

MATTHEWS, DANIEL HUGH (1936 - 2020), Baptist minister and college principal

Name: Daniel Hugh Matthews
Date of birth: 1936
Date of death: 2020
Gender: Male
Occupation: Baptist minister and college principal
Area of activity: Religion
Author: D. Densil Morgan

Hugh Matthews was born on 25 October 1936 at 6 Heol Bryn-gelli, Treboeth, Swansea, the second of two sons of Daniel Eustis Matthews (d. 1975), coal miner and road worker, and his wife Annie Ada (née Phillips, d. 1994). His elder brother, Thomas Kenneth, was born in 1930. The family church was Caersalem Newydd, whose minister, the Revd W. H. Rowlands, had a formative influence on Hugh as a young man.

After attending Tirdeunaw junior school in the village, he proceeded to Swansea Grammar School, which had been relocated to Townhill due to war-time bombing, and then, in 1955, to the University College of North Wales, Bangor, where he read for an honours degree in Welsh before undergoing ministerial training at the city's Baptist College. Having been awarded the BD degree in 1961, he was ordained to serve a small group of churches on the Cardiganshire-Carmarthenshire border, namely Noddfa Lampeter, Bethel Silian and Caersalem Parc-y-rhos. At Bangor he met Verina James (1941-2012), a student at the Normal College and the youngest of five children of Arthur and Katie James, a musical family who worshipped at the Salem Baptist church in Llanyfelach, not far from the Matthews' home. Hugh and Verina were married in August 1963 and had two sons, Tegid (b. 1966), and Gethin (b. 1968).

After serving in west Wales for six years, he was called to succeed the **Revd Walter P. John** as minister of the renowned Welsh Baptist Church at Castle Street, central London, commencing his ministry there in June 1968. As well as playing a full part in the religious and cultural affairs of the London-Welsh community, during these years he became well known in denominational circles and further afield. A period of study at the Ecumenical Centre at Bossey, Switzerland, in the early 1960s had inculcated in him an appreciation for inter-church relations, and his first published volume, *Llyfr o Ryfeddodau* ('A Book of Wonders', 1969), a commentary on the Book of Revelation, was commissioned by the four Nonconformist denominations in a series of Bible studies for adults. It was in London too (partly through his friendship with Dr Geoffrey F. Nuttall, historian of the Puritans) that he developed a scholarly interest in the history of Welsh Nonconformity, taking on the editorship in 1978 of the *Transactions of the Welsh Baptist Historical Society*, a task he fulfilled for over thirty years until 2009. A research dissertation on the development of the Baptist ministry between the Puritan period and the nineteenth century earned him a University of Wales MA in 1980, and in a further MPhil dissertation, awarded under the auspices of Spurgeon's College in 1986, he analysed the historical contribution of the eighteenth-century London-Welsh preacher **David Rees** (1683-1748) of Limehouse.

In 1985 the family returned to Wales when Hugh was appointed tutor in New Testament and Church History at the South Wales Baptist College in Cardiff. The only Welsh-speaker on the staff at the time, he did much to preserve the establishment's commitment to Wales when it was in danger of gearing itself almost exclusively to the churches of the Baptist Union of Great Britain in England and elsewhere. His contribution to biblical studies continued with the publication of *The Church in the New Testament* (1996), delivered initially in the series of Pantyfedwen Lectures, arguing that during its formative period the church had been a fairly loose, charismatic community whose ministry was more pragmatic than hierarchical and more open to the leadership of women than had previously been thought. His commentary on the Letter to the Hebrews was published in 2003, by which time he had been appointed to the panel responsible for the revised *New Welsh Bible* (2004) having been allocated Hebrews and Philippians to translate. Neither was he neglectful of historical studies, having published a chapter on the radical Anabaptist Thomas Müntzer in a Welsh-language volume on the Protestant Reformers in 1988 and a chapter in John Gwynfor Jones's *Agweddau ar dwf Pwritaniaeth yng Nghymru* (1991). He also contributed historical pieces to the *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* and the *Transactions of the Welsh Baptist Historical Society*. Following the retirement of the Revd Dr Neville Clark as principal in 1991, he was appointed successor, and in 2000 was awarded the DD degree honoris causa from Campbell University, North Carolina, whose links with the Cardiff Baptist College were longstanding. He served a term as Dean of Divinity at Cardiff University, and did much to ensure effective cooperation between the University's Department of Religious Studies and the two theological seminaries, the Anglican St Michael's College Llandaff and the Cardiff Baptist College.

Having been in post at Cardiff for sixteen years, he retired in 2001. He continued publishing: *Geiriau'r Gair*, 'The Words in the Word' (2005) was a lexicographical study of theological terms used in Holy Scripture, while *From Abergavenny to Cardiff: A History of the Cardiff Baptist College* (2007), one version in English and the other in Welsh, was a commissioned work celebrating the bicentenary of the college to which he had contributed so richly during the final two decades of the previous millennium. Both he and Verina had been active in the life of the Tabernacle Baptist Church in Cardiff's Hayes throughout the years, she on the musical side and he more especially in the weekly bible class. Verina's death in 2012, following a cruel illness, was a devastating blow. He remained active nevertheless, and his later devotional works, *Siprys* ('Mixture', 2013), *Damhegion y Beibl* ('Biblical Parables', 2016) and *Gorfoledd y Gair* ('The Joy of the Word', 2017), were based on shared studies within the church fellowship. During this period he too was afflicted with cancer and underwent extensive treatment in more than one hospital. He died at home on 27 November 2020, and was cremated at Morrision Cemetery in the vicinity of the old family home at Treboeth. His final volume, a study of Old Testament characters, had appeared a week or so before he died.

Hugh Matthews was a diligent minister, a humble scholar and a faithful friend to many people, young and old alike. Among his many virtues were kindness, graciousness and an uncanny ability to make others feel comfortable in his company, all of which were rooted in a self-effacing though robust Christian piety. He was, without doubt, the most significant Welsh Baptist historian of his generation.

Author

D. Densil Morgan

Sources

Personal acquaintance

Family information via Dr Gethin Matthews

Further reading

'Obituaries', Baptist Union of Great Britain

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