

MORE THAN A BUILDING ...



Morlan celebrated its tenth anniversary in April 2015. To mark the occasion, Morlan's Programme Committee organised ten events over ten months to showcase the various aspects of the centre's work. The ninth of these Ten at Ten events was an exhibition of art and poetry entitled *More Than a Building ...*

As an introduction to the exhibition, this article by Pryderi Llwyd Jones, Ex-minister of Capel y Morfa – where Morlan's roots lie – gives some of the background to establishing Morlan and also reminds us of its true purpose.

Every date is misleading. Ten years since Morlan started? There were years of the usual slow progress before this – the permission, the planning, the re-planning, the funding – but there were also encouraging signs during this (other) period of ten years. One of these was the fact that the Elders and the church resisted the temptation to sell a piece of land where Seilo Chapel and Beth-seilun Hall once stood (although a few would have preferred this) and chose instead a more hopeful and daring path. Three kinds of centre were considered: the first was a continuation of the *Youth Centre* that already existed (after an innovative and enterprising period of development by the town's Presbyterian churches); another option was a *Centre for Peace and Justice*; the third option – and the one that was chosen – was a *Centre for Faith and Culture*, knowing that such a centre would incorporate elements of the other two. It was also obvious that the purpose of such a centre wouldn't be meaningful without a chance to explain it over a preparatory period. Hence the various activities that took place before 2005.

PREPARATION

A conference to launch this preparatory period took place in the Theological College, Aberystwyth, to which local churches and establishments were invited. The guest speaker was Donald Smith, Director of the Netherbow Centre, Edinburgh – a centre of 'the church and the arts' – which was established at the same time as the Edinburgh Festival immediately after the Second World War. Like the Festival the Netherbow is still there in the midst of the hurly burly of that busy city. I had a chance to spend a couple of days there in May 1996.

The Director of Colliers Centre, Manchester was invited to a meeting at Trefeca, near Brecon. This Centre was established by the Methodist Church in Central Hall and run in the style of a night club. Several of us also visited that Centre.

A very striking and memorable exhibition of pictures on the theme of *Easter People* by the artist Emma Evans-Fairbank from Hereford was also held which enriched the celebrations of Easter 1995 enormously.

In addition, several people were invited to visit us, people who would open doors and minds to the mission of the church in building bridges and creating an open space between the church and our modern culture. These included John Bell (twice) from the Iona Community who challenged us to consider what is living and worshipping 'on the edge' and to ground our faith and beliefs in the life of the community that surrounds us.

There was also a memorable visit by Irina Ratushinskaya, the Russian poet (author of *Grey is the colour of hope*), imprisoned for three years because, as a Christian, she criticised the Soviet authorities. Other names include Hywel Teifi Edwards, Dafydd Iwan, Emyr Lewis and the theologian Frances Young, author of *Face to Face*, a powerful treatment of suffering written from her experience of raising a child with severe disabilities.

During this time, the Bible Society was publishing a magazine called *Bible in transmission: a forum for change in church and culture*, and some of us travelled to Llandrindod to meet the editors to raise the possibility of a centre such as Morlan becoming part of a network of similar centres which would support and contribute to the magazine and the work of the Bible Society.

During this preparatory period, two one-day festivals were held with a chance for people of all ages to participate in various workshops – music, craft, drama, dance, and so on – and the climax of both festivals (held in different locations) was a colourful service of worship on the theme of the festival.

The aim of all these events was to plant the seed and to lay the foundations for the Morlan Centre.

HARD WORKING PEOPLE

I've already talked about the 'ten before the ten'! There would be no ten to commemorate if it wasn't for the ten of preparation. And there would be no ten of preparation if it wasn't for several factors. The main factor without a doubt is the dedication of the people who spent years in committees, discussing and implementing. Not everyone was enlightened or convinced about the mission and partnership of the church through Morlan – with Morlan being a different and more venturesome extension of the life and mission of Capel y Morfa. Not everyone, because for many, over the generations, the church is simply a place to go to (or not go to as the case may be) to worship, to listen to sermons and to sing hymns. This is not a criticism but an acknowledgment that this is how some have always thought. Morlan comes from a different mindset which is why we must appreciate those who gave so much of their time and talents to lay the foundations of the centre. Although not many remain actively involved with Morlan (and have been pleased to hand over the reins to others), their heart and their support remains one hundred percent. Their contribution was a huge commitment and labour.

GENEROSITY

We must talk about the financial foundations as well of course which also demanded generosity and commitment, both of which came in abundance. Generous donations came from several members of Capel y Morfa and others who were young enough in spirit with a deep enough spirituality to know that the church had to face the challenge of our times by trying out different and flexible means, methods and patterns of being a church and spreading the gospel.

We must mention the precious pennies of the common folk who built our chapels in a previous age (and in the case of Aberystwyth the large number of branches of the

chapels) but not at the expense of forgetting about the vast commitment of adapting an old hall/vestry to the requirements of a new age. By supporting the development of the Morlan Centre with a substantial grant, CWM (Church World Mission) was responding and supporting the efforts of Capel y Morfa members.

QUIET ROOM

There are two further things to remember. A centre such as Morlan needed a lot of resources, but none more important than the Quiet Room. It is as important to Morlan as the pulpits in the town's churches. And it is within two steps of the office. It is a place to meditate, contemplate, pray, sit quietly, think about the word of God. The essentials of faith and belief. Although smaller now than it used to be (due to health and safety regulations), it remains central to Morlan's work. It is from this room that Morlan's life force flows and returns continuously: bridging, holding, planning, like a heart beat. It is not for everyone who uses the centre of course, only for those whose heart lies at the heart of Morlan.

A 'Mission Statement' was formed which is as important to a church and a centre as it is to places such as M&S, Aldi and Waitrose and others who have such statements, so that everyone involved in the work knows to which direction they should go.

We believe that the Lordship of Christ on life and world enables and compels us to be involved in all aspects of the life of our community, our nation and our world. We believe that we cannot confine his Lordship to any church or tradition, and that he constantly invites us to discover Him in the midst of our modern culture – facing us with the challenge of His gospel, blessing us in our witness, and enabling us to be creative with our talents and gifts.

CELEBRATING TEN

I have not mentioned the excitement of the official opening on Saturday, 23 April 2005 (a whole week of events) or the excitement of the first three years. But I am pleased to refer to, and to give thanks for, the life, the growth and the maturing that has happened **since 2008**, the year of my retirement. Carol, after seven years of service to Morlan, has brought a measure of stability to the office and the administration which is vital to the centre's success.

It is not an easy task to ensure that Morlan's work continues whilst at the same time trying to be as self-sustainable as possible – although no church or centre is totally self-sustainable of course. As is the case with many, much pressure is put on a handful of faithful volunteers. But, despite this, it is obvious that there is a team in place that are in complete harmony regarding Morlan as a Centre for Faith and Culture. There is so much to celebrate during this tenth anniversary, and many congratulations for such an original and interesting programme to do that – and I hope that there will be many more birthdays to celebrate again.

Pryderi Llwyd Jones