

Walk St David – A Team Member’s Reflection

Hello again!

Well, it’s now over 3 weeks since I and a team of 7 other men arrived on your doorsteps (sometimes literally!) with our rucksacs and walking boots as part of Taith Dewi Sant - Walk St David. I’ve done several mission weeks like this before, but every one has its own character, and for me this has been my first real taste of village life right in the heartland of Wales. It has been a memorable week in so many ways – meeting many of you in your churches and homes, enjoying wonderfully warm and sunny weather which let us get out and about as well as appreciate the natural beauty of your countryside, learning something of Welsh identity and language issues – and having a very full week indeed of planned and unplanned encounters with people of all ages and in different circumstances. It’s always been my experience that time seems to expand and a week of mission feels like two, it’s just so full of rich and rewarding experiences.

So, what can I say in reflection about the week we spent with you? Well, I hope that the months of planning and curious wondering beforehand about these Walk of 1000 Men teams, soon gave way to an easy friendship when you met us. We came from different parts of Britain, from Orkney to Dorset, East Anglia to Snowdonia, most of us working men, some married and with families, others single, and from several different church backgrounds (I don’t know even now what most of those were – we find that with the focus on mission and the unity of the gospel these become relatively unimportant). We included a farmer turned retreat centre manager, businessman, cleaner, carpenter, tradesman, minister, two engineers – and our interests spanned astroturf to astronomy, acting to archaeology. We also had the benefit of having two Welsh speaking members which was often helpful in opening up doorstep or other conversation opportunities, as well as giving our team some insights into Welsh language issues.

We were based for the first part of the week in Capel Garn in Bow Street, camping out in the vestry in our sleeping bags, and enjoying the unusual benefits of central heating and a well equipped kitchen. Not that we needed to cook much, we were so wonderfully supplied by hot meals and buffet lunches, as well as kind offers to share meals and enjoy shower facilities in your homes in the evening. And in the second half we stayed in the Baptist church vestry in Penrhyn Coch, with the non-snorers keeping themselves a safe distance away in the church itself! The cloudless dark evenings there gave some wonderful opportunities to marvel at the canopy of stars, which some of us bred in town light don’t normally see like this.

Wyn and Judith, along with your church leaders, had prepared a very full week of activities for us to engage with the local community – and we were delighted whenever some of you were able to join in with these. We had so many local opportunities - visiting older folk in residential care facilities and in coffee/lunch meetings; children in primary schools, brownies and guides; harvest thanksgiving services; ladies meetings; drug addiction and learning difficulty establishments; local pubs and research facilities to list just some. In particular we were able to knock on hundreds of doors and meet many people in Bow Street, Penrhyn Coch, Talybont and Taliesin, as well as in Llandre, Capel Bangor and other villages. In all of these we each tried in our own different ways to talk about what it means to know Jesus and ask him to be at the heart of all that is important in our lives. We distributed several hundred booklets introducing the gospel message, and we were encouraged as a number of people made steps of faith and commitment in church services and during the course of the week.

It’s not possible to adequately summarise all these activities, especially as each of us were involved in different things during the week. Our highlights were so often in the personal encounters we each had, as well as in the group events and activities. There are always people or incidents that stand out as significant or particularly blessed encounters, and although not particularly dramatic, I’d like to very briefly share a few anonymous examples of my own, just so that you might have a sense of what took place and also to pray that God would continue to work in all the encounters such as these that the team had, as well as in your own endeavours going forward.

- One lady had been involved as a student in Christian activities, but had been hurt by some of the failings she had seen in a leader; we encouraged her not to let this remain an obstacle to her.

- One young man answered our spiritual survey questions but did not seem particularly interested. However when we asked if he had recently read any of the New Testament, he said 'Wait there' and promptly came back with a modern copy of the Bible, asking us how to approach reading it!
- One elderly man who completed a survey, mentioned that he had read the bible through twice in the last five years. (That's something most Christians haven't done!) We encouraged him to seek a personal encounter with God.
- We came across two women who had been interested to find out about Christianity, and had even attended an Alpha course and read books they were given, although both remained unconvinced. They were however by no means closed to further discussion and at least one had a good friendship with an active Christian.
- Several people we met had personal friends who were Christians, whom they liked and respected, and with whom they had had discussions in the past, and we felt these could continue to be important contacts for them.
- One lady we met invited us in, and asked if we knew of an English-speaking church she could attend, having recently come into the area.
- In one pub a lively discussion was taking place publicly; quite quietly and unobserved by most of his friends, one young man asked about prayer for his personal circumstances and was happy to receive a booklet from us.
- One lady informed us she had been diagnosed with a serious illness, but although not specially religious, was willing to receive prayer from us on her doorstep.
- In a coffee morning with several ladies, we were enjoying a general conversation together, when the conversation opened up into a deeper spiritual discussion about the need to genuinely practice what we preach, where the message of Jesus was also able to be clearly presented.

Although our stay was very brief, and can only provide a small perspective into all that goes on normally, I wonder if you will permit me to reflect on a few threads of observation I had as a visitor. In the missions that we have done in different parts of Britain, we encounter people holding a wide range of spiritual viewpoints and attitudes, but too often reflecting the sad truth that most people in the UK no longer hold Christian convictions or practice it in anything like the same degree as they did some decades ago. There is a reduced regard for the church, its authority and its relevance to their lives, and this seemed evident here in your communities too. We were made aware daily that people are no longer sure or confident in matters of spirituality or faith, or the nature of Jesus or the afterlife, and indeed appear wary of religious certainty as if that is something that is no longer possible or indeed appropriate in our day and age. Many had little time for God, little inclination to spend time or effort looking into these things, being very largely caught up in the daily business of material living.

Nevertheless we were warmly received, and with a good deal of courtesy even amongst those who did not share our perspective, and we were often reminded that many people especially amongst the older generation had a foundational experience of biblical teaching and responded warmly to our approaches. As in other parts of Britain, here also we found a widespread lack of understanding and deep need for a spiritual awakening, but I also found encouragement in that this very lack of Christian knowledge and understanding can also be an opportunity, as it was not always accompanied by cynicism or rejection and was open to be engaged with. We met a number of people who were interested to hear what we had to say, and I believe could be open to exploring this in the right circumstances. I think there continues to be a very real opportunity to attract and draw people like these to faith in God as they encounter people who hold the truths of Christian faith clearly in their hearts and minds; Christians who live attractive, wholesome lives, unashamedly filled with the love of God, living as part of a welcoming, generous community of believers which is seen as open and relevant to the present time.

So I think that the challenge and opportunity to individuals and churches is present but it can be met, especially wherever there is a will and preparedness to take a fresh look at some of the ways we present ourselves in churches and engage, even if this means doing things a little differently at times. I was struck on the one hand with the very respectful and worshipful attitude present in church services we attended, but also heard of novel outreach initiatives that aim to provide new ways to engage un-churched people. In our mission week we also encountered different strands of community which may each need to be addressed in different ways to be relevant to them, for example:

- Younger working families and individuals who I expect will prefer to hear about Christian life and truth in a modern or contemporary setting, expressed in ways and accompanied by activities which are attractive and draw them in.
- Agnostic but reasonably open individuals who might find Exploring Christianity events of interest if delivered in ways or by individuals which bring out the relevance to contemporary life
- Older people, often affected by life experiences such as bereavement, illness and loneliness, who may particularly appreciate traditional community events, pastoral ministry, an occasional visit by a lay home visiting team, etc.
- A number of people who had had previous involvement with a local church or chapel, but who no longer attended, but might be individually befriended and encouraged to become active in faith again
- People of different streams of Christian faith or language, who may need bridging activities to help draw them together and in some cases provide some healing from past or present differences

Of course, all these will be familiar ground to anyone who has been in pastoral ministry, but I think needs to involve every church member to be successful. I mentioned earlier that we approached this mission with you as a partnership, and we were encouraged when some of you were directly involved in some of the door to door visiting or other events. Most of our mission team members and prayer partners have joined as a result of seeing a mission happen close-hand in their own area, and we are delighted that some of you have expressed an interest in next year's mission to Dorset. I know the leaders of Through Faith Missions would be pleased to hear from anyone who would like to find out more, and you are welcome to contact them directly or through one of us.

Before I conclude may I again express our thanks to you all for the open-hearted welcome and generosity with which we were received. It was a pleasure to meet and work alongside you, and I hope we will have opportunity again to meet up, whether as visitors to the region, or in some future Christian endeavour.

May God bless you richly!

Richard Winski
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