

Eastwood Baptist Church – Its History

This history was published in 1996, on the occasion of the Church's 85th anniversary. The editor takes up the story...

History can be as dry as old bones or full of life.

The difference is presentation. For that reason, I have used a degree of "acceptable supposition" as the mortar to bind together the sparse facts known about Eastwood Baptist's founder, Thomas Edwards, and the Church's earliest days.

That aspect aside, this narrative is not intended to be an exhaustive account of Eastwood Baptist church's eight and a half decades, but I hope it serves to remind us of God's guidance and providence throughout the years.

Finally, a big thank you to all who helped in the production of this work.

Earliest Days

The year is 1879. The British Empire is at its pinnacle and South Coast ports are bustling with merchant vessels from the four corners of the world. A ship weighs anchor, slides gently into the Channel and heads south. It's destination is India, the jewel in Queen Victoria's crown. The journey will be long and, at times, unpleasant.

As the ship pulls into the Channel currents and gathers speed, passengers line the side-rail, watching silently as England's shores fade over the horizon. For most it is a bitter-sweet moment; the sadness of leaving family and friends mingles with the excitement of what lies ahead - another world, a land of sun-baked plains, lush tropical forests and strange cultures and religions.

For one of those passengers, the days ahead would be a particular time of reflection and preparation.

Rev. Thomas Edwards was a 22-year old missionary, commissioned by the Baptist Missionary Society to spread the word of God to India's millions. At times in the coming weeks, when he was surrounded by the engrossing solitude of the ocean, he would fill his mind with pictures of the verdant valleys of his native Wales and of his father's farm in Monmouthshire. Those long, golden summer days when the whole family worked from dawn to dusk gathering in the harvest. Now he had accepted God's call to a different harvest.

Life on board quickly settled into a routine and, as the days passed, Thomas got to know his fellow travellers. They were a mixed bunch, but mostly merchants, soldiers and administrators - the lifeblood of the Raj. Time hung heavily on the long voyage, and if he was not studying his Bible or writing letters that would take months to arrive, Thomas engaged in conversation with other passengers. When he revealed he was a missionary, he usually encountered one of two reactions; some would eagerly question him about his faith, while others, seemingly trying to maintain a detachment from spiritual matters, would concentrate on details of his life and upbringing. Thomas lost count of the number of times he recounted the minutiae of his 22 years, of his school-days at Abergavenny Grammar, his conversion at the age of 17, his subsequent baptism at the tiny tabernacle in Llanthewy Prytherch, and of his days at the Baptist College at Pontypool.

India

As the ship drew near to India, Thomas stood with other passengers eagerly scanning the coastline. He was about to embark on his life's work. He had reached the place that was to be his home for the next three decades.

While he knew what to expect, India hit him like a balled fist: the heat, colour, smells and excitement were almost shocking in their intensity and made a lasting impression. But he adjusted quickly and was soon hard at work.

He was the product of his upbringing, a traditional Welsh preacher with an outgoing personality and a commitment to his Lord that captivated his audience. He drew large crowds wherever he spoke and caused more than a few wry smiles with his ability to sing Christian hymns to Indian tunes. The task was daunting, not only did he have to overcome vast cultural and linguistic difficulties, but he also had to constantly guard against inflaming the opposition of Hindu and Moslem fanatics.

But where others saw problems, Thomas saw opportunities and his witness grew. Soon, the demand for more labourers for the harvest was overwhelming. He responded by turning his considerable energies to training. For many years, he trained Indian preachers at the Serampore College near Calcutta. It was not, however, a work rooted in the classroom, and he would frequently embark on long evangelistic tours, instructing his students in the practicalities of missionary work.

Thirty-two years after he first set foot on Indian soil, Thomas Edwards boarded a ship bound for England and a well-earned retirement. Behind was a lifetime of dedication and achievement, memories and friends. As he waved goodbye to the many who lined the dock-edge, his heart was heavy with the conviction that he was seeing India for the last time. But once at sea, his mood lightened and his thoughts turned to the tiny Essex village of Eastwood, where he had chosen to spend his retirement years.

England and Retirement

Eastwood, the place where Thomas and his wife were to settle, was a sleepy agricultural backwater, but one with deep roots. It received its name from the Anglo Saxons, who invaded Britain in the 5th to 7th centuries. At the time, Rayleigh and Thundersley were hamlets nestling deep in the Great Forest of Essex. Eastwood was so named because it lay to the east of those small villages. Over the next five hundred years of so, Eastwood changed little, although it was considered significant enough for the Normans to include it in the Domesday Book.

In the 13th century, the kings of England and their courtiers made forays into the Great Forest to hunt deer, boar and other game. They would stay at Hadleigh Castle and frequently travelled to Eastwood. Those aristocrats are remembered today in local place-names - Nobles Green and Dandies Drive, for example. One of the last kings to hunt in the region was Henry VIII, whose second wife, Anne Boleyn, came from the Rochford area.

Over the ensuing years, Eastwood continued on its sleepy way, virtually untouched by the passage of time. By the 1900s it was still a small village, with some 181 houses lining a narrow unlit road used mainly by cattle and horse- drawn vehicles. The only church in the area was St. Laurence and All Saints, which dated back to AD 1100.

An Inspired Idea

Mr and Mrs Edwards moved into a house in Whitehouse Road, close to Cockethurst Farm. Although he was retired, missionary zeal continued to course through the veins of Thomas Edwards and before long he was holding open air services on a piece of open land on the corner of Nobles Green Road and Rayleigh Road, both of which were little more than leafy lanes.

The conviction that Eastwood needed its own Baptist church gradually took seed. It started to sprout one sunny afternoon when Thomas went to meet with two old friends, Pastor William White of nearby West Leigh Baptist and Walter Eastlea. The three met often in Walter's well-known rose garden in Picketts Avenue and frequently discussed the idea of building a church in Eastwood. West Leigh was a "planting" by Leigh Road Baptist, where the Edwards regularly worshipped, and in 1910, less than a year after he moved into the area, Thomas Edwards challenged Leigh Road to get "planting" again and establish a new church in Eastwood.

Thomas was not one to make a suggestion and leave others to carry it through. He acquired the piece of land on the corner of Nobles Green Road where he held his Sunday meetings and offered it as the site for the new church. From that point, events quickened. In January 1911, a builder's estimate of £340 was accepted and Eastwood Baptist Church was close to becoming a reality. Work was soon underway and the stonelaying ceremony took place in early March. It was a small, simple construction, comprising a modest-sized hall with a vestry and kitchen, and building work progressed rapidly. Within a few weeks the builders were packing away their tools; their work completed.

While the new church was taking shape, there was a growing sense of excitement among the Lord's people in Eastwood and throughout the district. Plans were excitedly laid for the official opening on April 11. When the day finally arrived, Mrs Edwards "cut the ribbon" and opened the door not just to a new building but to the start of a new era of Christian witness in Eastwood.

Thomas Edwards was appointed Superintendent of the fledgling church, which was under the protective wing of Leigh Road Baptist. With Eastwood being little more than a small, agricultural community, there were some who were unsure the new church would succeed.

Such doubts were soon swept aside; each Sunday groups of people, some large and others small, could be seen walking over the surrounding fields, heading for the new church. When the evenings were dark, they would light their way with hurricane lamps that would sway from side to side as they moved over the uneven farm land. When it was raining, the church kitchen served as a makeshift changing room, where soaked coats and muddy boots were left to dry off.

Under the influence of Thomas Edwards and his wife, Eastwood Baptist grew rapidly. Within two years it was felt to be sufficiently robust to stand on its own two feet, and a new constitution was drawn up establishing it as an autonomous church, separate from its Leigh Road "mother". The strong bond between the two churches did not diminish, however, and continues to this day.

It was a time of great happiness. The pace of life was slower and pleasures simple. Easter was a particular time of blessing, not just for all it means to Christians but also because it was then that Eastwood celebrated its birthday. Throughout the area, Easter Monday was more popularly known as Eastwood Monday. There was an afternoon service followed by tea, usually on the green beside the church. While the tables and chairs were set-up, the plates of sandwiches and cakes arranged and the tea brewed, church members and friends would wander around the local countryside, enjoying the leafy lanes.

The week before Christmas was a similarly memorable time, when members of the congregation would gather to go out into the neighbourhood to sing carols. The evening usually ended with refreshments at Dandies Farm, the home of church members, Mr and Mrs Salt. Being in the heart of a largely rural community, the church could boast several members who owned or rented farms and it was not unusual for the Sunday School to meet in a local barn or meadow.

A Time of Great Change

The early years of the fledging church were filled with joy. That changed with the arrival of 1914; it was to be a year filled with sorrow! The first blow was the death of Mrs Edwards from Tuberculosis. She was much loved and as a dedicated youth worker and a gifted musician, her passing was keenly felt by young and old alike. The second blow followed quickly, with the eruption of the First World War.

Many young church members and others from Eastwood and the surrounding district joined the armed forces. As so often happens in times of great distress, the Nation turned to God, and the pews of churches throughout the land were filled week after week. At Eastwood, the influx brought a pressing need for somewhere to accommodate a growing number of young people. As the pressure mounted, work was started on a small hut next to the church. The building was officially opened in 1916. As the slaughter in the trenches of Northern France and Belgium continued, the enlistment of young men left the mission fields of India and elsewhere depleted.

To deal with the crisis, missionary societies recalled into service retired missionaries. Thus in 1917, Thomas Edward was invited to travel back to India. The invitation was unexpected and caused much heart-searching; while he was overjoyed at the prospect of returning to a country he loved and to seeing old friends, his relatively short time at Eastwood exerted a strong pull. But he was sure that God's will was for him to return to the country to which he had devoted most of his life. Before his departure, however, he decided to hold a last baptismal service. Many came forward to pass through the waters of baptism in what was a highly emotional service. In the months ahead, as he trod India's dusty roads, Thomas carried the joy and praise of that day in Eastwood in his heart.

Thomas Edwards was succeeded by Mr P.H.Hughes, who served the church between 1918 and 1920. Little is known about Mr Hughes, but a few details about his successor, Mr Fenwick, exist in the church records. He was a Scotsman who was small in stature but with a commanding presence in the pulpit. He had an unsensational approach to spreading the gospel that brought a rich harvest. It was not an approach that met with universal approval, however. A small but vocal group of deacons criticised him for not pouring out fire and brimstone from the pulpit each Sunday. While he enjoyed the love and support of the majority, Mr Fenwick was deeply wounded by the attacks and, in early 1923, decided to leave. Almost as if he was seeking to escape the pain he was feeling, he moved with his wife to the other side of the world, Australia.

Later that same year, Thomas Edwards returned from India and accepted an invitation to fill the vacancy at Eastwood. His health, however, was failing and in September the following year he set off with his second wife for a six month holiday in New Zealand. In his absence, Rev. Paul Monk from Shoebury took charge. Thomas subsequently returned to Eastwood and continued to be closely connected to the church he founded until his death, in 1926, at the age of 69. He had lived a life of dedication and service to his Lord; his reward was to have the great joy of seeing the church he established grow and flourish. His parting gift was a plot of land to be used for an extension to the church. He was sorely missed, although his wife continued to be actively involved in the life of the church for many years, as did his daughter.

Rev. Monk served the church for almost four years before he, too, was struck by ill health. In July 1928, he handed over to Rev. P.W. Jew from Benfleet. Sadly, he, too, subsequently suffered poor health and was forced to move to the healthier climate of Southern France. He returned to England some years later and settled in Shoebury.

At the time, Eastwood Baptist Church had a reputation for missionary work. The highlight of the church's missionary calendar was the Mission Deputation Weekend.

It was a hectic weekend, with missionary workers from a wide area converging on Eastwood. The atmosphere throughout the two days was both reverential and cordial, with the church and the home and garden of Mrs Edwards (who lived in a bungalow alongside the church) being thrown open for use by delegates.

The Thirties

The Thirties were a time of progress for Eastwood and its Baptist church. Gas lighting was introduced and was acknowledged by all to be a substantial improvement on the, dull yellow glow emitted by oil lamps. The church came of age at Easter 1932. The event being marked by a series of special services. Although only 21 years old, the church building was beginning to look considerably older. The deterioration had been particularly evident to Thomas Edwards on his return from India. Characteristically, he had attempted to do something about it and encouraged the establishment of a fund for a new building. It was, initially, a grand scheme; the new church would cost the not inconsiderable sum of £3000 and would seat 300 people. It proved to be over ambitious and the rebuilding plan was subsequently shelved in favour of a new school hall, although that idea similarly sat on the shelf for some years.

The pressure for larger accommodation soon became intense. In 1933, the church secretary reported that the number in Sunday School had risen from 131 to 176. The Boys Brigade was especially popular and the number became so large that it was impossible to accommodate the group for its Sunday Bible School.

Fortunately, the owners of a large house nearby, The Bellhouse (now a pub/restaurant), Mr and Mrs Cornish, stepped forward and offered the Boys the use of their drawing room.

The situation continued unresolved until early 1937, when a special church meeting accepted an estimate for the School Hall to be extended. The stone laying ceremony took place in June that year, with the hall being opened in September. The cost was £630, which included the renovation of the existing building.

At the time the new hall was opened, the Pastor was Rev. W.S. Chapple, who had assumed the role from Mr Jew's successor, Rev. William Slater.

Throughout Eastwood's early years, there were lengthy periods when the church was without a Pastor or leader. During those times, Lay Preachers performed a valuable service. One of the reasons for the church's apparent inability to attract a Pastor was undeniably financial. The minutes of church meetings at the time made almost continuous reference to the lack of funds. Indeed, after the departure of Mr Jew, one member proposed that the church dispense with the practice of paying a stipend and, instead, give the Pastor £1 for each sermon preached.

Surprisingly, the idea was accepted, although never enacted. Fortunately, Walter Slater agreed to come out of retirement to act as Pastor and refused any remuneration! Rev. Slater left Eastwood at the end of 1935 and retired to Sussex.

For the people of Eastwood and the rest of the UK, the late 1930s was a time of considerable tension and concern. The optimism that had followed the ending of the First World War - "the war to end all wars" - was replaced by fears that Europe could again be plunged into a bloody conflict. The German leader, Adolf Hitler, annexed Austria in 1938, and tightened his iron fist around Czechoslovakia the following March. In September of 1939, German troops marched into Poland forcing Britain and France to declare a state of war. Europe was again ablaze.

As the country moved onto a war footing, the newly-built church hall was quickly designated an emergency rest centre by the local Air Raid Precautions Committee.

One person seemingly unperturbed by the turn of events was Mrs Royce, the church's caretaker from the thirties through to the late sixties. She was a well-known local character who for as long as anyone could remember had always dressed from head to toe in black. Her reputation for eccentricity was not helped by her practice of travelling everywhere on a very old bicycle. As a caretaker, she performed her tasks with dedication bordering on over-enthusiasm; if a church meeting was running overtime, Mrs Royce would simply walk in and switch off the lights! Fortunately, our current caretaker, Mrs Olive Hammond, is more forgiving!

Throughout the dark days of World War Two, services continued to be held regularly at Eastwood Baptist, although the Sunday evening services were moved to the afternoon because of Blackout precautions. Fortunately, the church was relatively undamaged by the war. It did, however, suffer a near fatal blow from a bout of cold weather. One night, a particularly severe frost caused a water tank in the church to split. It is recorded that the building was completely flooded and needed costly repairs.

Eastwood Baptist Church's pastor throughout the very difficult war years and beyond was Walter Iles. He was popular and much-loved; his black Ford Prefect frequently being seen driving along local roads, packed with children for the Sunday school or ferrying members to the various church meetings.

The Post-War Years

Eastwood changed rapidly over the post war years, evolving from an agricultural village to a bustling semi-urban community. The church that at one time was adequate with 80 seats was bursting at the seams. Worse still, it was not wearing its thirty odd years very well. A visitor to the church would have been little short of shocked by its condition.

The roof was cracked, the walls covered with slimy mildew and the timber was rotting badly. A new building was a top priority. A Building Fund was hastily set-up and the long and slow process of raising enough money commenced. John Cooper served as Lay Pastor throughout most of the Fifties. He joined the fellowship at Eastwood on August 5, 1951 and was subsequently asked to take over as Pastor. He declined. The church persisted and after the third invitation, Mr Cooper "with fear and trembling" accepted. He was inducted into the ministry on September 1, 1951, by Rev, F.C.Bryan, Area General Superintendent of the Baptist Union. "He was a gracious man and welcomed me like a brother," he later said. John Cooper looks back on his time at Eastwood as a time of great blessing. "I can honestly say that I was wonderfully blessed as I sought to serve the Lord and the fellowship," he says. "I owe the fellowship at Eastwood a great deal. R.D.B.Fennel was my Secretary and several other names come to mind: Arthur Edwards, Arthur Land, Stan Welch and most of all, my beloved brother Leonard. What caused our hearts to rejoice was the conversion of many boys and girls, men and women."

In the mid to late 1950s, the Cooper brothers, together with the church secretary, Arthur Edwards, and Stan Welch, formed a missionary team. The Eastwood Four, as they became known, travelled throughout Southend and Essex, spreading the word of God. John Cooper remained at Eastwood for seven years before moving to Quorn Baptist in Leicestershire. He was succeeded by his brother Leonard in 1959, who remained until 1968.

Work with Young People

From its earliest days, Eastwood Baptist devoted considerable resources to young people, although the work was not without controversy on occasions! In the post-war years, for example, the church had a thriving Life Boys section, which was run by a Mrs James. On reaching a certain age, the boys tended to transfer to the Boys Brigade, which was operated at nearby Eastwood Congregational Church. That exodus of young people was a source of concern, and a meeting was called between the two churches to discuss the issue.

It was decided that it would be preferable for the two organisations to operate from the same church. Consequently, the leaders of the two organisations were asked to pick which venue they felt the more appropriate; they opted for Eastwood Congregational and within a year, Eastwood had lost its Lifeboys. Martin Cooper, son of Pastor Leonard Cooper, has fond memories of being part of Eastwood's youth group in the Fifties and early Sixties: "Cabin Boys, the junior branch of Lifeboys - itself a younger version of Boys Brigade - met weekly in the old church hall for various drills and games. Christian endeavour was Monday night's activity, with bible quizzes and 'sword drill' under the ever-watchful eye of Stan Welch and others. "In the early Sixties, the Friday night Youth Club was the highlight of the week. We played table tennis and snooker on rickety tables and threw darts at a worn-out board. But what good fun. Mayhem and highjinks galore, but always followed by the epilogue to keeps us on-track spiritually. "How thankful I am now for the dedicated labour of love by godly men and women who gave their time, emotion and energy to help us develop our potential. Where would some of us be now were it not for their faithful, sacrificial service?"

Martin currently lives in Southampton and serves God full-time in the ministry with the Navigators.

In the early Seventies, Eastwood's youth work leaders took stock of the impressive development of the Friday night club and felt it would benefit from being attached to a national youth movement.

Covenanters was suggested. The church as a whole liked the idea and the Eastwood Covenanter Group was started on April 1, 1973. It was not, however, the only youth organisation with which the church was involved in the seventies. Junior Christian Endeavour had been operating since 1959, its role being to train young people to undertake the Lord's work, and a uniformed Campaigners group was started in October 1975. Over the coming years, Covenanters faded and Campaigners proved more popular. In May, 1982, however, Campaigners was discontinued and Covenanters re-introduced.

Golden Jubilee

In 1961, Eastwood Baptist celebrated its Golden Jubilee. To commemorate the event, memorable services were held over the last weekend in March. It was a time of considerable blessing, and one which served to focus on the future and the need for a new church building.

The celebration provided a timely boost to the Building Fund. The momentum continued, and by the end of 1968, ten years after it was first started, the Fund stood at the considerable sum of £9275 and work could begin.

That same year, Eastwood welcomed a new Lay Pastor, Lewis Mann. Lewis had been a member of Eldon Road Baptist Church in Wood Green, North London for twenty years and had taken early retirement from the GPO, where he was Postal Finance Cashier in the Accountant General's Office. He became Eastwood's full-time and unpaid Pastor on November 30, 1968. His formidable skills were soon put to good use in the task of administering and increasing the Building Fund.

In early 1969, a local Christian firm, Wiggins, offered to carrying out the construction of the new building on a cost-only basis. Demolition work started one bright Monday morning in the summer of the same year. Under the direction of architect, D.N. Silverton (a deacon at Leigh Road Baptist) and Wiggins' contract manager, Ray Iles, son of Eastwood's Pastor from 1941 to 1950, the old brick and stucco building was quickly reduced to a pile of rubble.

To make way for the new church, a nearby orchard was removed. While work was progressing, the congregation transferred to the nearby Eastwood Memorial Hall.

A Thanksgiving and Stonelaying ceremony took place on September 13, 1969. The service was conducted by D.N. Silverton in Eastwood Junior School at Kent Elms Corner. Prayer was led by Rev. R.J. Spencer, with the main address from Rev. S.G. Nash. The Westcliff and District Male Voice Praise Choir added to the air of celebration that was an almost tangible part of the proceedings.

After a period of closing prayer, everyone present got up out of their seats and walked to the site of the new building on the corner of Nobles Green Road for the Stonelaying Ceremony. The stone, with the inscription "To the Glory of God,• was laid by Rev. T.W. Shepherd of Belle Vue Baptist. Mr Shepherd delighted the large crowd which had gathered for the event by pointing out that Eastwood Baptist had a special significance for him, since it was where he had been married 41 years previously. The new building cost just over £20,000 and was opened on March 14, 1970.

Pastor Mann has left this account of that memorable day: "The builders had completed their task about ten days earlier and all furnishings were in hand except 200 chairs needed for the main auditorium.

We were greatly relieved when they were delivered - the day before the opening!

"We had some rain during the morning of the 14th but it cleared around noon. People began to assemble over an hour before proceedings began. Among the early arrivals was a coach load from my previous church at Eldon Road. Punctually at 3.15 pm the Opening Ceremony began on the steps of the main entrance. After Phillip Henman (chairman and treasurer of the London Bible College and chairman of the International Council of International Christian Fellowship) had read a few verses of scripture and had offered prayer, he cut the ribbon and declared the church open 'as a house of prayer for all people in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.' After which we sang 'O enter His gates with praise' and all who could entered.

"Two hundred and eighty were seated in the church, about thirty were accommodated in the vestibule and some fifty or sixty heard the service relayed to the Deacon's Vestry and the School Hall.

"The singing went splendidly in the service, over which Mr Henman presided. The Rev. James Adams MA (Superintendent, Eastern Area, Baptist Union) led us in the act and prayer of dedication and the Rev. Stanley Voke BD (Minister, Walton on Thames Baptist Church) brought a most apposite and helpful message from God's world.

"Nearly 300 enjoyed a buffet tea in the Memorial Hall, a masterpiece of organisation by our Senior Deacon and Sunday School Superintendent, Reg Beckingham.

"The church and vestibule was again crowded for the Thanksgiving Service. The Rev. Godfrey Robinson BA, BD (Minister, Bromley Baptist Church) brought a timely and encouraging message and the praise was greatly enriched by the signing of the Eldon Church Choir.

"On the following day we celebrated the Church's 58th anniversary. The Rev. Ronald Luland (Hon. Treasurer) preached most helpfully morning and evening. Frank Sampson spoke to a splendid crowd of parents and Sunday School scholars in the afternoon. The evening service was enriched by the singing of the Westcliff and District Male Voice Praise Choir and those friends also conducted the after- church Fellowship Hour. In the Fellowship Hour, I had the privilege of announcing the total of offerings received during the weekend. These amounted to £2,341. 1. 11d. As you can imagine, we sang the Doxology with glad and grateful hearts."

A second significant event in 1970 was the purchase of a new organ. The instrument, an Allen model, was assembled from a kit imported from the USA by a company based in Surbiton. The electric Allen was reputed at the time to be the closest in tone to a traditional pump organ - a point confirmed by the deacons and organist on a visit to the Surbiton workshops.

Lewis Mann retired from the Ministry in 1976, and was replaced by Ray Iles as Moderator.

In 1977, plans were approved for the construction of a Manse on land acquired by the church in 1973. The development was seen as essential if the church was to attach a full-time Pastor. Building work started in the autumn. Its first occupant was Rev. Colin Frampton, a young man who together with his wife Maureen contributed greatly to the development of the church in his five years as Pastor.

In late 1983, shortly after Britain had fought Argentina in the Falklands War, Colin felt God's call to minister to the people of those troubled islands in the South Atlantic. There was great sadness at his leaving, and his final service at Eastwood was an emotional affair.

A New Era

While the search for a replacement got underway, Rev. Ted Earle accepted the post of Moderator.

A long and careful search ensued for a new Pastor. Sunday after Sunday, prospective candidates took part in the service, introducing themselves and delivering God's message. After each of the candidates had visited Eastwood, there was unanimous agreement that there was one who was clearly the right man to guide EBC in the years ahead, Rev. Michael Bell. Michael Bell, together with his wife June and two young sons, Alan and David, came to Eastwood in the summer of 1984, and commenced his Ministry in September of that year. After ministries in Harborne, Birmingham (1966-1974) and Selson, South Croydon (1974-1984), the move to Essex was a return home for Michael and June, both having originated from nearby Romford.

"In 1983, we felt it was time to move on. Both my wife and I had elderly parents living at Romford and it seemed right to consider a move to Essex," he explains. "Through the help of the Area Superintendent, I met with Eastwood's deacons in late 1983 and preached at the church in the New Year. When the call to the Pastorate was given, it was accepted and a new chapter in the church's life began."

Within a few years, Eastwood Baptist was again studying plans for further construction work, this time for the long-established School Hall. In June, 1988, Pastor Bell made a statement to the church about the School Hall. "The old hall represents a standard we would not have in our own homes, he said, adding: "Second, or third is not good enough for the Lord.

A building committee was formed and plans for the future began to take shape. Three options were considered for extending the church to make new halls.

The views of members were sought in a questionnaire and an architect was commissioned to turn the thoughts and ideas of the congregation into a visible reality. While that process was continuing, Pastor Bell issued a further challenge to the church. It was a powerful and dramatic call to raise £20,000 by the Easter of 1990. Despite the size of the sum, and the relatively short deadline, it was raised in full, on time! In October that same year, the final plan for the reconstruction of the church was agreed. It called for the demolition of the old school hall and the extension of the existing church building to include two halls and two further rooms, in addition to a new kitchen. The plans received Local Authority approval in June 1991 and fund raising started in earnest.

The membership embarked on the task of cash-raising with enterprise and ingenuity. The ideas were many and various and ranged from a quiz night to marmalade making. One member typified the spirit of many when she raised more than £200 by spending long hours knitting small toys. Slowly, the cash mountain was climbed.

In July 1992, a builder was selected and the tempo of the project accelerated. Demolition of the School Hall commenced on November 2nd. As the work progressed, a commemorative stone was laid on January 9th. Once the builders had left the site, the skills of the congregation were again enlisted, this time to complete internal installation and decoration work. Many spent long days and evenings installing pipework, electrical wiring and skirting boards, while others were busily painting and tiling. With the commitment of many, the building was soon ready to go into service.

A thanksgiving and dedication service for the new extension took place on May 22, 1993. Worship was led by Rev. Bill Eugster of West Leigh Baptist and President of the Essex Baptist Association.

The close links between Eastwood and its mother church, Leigh Road, were emphasised when Rev. Roger Martin of Leigh Road Baptist delivered a thought-provoking sermon. The church was packed to overflowing with individuals and groups for far and near, as Rev. Eugster officially opened the new building, assisted by the youngest and oldest church members, respectively Rachel Eastwick and Jessie Porter. It was a joyous occasion made possible by the efforts of many people and the generosity of individuals and groups both within Eastwood Baptist and outside.

All present on that day would have agreed with the sentiments uttered by Lewis Mann many years earlier on a similar occasion when Eastwood Baptist had concluded a period of reconstruction: "We have been on the mountain top. Please pray for us as we return to the valley of ordinary routine. Pray that the ordinary services and activities of the church may be so filled with the Presence and Love and Power of the Holy Spirit that revival may break out in our midst and the neighbourhood reached for Christ."

In the months that followed, work continued on the interior decoration and on the task of raising the money needed to pay off the debt outstanding from the construction project. The former task was accomplished relatively quickly, but it was not until September 8, 1994 that the full cost of the new building - £140,000 - was paid in full.

Since they opened, the new halls have continued to prove their worth and it is hard to believe how we ever managed without them. Sadly, however, that is not the end of the matter. The lower hall has developed a serious damp problem which is causing concern. Discussions are continuing between the church, the architect and the builders. While those talks have been protracted, the Church Secretary is confident the problem will be resolved satisfactorily.

In its long history, Eastwood Baptist has faced many such problems and obstacles and through God's grace overcome them. Earlier this year, EBC celebrated yet another significant milestone, its 85th birthday. The event was marked by a special anniversary services.

The Church Secretary recounts that important day: "We gathered to celebrate 85 years of worshipping God on the corner of Nobles Green Road and Rayleigh Road. Rev. David Harper BD, who has been a good friend of our church over many years, led the services. David's association with the church has included his performing Michael and Cecilia's marriage ceremony on August 4, 1990, and in him taking a keen interest in the building of our new halls.

"At the anniversary services, we were able to reflect on God's faithfulness down through the history of our church and on the many believers who have worshipped and worked in Eastwood Baptist. Some have already gone to Glory. Those still in the work re-affirmed their commitment to Him who has commissioned them."

Today, Eastwood Baptist remains a lively, thriving, growing community of God's people. Thomas Edwards would be immensely proud of that, but he would be the first to point out that the glory belongs to God. Let that thought be at the heart of our anniversary year and in the future as we approach the new Millennium.