

# 'SEE HOW GREAT A FLAME ASPIRES, KINDLED BY A SPARK OF GRACE'

## *DAVID HULL, IN CONVERSATION WITH KEITH JARVIS, REFLECTS ON THE ORIGINS OF THE METHODIST REVIVAL FELLOWSHIP, ITS LINKS WITH THE EAST AFRICAN REVIVAL, AND THE MESSAGE WHICH COMES DOWN THE YEARS TO US TODAY.*

My conversations with Keith Jarvis about revival, one of the subjects closest to his heart, began five years ago at MET's Revival Prayer Conference, at which I was one of the speakers. On the Saturday afternoon, I was asked to share some reflections on the East African revival. As regular readers of MET Connexion will by now be well aware, my wife, Sarah, was born into a family steeped in revival. Her grandfather and great uncle, Drs Bill and Joe Church, were central figures in the East African Revival. Since marrying her, I had read some of the accounts of the revival and so, when asked to share some reflections at the conference, I was able to say that what had struck me most was the sense that the revival wasn't initially a triumphant experience. Rather, it began as Joe Church came to the end of himself and sat under a thorn tree, having reached a point of desperation and about to give up on his missionary efforts in failure. It was then, as he prayed, that revival came. Historians of the revival have identified that desperate prayer under that tree as the beginning of the great revival.

The MET Revival Prayer Conferences, now known as REVIVE, are a legacy of one of MET's predecessor organisations, the Methodist Revival Fellowship. As that afternoon session ended, an early member of the Methodist Revival Fellowship, Keith Jarvis, caught me for a conversation, which I have never forgotten. He explained to me that he had known Joe Church and that I had observed what Joe Church himself had identified as one of the characteristics of the revival. 'People in Britain misunderstand what revival is,' Joe told him; 'They think it is the top blowing off, but it is the bottom falling out.'

Keith told me that he had known Joe Church many years ago, even visiting his Cambridgeshire home. Given I was serving as Chair of MET and had recently married into the Church family, I was amazed when Keith told me that he believed the birth of the Methodist Revival Fellowship was directly related to the East African Revival. Over the past five years, I have wanted to continue that conversation with Keith, and this present edition of MET Connexion, focusing on Revival, has given me the perfect opportunity.

It was in 1958, when he first went to the Southport Holiness Convention and heard John H J Barker speaking, that Keith's interest in revival and a deeper spiritual life began to grow. It was both a challenging and a disturbing experience and prompted Methodist minister, Harry Lister, to encourage him to join the

Methodist Revival Fellowship which had been formed earlier that decade.

About the same time, Harry Lister handed Keith a leaflet advertising a conference in North Wales, led by Roy Hession. Unbeknown to Keith at the time, Hession, a British evangelist, had been greatly influenced by the East African Revival. The only thing that caught the young Keith's attention was the price: £5 all in. It seemed like the offer of a real adventure that he couldn't resist. That week, he met not only Hession, but also William Nagenda and Yosiya Kinuka, two of the leaders of the East African revival, who spoke powerfully of the work of the Lord in their hearts. Keith later discovered that, had he gone to the gathering a week earlier, he would also have met Joe Church; as it was, that would have to wait for some years.

Roy Hession had been converted under Joe Church. He had begun to call together British people who had been touched by the East African Revival and they had gathered in Matlock, Derbyshire in 1947. There, they sensed the Lord speaking to them, a message Hession documented in his small, though nonetheless influential book, 'The Calvary Road'. From those beginnings grew a network of revival fellowships across the UK.

The Methodist Revival Fellowship began in 1952. Lists of those involved read as a rollcall of many who would become the outstanding evangelical Methodist



*L-R: William Nagenda, Roy Hession and Yosiya Kinuka 1956, Abergele, N. Wales*

leaders of their day: John Barker, Howard Belben, the Rt Hon Roland Lamb, Robin Catlin, Ron Taylor, Trevor Staniforth, Keith Lewis and Harry Stringer. It was Howard Belben who inserted the word 'Methodist' into the Revival Fellowship's name within the Conference resolution which launched it, keen that it should clearly be a fellowship of Methodists, for Methodists, within the Methodist Church. Such people would have a profound effect on Keith's Christian discipleship and ministry and, over the years, the MRF would provide great encouragement, inspiration and fellowship in the midst of his circuit ministry.

A jubilee conference was held at Swanwick in Derbyshire in 1971 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of the Rwanda Mission, which had sent the Church brothers and their forebears to East Africa. Festo Kivengere, one of the most prominent African leaders of the revival, was the main speaker. Through Kivengere, Keith was introduced to African Enterprise and, at the invitation of its British Secretary, Jean Wilson, would later join the board of directors.

Keith internalised the message of the revival; it shaped his heart, discipleship and ministry. Over the years, he spoke at a number of revival conferences and made several trips to East Africa, where he felt very much at home amongst the brothers and sisters in Christ there. Some of Keith's conference messages can be listened to via the website [sermonsofgrace.org/keith-jarvis/](http://sermonsofgrace.org/keith-jarvis/).

It was whilst he was speaking at the revival fellowship conference in Southwold in 1973 that Keith first met Joe and Bill Church. In 1981, Joe Church's *Quest for the Highest* was published and Keith reviewed it for *Sound of Revival*, the MRF's magazine. Keith observed that the book was likely to be, 'the last of the real "pioneer missionary" books about Africa, especially as a first-hand account'

and he outlined the main emphases of both book and revival: 'repentance, the cleansing blood of Jesus, and walking with God in the light'. Referring to Joe Church's diaries, which provided the main source material for the book, Keith suggested, 'Perhaps there has not been such a well-documented account of revival since Wesley's journals'. He looked back, observing how, in 1936, Joe Church had published 'Victorious Praying', a call to the churches of Britain to pray for revival. As he read and reviewed this latest book, Keith reflected that perhaps the emergence of revival fellowships across the denominations, not least the MRF, may well have been an answer to that call to prayer. Thus, within divine providence, the MRF's roots may well be traced back to that short pamphlet, written by Joe Church.

It was as a result of that review published in 'Sound of Revival', that Joe Church invited Keith to visit him in his Cambridgeshire home. There, as they looked through the archives of the revival together, Joe Church asked Keith if he would write an ongoing account of the revival. With all his other ministry commitments, he felt it would be a project too far and, in the end, the account would be vividly written by Katherine Makower in 'The Coming of the Rain: The biography of a pioneering missionary in Rwanda'.

That meeting with Joe Church in his home was almost forty years ago. The message of the East African revival and fellowship with those who had experienced revival first-hand has continued to shape Keith's life and ministry to this day. The legacy lives on.

Methodism was born in revival. Almost three hundred years ago, Charles Wesley wrote in astonishment about all that the Lord was accomplishing in his day, 'See how great a flame aspires, kindled by a spark of grace'. Joe Church adopted a similar image, writing from the heart

of the East African Revival, describing the holiness it cultivated in the hearts of those caught in its path: 'Revival is like an African bush-fire: as it burns and spreads over the mountain side all that lurks in the long grass, the snakes and the rats, have to flee for their lives.'

What was the message at the heart of the revival fellowships and of the revival itself in which they were rooted? It was and is, purely and simply, the message of Jesus: beholding the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and walking in the light with him. We must not make revival the main thing. In many ways you have to 'get into' revival before you can properly pray for it. It is a message of brokenness, of seeking for holiness and of being filled with the Holy Spirit. Joe Church and his colleagues discovered that it was not in calling the Africans to repent, but out of the confession of their own failures, that revival came. The way we began the Christian life, in coming to Jesus at the foot of the cross in repentance and faith, is the way we must continue in it. The Holy Spirit who led us to the cross when we first became Christians leads us to the cross today. We have a continual need for the Holy Spirit, for the cross, for repentance. We are sinners saved by grace. When we fully depend on him, the Lord could once again bring revival 'in the midst of the years' (Habakkuk 3:2 KJV). It could begin with us.

It is a legacy that urges us each to ask of ourselves: am I revived at this moment? Am I walking with the Lord right now?



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