



**Eluned Thomas (1928-2018)**

## **An interview with Eluned Thomas**

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# An interview with Eluned Thomas

**A native of Llangennech, near Llanelli, Eluned Thomas was the widow of the Rev. John Thomas, who ministered at Sandfields, Port Talbot. She lived in Cardiff and was a faithful member of Highfields church. This interview took place at 3 St. Isan Road in March 2004.**

## ***Can you tell me a little about your background in Llangennech?***

I was one of two children. I was brought up in Llangennech and we would go faithfully to the Baptist chapel there. There was nowhere else to go, really; there wasn't even an Urdd branch there. I would meet my friends in the children's meeting in the chapel. To be frank, going to chapel did not mean much more than that to me in those days.

My father was a shop tailor, and it was my grandfather, J.B. Rees, who started the business. He was a poet, and his bardic name was Morleisfab, after the river Morlais which flowed through the village. When I was thirteen, my father died following a long period of illness. By that time, war had broken out and it was a difficult time for everyone. It was certainly a difficult time for my mother who had no experience in the business.

Around that time we had a new minister in the chapel. At fourteen I was baptised, and, in my own way, I was very sincere, but the gospel meant nothing to me. I fared better in the Sunday School examinations than in the school exams, since I wanted to please the minister.

**‘For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God’**

In 1945, when I was a teenager, with rather a sullen outlook at times, I remember my mother telling me to go down to meetings that were held in Llanelli. The organiser of the campaign was the son of an old friend of hers, John Griffiths, who was a medical student at Barts in London. I went to the campaign with my cousin Mari.

I had never been to such a meeting before, with everything culminating in walking down Murray Street, Llanelli's main street, singing English choruses that were completely new to me. I felt deeply ashamed, and followed the crowd at a distance as it approached Seion chapel, Llanelli.

The chapel was overflowing, and many young people gave their testimony; it was all too extreme for me! However, as I spoke afterwards with some of those young people outside the chapel, I understood, for the first time, that if I did not know Jesus Christ personally, I was not saved. The word ‘saved’ was an awful word for us. I remember Gwyn Walters talking with us in the vestry, explaining more. I said I was alright and that I went faithfully to chapel and Sunday School. Then Gwyn quoted the verse, ‘For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God’ (Ephesians 2:8). Very gradually I came to see that that was exactly what the Bible said, and my mind was enlightened. I knew, somehow, that what they said was true and that what I had believed previously was far from true. The next day, there was another meeting, a Bible study, in English this time. That was a strange experience for me – and in my nervousness, when my turn came to read ‘who only hath immortality’, I found myself saying ‘who only hath immorality’. Gwyn Walters deftly added, ‘We’ll just put that right.’ I went down to the meeting every morning and every evening, and gradually learned more each time.

***How many came to a personal knowledge of the Saviour at that time?***

Many, around a hundred, I believe, and a great many of them went forward then to serve as missionaries or preachers. It was a very special week.

***What was the response of the home to all this?***

The following Sunday, the first Sunday in August, there was a special meeting where young people were called forward to read, as was our practice in the chapel, and I went forward to read the third chapter in John's Gospel, which has the words 'You must be born again.' I was full of enthusiasm. After the meeting, one of the deacons asked, 'What has happened to you, then?' 'Well, I've been born again,' I replied. My mother, who was sitting at the front in the family's seat, felt ashamed.

The minister led us in the Sunday school that followed. I knew by then that he taught us a modernist theology. He argued against the authority of the Word. I did not have any answers for him, but I knew then that he was not right. He went to see my mother the following week, and told her that she should prevent me from going to the meetings in Llanelli, partly because I had a 'sensitive' disposition. He was certain that I would get some sort of 'religious mania'. My mother had a real fright, but to her credit she never stopped me from going, although she said many times: 'They should not go after people like you. You're alright as you are. They should go after people in the world.'

***You and your mother were very close. Did the experience change your relationship with her?***

We were extremely close, and like two sisters. (In later years she came to live with us in the manse in Aberafan, and she was there until she was sixty years of age.) When I lost my mother, I went through a time of bitterness, and John, my husband, suffered

considerable worry on my account at that time. Outwardly I was fine because I did not want the chapel members to know. In my heart, I felt bitter towards God. It took a long time for me to get over that.

I had great losses in the sixties – my mother died in 1960, my only brother in 1964, and John died in 1969, when he was only 41 years old. When John died, I was given special grace by my heavenly Father. John had been to a committee in the Evangelical Movement's office in Port Talbot that evening. As he returned, and as he walked towards the house, he had the stroke, and one of the chapel folk happened to be passing at the time, and helped him into the house. I thought he'd had an accident with the car. So I phoned the doctor and said just that, but John added that he believed he'd had a stroke. He died the following day.

***That must have been a terrible shock for you. Did you find any solace or help at that time?***

Shock is the correct word because your mind at the time seems to be paralysed. I received a severe blow, and the effects of that blow have never fully left me. It's a physical thing more than anything. But I felt that I was not the only one who had suffered a loss – and that was a help. The chapel had suffered a loss also. And I was helped particularly by talking with the older members who were full of admiration for John. Strangely enough, he had succeeded in visiting all of them the week before he died, as if he had felt some kind of burden to see them all. When blows like this come, it is difficult to imagine how people can cope, without the support of saints around them. It was a loss for the whole church, and a great personal loss for me.

In the evening after the stroke, John he asked me to telephone the Movement office as the committee members would still be there. And Elwyn Davies, the General Secretary of the Movement, and Graham Harrison came round to keep me company.

When Hugh Morgan arrived, they agreed that he and Elwyn would stay overnight. That was a real help. Elwyn told me afterwards that John had had to leave the committee before they finished, and that he had done something unusual: he went round the members and shook hands with each one of them before leaving.

***You have mentioned the time you met Hugh Morgan for the first time in Llanelli. What else do you remember about those times?***

John and Hugh Morgan were great friends and used to go to chapel every Sunday. The two came to faith a week before Mari and me. Then, a week after the campaign, John was called up to do national military service. He had to leave his work in the office in the town and, as a young Christian, face a difficult experience. I was still at school, and Hugh was at the Grammar School in the town. John went to Germany with the air force. I had to take leave from school for a year since my aunt (who helped my mother with the business) had to go into hospital. My help was needed at home. When John returned on holiday, we started to go out together, and that's how the relationship developed.

***And the call to the ministry? How did that happen?***

John went to Trefeca College for a year to study a special course that was offered to ex-army personnel. That's when he met Gareth Davies. There was a Students' Christian Movement at Trefeca at the time, and John was eager to establish an Inter-Varsity Fellowship group there since it was a campaign organised by that fellowship that had been instrumental in bringing him and me into Christian faith. It was through the same group that Gareth Davies became a Christian.

From Trefeca John went to Aberystwyth to study theology for three years. He represented the students on Inter-Varsity Fellowship committees for two years, following which he served as president of the Christian Union. He spent his fourth year as a theological student in Bala.

***In the meantime, what did you do?***

By then I had gone to the college in Swansea to study Welsh, History and English. There was a Christian Union there also, under the leadership of Gwyn Walters, Meg Foot and others. Professor Henry Lewis was head of the Welsh Department and Simon Evans was one of the lecturers. I chose literature as my main focus of study, and I enjoyed reading literary works.

***Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones had a fruitful ministry at Sandfields, Port Talbot, where you and your husband served diligently for many years. During those years, did some of the Sandfields people refer back to that time of blessing?***

Since the days of the Doctor at Sandfields, two other ministers had served there: W.M. Jones and Emlyn Jones, and both did a good day's work. Of course, many of those who had come to faith under the Doctor's ministry

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were still alive. Theirs was a living faith and experience, and they felt a great debt to the one who had led them to the Lord. The chapel had entered a completely new phase under Dr Martyn's ministry, and the truth was that he chose to come to that chapel when it was about to close. It was only a small group that had kept the door open, and that for social reasons mainly.



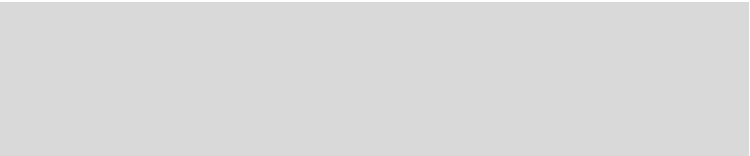
When John and I were at Sandfields, the secretary was E.T. Rees. Also two brothers, Edwin and Cyril Pick, gave the work their strong support. Cyril had a men's tailoring shop in Station Road, and the Evangelical Movement's office was located on the first floor of that building in the early days.

I remember another of Sandfields' saints – Llewelyn Thomas the Launch, as he was called. His work was to row the small boat, *The Launch*, down at the docks, from one harbour to the next. Men would pay him with beer. I became great friends with his daughter, Mrs Macdonald, and I heard her say how she often had to go and half carry him back at the end of the night. When you looked at him, after he had come to faith in Jesus Christ, you would think that he had been born a saint, with his white hair and beautiful character. Mrs Bethan Lloyd-Jones recorded the story of some of these early saints in her book, *Memories of Sandfields*, which was published in 1983.

### ***What was your role as a minister's wife in a large church?***

I was brought up at a time and in a locality when a minister's wife was expected to dedicate her time to the church. And I was a person who was willing to accept that custom, and I really enjoyed taking my part amongst the women of the church.

We did not have children, and that was a disappointment to us both, of course, and so I was free to dedicate myself fully to the work. I remember someone asking Bethan Lloyd-Jones what was the most important work of a minister's wife, and this was her answer: 'making it easy for your husband to minister'. I believe she was correct. If the work of a minister's wife hinders him in his work of leading the church, there is something seriously wrong. Also, in a large and busy church, there is more opportunity for a wife to serve the church. Of course, we should not lay the law down in this matter. I enjoyed the work immensely, and, following John's sudden death, the church members gave me great strength and support.



### ***What about that chapter that led to leaving the denomination?***

For some time, John had been preparing the church for the possibility of having to leave the Presbyterian Church of Wales. He used to say that we were the true Calvinistic Methodists, and that it was others who had moved from the source. But the right time had to arrive before taking action. Doctrine on the basis of the Word would be the reason for taking action. In the end, the church was forced to leave the denomination, since the members, for some years after losing John, were eager to call the Rev. Gwynn Williams to be their minister. As one who had not been ordained by the denomination, he was not entitled to officiate at communion. The church, on the other hand, said that they authorised him to do so since we had called Gwynn to be our minister. As a result the denomination instructed the church to leave the denomination. Therefore the church was pushed out of the denomination rather than leaving it. It was a difficult time for Gwynn, who had been brought up as a minister's son (his father, the Rev. J.D. Williams, was then minister of Bethany, Rhydaman). But he was a great help. He was the man of the moment, a keen thinker and one who knew the Methodists' background.

### ***After you had lost your husband, you helped out at a shop in Swansea. Can you outline that experience?***

That was one of the Movement's shops in Swansea, and it was looked after by one of the best Christians I have ever known. Her name was Gwenfyl Williams, a remarkable lady who lived for the Lord. For me, the mourning after John had been deep, and the future seemed bleak. Gwenfyl's walk was prayerful and completely spiritual, and she was very kind to me. She could tell by just looking at my face as I arrived in the morning what sort of day lay ahead of us, whether it would be a good or bad day. She was gentle and sympathetic, and knew that I did not really want to live.

I was unhappy about the future, without any idea what I would be doing. Then, most remarkably, the invitation came for me to serve at Bryntirion, the Evangelical Movement's new centre at Bridgend. I remember that, a few days before John's death, he and other members of the committee had been to see a possible house for the work. When he returned home to share the news with me, I asked who would be looking after the house, and his answer was that he could see me fulfilling that role. I asked what he would do and whether he would live on my income, but he did not reply. Before the end of the following week, he was dead.

When the invitation came to work in Bryntirion, I remember the Rev. Elwyn Davies asking whether I would be willing to accept the invitation. I accepted gratefully. I knew that it was much better for me to be busy than to be gloomy and morose. Between the shop, the church and then Bryntirion, there was no time to be inactive.

***So you made a deliberate and conscious effort to keep busy following the bereavement?***

Yes. I hated to think that other people took pity over me. This is my advice to anyone who is hit by bereavement such as the one I had: by keeping busy you keep self-pity at bay.

***What do you remember when you contemplate your husband's ministry?***

He had a gift for teaching the Word, and his teaching has remained as an example to me throughout the years. He opened the Word effectively, and when he commenced a new series on a Sunday morning, I loved to hear him preach the opening sermon: for instance, the background history to Paul's letter to the Corinthians. He was gifted also

at leading the mid-week discussion. Many of the saints in the chapel had received little education. A member would ask him a difficult question, and he would give an effective answer delving into the crux of what bothered the questioner.

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Those experience meetings were practical, not theological. Another experience meeting, for the men, was held at Sandfields, and they discussed the big theological subjects! The chapel's young people would learn a great deal as John discussed the various articles from the Calvinistic Methodists' confession of faith.

***Since you moved to Cardiff to live, I know you have helped generations of young students. How did you succeed in that work and what sort of experiences did you have?***

After six years at Bryntirion, I was physically tired, and I needed a home of my own. Bryntirion was a busy place, and I did not find it easy to rest and relax there. However, it was difficult for me to acquire my own house as the mortgage companies asked how I intended to pay for the loan. I did not want to go out to work and I had decided by then that I wanted to provide lodging for students, because I knew that I got on well with young people of college age.

Before I could secure a mortgage, I had to secure what's known in the legal world as underwriters. I needed two, and two offered their service without me having to approach them! Without doubt, this was God's work.

Because Bethan Morgan was vice-president of the Christian Union in Cardiff, she could announce, before I arrived, that her aunt was coming to the capital and that she was an excellent cook and intended to keep students. As a consequence to that, I gave lodging to students from one year to the next consistently, and I did not have to advertise.

### ***About how many students did you cater for?***

I provided for six students for years; then, after a friend offered a loan without charges, I had the attic converted into another bedroom. After that I had room for eight students at Cilgwyn, 2 Hendy Street, which is conveniently situated off Ninian Road.

### ***Why did you decide to move from that home?***

During the last year, I was not in good health, and since many more halls were being built there was not such a pressing need for student lodgings. Also, as student provision was becoming more self-catering, I was less content with the service I was providing. Not having had my own children, I was like a mother to them – cooking and washing clothes and enjoying it all. As I look back now, I don't know how I succeeded since I also worked for a while in the Christian bookshop to meet financial needs. I was certainly given strength from above.

### ***As you look back over the years, is there anything you would have wished to be different in your life?***

I would have liked John and myself to have had more time for ourselves when he was alive. I believe we were too busy in the work, and that we did not secure enough time for the two of us. I have often said to young couples going to the ministry that this is important.

### ***Of all your memories, which one means most to you?***

It's the student conferences that I remember with greatest clarity. When I was in college, there was only one conference for students: the Inter-Varsity Fellowship conference. Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones gave addresses at those conferences over a period of three years, as Geraint Fielder has related in *Excuse me, Mr Davies – Halleljah!*

Before John went to college, we were both staunch Armenians. But Gwyn Walters returned from the

**‘You must be born again.’**

college at Aberystwyth and enlightened us on the doctrine of election, and I was so angry at such an emphasis. Then, after John went to Aberystwyth to study, he returned from college with the news that he also had become a Calvinist, and had seen the wonder of the doctrines of grace. I was not pleased with all that. It became difficult for us to pray together, and that was the background to the conference at Cilgwyn, Castell Newydd Emlyn, where Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones preached on the sovereignty of God. I remember how we went under the shadow of a tree at Cilgwyn where I tried to pray, but without success. Eventually John went to see the Doctor to ask him to speak with me. After hearing the Doctor explain it, I accepted the doctrine. Nevertheless, I still had inner difficulty with the emphasis, until John preached one Sunday on the words, ‘You must be born again.’ In that sermon he gave such a picture of man in his sin and blindness that I realised suddenly that, if God had not accomplished the work, I would *never* have believed. After that, I have been able to cherish the doctrine and be grateful for it. I needed to have a revelation of man’s crisis in sin before I could appreciate the answer in Christ.

### ***Did you make friends during the blessing?***

I was a member of a large church at Llangennech, but I did not know anyone at the time who could share the same experience with me. But there was one woman in the chapel who had an apostolic background; she had been praying for me and others in the church. Then Mair Jones (who subsequently worked for many years in the Movement’s office) came to faith, and that was wonderful for me.

Recently, a few weeks ago, a campaign was held at Llangennech, under the leadership of the ministers at Salem and Bethesda. Mair said that someone had told her that the young people today ‘are the same as Eluned Rees and you’. It is clear,

therefore, that they remember today that we had something different from what was believed by many. The company was united in those early days by the Inter-Varsity Fellowship and the Evangelical Movement, and I am indebted greatly to both.

**For the beginnings of the Evangelical Movement of Wales, see Noel Gibbard's *The First Fifty Years: The History of the Evangelical Movement of Wales 1948-1998*, Bryntirion Press, 2002.**

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