

FULL *Circle*



The story of Stephen Smith

Stephen Smith's life has come full circle. He went from Portadown, Northern Ireland, to Portugal as a missionary, but now finds himself back in Portadown where changing economic conditions and a sizeable number of Portuguese migrant workers give him opportunity to continue witnessing to the people he loves.

Stephen Smith grew up amid the turbulence and violence of Northern Ireland in the 1960s. Home was the mid-Ulster town of Portadown, scene of many of the traumatic events that blighted the province's past. Stephen's spiritual home was to become the Free Presbyterian Church, whose congregations were then being established rapidly to meet the need of those dissatisfied and disillusioned with the compromise of main-line denominations. Travelling at first to Armagh, Stephen's father soon joined the newly founded church in Portadown, where he serves as an elder to this day. It was during the 1960s that Stephen's life took a new direction; as a young boy he received Christ and found a new vital focus.

Stephen recalls that as a teenager he had a greater-than-average interest in missionary work.

"I loved to attend deputation meetings," he recounts, "although there was no sense that such a life was for me. I would pray for the missionaries, was fascinated by their reports—especially by the stories of Brazil—but had no personal conviction to go. That was for someone else."

It was only after leaving school and working for a period as a draughtsman that Stephen felt the Lord dealing with him in a definite way concerning missionary service. Convinced of the Lord's purpose for his life, he enrolled for training at Swansea Bible College in Wales. There the curriculum was extremely practical with emphasis upon the devotional life of the candidate and with extensive contact with missionaries.

During these years of preparation Stephen formed a friendship with the young lady who was to become his wife. Hetty Hylands, a

member of Martyrs' Memorial Free Presbyterian Church in Belfast, was also preparing for missionary work but at another college in England. By the time Stephen and Hetty were married in 1980, they had both become impressed by the work of Acre Gospel Mission in Brazil and desired to serve in that land.

Upon returning home to Northern Ireland after college, they began the process of applying to the Brazilian government for the necessary visas and permits. This process could be long and torturous at the best of times. While they waited, Stephen helped out on a part-time basis in the Portadown congregation. As time went on it became increasingly clear that the door to Brazil was closing.

The Brazilian government instigated a clamp down on missionary activity in the interior. Workers were withdrawn, and no new visas were issued for the Amazon region. It seemed that Stephen and Hetty's missionary service was to end before it had even begun.

But God had another plan. Acre missionary Hazel Miskimmon had a contact in Portugal, and the mission determined to send the Smiths there to learn Portuguese and so be ready when the door to Brazil might open in the future.

"None of us viewed Portugal as a mission-field," Stephen remembers. "It was a holiday destination, pure and simple. Africa, South America—these were mission-fields, but not Europe. I suppose this is still the conventional view."

Stephen and Hetty spent the first six months at Feijo, just south of Lisbon, the Portuguese capital. It was quite an eye-opening experience. Each of the limited number of evangelical pastors struggled to minister to four or five small, scattered churches, and evidence of the labours of Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses was everywhere. After returning home for the birth of their daughter, Joanne, Stephen and Hetty were led to consider Portugal as their

field of service. So began almost twenty years of witness.

From 1982–85, the Smiths gained further experience in the language as they worked alongside Pastor Francisco



Hetty and Stephen Smith

Correlo, who had charge of five small churches. The Smiths based themselves in Azoia, to the south of Lisbon, some twenty-five minutes from Feijo. Their second child, Richard, was born during this period.

A further change occurred in 1985. For some time, a Brethren missionary had been giving valuable assistance to a group of believers in Sines, a fishing town about a hundred miles from Lisbon. The history of this work is interesting. Founded as a result of the work of Brethren evangelists in 1943, this small church obtained an old Roman Catholic chapel by purchasing it from the local Communist-controlled council! Stephen and Hetty were invited to visit their work with a view to relocating. Once they visited, they felt constrained to remain.

The Smiths made their home in Santo Andre, a neighbouring town, intending to explore the possibility of establishing a witness there, while assisting at Sines. Indeed, they were compelled to focus on Santo Andre as a matter of urgency. Location in the town was possible only if Stephen had employment, and if his employment was as a pastor, then a church

building was necessary. A shop situated on the ground floor of an apartment block was rented from the council, converted for use as a church, and opened for this purpose in February 1986. Some fifty percent of the

population of Santo Andre were of African origin, people who had been displaced from Angola, Mozambique, and South Africa, and numbers of them were reached with the gospel as the work commenced. Within two years a small but vibrant congregation of thirty-five people had been established.

An indication of the impact the gospel had at Sines may be seen in relation to one family encountered in the early days of working there. There were three children in the family, and one boy, Rogeiro, was converted at the age of ten. The Lord continued to

work in his life and ultimately, after training at college, Rogeiro returned in 2000 to pastor the work at Sines, and also to oversee the witness at Santo Andre in 2001. Rogeiro's sister was also converted, brought to attend college, and is now married to an active Christian worker in Lisbon.

It is this sort of "success" that Stephen Smith is most encouraged by: the conversion of Portuguese nationals and their being led and prepared to take on the work of witnessing to their own countrymen.

"Our aim was always to labour alongside those who were faithful to the Lord in Portugal," he declares. "In an area mostly rural, we sought to locate Portuguese pastors and small, evangelical churches, seeking to bring them together for mutual fellowship and outreach. Remember, less than two percent of Portugal's population is deemed evangelical (it is ninety-five percent Roman Catholic), so every bit of encouragement helps in the stand for the truth of the gospel."

Portugal is still a country with a vast spiritual need. While overwhelmingly Roman Catholic, attendance at Mass varies from just forty-five percent in the north to a paltry five percent in the Communist strongholds of