

The Elim Pentecostal Church is 90 years old this year, though that's young compared with many other denominations. But it's a good time to reflect on the development of Elim – its founding in 1915 and subsequent growth is an exciting story of faith. For both those new to Elim and long-time members who would like to know more about our past, **Desmond Cartwright**, the Movement's official historian, takes us on a 90-year journey back to our roots...

'They came to Elim'

Discovering the remarkable story of nine decades of Pentecostal witness



Above
Evan Roberts, the leader of the Welsh revival that brought the young George Jeffreys to faith

The man who under God founded the Elim Pentecostal Church, George Jeffreys (1889-1962), was brought up in the Welsh Independent (Congregational) Church. He came to faith during the first period of the Welsh Revival of 1904, when he was 15 years old.

A few years later, after the initial impact of the revival had subsided, a new movement was introduced into the Welsh valleys. Though this was at first on a much smaller scale, it contained some of the features of the revival such as regular prayer meetings and times of seeking God – yet it still caused some controversy.

But this movement's features attracted the attention of some of those who were known as "the children of the revival". Many of these people discovered

that they wanted more than what some of the existing churches were providing, and they were not satisfied with the dry routine of orthodoxy or a creeping liberalism.

George and his older brother, Stephen, were first opposed to the Pentecostal manifestations

The meetings continued for seven weeks and there were 130 converts as well as a number of people healed and baptised.

when they were reported in Wales in 1908. But when Stephen's son, Edward, spoke in tongues during a holiday in West Wales, they were forced to examine the teaching more carefully and then both brothers were to share the same experience.

George was also healed of a stammer and facial paralysis.

George, still in his early 20s, began doing a little preaching in some of the small mission halls in Wales around 1910. As he began to develop in this, there came increasing demands for his ministry and this brought him into contact with the Pentecostal Missionary Union (PMU).

Feeling the need for training, he applied to the Council of the PMU who accepted him as a candidate for missionary training at the Preston Bible School in November 1912. He was a good student but only stayed for a very short time – because he left to help his brother.

Stephen, who was still working as a miner, had been holding meetings near Swansea over the Christmas and New

Main pic
Crystal Palace was packed in 1936 as Pentecostals gathered for Elim's 'Coming of Age' celebrations

Year holidays when a mini revival broke out. Quickly, he got in touch with George and asked for his help with the ministry. George willingly obliged.

The meetings continued for seven weeks and there were 130 converts as well as a number of people healed and baptised in the Holy Spirit. Soon, a Christian newspaper carried the headline, 'Wales in the Dawn of Revival'. These were the first of a series of meetings that took George and Stephen to mid-Wales and London early in 1913. Stephen also held meetings in Llanelly, where he became pastor until 1920.

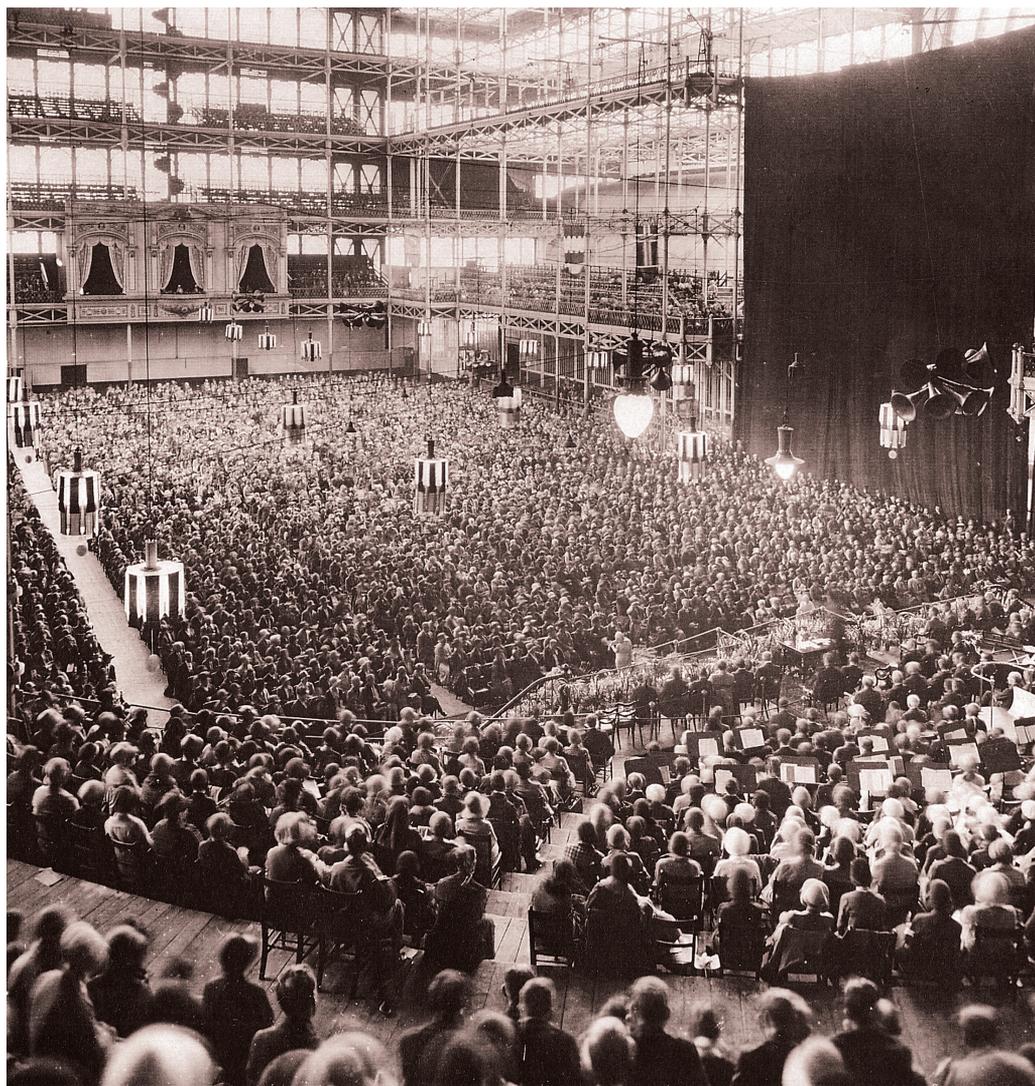
George Jeffreys met the group on 7th January 1915 in Knox's Temperance Hotel... The Elim Movement was launched.

George, meanwhile, was invited to preach at the Pentecostal Convention in Sunderland. It was a great honour because he was, at 24, by far the youngest speaker in such distinguished company. And it was as a result of these meetings that he was invited to the north of Ireland by two of the Gillespie brothers – George and William.

They sent him three ten shilling notes (£1.50) that paid his fare. The brothers together with a group of young men had booked a hall in Monaghan in which they were planning to hold Pentecostal meetings. But sadly, when it became known that they were Pentecostals, the booking was cancelled!

After George had spoken at meetings in Belfast, he met the group of young men in Monaghan on 7th January 1915 in Knox's Temperance Hotel. This was the meeting from which the Elim Movement was launched. There were seven men, including Robert Ernest Darragh from Bangor who had also been a student at the Preston Bible School.

The group invited George to take up permanent evangelistic work in Ireland and declared that



they sought to reach out with the "Full Gospel on Pentecostal lines". Soon, meetings were held in various places and these met with a measure of success.

Then, with the growing numbers following a tent mission in North Road, Monaghan, other Christian workers began to join the group. So a somewhat dilapidated hall was acquired in Hunter Street, Belfast, and this became the first 'Elim' church – named Elim Christ Church. George Jeffreys became pastor.

The growing group of men and women adopted the name of the 'Elim Evangelistic Band' in 1916, and by the end of December 1920 there were 21 workers in 15 churches in Ireland.

Many of those who joined were very able ministers of the Gospel – but money was very

Nearly 15,000 Elim people gathered for the day at Crystal Palace in 1936.

tight at times and this could frustrate their work. Sometimes George was hard pressed to find money to reply to letters in which he was invited to speak at meetings in distant parts of the country.

Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, news was received that George had been made the chief beneficiary of what was said to be a sizeable estate left to him by a lady who had died in north Wales in November 1917.

Unfortunately, the will was contested, so George was advised by his friend, John Leech KC, to register his Elim Evangelistic Band under the name of the Elim Pentecostal Alliance. This legal registration gave the group official recognition as a denomination and would also save George from having to pay tax on the legacy. ▶



Faculty and students of the Elim Bible College, Christmas, 1927



- But, as it turned out, they had to wait until well on into 1925 before the money arrived. It amounted to less than £1,000 – but this was still a substantial sum in those days.

Meanwhile progress in pioneering the Movement was restricted to Ireland until after the close of World War I, but in the next few years there was to be a rapid expansion on the mainland.

George continued preaching wherever he could in England, even during the war, but he never established any churches. But in 1921 he was asked by butcher George Kingston to hold meetings in Leigh-on-Sea, Essex. Thus the first Elim work in England was established.

The group went different ways so that they could cover more ground while preaching – before reuniting in Los Angeles.

In 1922, George moved to London where he pioneered a church in Clapham. They were able to acquire a disused former Methodist Free Church in Park Crescent and the headquarters was transferred from Belfast. The first offices were in the minor hall of the church, and then a two-storey building was added for the newly established Elim

Publishing Company. The church prospered and the congregation grew to some 500.

Then in June 1924 George Jeffreys sailed across the Atlantic for what was to be his first and only visit to North America. His brother Stephen and three others, Robert Darragh, James McWhirter and Ernest Boulton, accompanied him. They began ministering in Canada, where George preached at the Conference of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada. Afterwards, they split and went different ways so that they could cover more ground while preaching in leading assemblies – before eventually reuniting in Los Angeles, the cradle of modern Pentecost.

There they visited Aimee McPherson's Angelus Temple, where they saw the word 'Foursquare' used in the name of the church that was founded by Aimee. Even today, it is an impressive sight for any visitor. The British visitors were so impressed that, not long after their return to England in October, they decided to incorporate the name into the title of their own work. Thus the full name became the Elim Foursquare Gospel Alliance, which remains the legal name of the Elim Pentecostal Church today. Very fittingly, it summed up the fundamental doctrines that

Elim's full name summed up the doctrines that proclaimed Jesus Christ as Saviour, Healer, and Baptiser in the Holy Spirit and Coming King.



The vast tent used for the Monaghan mission in 1915

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In 1925, George and Stephen gave up their pastoral responsibilities to begin a period of extensive evangelism. They began in Barking in Essex in January with just a small group. But, following a number of outstanding healings, soon large crowds filled the hired halls. Within less than ten years Elim had established 36 churches in the London area.

A small Bible School was started in the minor hall of the Clapham Church in 1925. And when a former convent came onto the market in Clarence Road in Clapham this was acquired and re-opened in January 1926 as the Elim Bible College. The offices were built next door and the four-acre site became a centre of activity for the next 40 years.

In that same year, Elim hired the prestigious Royal Albert Hall for a series of meetings over the Easter Holiday. This was a rather hurried decision because the meetings had to coincide with a short stopover visit of the dynamic and flamboyant Aimee McPherson. There was a widespread interest in her visit but later Elim and George Jeffreys alone would fill the 5,000-plus seats every Easter until 1939.



George Jeffreys baptises a woman at one of the great Easter meetings in the Royal Albert Hall, 1928



Crowds gather in 1932 at the Movement's first church, in Hunter Street, Belfast – founded in 1915

The initial success of the London meetings set a pattern of evangelistic style meetings that were conducted by George Jeffreys and a group of three other men who became known as the Revival Party. They were Robert Darragh as song leader, James McWhirter as organiser, and from 1928 Albert Edsor as pianist. George did most of the preaching.

They went from town to town throughout Britain establishing churches – following a series of meetings that continued with increasing momentum for several weeks. The first meetings were almost always small but, time and again, gradually the largest hall would be packed, hundreds professed salvation and many were healed. Then the party would move on to the next place – often hundreds of miles away – and similar scenes would be witnessed. And so such evangelist success continued for ten years.

The small beginning in 1915 had grown to a much larger body of churches that numbered more than 200 within 20 years. Some of these had regular congregations of several hundred on a Sunday evening.

It needs to be remembered that this was the period in British history that witnessed the General Strike and the collapse

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of the stock market and the Great Depression. Yet through it all they went on pioneering churches, buying up redundant churches and filling them with newly born-again people. The small group that formed the Elim Evangelistic Band was to grow into the ministerial session of the annual conference held from 1934.

In 1934 the constitution was revised and a Deed Poll agreed to, and an Executive Council of nine men was appointed to govern the Movement. George Jeffreys and E J Phillips remained in office while George Jeffreys, as the founder and addressed as Principal, was allowed three nominees. The ministers elected four others.

Following a visit to Switzerland in 1933, George formed the World Revival Crusade that funded his evangelistic work. He had further successful meetings in Switzerland in 1935 – at a time when he was beginning to discontinue his major pioneering work in Britain. At the same time he began to disagree with many of the other leaders over the vexed question of church government and a theological belief called British Israelism. These disagreements would eventually lead to the unfortunate loss of George as the Principal of the Movement he founded.

In September 1936, Elim hired the massive Crystal Palace for its 'coming of age', having existed for 21 years, and nearly 15,000 people gathered for the day. Elim had first met there in 1930 but it was to be the last time that they would use that venue – because it was destroyed by fire not long afterwards.

Sadly, the disagreements diverted attention from what was the Movement's *raison d'être* and a period of stagnation ensued. And it became increasingly clear that there was the strong possibility of serious fracture as the founder and a small number of ministers sought to introduce dramatic changes into the work.

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During the years 1935-38 there were protracted discussions, especially at the annual conference. In an attempt to reach a conclusion that would satisfy all, discussions continued for two weeks but not long after the end of the November 1939 conference, George Jeffreys resigned as a minister. It could not have come at a worse time. ▶



Elim Ministerial Conference of September 1936

- ◀ War had been declared on 3rd September and ministers and churches were occupied with more urgent matters than re-writing the constitution.

John Dyke, a leading minister commenting on that time, said that 'the tide had gone out', and 20 churches – including Clapham – were destroyed or damaged owing to enemy action.

Brewster got a new era going with a tent in Wigan. During seven weeks at the site of an old coal shaft, hundreds came to faith.

But as the war drew to a close, Elim began to recover its confidence and a new evangelistic strategy was planned. Among the prominent members of this group were Percy Brewster, minister of Cardiff City Temple, and John Woodhead.

Brewster, who had begun on his own initiative in Neath ten years earlier, got a new era going with a tent in Wigan in July 1945. During seven weeks of meetings at the site of an old coal shaft, hundreds of people came to faith.

A few months later they were able to purchase the old Methodist Central Hall for their new church. This was the first step on the road to recovery and, over the next few years, in spite of the austerity of those early post-war years, the work began to grow again. The Bible

College reopened and a new optimism returned.

As the country began to recover economically from war-time restrictions, the Movement began its own recovery and the number of churches continued to grow from 220 in 1948 to 300 in 1962. In those years, as Britain's standard of living improved, there were increasing challenges to previously accepted moral and ethical standards. So in response to change, a special prayer conference was held in Birmingham in 1961 and it gave new impetus to many.

Other forces were also at work on the religious scene. Elim, previously ignored or rejected by the religious establishment, began to find a wider acceptance within the Evangelical Alliance and similar groups – where some Elim ministers were to make an important contribution.

Pentecostal experiences began to occur among groups within the mainstream churches – generally labelled as restorationists – who began to form what were labelled 'house churches'. Many within Elim had to look again at their ideas as to what the Church was intended to be. The older and somewhat rigid form of government that had proved successful for the early years of Elim's establishment was being questioned. As a response, such things as to the nature of the Church and its leadership were discussed in special

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conferences in Southport, and reports on the doctrine of the Church and the ministry of women were also adopted.

The changing times needed a fresh and more dynamic approach. The one-year college training period that had prevailed from the early days was replaced first by a two-year and then a three-year course. The college itself was moved to Capel near Dorking in 1965 where it remained until moving to its present site in Nantwich in 1987.

Today, more than 90 churches have more than one minister, and many have a much greater involvement in their local community than in the past.

Some areas have seen dramatic changes over the years, and nowhere has seen greater change than London. It is in the capital that Elim has seen its greatest growth as, under the successive ministries of Eldin Corsie, Wynne Lewis and Colin Dye, Kensington Temple has grown to a total congregation of around 14,000. Other churches in the London area also continue to enjoy sustained growth.

This is not just a time to look back... we must face the challenge of reaching the next generation with the unchanging Gospel.

Larger regions, each with their own full-time Superintendent supported by a team, have replaced the structure of district presbyteries. And ministers and churches are now in closer contact locally, though the central administration remains in Cheltenham, where it has been located since 1969.

Elim has come a long way in 90 years. But this is not just a time to look back, we must also look forward to face the challenge of reaching the next generation with the unchanging Gospel.

To learn more about Elim today, see www.newlifepublishing.co.uk/elimguide and www.elim.org.uk