

Publishing Editor's column

MANY YEARS AGO I was one of several brethren and sisters who attended a big Jehovah's Witnesses gathering in a town hall. This was in response to an invitation from a family of that persuasion who were taking an interest in the Truth and wanted us to see what their gatherings were like. Two things surprised me about the gathering. The first was the obvious disinterest of the audience, and the second was the fact that the man giving the final prayer referred in it to the precise number of people attending. However, Jehovah's Witnesses are great compilers of statistics, regularly publishing figures of the number of congregations and number of members country by country, as well as figures of hours spent door-knocking and the number of *Watchtower* magazines sold.

In contrast, Christadelphians do not keep statistics. I have never seen a figure for either the number of brethren and sisters or the number of ecclesias in the world. No Christadelphian-published magazine that I see publishes a circulation figure. (If anyone is interested, it is about 2,200 for *The Testimony*, a decline from nearly twice that number in the 1960s.) One thing has become very clear to me: the Christadelphian community in Britain has been steadily declining in numbers for some years, as can readily be ascertained from any issue of *The Christadelphian* by counting up and comparing the number of baptisms and people returning to fellowship with the number of deaths and withdrawals of fellowship. I recently compared the figures for 2003 with those for 1966; in 2003 there were 128 reported baptisms and 223 reported deaths in British ecclesias; the figures for 1966 were 301 baptisms and also 223 deaths. Back in 1870 *The Christadelphian* reported that there were 188 baptisms and only ten deaths during the course of a year in the British ecclesias.

The Truth has thus clearly gone from growth to decline in Britain. Many of our readers will be well aware of this already, and dismay has been expressed over the situation. But let us never forget that the Truth is still growing worldwide; its growth has been phenomenal over the past decade. During 2003 there were 133 baptisms in India reported in *The Christadelphian*, and 246 reported for Africa excluding South Africa. Even in countries where the Truth has been long es-

tablished, the situation is not as dismal as in Britain. In the Australian magazine *The Lampstand* there were 105 baptisms recorded for 2003 and only twenty-five deaths.

Baptisms, of course, come from two sources, those outside the community drawn by personal contact and preaching, and those brought up within the community. The general experience within the British ecclesias is of increasing difficulty in attracting interest in the Truth, and in many areas the complaint is that very few young people accept the Truth these days, though some ecclesias are exceptions. I have read or been told on several occasions over the years that visitors and young people are put off from accepting the Truth by our exclusiveness as a community, our supposed overemphasis on prophecy, our firm doctrinal standards. The conclusion drawn from this is that, if we would only loosen up on things, people from outside would be more inclined to join us, and our young people would be more ready to accept the Truth.

Even if this argument were true, it would be entirely wrong to water down the Truth for the sake of gaining more members. However, there is no evidence that doing this would bring about more baptisms in countries where the Truth has been held for a long time. The growth of the Truth in Australia referred to above has certainly not come about because of a weakening of standards, but rather the reverse. My experience of other countries is limited, but I have attended large flourishing ecclesias in Australia where the Truth is firmly upheld, and meetings are well-attended, Sunday schools and youth groups are thriving and young people come into the Truth, all against a background of firm adherence to Christadelphian doctrine and practice.

In contrast, apathy seems to have seized much of the ecclesial world in Britain, with lectures and Bible classes poorly attended, fraternal and preaching efforts ill-supported. Whether we can do anything about the lack of interest in the Truth in Britain is a difficult question, but I am sure that if the overall commitment to and enthusiasm for the Truth in our ecclesias were to improve, so would the number of baptisms of those brought up in Christadelphian families.

Tony Benson