



## THE EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE: A BRIEF HISTORY

The following is a summary of the official history of the Evangelical Alliance, *One Body in Christ*, by Ian Randall & David Hilborn (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2001). The book is now out of print, but copies are available from the Evangelical Alliance and from various online retailers.

### **Overview: The Place of the Evangelical Alliance within Modern British Church History**

*Unum Corpus Sumus in Christo* – 'We are One Body in Christ' – was the original motto of the Evangelical Alliance when it was founded in August 1846. Unity and catholicity were its defining principles, and it was conceived as an avowedly global body. However, its genesis and early administration were largely British, and in many respects it bore the hallmarks of Victorian Church life. In the early part of the Twentieth Century the Alliance adopted a broader Protestant agenda, but lost momentum. This was recovered after the Second World War mainly through sponsorship of evangelistic work, and most notably through support of Billy Graham's Crusades. Division over the ecumenical movement and denominational allegiance in 1966 did considerable damage, but the 1980s saw phenomenal growth. This owed much to the rise of the Charismatic movement, but also to the resolve of the young visionary General Secretary Clive Calver and others to avoid the 'tribal' divisions of the past. Following Calver's departure and Joel Edwards' appointment as General Director in 1997, the Alliance has sought consciously to renew its early commitment to social engagement alongside evangelism and church growth.

### **The Origins of the Alliance**

The Evangelical Alliance inherited and developed the pan-evangelical spirit of the Wesley-Whitefield revival of the 1730s – a spirit later promulgated by the London Missionary Society and others. It was also undeniably spurred by opposition to Tractarianism, and to a perceived resurgence of Roman Catholicism in the 1830s and 40s. Equally important influences, however, were the Scottish Disruption of 1843, and a more benign 'keynote of love'. Scots Presbyterians – notably Thomas Chalmers, Robert Balmer and John Henderson – emerged as key progenitors of the Alliance, organising a 'preparatory' Liverpool conference in November 1845. English participation was then galvanised by the Congregationalist John Angell James, the Anglican Edward Bickersteth, the Wesleyan Jabez Bunting, the Baptist Edward Steane, and others. Irish and Welsh evangelicals were less prominent at this stage, but would play significant roles in due course.

### **The Formation of the Alliance**

The inaugural conference of the Alliance was held in London from 19 August to 1 September 1846. Unthinkably from today's perspective, the venue was the Freemasons' Hall in Great Queen Street, Covent Garden. However, this was frequently used at the time by other interdenominational bodies like the Bible Society, the London Missionary Society and the Anti-Slavery Society as a neutral 'Hall for Hire', and no leading member of the Alliance seems to have been a Mason at the time of its formation. 84% of delegates were from Britain; 8% from USA, and 7% from Europe and the rest of the world. A thoroughgoing international structure was envisaged for the new body, but was abandoned after a dispute on slave

holding between the British and American delegations. Instead, a loose network of autonomous national and regional Alliances was put in place. A doctrinal basis was adopted, but only after vigorous debate on 'eternal punishment', which was affirmed in a clause added by the American delegation to the statement on the last things.

In November 1846, the British Organisation of the 'World's Evangelical Alliance' was established at a conference in Manchester. There were 3,000 founder members, and 6,000 people were in membership by 1859. The Alliance journal, *Evangelical Christendom*, was launched in 1847. It ran until 1954, when it was succeeded by the *Evangelical Broadsheet*. This in turn gave way to the current Alliance magazine, *idea*.

### Religious Liberty and the Search for a Social Agenda

Early uncertainty as to the Alliance's socio-political role was resolved in favour of 'common action'. This was pursued chiefly in relation to religious liberties. From 1850 onwards, the Alliance combined regularly with parliamentary leaders to petition governments around the world on freedom of worship and witness. High profile, successful campaigns in Turkey, Russia, Italy and Spain consolidated the reputation of the Alliance in this regard. The activist momentum was lost somewhat in the first half of the twentieth century, but has been recovered since the historic Berlin and Lausanne Congresses of 1966 and 1974.

### Nineteenth-Century Theological Controversies

Concentration on the 1859 Ulster revival deferred the Alliance's engagement with Darwinism, but supporters like Thomas Chalmers, James McCosh and others advocated evangelical versions of evolution through the 1850s and 60s. An international Alliance conference in New York in 1873 openly gave a platform to supporters of theistic evolution. However, certain key British leaders like T.R. Birks strongly opposed the Darwinist account of origins. Higher criticism also became a cause for concern. The Alliance was initially antagonistic, organising rallies against it, and related 'infidelities', in the 1880s. The great Baptist preacher C.H. Spurgeon spoke at these gatherings. By the turn of the century, however, a moderate embrace of the higher critical movement was becoming acceptable. Hell remained a concern, as it had been at the inaugural conference: Birks' *The Victory of Divine Goodness* (1873) suggested some remission of the suffering of the damned; the Executive Council split on issue, and Birks resigned his honorary secretaryship. 15 men then resigned from the Alliance Council when it decided not to withdraw Birks' actual membership: the Council declared that to do this would be to act inappropriately as an 'ecclesiastical court'. Those who resigned, however, felt that undue licence was being allowed in the interpretation of the Basis of Faith.

### Global Developments

Failure to form a tight international body in 1846 was mitigated by a sequence of major international conferences and missionary conventions in ensuing years. The Swiss-American theologian Philip Schaff emerged as a key advocate of internationalist, ecumenical evangelicalism at these meetings. However, his vision of structural unity diverged from others' focus on 'invisible' oneness – e.g. as expressed by the renowned Presbyterian theologian Charles Hodge at the 1873 New York conference. These differences were later highlighted in mixed Alliance responses to the landmark World Missionary Conference held at Edinburgh in 1910, and in later tensions over the post-Second World War ecumenical movement.

### European Relationships

Early pan-European co-operation in the Alliance was enhanced by the involvement of Scandinavians in 1880s and 90s. Later, however, it was seriously damaged by British-German differences over the Boer War and World War I. Even so, during the First World War the British Alliance established itself as key national prayer leader. The Russian revolution was perceived as a great threat by European Alliances, who joined forces to support Orthodox and other Christians in the Soviet Union. Having become General Secretary of the British Organisation at the age of 30 in 1904, H. Martyn Gooch took on an 'ambassadorial role' in the '20s and '30s in support of European evangelicals oppressed on one hand by Roman Catholicism, and on other by Communism. As the new threat of Fascism arose, the British Organisation liaised closely with the German Confessing Church. Martin Niemöller became a key contact, and the Alliance hosted a tribute to Karl Barth when he visited London in 1937, having championed his theology in preceding years. During the war the British Alliance was once again at the forefront of national prayer, organising a number of rallies.

### **The Alliance in the Early Twentieth Century**

R.J. Campbell's contentious 'New Theology' was opposed by an Alliance pamphlet series in 1907, but under H. Martyn Gooch the British Organisation was re-positioned as a 'Broad Protestant Alliance'. It adopted a much shorter, less specifically evangelical statement of faith in 1912, and there was some ambiguity about its status in relation to original Basis. Gooch convened a conference upholding 'The Fundamentals' in 1920, but the Alliance steered clear of oppositional, post-'Monkey Trial' American Fundamentalism, and concentrated instead on home and European Protestant unity, and on backing the broad-based Keswick movement. However, it still proved itself sufficiently conservative in this inter-war period to reject Liberal Evangelicalism, Prayer Book reform and Frank Buchman's doctrinally controversial Oxford Group

### **The Alliance and Post-War Evangelism**

The Alliance sponsored interdenominational evangelism from outset: Sunday evening rallies were held at Exeter Hall in 1850s; various outreach events were organised in connection with the Ulster revival of 1859, and strong support was lent to D.L. Moody and Ira Sankey's historic British campaigns of 1873-5. Alliance representatives gave help to leaders of the Welsh revival of 1904-5, and mounted a major mission campaign in conjunction with the British Empire Exhibition of 1924. Particular emphasis was placed on evangelism under the General Secretaryship of Roy Cattell after the Second World War, and this did much to boost the Alliance's public profile. In 1945 the Alliance backed a highly successful series of meetings led by Tom Rees at the Albert Hall. The next year it invited Billy Graham from the USA to lead a youth campaign. When the Alliance subsequently sponsored Graham's massively popular Haringay meetings of 1954, it helped to bring about a turning point in modern British evangelicalism. The Alliance would go on to support further successful Billy Graham campaigns in the 1960s and 1980s. Gilbert Kirby, who took over from Cattell in 1955, went on to serve also as the first secretary of the Evangelical Missionary Alliance from 1958.

### **The Alliance and the Ecumenical Movement**

The ecumenical movement had been a bone of contention in the Alliance since Edinburgh 1910, but tensions heightened following the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948. Officially, the Alliance adopted a stance of 'benevolent neutrality' towards new body, recognising that many of its members had happily involved themselves in the WCC. At the same time, however, it warned that 'outward uniformity' should not to be mistaken for its own long-standing commitment to 'real spiritual unity'. As an alternative, and in recognition of the original international vision of Alliance, the World Evangelical Fellowship was formed

at Woudschoten, Holland, in 1951. Future Alliance Vice President John Stott was a key speaker at the inaugural conference.

In Britain, tensions on ecumenism increased. The Alliance sought to address these at a 1965 Assembly and again, in 1966. Gilbert Kirby took a calculated risk by asking Stott and the leading independent evangelical Martyn Lloyd-Jones to address the opening session at the 1966 event. Lloyd-Jones had long been sceptical about the ecumenical movement, and had become increasingly critical of theologically 'mixed' denominations. The Anglican Stott was more favourable towards ecumenism and had consistently counselled loyalty among evangelicals in mainline churches. In his speech, Lloyd-Jones called for a reconfiguration of evangelicals into new association, although debate still continues on whether or not this implied actual secession. Stott rose from the chair to say Scripture and history opposed Lloyd-Jones' view. A controversy ensued which would deeply damage the Alliance. Formed in 1953, the British Evangelical Council now rallied to Lloyd-Jones' cause, and gained many 'anti-ecumenical' evangelicals as the Alliance lost members. In 1970, the Alliance hosted a highly-charged conference on the doctrine of the Church, at which Anglicans committed to denominational loyalty and ecumenical engagement, as advocated by their 1967 Keele Congress, met stern opposition from BEC leaders and Lloyd-Jones supporters. The Alliance's Basis of Faith was revised in same year. The new text was more specific than the old on the centrality of substitutionary atonement, but was apparently less prescriptive on eternal punishment.

### **The Alliance and Renewal from the 1960s to the early 1980s**

The rise of the Charismatic movement in the mid-late 1960s brought fresh challenges. Gilbert Kirby underlined the need to re-focus on the 'neglected doctrine of the Holy Spirit' in 1964, but warned of excesses in respect of the charismata. Bridges were built with Pentecostal denominations, and some Pentecostal leaders became active on the Alliance's Council. Under the leadership of A. Morgan Derham (1966-8) and Gordon Landreth (1969-82), this embrace of Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal influences continued. Though relatively brief, Derham's period as General Secretary will be remembered for the establishment in 1967 of the Evangelical Alliance Relief Fund (TEAR Fund) – a project whose impact and growth allowed it within a few years to become an autonomous charity.

Evangelism was re-thought by the Alliance in a 1968 report called *On the Other Side*, and through the Alliance's involvement in the Nation-wide Initiative in Evangelism (NIE) during the late 1970s. Emphasis in each case was shifted from mass meetings to local church and community outreach projects. The appointment of the dynamic British Youth for Christ leader, Clive Calver, as General Secretary in 1983, was a reflection of this.

### **The Resurgence of the Alliance in the 1980s and 1990s**

Clive Calver's period at the Alliance was one of extraordinary growth: from 1,000 individual members in 1983 to 56,000 in mid-90s, and from less than 1,000 churches to 3,000 in same time span. This expansion owed much to Calver's immense energy, and to his ability to assimilate new 'House Church' constituencies whilst maintaining and increasing the support of conservative evangelicals. A keen student of the Alliance's history, Calver consciously sought to recover the twin emphases of its founders: constructive unity and concerted social action. The Spring Harvest festival, conceived by Calver and others in the late 70s and boosted greatly by the Alliance under his direction, epitomised the former. Founding of African Caribbean and Asian Alliances and national Alliances in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and establishment of a Public Affairs department, the employment consultancy Evangelical Enterprise and so-called Christian Action Networks bore out the latter. By 1996, the Alliance

was confident enough to face down the legacy of 1966, and convened a major Assembly in Bournemouth, to chart ways ahead. This turned out to be Calver's swansong: he left the Alliance to head the US Christian charity World Relief shortly afterwards.

### Theology and Ethics in the Recent History of the Alliance

Aware of a growing need for theological reflection, Clive Calver had suggested in 1992 that an advisory group be formed for this purpose. The Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals (ACUTE) was duly founded in 1993. Dave Cave was employed as convenor. ACUTE's mettle was soon tested by the so-called 'Toronto Blessing' controversy of 1994-6. Three special consultations were arranged and a statement issued on this dramatic new wave of charismatic activity. A paper addressing the question 'What is an Evangelical?' followed in 1996. David Hilborn took over from Cave in late 1997 and soon edited *Faith, Hope and Homosexuality* – a widely welcomed articulation of the evangelical position on this increasingly fraught issue. *The Nature of Hell* followed in 2000, picking up on a long-established Alliance debate: it concluded that annihilationism/conditional immortality represented a 'significant minority evangelical view', and that this view fell within the parameters set by the 1970 basis of faith. A more detailed reflection on Toronto and a report on evangelicals and the Orthodox Church were produced in 2001. Books on Prosperity Teaching, generationally-based mission and social transformation followed. In addition, a Policy Commission was formed in 1999. It issued reports on transsexuality in 2000 and on GM foods in 2001, and joined with ACUTE from 2003-2006 to produce a major report on 'Faith and Nation in Britain Today'.

### Shaping the Alliance for the Twenty-First Century

Joel Edwards, formerly General Director of African Caribbean Alliance and UK Director, succeeded Clive Calver in the summer of 1997. A tour entitled 'Seizing the Moment' outlined the Alliance's commitment to redoubled activism in evangelism and social concern. Social breakdown was surveyed in a special report overseen by the Alliance's President, Sir Fred Catherwood. 1998 saw 'Amen: A Day to Pray' mobilise churches across the UK in intercession, and the Belfast office was active in the background of the Good Friday Agreement. The Scottish Alliance worked hard to establish a presence in the new Edinburgh parliament; the Welsh Alliance did the same in the Cardiff Assembly, and formed Gweni to link voluntary organisations. The Church Life department under John Smith increased church growth advocacy work, while in 1999 a 'Shaping Tomorrow's Church' tour raised hard questions about the gospel and 'post-Christian' culture. Media opportunities, developed under Calver, expanded markedly as Edwards and other Alliance spokespeople appeared on prestigious radio and TV programmes like 'Thought for the Day', 'Any Questions', 'Question Time' and 'The Moral Maze'.

As the new millennium dawned, staff and Council agreed that the Alliance had 'come to the end of a chapter', and sought to recast it as a 'Movement for Change'. Evangelical unity, they agreed, would need to be directed more explicitly towards changing society. 'Christendom' models would become less central, and paradigms adopted by specialised campaigning groups and movements would be more relevant. Public Affairs Director Martyn Eden cited research which suggested that just 2% of a population can significantly alter the ethos of a culture if well motivated and organised. An Assembly was held in Cardiff, to publicise and establish this vision. In the next few years, it was delivered through a core focus on values of trust, hope and respect, through intensified emphasis on local church-related community projects, and through strong input and lobbying success on issues of religious hatred, equality and religious liberty. 160 years on, the legacy of the Alliance's founders is alive and well.