

## **A Pastor's Testimony**

### **Rev Timothy Wood is Pastor of Wigmore Evangelical Free Church**

**I was born in the railway town of Crewe on 25<sup>th</sup> April 1962, the youngest of three boys.** My father was pastor of a back street church in Crewe. He saw great blessing there after a very difficult beginning. When he started there was a small congregation of eighteen but when he left sixteen years later the membership had grown to two hundred.

My early days in Crewe were good ones despite difficult finances which restricted our movements. The things I used to do were typical of what boys did; I loved climbing trees, playing with matches, playing 'dare' on the railway tracks and then running away! However, being a pastor's son, expectations for good behaviour were high. My parents taught my brothers and me the scriptures from an early age. Family devotions were important to them and I can remember them to this day. We even went through 'Pilgrim's Progress' together. As a youngster these things, on top of going to church and attending Sunday School and Youth Clubs, made a deep impression on my spiritual life. My father says he remembers when I made a profession of faith at the young age of six.

Even as a youngster I had a craving – sport! Football (or soccer as the Americans would say) was my first love but I loved every sport – cricket, cross-country and sprinting, tennis, table-tennis, swimming, were my great loves. As a youngster I was very competitive – my family will say I still am.

At the age of eight, my father felt the call to London. The move was a big step for my family as they have always lived in the north. This was now in the early 1970s, the year the Beatles split, the peak of the cold war. I had a great fear of communism at a time when the threat of communism was real. Hearing many stories from Open Doors about Bibles being smuggled into Eastern Europe, I decided to take action of my own, digging tunnels in the bottom of our garden and hiding Bibles, waiting for the communists to take over.

The Church in London was a big one. The youth work was flourishing. Going to Christian camps and receiving good teaching at Church all helped me in my spiritual life. Life at the manse had its drawbacks however. I couldn't quite understand why some people were so rude about my father who made such a deep impression on my life during that period.

Sport was still the thing that I loved. It didn't matter what it was, I would go for it. By now I was in several football teams, including the school team. I was winning competitions at tennis, table-tennis and I was even in the school chess team. I took up a bit of boxing, but being vain I gave it up because my nose was getting slightly crooked! When the summer came, my brother and I would play cricket for hours in the garden. There was a point where I had to stop playing sport when I nearly lost my eye whilst playing golf in the garden. My brother took a swing, unaware that I was standing behind him, and he hit me in the eye. Hardly surprising that ever since then the only sport I don't like is golf!

When I was twelve, my parents felt it was right that I should go to boarding school. I was shocked by this because I was happy at home and basically didn't want to go. The only advantage was there was lots of sport, in fact, sport every afternoon. In the winter it was mainly rugby and football and in the summer cricket, tennis, and swimming. It was while I was at boarding school that I developed a love of two more sports, horse-riding and squash, which I still play today. Yet this time marked the decline of my spiritual life. The first term I was far from happy. After that, things got better as I got more involved with school life. Being in nearly all the sporting teams helped but other things were also happening, such as sneaking off to smoke. Things became daring – when we had free afternoons, we would go fishing in no-fishing areas, scrumping in apple orchards, provoking farmers into chasing us. The last time I did that was when a farmer chased us with a shotgun.

Still, I tried my best to keep my spiritual life going. At first I would sneak off on my own and read my Bible. I was top in religious studies, yet as time went by I no longer felt the need to read the Bible. When I was allowed home at weekends I would go to Church but really by then I had little care for spiritual things. Surviving at boarding school was tough, as by now I learnt you had to look after yourself first which made me more aggressive, more competitive and more independent. My parents noticed a change in me; smelling of smoke, swearing, telling coarse jokes and an aggressive attitude to life.

Leaving school and returning home was great, but by now my spiritual life was damaged. I always believed in God and did not believe in the evolution theory. I knew the answers, but I was simply not prepared to obey. Although my language was coarse, even then I could never bring myself to blaspheme. Returning home didn't improve my spiritual life, and I no longer went to church. I saw the grief this caused my parents but I no longer cared. The added burden to them was the way I had become. They always said I was perfectly pleasant and still could bring laughter into the house, but it was my love for the world that they noticed. I had an auntie who lived nearby, and she was very rebellious. She actually did little good for my spiritual life. In some ways, I was easily led by her, as she gave me cigarettes and took me to pubs at an early age.

By now, I mixed in with a group of friends who led me further astray. While sport was still high on my agenda, so was attending football matches, wild parties, smoking, drinking and just loving life. By now I joined a gang of skinheads, we soon grew out of that, but we still continued as a gang who would not be pushed around. We would often hang around the streets up to no good, having stone fights with other gangs, playing knock down ginger and even putting fireworks in people's letter boxes. Living in London gave us opportunities to attend nightclubs, concerts and other activities. Late nights home were now frequent, causing my parents to worry all the more.

Still playing football on Saturday mornings, I also attended football matches following my favourite football team West Ham. I was involved in crowd disturbances and riots, even knocking off a policeman's helmet on one occasion making myself a hero to my friends. It was at West Ham that I was first arrested, banged up and locked in a cell. For a moment I had an opportunity to think about myself and how this would affect my parents. I still loved them and cared for them and admired them for their work for the Lord, but still I had missed the point. This moment of thinking was short-lived when I was joined by another prisoner from the crowd trouble. I was eventually released and had to face the painful ordeal of telling my parents what had happened and then the ordeal of going to court, and I was still only sixteen. I was acquitted, having lied through my teeth. Still I persisted in my sinful ways, yet in order to spare my parents worry, sometimes I would come home in good time, allowing them to think I was asleep, only to climb out of the window and join up with my friends.

There were times when I must have thought I was a Christian. Occasionally we would have dinner with my family and things were discussed. We often had guest speakers such as missionaries, evangelists and other pastors. I remember pastors staying with us from the Eastern block and telling us stories of life behind the Iron Curtain. Yet one visitor I remember very well, who had a massive impact at the time, was Fred Lemmon, a convicted gangster thief who was from the east end of London. One night while in prison he was about to murder a prison guard, when Christ spoke to him. That night he was converted. This made me think but again it was short lived.

By now, I was experimenting with drugs, taking pills and often being drunk but my life was far from being satisfied. Work wasn't going well. I was constantly in trouble with the police; altogether I was arrested sixteen times for petty crime. On one occasion ten of us were arrested for a brawl. It resulted in us having to go on trial at the Old Bailey which lasted two weeks and saw us acquitted.

I was now twenty and I had that feeling I was drifting further and further away from the Lord.

One day the doorbell went. My father came into the room looking very annoyed at me, saying there were two police officers who wanted to speak to me for an alleged assault. I remember the occasion

two days before; there had been a fight. I knew I hadn't been involved in this particular fight because I was elsewhere involved in another fight, so it was a case of mistaken identity. What I was doing was no better but I was not going to admit to that.

At the police station my shoes were taken off and bang, the cell doors slammed. Having been in the police cells many times before, this time it felt strange. This time I was afraid. I knew that if I kept this up sooner or later I would be in prison for good. I felt now like the Prodigal Son, in despair but had a sudden awakening. What if I prayed? I still believed in God. What if I should talk to Him? Would He answer? How would He answer? I really wanted to escape from this mess. I remember as a child my mother told the story about wrestling with God and she said Jacob challenged God. I remember thinking at the time that was a brave thing for Jacob to do, but it came back to me while I was in the cell so I prayed. I actually got down on my knees and made the prayer, "God if you get me out of this mess and out of this cell within an hour, I will promise to follow you". With the wisdom of hindsight, I realise this was unbiblical, but God is gracious. What happened after that was a total time of prayer. Strangely enough, within the hour, the cell doors were opened. Was this just a coincidence, or was it an answer to prayer? I believe it was an answer to prayer. I felt this overwhelming sense of love.

As for my part, I knew I had to do something. After talking to my parents about the charges, I still couldn't pluck up courage to tell them about my experience but I was asking indirect questions.

That night I picked up the Bible desperately seeking and hoping that God would speak to me. I decided to read through the book of Revelations. So I read the first chapter, nothing spoke to me. I read what Christ had to say to the Church of Laodicea and came across chapter 3 V 19 "Those who I love, I must rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent." I realise now that Christ was speaking to the Church of Laodicea, and therefore mainly to Christians, but at the time I felt God was using this to speak to me about my need to repent. Then I read v 20 "Here I am, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in." I realised that this was the state of my heart, that by my rebellious ways, I have shut out Christ, yet He must come in. It was then that I confessed all my sins and asked Him quite simply to take my life. I knew then I had the assurance of my salvation.

I didn't really make a song and dance of it at the time. I suppose I thought it wasn't the done thing to tell everyone. But as I grew I realised that this was the thing to do. When the time came to tell my parents, it brought joy to them as well as to me.

Making a break from the past was difficult, breaking from my friends and all my old habits, yet I was a new creation, the old had gone, the New has come. *2 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 17.*