

Falkirk Baptist Church Youth Work 1967 - 1988



by Arthur Hembling

Arthur & Wilma's Story

"I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

If I had seen those words in January 1967 when I moved with my parents to Falkirk, I would have laughed my head off! There was no way I wanted to leave my friends, relatives and the security I had in the community and school I attended. My father's company, SGS Fairchild, had relocated to Middlefield and we had to move. My mother was concerned about the implications, but she had a strong faith and knew it was right to go where my father's work was located. The week before we moved she knew the move was a right one, when opening the first page of the Christian Herald she read a full page article by Rev John Lyons of Falkirk Baptist Church. *"That's the church we must go to when we get there"*, she said, and we did.

I can still remember walking into the church that first Sunday morning. The organ was being played by Hume Waddell and there was a warmth about the place that even a seventeen year old could sense. At the end of the service I was greeted by an enthusiastic John Furmage, the youth leader at the time, and Ian Cox and Daniel Green who became my best friends. It was through their friendship and their faith that I soon began to realise that being a Christian was more than "doing church", something which I had done since I was young enough to remember. I started to go to the youth fellowship and found the group welcoming and encouraging. The older members of the group have since that day remained some of my closest

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friends - Anne and Simpson Gillespie, Tom and Wilma Taylor, Bill and Irene Black, Bill and Ray Murray, Nancy Mitchell, Kathleen Lyons, Hume and Isobel Waddell, John and Valerie Furmage, just to mention a few.

The Followers

At the time Ian and Daniel were learning the guitars and invited me to join them. I couldn't play a note so declined. It was several months later that there was talk of forming a gospel group and I was asked to learn the bass guitar, which they said would be easy because it only had four strings. The bigger challenge for me was that the intentions of the group was to share the good news about Jesus with young people in youth groups and coffee bars. I realised at that point that "doing church" didn't make me a Christian, and that I would have to make Jesus my own Saviour if I was going to tell others about Him. It took a night of struggle before the dawn of a new day and the light of the world broke into my life - and I have never looked back since.

The Followers formed, led by Ian Cox, and I struggled to master the bass guitar. Alistair Mackie and Malcolm Pepper became the other members of the group. The church were dubious about this modern music; some liked it, while others tolerated it because they wanted to encourage us. John Furmage became our manager, and we had a good support base from some of the younger element in the youth fellowship. It was at that time that the youth fellowship was being attended by a number of young people from other fellowships in the town, who either had none of their own or who preferred the openness of the fellowship.

The Followers started to become popular and

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weekends were often taken up by travelling to take meetings around Scotland (the word 'gig' was not in vogue then!). Falkirk Baptist also had its coffee bar and started a mid week outreach club for young teenagers which was run by the young people of the youth fellowship but became unsuccessful due to lack of manpower. The elderly people in the church were wonderful supporters with Mrs Mallis and Mr & Mrs Campbell being faithful in prayer, and one of our greatest and most generous supporters, Miss Scobbie, who funded much of our equipment and who used to sit in the front row during home engagements. I am convinced that this was because she was a little deaf!

It was during that time that John Furmage started at the Baptist College in Glasgow to train for the ministry. John will always have a place in my heart because his love, enthusiasm for Jesus, and sheer determination to follow where God was leading him, were an inspiration to a young Christian who was also seeking to go where God was leading. Valerie Oman was John's young lady, although we often wondered how she stayed the course in the early days! She was a stalwart of faith, wisdom and gentleness and we always knew God had something special for them both. It came as no surprise when they married and announced their belief that God was leading them onto the mission field.

Youth Fellowship

The Followers had several successful years of ministry, and being launched into the frontline of Christian witness was indeed a challenge and blessing. How I grew! Only God knew what He was doing, and when the time came for us to lay down our guitars it seemed to me the end of everything. But no sooner had I played my last

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note than a very wise and godly minister came and invited me to take over the leadership of the youth fellowship. Did John Lyons really know what he was doing? John Furmage was off to college and the young people were to be left in my charge! Scary, but true. In May 1969 I took over the leadership of the Youth Fellowship, and I was blessed with some wonderful support in Margaret Braid (Markie), Eleanor Cassidy, Daniel Green, Margaret Turnbull (Green), and Helen Matthews, who were part of the youth committee. It was during that time that we continued to grow with new members coming into the church and the group. A number of student nurses from the infirmary were attending, and again a strong group from other fellowships swelled the numbers. We were joined on a regular basis by young people from The Bethany Hall, Olivet Hall, Maddiston Brethren, Lauriston Brethren, Dawson Mission, and Miller Hall, as well as others from Fife and Lanarkshire and the Falkirk district. Looking back, many of these are now leaders and the backbone of many fellowships throughout the UK. Some of those nurses also became the wives of some of our young men - Olive Cox and Marilyn Maguire. During that time at the church there was the mission run by students from the Baptist College. Such people as Bill Slack and Jim Hamilton were part of the team.

Bob Knox

During these successful years for the youth fellowship, the vibrancy of the group was evident. Weekends away, such as St Andrews, Anstruther, and Pitlochry were most notable, the famous coach trip to Oban and return barbecue which has never been bettered to this day! There were the summer barbecues to Loch Voil and Lubnaig, as well as a variety of social events which kept us busy. We used to take services in the Old Folks Home in

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“I Will Build My Church”

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Dawson Park and run the Senior Members outing once a year. This balanced the spiritual side which was very active, with open meetings, street witness, coffee bars and the infamous concert in January when the Gospel group were snow bound in Dundee and we had 150 young people in the hall. We received good teaching from a variety of speakers and our fellowship kept us strong. One of those speakers was Bob Knox, who was to play a most significant role in shaping my life and the lives of many other young people in Falkirk. Bob’s face glowed with the presence of Jesus. He had an exuberant faith, boundless energy and evangelistic zeal which became the model for a whole group of young people who still today continue to be influenced by his witness.

It was during these years that significant activities were happening throughout Central Scotland. God was moving by His Spirit and the movement of renewal was developing. There was the influence of the Gospel Rhythm concerts, groups coming north from the deep south such as Out Of Darkness from London and the Messengers from Manchester. Groups like the Living Stones from Glasgow and The Gospel Folk from Motherwell were very much in vogue and together with the Messengers played at the “Out of this world” concert in the town hall, organised around the youth fellowship. This was a mediocre affair, but was to be the springboard for other concerts and events in the future. The American influence was beginning to infiltrate into the country with the Jesus movement. This was to have a significant impact in Falkirk and across Central Scotland. The youth scene was changing with a real zest for evangelism, especially coffee bars, clubs and missions. Singer-songwriters were emerging and Falkirk was very much in their patch. The most significant were Andy Scarcliff, Paul Openshaw, Martin Inchley, and a young lady by the name of

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Marilyn Hutton. Their songs were a vibrant testimony to the move of the Holy Spirit in the lives of young people at the time. It was the same time in England that a young man by the name of Graham Kendrick appeared on the scene.

Arthur Blessitt

Many of the young people of Falkirk Baptist Church were caught up in all that was going on. But there was a longing to see more happening for the Lord in the town. Through the contacts we had made came an unexpected opportunity in February 1972. I had just begun my new job with Philips which was also to prove a significant move in the future. Arthur Blessitt was coming to Scotland and we were given the opportunity to host a day event. Ian and Olive Cox, Linda Stoddart, Charles McLaughlin, Victor Przybylinski and myself met to pray for wisdom for we believed God was opening a unique door for us and this opportunity was from Him. It was a bold step of faith but we accepted and within a matter of a few weeks had organised a visit to the Polmont Borstal and an open air concert preceded by a Jesus March through the town.

Falkirk Youth Outreach

Every obstacle was removed, officials gave permission by return and because we needed a name, Falkirk Youth Outreach (FYO) was born. To say the event was amazing was to understate what God was doing. Arthur Blessitt's reception in the Borstal was overwhelming with many young lads taking a step of faith. It resulted in a Bible Class every week for almost a year. Our publicity had been rushed but everywhere there were Arthur Blessitt posters to be seen. Callendar Park had been booked for an open air service, the downstairs of the house was opened (the main room) and the

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weather was good. No one could have predicted the response. We began with the Jesus March around Falkirk which grew and grew till more than five hundred people were in the procession. Then as we approached the park there were streams of people pouring into the park, an estimated eight thousand for the service. Marilyn Hutton, The Living Stones, Bob Knox and Arthur Blessitt took part and the response by enquirers at the end was overwhelming. The room was filled and people spilled out into the arena area for counselling.

As a result FYO had been established and our vision was to establish a base in which we could continue to meet some of the young people and also to continue our outreach. In September 1972 the Upper Room was opened in Bank Street, in a disused tenement building. We paid a small rent and made an intimate meeting room for outreach. The churches basically frowned on it, but John Lyons and Bob McGhee from St Andrews Church of Scotland became supporters and gave us credibility. During that time we used to meet there on Friday nights and in Falkirk Baptist Church after the evening service. One special event which took place in Grangemouth we had special plans to infiltrate. The Grangemouth Pop Concert with Status Quo and other mega bands was being held around the time the Upper Room was opening. We planned to be there but our arrangements for the concert changed as the Lord called us to minister in a different way to all who gathered the night before. Here we came into contact with drug addicts, Hari Krishna, and young people from all over the UK. That night we were able to serve hot tea and coffee, urns being supplied by mystified ministers at 11pm, and to witness to Jesus in song as around 600 gathered around to keep warm.

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Ecumenical

Bob Knox was at the centre of all this! The Upper Room was to be served by groups and singers already mentioned along with Challenge, The Sowers from Fife and The Country Gospel Four from Kilsyth. Every Friday night The Upper Room was open often in the wee small hours while young people shared their faith with all who came in. There was the Scottish tour of Larry Norman, organised along with FYO and Buzz Magazine which was fairly successful and links were being developed with other churches in the town. FYO had the tenacity to be ecumenical and cross the barriers churches put up. Baptist, Church of Scotland, Mission and Brethren all joined in events and teaching nights were organised on drugs (Vic Ramsey) and outreach. It was during that time that other key people came to the fore such as Rev Ray Whittle from Bathgate and Andy Macconnichie from the Town Mission. Falkirk Baptist was involved in a big way and, whether it knew it, was key to much that went on.

During 1973 I met Wilma. It was at one of our infamous get togethers, and I remembered I had met her at Bob and Lilly Knox's house a few times. Bob and Lilly's house had become for many a place to meet and discover faith in a new way. It was always open, welcoming and while biscuits were scarce at times, love was abounding. It was there that we grew in our faith, talked and explored the Bible, and developed lasting friendships. Joyce Docherty (nee Jack), Hugh and Rosemary Brown from Larbert Baptist along with a host of others met there regularly. I met Wilma a week before our second Arthur Blessitt concert in the town. This concert wasn't so effective as the first, and although it was well attended it was poor by the previous standards. This was mainly due to a day of torrential rain.

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Spree 73

Shortly after this I went with others from Falkirk to Spree 73 in London. I perhaps didn't grasp the significance of that week of evangelism and training. I can still remember Billy Graham inviting all who would give all of their lives over to the service and call of Christ to stand up. I knew I had to and along with thousands of others made that commitment. God also saw, and in His divine providence was setting out a time in the future when His call would come! I returned and we made plans to get married. It was a year or so off but during that time the youth work in Falkirk Baptist was changing. There was a sense that the youth fellowship was coming to an end in its present form. Margaret Braid had married Derek Markie, Alan Maguire had married Marilyn, Daniel Green was engaged to Margaret Turnbull and there were few young people coming through. So in the summer of 1974 the youth fellowship at Falkirk Baptist Church ended and in the December of that year I married Wilma.

God gave us time to settle down before opening a new chapter. Because there was no youth group our links with others whittled away. New people had come to the church, Duncan and Yvonne Dougall, Douglas and Dorothy Smith, Bill and Isobel Ferguson, Drew and Lillian Fisher, and Leslie and Christine Marshall, with whom we became friendly. During a holiday in Malta with Hugh and Rosemary Brown we felt the Lord was prompting us to start another youth group. Wilma was well suited to youth work. As a girl in the Girls Brigade in Wishaw Baptist she became a Christian. She became a member of the youth group in the church there under the leadership of Bob Knox. Like me she came through the same school, with Bob helping her to grow in confidence and in her faith. She became an officer in the GB and subsequently

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went on to gain her Duke of Edinburgh Gold award, a great achievement. God was moving in her life as well, through her experiences with the youth group and the Brigade. When she first came to Falkirk Baptist she became an officer in the Boys Brigade junior section under Tom Taylor, and during her time in the church worked as a teacher and leader in the beginners in the Sunday School. It was during this time along with me that we restarted the youth group.

Elizabeth Cox along with Alan Vernal, Gillian Clark (McIntyre) and Clark Leiper were the founding members, and along with Hazel and Judith Thompson, Hazel Robb and some of the young people from the Bog Road the youth group had its beginnings. Because we were small we met in houses, and this became a mark of the group for a number of years. It wasn't long before the group started to grow and was joined by one young lady, Kay Leishman, who had just become a Christian through Cliff Richard. Kay was subsequently to be joined by her parents and her young brother, Billy, at the church and again the hand of God was at work in a significant way. Again the activity started with notable weekends away such as Crieff, Aviemore, Kinncraig and Douglas. Each was significant in the development of faith in these young lives. We had barbecues and weekend missions involving Scotroc with Captain Stephen Anderson. On Sunday nights couples in the church were joining the growing list of host meeting houses. As a thank you the young people arranged a special thank you every year by organising a food and fancy dress theme night in our house. The sight of Simpson Gillespie, Duncan Dougall, Bill Ferguson and others dressed up was worth it alone, but it marked the close links between the young people and the membership in the developing work.

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Dance Group

When Ian Reed came to the church another significant turning point in the fellowship's life took place. Linda Reed soon became a member of the youth group and it was during that time that the girls developed a dance group that for its day was one of the most creative things I have still to see bettered. Gillian Clark headed it up along with Ruth and Carol Taylor, Alison Black, Kay Leishman, Gail Leiper, Elizabeth Cox, Linda Reed and others. This group were even invited to take part in the Baptist Assembly in Edinburgh with a memorable interpretation of "Thief in the night." The group grew with new members joining all the time. Stephen Robb, David and Neil Fellows, Leslie Boslem, Alistair and Magnus Latona, Kevin Gillespie, Stephen Macdonald, along with Bill Leishman and Alan Vernal were just a few of the regular members. Caitlin joined later and from the day she arrived Clark Leiper's single days were marked.

Holy Spirit

Activities were full and varied, along with weekends away and gallons of water (they always went together). In the summer months it was often outside activities such as barbecues and rambles, while during the winter months it was discussions, bible studies, talks, films and worship. The leadership evolved with some of the older ones taking on the younger ones to teach them the ropes. The church was growing as well, and activities were both vibrant and reverent. The mark of the group was its knowledge of the Lord and this was evident in the outworking of the faith of many of the young people. The weekend at Douglas will always remain a high point in the youth group. Duncan Dougall had been invited to share

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the devotional times with us and on the Sunday morning we sensed that God wanted to do something special. Duncan talked about the Passover supper and related it to the Lord's supper. We had the opportunity to share together, and during that time the Holy Spirit came in such great power that many of our young people were touched in a very special way. The presence of the Lord was so great that day.

During the year of 1987 Wilma and I believed it was right to stand down from the leadership of the youth work. Unknown to us a secret thank you event had been organised by the young people and with a little collusion with Anne and Simpson Gillespie, we were guided to the church hall for a special party. It brought to a close a chapter which had begun many years before. Although we handed over the reigns, there was a brief spell when we helped during a time when Ronnie Fleming left the leadership to move to the south of England. But waiting in the wings was another young man, Bill Leishman, who God had provided and who was being prepared for the next step in the Master's great plan.

As one door closes so another opens. In the October we left Falkirk Baptist Church to move south of the border. We believed God was leading us in a new direction but what that would be was still veiled. At a special farewell the deacons of the church met with us in the Norwood Hotel in Bonnybridge. God was about to open another chapter, which was to require an even greater step of faith than when John Lyons all those years ago invited me and subsequently Wilma to lead a youth group in Falkirk Baptist Church.

When we moved South, never did we think that God had special plans for us. Leaving Scotland was the hardest thing we have ever done. Our

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friends, family, church and spiritual home, and our security were all wrapped up in Falkirk and it was like a bereavement. Before we left, one person shared a verse with us.

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

We indeed needed His strength at that moment in time. But His grace was more than sufficient. Finding a new home was not easy but God in His providential love had all that planned.

Northchurch Baptist Church

We eventually ended up living in Tring in Hertfordshire, a beautiful little market town some fifteen miles from the M25. Finding a church was not so easy, but when we had almost come to the point of despair, God showed us Northchurch Baptist Church. There we found love, acceptance, great teaching and fellowship. It was like being back in Falkirk. We also ended up back in youth work, something we had firmly left behind in our thinking. We became youth workers again for another five years. During that time many visitors from Falkirk ended up in our home, like Bill Leishman, Gail and Tim Berrall, Julie Graham, David Fellows, and Tom and Wilma Taylor to mention a few. It was also during that time that God began to prepare our hearts for something, but we didn't know what. We had become sensitive to Him and were seeking His will.

It was during our work with the youth that the Lord called me into full time ministry. The young people had been involved in the *Cracker* project and this particular year they were running *Radio Cracker*, a radio station for a month. Training for the leaders was over a weekend in Birmingham, and I along with three others went. On the Sunday morning

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Steve Chalke spoke at a special service for all the workers. He spoke about Abraham being called by God even though he was an old man and Abraham stepped in faith, even though he didn't know where it would lead. At the end of his address, Steve challenged those of us gathered to respond to the call of God to service. He believed there were those there that morning whom God was calling into full time ministry.

Ministry

That was it! I could not escape that challenge. All that day and on the journey home I wrestled with the thought, God was calling me. I shared it with Wilma and she was affirming and supportive. It had to be tested by the local church, and through the long process, but through each step God has been faithful. Spurgeon's was the obvious choice as being evangelistic and very forward thinking, something I needed. We had worries over finance, how to pay our mortgage, but that was taken care of. As a sign of confirmation, I asked for redundancy and even though there was no provision for that within the company, they gave me the full package which was considerable after 20 years. This provided for a need. The church were magnificent, sacrificial in their love and generosity, just like the Macedonians (2 Corinthians 8). They provided for fees, expenses, Christmas love gifts and even extra for holidays. During that time Wilma worked to help us as well. It was a big sacrifice for her to make, but it all worked out, with her being able to join me at college for the final year to do a year of pastoral studies. This prepared her for the next step she was to take in counselling. She has now achieved her diploma in counselling and works in the local prison and in the Christian counselling service in town.

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During the four years at Spurgeon’s, God had taught me much about myself and His grace in my life. Every step during the years at Falkirk were in preparation for the work He was preparing for us to do for Him. I still believe that what He is calling us to and preparing us for has still to come! We both still believe it is back in Scotland. While we wait, we are trying to be obedient to His call and to work in the place where He has set us at present, at Holly Lodge Baptist Church in Ipswich. We have also had the joy of seeing Bill Leishman go through Spurgeon’s and now settle in Manchester. What a wonderful Lord we serve!

“We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us!”.

This is not so much a history lesson but a story of faith in God’s providential care. We did our bit by being faithful to Him and to His call. Thank you all for sharing the journey with us then and to those of you who continue to share the journey. May God bless you.

Arthur Hembling



Arthur & Wilma Hembling