. Paul’s had been without a pastor for some 20 months and took a real step of faith in opening themselves up to this ministry. We, in turn, were apprehensive about coming as the first interims, partly because of my relative lack of experience in launching such a ministry, and partially because I have rather strong leadership and preaching styles. Being an engineer by training and practice I tend to be rather direct! These concerns were quickly alleviated, however, as the people of St. Paul’s readily and openly accepted us, made us feel welcome and as “at home” as a pair of Texans can be made to feel in a European culture. They have been challenged, to be sure, and we’ve not accomplished half of what we wanted to accomplish, but that’s because we have very ambitious goals and the time we’re here to accomplish them is very short. The people themselves have been wonderful to work with and very generous in their outpouring of love and support for our ministry. They’ve provided a wonderful, cozy place for us to live (called a “manse”) and a nice little automobile to drive (petrol is around \$9/gallon at this writing!). More importantly (to me, at least) they have accepted our Biblical preaching and teaching, and are rising to the challenges we’ve put forth to grow in the nurture and admonition of God’s Word and to be obedient to His Spirit’s promptings and to the principles and commands of Scripture. We’ve instituted a number of Bible studies and helped them get started on renewing the “face” of the church to make it more appealing to the passing public as well as give the members a place to be “proud of,” in the sense of not being reluctant to bring a friend, neighbor, or relative because of the appearance of the building or of what they will experience once inside. St. Paul’s itself is in a wonderfully strategic physical location in Skegness, 50 meters off the main shopping avenue in the center of town. Thus the potential for reaching significant numbers of “unchurched” people is very high.

We've also been encouraged by the heart of the people for those who do not know Christ. Everywhere we look we see evidence of people suffering the consequences of poor choices, of a culture which has lost its moral compass, and of a nation steeped in "Christian culture" but which has lost the true meaning of the faith. The people of St. Paul's and of our first church in Thornaby have the heart, but needed strong, God-directed, consistent leadership. They needed to reacquire the vision of God for their churches and for themselves individually. They need to hear the clear but sometimes painful Truth from Scripture about Who God is, what Jesus has done and is doing for us, and what our responsibilities are to God for living by His design and plan. Our hearts have often been so burdened for families wherein one or both parents are trying to walk in Christ but their children are far from Him. Relationships are generally not founded in faith, the principles of which form one of our personal ministry and life focal points (we have a relationship seminar ministry as well).

It is very difficult for me to write my "impressions" of this ministry at this time; our hearts are being ripped apart, as it were, because we have to leave (see the six-month explanation above). That's one aspect of ministry that is difficult to prepare for: we form such loving relationships with the people and then must move on. A benedictory devotion I gave Sunday afternoon to the church as they hosted a surprise luncheon for us was from Philippians 1:6-11. I wept as I tried to explain how Paul's emotions toward the people of Philippi so mirrored mine toward the people of St. Paul's, and how his prayer for them, and his confidence in God's plan for the Philippians, so mirrored mine for them. In this passage Paul writes, "7 For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since ... in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me." And I, with Paul, "6 ... am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."

Like the "Secret Garden" that suffered from years of abandonment and neglect, but sprang to life with diligent care – clearing weeds, cutting back wild growth, turning the soil to expose it to the sun and fresh air, planting good seed – the Body of Christ in England is showing wonderful signs of renewal and growth, and of bearing fruit for our Master. My wife Brenda and I are at this moment helping our replacements to transition into this role and into this ministry. It is a terrifying prospect for them. They've never done anything like this before. The challenges are enormous and the potential pitfalls are real. But the love and the grace and the power of God are far greater than all these things, and the prospect of His glory being revealed, and of our church being brought forward from a spirit of discouragement and despair to a celebration of hope and faith and His future is even more overwhelming. God is at work in England. We see it everywhere. And we are so very, very grateful to have been chosen by Him to serve in this place, in this time, and in this way.

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