

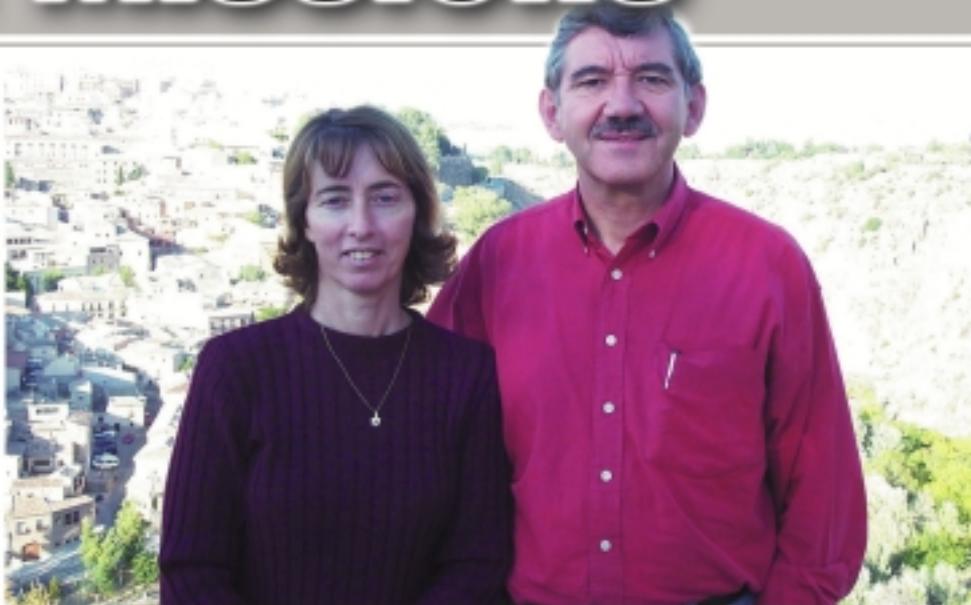
SPREADING THE WORD:

Foreign Missions

One of the marks of the New Testament church was that it was a missionary church (Acts 8:4-5). The New Testament Christians were zealous to spread the good news of the gospel, witnessing both at Jerusalem and unto the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 1: 8). They witnessed when there was peace and when there was persecution, when they were having fellowship in each other's homes and when they were imprisoned. And while they were busy in Jerusalem, they did not forget the rest of the world. We read that they went everywhere preaching the Word.

In the early days of the Free Presbyterian Church, amid all the battles and difficulties, when money was scarce and numbers were small, the need of the foreign mission field was not forgotten. Some of our members were called to serve overseas with independent missionary societies. Dr. Bill Woods and Mr. and Mrs. Victor Maxwell laboured in Brazil, Mr. and Mrs. Carson worked in Africa, and Miss Valerie Shaw served among the Jews in the United Kingdom, to name but a few. In order to foster interest in missions and to raise much-needed financial support, Presbytery set up the Missionary Council in 1962. The Council was composed of two representatives from each of the congregations, and the chairman was appointed by Presbytery. Its first year's efforts at fundraising brought in around £550 or \$2,200, out of which a monthly grant was sent to our missionaries.

It soon became obvious, however, that more needed to be done. The very same problems that led to the formation of the Free Presbyterian Church in 1951—apostasy, ecumenism, and compromise—were afflicting every major missionary society. In fact, ecumenism was the offspring of the great missionary conference held in Edinburgh in 1910. The Free Presbyterian Church was faced with serious questions. Were we going to take a stand at home but compromise on the mission field? Were we going to train our own men for the



Rev. John Hanna and his wife, Noranna, missionaries to Spain.

ministry but send missionary candidates to interdenominational colleges for their training and then ask them to serve under compromising missionary societies?

Something had to be done. A new way had to be found, and yet it was not a new way but the old well-tried scriptural way, in which the church sent forth its own missionaries (Acts 13). Had not our Presbyterian forefathers done this in 1840, when they sent their first two missionaries to India, and again in the 1860's when another two were sent to China?

At a Presbytery meeting held in Ballymoney in March of 1974 it was agreed to set up a mission board. The following guidelines were adopted: 1) the Mission Board would operate according to the doctrinal and financial framework set up by Presbytery; 2) it would have full administrative and executive powers;

3) it would be answerable to Presbytery and would report quarterly; and 4) it would consist of ten members from Presbytery and three from the Missionary Council. The Board would work in cooperation with the Council, which would function as before, stimulating interest in the mission fields and raising funds.

In order to meet the need for a college to train missionaries and other Christian workers, the Whitefield College of the Bible was opened in 1979. It was housed first in a building in Cyprus Avenue, Belfast, which soon proved to be too small because of the numbers of students enrolling. The space problem was solved in 1981 when Presbytery agreed to move to larger premises and Laurencetown House was purchased. Laurencetown House is a fine, large building sitting on about twenty acres of ground on the banks of the Bann River close to the town of



Margaret Russell teaches a class of Kenyan children.



Banbridge. Many young men and women have already trained there for Christian service and have been called to serve God in many parts of the world.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s attempts were made to establish missionary works both in the Irish Republic and in Spain, but both ended in disappointment. Some years passed before the next missionary couple was sent forth. In 1977 Presbytery set aside Rev. John Hanna and his wife, Noranna, as missionaries to Spain. This land of over forty million souls, which had long been under the grip of Romanism, was opening up to the gospel. A new day was dawning. In 1986 Mr. and Mrs. Lyle Boyd joined the Hannas in this work. Three years later another worker, Miss Debbie Nichols from Toronto, joined these families after training in the Whitefield College. On Debbie's return to Toronto after ten years of service, Miss Joy Gillespie arrived in 1998 to take up her labours.

A new door of opportunity opened in Africa as well. Kenya, with its twenty-nine million people, was the next mission field. Here God called a young woman to carry the gospel banner in the West Pokot district. Margaret Russell left Northern

Ireland for Kenya in 1983. She worked with a small group who had taken a stand against ecumenism. Margaret has come through the fires of affliction with this group. Meetings were banned and churches were closed by the authorities, members were imprisoned and some were even murdered, but the work went on. Margaret was soon followed by Miss Gillian Gillespie (Joy's sister) in 1995. Two years later they were joined by one of our ministers, Rev. Ian Harris. Mr. Harris and his family settled in a new district far away from where the others labour. A church has now been established in a town called Kitale, and other outstations for preaching have been opened. In addition to new churches being formed, a Bible college, a Christian bookshop, and a Christian school have been opened. A school needs teachers, and to this work the Lord called Miss Noreen McAfee. She arrived in Kenya in August 2000.

Others are labouring under the Mission Board in various parts of the world. In Southern Germany Rev. Ralph Baumann has established a small Free Presbyterian work in his native Heilbronn. In India Mr. Ravi Pasupuleti, converted to Christ while

studying in the United States, has been seeking since 1998 to spread the gospel among the one billion inhabitants of his homeland. In the Republic of Ireland Mr. and Mrs. Colin Maxwell take the gospel to their Roman Catholic neighbours in the city of Cork. In Northern Ireland (our Jerusalem) Miss Joyce Walsh, Mr. Noel Stevenson, and Mr. James McAllister all work under the auspices of the Mission Board. Mr. Noel Shields does the same in England. Two families, the Johnstons and Steensons, spent some years in Cameroon before returning home. Others were sent to hold the fort for a period at the mission station in Jamaica, notably Rev. Paul Fitzsimons and his family, who ministered there for five years. Many more students are in training, some in college and some in language school. The smaller works in Northern Ireland as well as in the United States, Canada, and Australia are also supported monthly from our missionary funds.

It has been well said, "God's work done in God's way, will never lack God's support." We have proved this by experience. Our people are generous in their support of the Lord's work, whether it is to our own workers or to some of our members who are with other missionary societies. The work is carried on only by the freewill offerings of our people given through gifts, covenants, and missionary boxes. May we continue to depend only on the Lord as we seek to spread His words to the "regions beyond," remembering the promise of our Lord Jesus Christ, "Lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." ■



Mr. George McConnell is an elder in Mounse Free Presbyterian Church and is the denomination's full-time missions secretary.