

From Pit to Pulpit

The Life Journey of Norman Hiley

Born – 26th April 1927
‘Born again’ – 4th October 1952

Still Living For Jesus - 2014

Pit to Pulpit

I am going to speak about the 'unpardonable' – and speak about myself and how God took me from the Pit to the Pulpit. Psalm 40v2 is my text – 'He lifted me out of the horrible pit.. and set my feet upon a rock.'

There are many ways of preparing for your role in life which can be affected by your place of birth; where you were brought up; what kind of education you had; what was your training and calling? My years of preparation took me 35 years to get from the Pit to the Pulpit.

For these years I worked a job I didn't like in order to earn money I didn't want to buy things I didn't need -to impress people I didn't like. But what God was secretly doing with my life led to me being what I am now and doing what I do best.

My earliest childhood memories were at the age of 5 being locked out of school. Nobody had told me that the school was closed on Saturdays. I remember getting 2 good hidings from my father and refusing to cry. If I had cried he might have stopped beating me sooner.

I remember first schoolboy 'crush'. The lucky girl was the daughter of the Sunday School Superintendent who taught the class entered for the National Sunday School Exams. She was brilliant at winning top prizes in the annual Exams, so I joined the class just to be in the same room as her. Unfortunately this didn't last very long because at the first National Exam I finished top and she never spoke to me again,

So I should have learned that too much Bible knowledge wasn't always a good thing – but it was stored in my memory for use in later years when I reached the Pulpit.

I spent 5 years at a Church Primary School and in those days the next step was Grammar School if you could be best at what was called then the '11+ exams'. I was one of a few who passed all 3 exams and I then started as a Grammar School pupil at a school a mile away from home. It was here that another pupil from a village I had never heard of which was only 3 miles away who had also passed the exams. Her name eventually became Mrs. Jean Hiley.. I wonder how God put that into the plan for my life because we have now been married 66 years.

In 1942 School finished abruptly for me at the age of 15 when my father withdrew me from school because the legal age for leaving other schools was 14 – and the next day I found myself working at the Pit as an apprentice mechanic. On the 2nd day at work I was crawling along coal seam only 2 feet high asking myself -' 'What have I done to deserve this?'

That day I determined to get out of the pit – but it took another 15 years to do so. Because of the lack of men during WW2 I worked almost full time underground and at the age of 21 when I was deemed to be fully trained as a mining engineer I was made foreman of all the underground work. For this I earned the princely sum of £10 per week

At the age of 21 I also got married to the girl I met at school and she has been with me for 66 years. At the time I write this she is waiting for a special medal from the Queen for going beyond the 'call of duty'

My Pit experiences involved a lot of blood, tears and sweat working in low dangerous conditions, often in very wet places to work in..Mix water and coal dust together and you get a very sticky

substances known in the North-East as 'Clairts'.

I learned much about comradeship and the need to depend on others in life-threatening situations; especially when one day I was trapped by a fall of roof and need my work mates to dig me out of it.

There were many odd characters as well, and some of these I will never forget. There was a man called Gus Hartis who dentures kept falling out. He had had all his teeth removed and couldn't afford to buy a proper fitting denture and so he used those of his father when he died.

Another strange man comes to mind. I never knew his proper name because he was simply called 'Teddy Awkward'. He was useless at everything. I have met a few of those since I left the pits and went to work in better places than the pit.

I wasn't a bad lad. I didn't swear – not out loud anyway. I was brought up in a good moral Methodist home, and did a good turn every day as a Boy Scout should

Education – After starting at the pit education continued the hard way by going to Night School 3 nights each week to learn more as an engineer. I was the only one at the Pit who chose to do this and so was called upon to tackle jobs that 'others' were not qualified to do.

The phrase used was 'Send for Hiley' and this I found was still to be the same years later when my engineering qualifications took me working for an International Engineering Company.

At the age of 21 I began to play cricket for the village team after WW2 ended, and was successful at a local level. I played as an opening batsman and on one occasion had to face the speed of a former England bowler who had retired from international cricket, but was the fastest bowler I had ever faced. The ball came at me like 'greased -lightening' compared with the local, bowlers – but I survived to tell this tale.

The most dramatic event in my life came on October 4th 1952 which was the day of my conversion to faith in Christ. A miracle took place that night because when I committed my life to Christ my wife was at home and she was to be the first person I told about my new life through faith in Christ.

As I made my way home that night a thought came in to my mind which I later learnt was a verse from the Psalm 107v2. The words in my mind were - 'Let the redeemed of the Lord say so'. Now I do not know how you can remember something that you didn't know. But before I could tell my wife my news she had some news for me. She said, 'Whilst I have been sitting here I have given my life to Christ'. That is what I call a 'double' miracle that we should both do the same thing unknown to each other. This joint commitment to Christ began to change our lives completely.

This happened at 7.45 on a Sunday evening, but news travels fast in a mining village. At 4a.m. next day I was crawling in a 2 foot coal seam when a man passing me said – 'Norman, they tell me you have seen the light'. I most certainly had. It had met Jesus who claimed to be the 'Light of the world.'

Our home changed completely because Jesus was so real to us. We wanted to learn more of Him and I received some good advice from a mature Christian who said – 'Get a Bible; Open it; Read it – and DO what it says'. So I began to do so and after more than 60 years it is still my daily practice.

It became clear that other young people who loved Jesus needed to do the same and as the local churches did not provide such teaching for them my home became a place for teenagers to meet to learn more about Jesus from His Word and from each other.. I was their teacher, but I knew nothing

of the Bible myself, so each week as I learned something new I told them about it so that they could have the same blessing.

The idea of becoming a church Pastor never entered my mind, because such men were always special people who were trained in a Bible College before they were ordained to serve the Lord in His church. I thought that you had to be very clever to be a Minister and get everyone in the church to do what you told them to do.

But the main difference was that I now knew the historical Jesus as my personal living Saviour. I began to preach within a few weeks. A preacher friend asked me to give my testimony at a service he was to conduct at the Prudhoe Street Mission in Newcastle. Just 2 days before we were due to be there he lost his voice and said that I had to preach instead of him. I had never preached before; in fact I could not put 2 words together in conversation. I was the silent one.

He gave me my text – 2nd.Corinthians 5 v17 – 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has gone; the new has come'

He asked – 'Is that true for you?' To which I replied 'YES'. He said, 'Then go and tell them.' Which I did to my first congregation of 400 people. Life certainly had changed.

I had started on a road along which I couldn't see the end. Soon the Pit and the Pulpit began to conflict for my time so I resigned as the Underground foreman and went back to working shifts because I could say 'No 'to working on Sundays, which meant that I was freer to serve the Lord better.

I was changing as well and others noticed the change – especially my underground colleagues. There was an Over-man in charge of the workings underground who was a 'devil' in the flesh. One day one of the men wrote on the Notice board on which the Over-man gave his instructions a whole list of things that made this man such a 'devil'. And then he put my name to it. When the Over-man read it his temperature rose to boiling-point – but when he got to my name he said – 'Half of what is written there about me is true – But He didn't write it..

My prowess on the cricket field gave me the biggest class of boy's in the Sunday School where I started to teach. I was their local hero and I used to tell them about my heavenly hero called Jesus.

By now I was 28 years old and was shocked to see the stooping shadow of a figure that was me. Just at that time I had successfully completed my engineering exams and when the Colliery Engineer for whom I worked learnt that I was better qualified than him he told me to 'Get out' - And within 2 weeks I did get out and went to work in a factory making TVs where they gave me a white coat, a pair of tweezers and magnifying eyeglass

The pit could continue without me and within 8 years was finally closed by strong pressure from government.

Working in a factory was my first taste of private enterprise. The pay was poor and the prospects were worse. Instead of working with men who knew how to swear properly I was in a factory with 1500 women who were worse than the men.

So after 2 years I was on the move again this time it involved moving away from the mining village to Warrington in Lancashire.

From 1957-64 I worked for the Atomic Energy Authority -changing from coal (a dirty fuel) to Atomic power -(an invisible fuel)

I was so naïve that I travelled overnight to save money and so that my employers would not know I intended to leave.

I was interviewed by 4 men, who I learned later comprised the Director and Chief Engineer of the Estimating/Cost Dept. plus 2 other engineers (electrical and mechanical)

The Chief Estimator asked most of the questions, the first of which was – 'How would you build a house?'. I said that I had never built a house before, to which he replied -'You have never built an atomic reactor before either.'

My answer was taken straight from the Bible when I replied that I would want to know how much it cost, and that I could afford it before I began. This answer changed my whole career from practical engineering to cost engineering.

His next question was – 'What do you do in your spare time?'
My answer was very short - 'I preach.' He gave me 1 minute to tell him WHY.

What I did not know was that the Director was a Roman Catholic and the Chief Estimator with the questions was an agnostic. So when I was appointed I was sent to work in the Estimating Department under the chief agnostic.

I found him to be a very fair man in the way he treated his workers. I had many tussles with him on ethics etc but was always ready to listen to his advice; especially when promotions were due and he said I should not apply because I was not ready. After 2 years he said I was ready so I applied and was promoted as I had been in the coal mines.

With the promotion I was given the responsibility for the building of a Reactor starting with the hole in the ground to pressing the switch to start the complete plant. This meant that I had to learn about more things than just engineering, and this was to stand me in good stead later in my working life.

For 3 years I was in charge of the team dealing with building of the AGR (Advanced Gas-cooled Reactor) at Windscale in Cumbria.

Meanwhile the learning went on at night school in order to become a fully qualified engineer.
I also went on preaching at local churches as God continued to take me from the pit to the pulpit.

There was another important event in our lives because our 2nd son (Paul) was born the day I started work in Warrington.

In 1964 – after 7 years of being homesick Jean put a job advert on my plate for estimators for a chemical company in Stockton-on-Tees. It was only for a junior post, but to keep Jean happy I applied for it. When I told them of my experience with the Atomic Energy Authority I was offered a job as a Senior Estimator.

What I did not know was that they were looking for a younger man to replace the Chief Estimator and they had me in mind although they did not tell me at the time.

It was a good Company which had been started by a fine Christian man whose faith and principles governed how the Company did business, I was glad to work for such a Company and no doubt God had directed me there.

Travel to meet clients broadened my mind and completed my education. My first business trip was to Felixstowe in February, which was not the most exciting in my career. Soon visits to London, Paris; Amsterdam and Germany became normal. I had come a long way from the Pit – but was not yet in the Pulpit.

Learning to apply my skills internationally was a great adventure and I found that in whatever country I was working that I could think and express myself in their terms. Clients seemed to like this, because many British business men seem to be dismissive of foreigners.

So much was this the case that when a foreign client wanted to speak to our Company telex messages simply said - ' Send Hiley'

These years (1964-71) were the best in our married lives so far. We had a nice house with large gardens; We attended at good evangelical Baptist church with a fine Pastor; and we had 2 lovely sons.

Then disaster struck – or at least Jean thought so. With the discovery of North Sea gas the company, which made commercial gas from coal, was in danger of closing. A decision was made to diversify into building other forms of chemical plants, but this meant relocating the Company in London. Our cosy world was gone overnight as I was expected to move with the senior management of the company. House prices in London were 5 times higher than in Stockton and we studied the London Transport timetables to see where we could afford to live and at the same time be able to commute daily into Central London where the Company Office was situated.

We chose to live at Pinner in Middlesex and the 'pit lad' has moved to the 'Gin and Jaguar' belt. This was life on the POSH side of society where all the affluence is used to paper over the cracks in people's lives.

With every different house I have lived in the first thing was to paint to outside; starting with the roof gutters and working my way down. I took 2 days 'holiday' from work to do this, and whilst up the ladder a woman from a nearby house came knocking at the door and asked Jean- 'Will the MAN come and do our house next?'

Commuting to Baker St. in central London wasn't fun. The pit had only been a 10 minutes walk from home – in fact the pit often met you at your front door.- but here in the city what individuality you had would soon be swallowed up if you let it.

I had language problems – or at least the Londoners had problems with my type of English. In the North East we call a Bath a bath , and not a Barth. Grass is Grass and not Grarse. My bosses' secretary asked if I wanted a CAP of tea -to which I replied – 'Where I come from you wear a CAP on your head and drink tea from a CUP.'

When speaking at an Anglican church to the young people their leader said that he would translate for me if they did not understand my dialect. He described me as a 'German learning English'. 6 months later I went to speak there again and one young person said, 'Your English has improved.'

I found too that work levels in other countries were quite different, but also that you don't have to

come from Hartlepool where the local lad is called ANDY CAPP (meaning handicap – ie useless at doing anything)

Only 25% of any organisation do 75% of the work to keep others with somewhere to go each day and get paid for it. Consequently I did 75% of the major projects and my name got noticed on the 7th floor where all the directors of the company were.

The international dimension of the Company grew greater and this involved me in travel to Pakistan; India, Moscow, Japan; Europe and frequently to the U.S.A.

I worked with one company in New York where one of their Executive Directors was a man with a foul tongue and used the Lord's name in every expletive he could. One day when I could stand his obscene talk no longer I told him in a public meeting to stop referring to my friend in his speech. He asked – 'What friend?' to which I replied -'My friend is JESUS'

The Chief Executive of the American Company thanked me next day for silencing this man because they had not been able to do it years.

It became apparent that something was happening to the pit-lad that couldn't easily be explained. I believe that the only explanation was that God was working in my life and taking me through a training programme that would eventually equip me for ministry in a full-time capacity.

God was also behind my choice to live in Pinner. I found a good Evangelical church where the Pastor was also the Principal of the London Bible College which was situated only 1 mile from my home. As my preaching temporarily stopped because I was not known to any of the local churches I went back to doing what I was good at – night school - but this time not to study engineering but to study the Bible.

With the Principal's permission I was allowed to sit in for the lectures given to the 4 year Divinity students. After 1 year I was challenged about my studies as all the other full-time students had to apply to the University of London to take the Theology exams.

I took one day off work and went to take 3 exams in one day and was successful in all 3. As lightning rarely strikes twice in the same place I was encouraged to do the same at the end of my 2nd year. The outcome was that lightning did strike twice and after 2 years I was awarded the necessary qualifications which would allow me to be a full-time church Pastor.

I still didn't value what I had done in my spare time after work until I realised that some of the full-time 4 years students had failed to qualify in the exams. What they had spent £10,000 for I got for a fee of £10 to enter the examination room.

With this theological success came problems because at the same time in being successful in winning major contracts for the Company I was promoted to be Chief Estimator when my boss took an early retirement.

I was in charge of 2 departments for Estimating and Costing, but when it was suggested I also led a 3rd group it was time for me to say 'NO'

Then the company needed to be re-structured because it had grown so big and each Head of Department was asked to present a structure to the Directors for them to consider as the future way

for the Company to be governed.

I prayed about this and was led to consider Abraham and Lot where Abraham gave Lot the first choice of the land, and that he would take what was left. This is what I did. As others outlined their plans which showed them in positions of importance my plan showed me at the bottom of the pile.

The Result?

The Directors accepted my plan with one significant alteration – they made me a Director of the Company. This meant a 5 figure salary; a Company car and many other benefits. Jean even went with me on a business trip to Florida.

Occasionally at a Board Meeting where everybody else had been to Oxford or Cambridge Universities I used to ask the question – 'What are you doing here Elijah?'

CBI committees became regular events and I was elected Chairman of an influential committee on finance during the early day of the European Union.

The conflict for my time between business and preaching commitments had to be resolved and several things led to it :-

1. Open days at Spurgeon's College showed me that no new Pastors ever went to the North-East.
2. The death of my former boss just 1 year after he retired led me to ask would the same thing happen to me.
3. Change in preaching patterns as I was asked to stand in for resident ministers who may be absent either sick or on holiday.
- 4 Two invitations came to me to consider taking up Pastorates in London.

What was I going to do other than sit behind a desk; go jetting around the world on business; making a lot of money I didn't want or need.

Then a strange event occurred that was to shape my future.

I was sent to a 'Management by Objectives' course for Senior Managers in industry.

I was asked questions like – 'What do you in a days work?'

The 2 pages I wrote were drastically reduced by the Teacher, and finally he asked -'What would not be done if you were absent sick or injured for 6 months.

Finally my sheet was empty and he asked -'Does the Company pay you to do nothing?'

So I was asked to say why the Company employed me and paid me.

This was my answer.

The Directors on the 7th Floor required me to set up the best engineering group in the business so that the company could make reliable profits for the owners.

To do this I employed less men than most, but always made sure they were the best in the business and paid them well and let them demonstrate their abilities. Simply I was there to create an environment where men would to their best work; be well rewarded; and make the company profitable as well.

When I applied this result to the work I did it was of things not taught in any college.

1. Leaders have to be willing to work hard

2. Leaders have to be able to get others to follow them.

I also discovered that in the terms of the Management Course I was described as a **'Benevolent Autocrat – and a Developer'**.

This simply meant that I liked to get the job done, but without treading on others people's toes - And also that I was a kind of catalyst – ie able to develop the environment where others could use their skills and gifts to the best advantage

Both these qualities seemed just the kind of things Pastors need in leading a church, so that ideals, dreams and aspirations could become realities. All this being to please the 'Managing Directors' of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in whose name the work was done.

By now I was regarded in the chemical industry as one of the top in Europe in my particular job. My gift was leading people in situations where they could do their best, whether for the company or for God.

The Pit- which was 20 years behind me and where the hard lessons of life had first begun was soon to lead me to the Pulpit.

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I first tested the calling to the Ministry by seeking advice from my previous Pastor at Stockton. This followed frequent interviews in London with the Revd. Arthur Liston – the Area Superintendent in the Northern Area of the Baptist Union.

The outcome of these discussions was that based on my experience in commerce and that I had gained the necessary theological qualifications via London Bible College and the University of London. He was prepared to amend the normal route of appointing a Minister, and if he could introduce me to a church who would call me as Pastor I would then do everything more that the Baptist Union required me to do.

The plan was for me to visit a church which would call me to be their Pastor and go through the necessary interviews required by the Baptist Union. I did this to the satisfaction of the Northern Area Ministerial Appointment Committee and I then preached with a view to the Pastorate at the Beacon Lough Baptist Church in Gateshead. The church invited me to be their next Pastor, but this had to be endorsed by the Ministry Committee at the B.U in London because the church were in the financial position of having to apply for a grant for half of the Pastor's stipend.

Before this could be discussed in London the Revd. Liston died. So the B.U. insisted that I go through the whole procedure for accreditation to become a Baptist Minister.

They required me to go to a Baptist College, to which I said 'No' – as I already had the necessary theological qualifications they required through the London Bible College.

I was asked - 'What have you to offer to a congregation?'

I had not thought about this, but on the spur of the moment gave this answer - 'I want to make them aware of who God is; Aware of what He has done; and aware that what He has done He has done for them.' I have never had to change that answer at any time since.

Now that I was ready to respond to God's call to preach I had to break the news to the Board of Directors of the Company. They wouldn't believe it, or receive it, because they thought that I was

leaving to join another rival company, so they tried to get me to stay by increasing my salary significantly. When I said 'No' they then asked -'Well how much money do you want?'

I told them that no amount on money would persuade me to stay because I was leaving for a salary which was 80% less than my current salary. Finally, they realised that the Company I was joining was the biggest in the world they did everything they could to help me.

I had just been responsible for winning a contract for £250 Million in Russia, so although I officially had to give 3 months notice in writing to leave the Financial Director ignored my letter and on the day I was due to leave sent the same letter retyped and dated that day saying I was leaving in 3 months time. I signed the letter and left that day.

I was a Cost Engineer and had to work out what would bridge the difference between what I used to earn and what I would receive as a Pastor's stipend. The Baptist Area Superintendent had asked me – 'You have been successful everywhere you have worked – what if you are not successful as a Pastor.?'

I turned to, and relied on, Joshua 1v9 'Have not I commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged – for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.'

I had my finances all worked out. I would sell my London house at a good profit, and as the church would provide me with a Manse, I would invest the money at good interest which I would add to my stipend and just make it possible to work it out financially. The reality proved to be different. I was called to a church without a manse and had to buy my own house and live on £40 per week instead of £200.

God was saying – 'You will have to trust me.'

Remember that resignation letter re-dated by the Financial Director? For the next 3 months I had 2 'employers' the company and the church.

A few weeks later I received a letter from the Personnel Dept. saying that they had my letter of resignation, and as they were not holding me the 3 months resignation period they would have to pay me 3 months salary in lieu of notice. A cheque for over £4000 was enclosed and a hand written note thanking me for my services and saying, 'Return the company car and buy yourself another'.

So at the age of 50 I arrived to take on the task for which I believe my previous life had been preparing me. I had at last replaced the Pit with the Pulpit.

What did the following years bring? -

In 1977 I was appointed as the Pastor of a Mission church at Beacon Lough on the outskirts of Gateshead, Tyne and Wear. This was only about 12 miles from where I had once worked in the Pit.

The church had no money and no manse so I lived in 3 different houses in my first year there. You could say that I had a 'moving experience'

I was asked what I would do on a Saturday and took the Deacons by surprise by saying that I would meet with them at 8.00 a.m. for Breakfast and Prayer. This I believe is vital to any ministry, and soon the congregation were asking for a Prayer Meeting as they saw the church grow from 25

members to an attendance of a 100 each Sunday.

My knuckles were bruised knocking on some 2000 homes with the Message of the Gospel. The Baptistry was opened and well used in that growing period when new believers were won for Christ and added to the church

In the same period a debt of £12,000 was cleared and the church was able to have £10,000 in the Bank. There were 11 men in the congregation when I became the Pastor and I must have made the job seem easy because no less than 5 of those men were themselves called into the Baptist ministry.

Then I was fit and active and was known as the 'Faster Pastor' when games were played. Then without warning I had a heart attack which put me into intensive care for 10 days in hospital, followed by 6 months of slow recuperation.

At that time I thought that my preaching days were over, but having read the story of King Hezekiah in the Book of Isaiah who asked God to heal him and give him another 15 more years of life I thought - 'Why not me as well, Lord?

Those 15 years have been met which took me up to normal retirement age of 65, but since then the Lord has added 20+ years to carry on proclaiming His Word. What about the future?

God is full of surprises - In 1983 -just 1 year after my heart attack I began receiving invitations to preach at the Whitley Bay Baptist Church which was without a Pastor. At the time in my mind there were no thoughts that God was at work in this until I received a further invitation to preach with a view to becoming the next Pastor at the Whitley Bay Baptist Church - some 12 miles from Gateshead.. God was assigning me to a bigger area of responsibility to lead a church which was reported to have some 160 members.

At much expense I sold my house in Gateshead and bought another in Whitley Bay. The selection of which was again to prove to be in God's plan, because now there is another Baptist Church in Whitley Lodge situated on the housing estate where I went to live.

At the first Sunday service I was surprised, and maybe a little disappointed, to see that in a church with 300 seats and 160 members only 60 were present. It was smaller than the congregation I had just left.

My first announcement to the congregation was something I had never done before because I asked them if they could see any empty seats. There were 240 of them, but I said that I couldn't see any empty seats because God had shown me that in time every seat would be occupied.. 5 years later this became a fact. The dream had become a reality.

I believe is expressing truths in as simple a matter as possible and so there were two sayings that became the aim of the church

No.1. Each one is to tell one

No.2. Each one is to bring one.

So my first task was to teach the 'Way of discipleship' as I preached the 'Way of Salvation'. Those who became active disciples did No.2.and brought both neighbours and friends to hear about Christ as they had done.

The vision was 'Wall to Wall people worshipping, praising and serving God'

My preaching and teaching commitment was 2 Sunday services and a mid-week Bible teaching hour

A Saturday morning Prayer Meeting at 8 a.m. was introduced as it had been the basis of God's blessing at the Beacon Lough church.

Someone described the church at Whitley Bay as being like a car in show-room. It looked good, but was going nowhere because there was no petrol in the tank. In response to the ministry of the Word God put power into the tank and the church was ready to go forward.

A decaying building was refurbished using youth employment teams. Extra heating was installed so that the congregation didn't freeze in their seats.

The church had been built of red sandstone and had a high square tower. It was surrounded by a wall with a 6 foot high wrought iron fence, and seemed to the outside world very uninviting. With the advice of a deacon who was experienced in building work a price was obtained from a contractor to demolish the walls and landscape the exterior of the church making access direct from the street. Before this was brought to a church meeting for permission to go ahead the contractor arrived and one day later the 'Walls of Jericho' disappeared.

The Baptistery was repaired and in the first 2 years was used for the Baptism, of over 70 new believers.

Modern forms of worship were introduced alongside the more traditional forms of worship. I tried to lead by example and was busily engaged as a Pastor and preacher; financial advisor (I had plenty of experience from my former job) – Church gardener and Magazine editor.

In 5 years the church grew from the original 60 to 300 and every seat was taken. What next?

The town church needed space so 3 groups of 25 members were sent to other parts of the town to start new congregations linked with the home church. This gave space for even more growth. 2 of these congregations are now established as Churches in the Baptist Union and every 2-3 months I am still invited to return 100 miles to the North-East to preach. On a recent visit I was referred to as ' the man who has come to encourage us'.

I was asked by an editor of the 'Baptist Times' newspaper what was happening at Whitley Bay and from what area did we attract people? My answer was from a radius of 5 miles – North; South and West. He asked what about the East? So I told him to have a look at his map of Britain and he would find that to the East was the North Sea reaching all the way to Norway.

It was time to call a youth Pastor to serve the increase in the numbers of Young people and I was now at the age of 60.

From the beginning I was able to introduce a Discipleship Course called ' Master Life' at which 10 believers (some experienced and some not) were given 26 weeks of practical teaching on Following Jesus and making him known to others. One class followed another until over 100 people had been taught to tell one and bring one.. It was not my preaching that made 'wall to wall' people - it was the active witnessing of those who wanted to be disciples of Jesus.

I was asked by one deacon why I didn't go preaching at other churches very often. My answer was

because God called me to to preach His Word at Whitley Bay.

In 1989 I did go to the West Coast of the U.S.A. to exchange pulpits with another Pastor who came to Whitley bay - and this was repeated on another 2 occasions every 3 years.. I had travelled to the USA many times on business but it was a new experience going there to preach.

The Ministry isn't just all preaching, and there were some hair-raising times when dealing with some who sought help from the church. One phone call was from a man who wanted immediate help and I went to meet him in the town centre. Our conversation started well, but finished up with him drawing a huge knife and demanding money from me. I took off without having time even to pray.

On many occasions we had men at the church door on a Sunday asking to see me. One man – a Scotsman – came in several disguises but always with the same story. He wanted money for the bus fare to get him south to his Grandmother's funeral. He came so often I wondered how many grandmothers he had - But his Scottish accent always gave him away.

On occasions I had to deal with men who were opposed to the Christian faith and turned up at church to actively oppose the preaching of the Gospel by introducing heresy.

Constantly I was told by other Baptist ministers that I did not do things the way they had been taught at Bible College - but I had never been to college.

Like in my days playing competitive cricket it wasn't the correctness in my batting style that determined how far I hit the ball.. It was co-ordination of hand, eyes and feet that determined where the ball went.

I did things God's way and not in my own way to meet the needs of the people he had sent me to serve. They were there not to serve me – but I was there to serve them by listening to God and doing what He told me to do.

Sometimes it was encouraging; sometimes discouraging . Sometimes hilarious and sometimes sad. Very fulfilling and often frustrating.

I learned what Abraham Lincoln said was true -"You can please all the people some of the time; and some of the people all of the time – but you cannot please all the people all of the time.". One Anglican Vicar described me to his wife as – 'A Baptist minister who speaks like a human being.'

My policy in preaching is – If it is simple why make it complicated. Many have said the same thing over the years – 'How do you make difficult things sound simple?

That was the way Jesus did it so it is the way I try to do it. Jesus said that even little children have the capacity to believe in Him and that is why He made it as simple as A -B-C.

One senior citizen in the church said of me – “Life has never been so exciting for me as church is now – and all you do is preach and teach from the Bible. I still go back to the advice I was given when I first came to Christ – 'Get a Bible – open it – read it – and do what it says.'

There were no gimmicks; only a lifetime of proving the Bible to be true and the Lord to be faithful as He led me from the 'Pit to the Pulpit'.

What am I? To some I am still an ex-miner

To people in professional life I am an ex-Director of an International Company.
But to the people I seek to serve I am a Pastor and friend
To the children I was always ' Uncle Norman

But whatever I am, I am by the Grace of God.

I am doing what God called me to do, and what I happily want to do – to help others to find Christ as Saviour, and live for his praise and glory. Where better than to start and finish with 'Jesus only'

The church had been grown and the kingdom extended by a ministry built on -
1) Obedience to the Word; and 2) Openness to the Spirit

Consequently at every Service we saw evidence of God at work.

Soon 1993 drew near and only 1 year was left before the retirement age of 65.
I asked the deacons what they thought I should do, and would it be possible to serve the church in some way in support of the man who would succeed me as Pastor. They thought that I should retire at the age of 65 and enjoy my retirement. by 'putting my feet up'

With just one year to go this meant some 200 sermons to preach. Soon it was only 100 -and then to my last Sunday and only 2 to go,

That last Sunday was as electric as the first Sunday had been. People who knew what I had been to them as a Pastor wept openly, and some could not stand to coming back for the Evening service because they had run out of paper hankies

I didn't want to stop, and soon learnt that God wasn't finished with me yet. I now do not preach in one pulpit, but in many as I am invited to do so.

I found a different way to spell 'Retirement' - 'Re-TYRE -ment'.
That meant that I was good for many more miles of service.

I stayed in Whitley Bay for 1 year until I sold my house, and during which time I served in 2 churches at Darlington and Wallsend...

Then I moved to live in Leeds to be near to my youngest son Paul. and his family.
My eldest son was in Perth, Australia – but that was a move too far.

The Area Superintendent of the Yorkshire Baptist Association soon found me a new job. He was having to deal with several troublesome churches where congregations and Pastor relationships had broken down and he was reluctant to recommend another Pastor for the church until the 'trouble' had been uncovered and dealt with.

Quite unconstitutionally he appointed me as his 'troubleshooter'. He persuaded a church in trouble to accept me as an Interim Pastor and when the church was restored to spiritual peace and ready to progress he would send another full time Pastor.

I was a troubleshooter – but I was not to shoot the trouble makers. This is where my experience in industry and business came in.
I always remember a lesson I learned from a wise experienced man in a factory where I once

worked. When there was something wrong on a production line all the managers were called to a meeting to solve the problem. Unfortunately every manager tried to blame someone else for the breakdown. Whilst this was going on this wise old man kept mumbling loud enough for the Managing Director to hear – 'Aim at the man at the pump'
Finally in exasperation the Director said – 'What do you mean by 'Aim at the man at the pump?'

Here is the word of wisdom. When this wise man had been a schoolboy he used to like to go to the fairground where there would be a booth at which you could use an air rifle and try to knock down plastic balls which were going up and down on fountains. Knock one down and you got a prize. Now these fountains were kept going by a man at the back of the booth working a hand pump which provided the water pressure. If you aimed at the man at the pump and hit him on some part of his anatomy he suddenly stopped pumping and all the fountains stopped as well, and every ball fell at the same time.

What he was saying was - 'Get to the cause of the problem instead of dealing with the effects.'

Usually these appointments lasted 18 to 24 months, and I had no sooner finished the task at one church when I was sent to another the next week. By this means I acted as an Interim Pastor at 6 different churches in 10 years

At the age of 75 another church at Hunslet in Leeds the Pastor retired at 65 and they requested me as an Interim Pastor. I reminded them that I was 10 years older than the man who had just retired I went for the expected 1-2 years, but as there was no 'trouble' in the church I found a congregation who loved the Lord and loved His Word – and loved me so much that I am still serving there 10 years later. I was not 'employed' by the church and gave my services freely, but the church was most generous and made annual donations to work which I supported in Romania.

My interest in Romania came when I joined the Moortown Baptist Church where my son Paul was a deacon. I got involved in supporting a Romanian student to attend a Christian High School formed after the revolution against communism in 1990.

Being an inquisitive type I made my first visit to Romania going overland by road which took 3 days. The student I was supporting came from a family of 7 children all who spoke English except their parents. The student is called Emilia (Emi) and was 16 years old. She is now 37 years old and has 3 lovely daughters who she calls 'her 3 princesses'.

When I left for home I was challenged to learn some Romanian for my next visit.

As I had no-one to teach me I bought a Romanian/English manual and taught myself.

The whole family were surprised when they realised that an old retired Englishman was trying to speak their language. These visits came every 2 years and I made friends with the Pastor of the Baptist church in the city of Cluj. He now regards me as his 'English father' and insists that on every visit I preach to the congregation of 1000 – which I did with the help of a translator who spoke better English than I did. However, on my last 4 visits I have been able to start the first 10-15 minutes of my sermon in Romanian without a translator.

I am known there as the 'omul cu parul alb; (ie the man with the white hair)

During this time as I served as the Superintendent's 'troubleshooter' a group of believers in the Moortown Church asked the Pastor for more expository Bible Study, which was not provided at the Sunday services. His reply was that he was too busy with other aspects of the church's work and they should find someone-else to do it. They found ME.

A weekly Bible Study hour was started and in the past 15 years the whole Bible has been studied

book by book, with special series of teaching concerning the 'Work and Person of the Holy Spirit'. - and then 'Life of Jesus' – and the 'Life of Paul'.

Later members of the Group 'complained' that now they were getting more than they could take in just by listening and I was asked if I could write out the teaching so that they could study it later at home. The conclusion of that is that now I have all my expository preaching notes in the form of a personal Bible Commentary of the entire Bible Message of Old and New Testaments..

At present (2014) we are studying the whole Bible again, but this time concentrating on the Message of Salvation through faith in Christ alone.

Over the years these 'notes' have been requested by others and now each week the Studies are sent in full by email to 30 different preachers and churches in 6 different countries.

These studies are used by 3 Australian churches and even transposed for use in Fiji.. Pastors in the USA, Belgium and Bangladesh also use them as well as several students in England. In Romania the notes are published on their internet web-sight in both English and Romanian.

So after 22 years 'retired' the congregations I reach are bigger than I ever knew when serving in a local church.

The years 2004-6 were a severe test of our faith and commitment because our youngest son Paul was killed in a mountain accident in Switzerland at the age of 47 – and our eldest son Peter died in Australia of cancer at the age of 56. So we are left without a close family now.

But both our grandchildren married – Ian who is doing mission outreach among gangs in London; and Rachel who is a hospital dietician.. She has a son (which makes Jean and me 'GREAT' Grandparents - and we enjoy him so much – but these blessings are tempered by the loss of our own 2 sons. With Job we have to say – 'The Lord gives – and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.'

People say that my preaching changed after the death of my 2 sons. I was not aware of it but others said that I now preached with tears in my heart - so be it. I am not ashamed to be 'a man of tears' because in John's Gospel I read that at the graveside of Lazarus Jesus wept.

How much does the Ministry cost?

I know that all my theological study cost me was £10 to take the University of London exams, but it really cost me the price of a cup of coffee..

Just 2 years after I left the International Company in London I visited the firm when on a visit to London. The Financial Director offered me one of 2 things. I could have a job at double the salary I had when I left – OR I could have cup of coffee.

The fact that I am still doing what I left the firm to do tells you that I chose the cup of coffee, which when you calculate the difference in wages and a Pastor's stipend over 20 years would amount to ½ Million Pounds. Did you ever know a cup of coffee cost so much?

I have never regretted that day in 1952 (ie over 60 years ago) when I realised my need of a Saviour and invited Jesus Christ to be the Lord of my life.

I started that New life by teaching other young people from the Bible. Now 60 years later I am still

doing the same, but now by email and through the weekly Bible hour here in Leeds.
I will never forget the advice I received in October 1953 from a wise pitman preacher –
Get a Bible – Open it – Read it – Do what it says.'

I have preached in many places in England, as well as in America, Canada Australia, Belgium,
Norway and Romania -but the Message hasn't changed = it is Jesus only. And so I preach that
Salvation is by Grace Alone; through Faith Alone; In Christ Alone – and for the glory of God Alone.

The message I received from the Lord the night I was saved was – 'Let the redeemed of the Lord
say so' Ps 107v2. Once I got started I have never stopped.

I think that Psalm 40vv1-3 is very appropriate to my Salvation and calling to preach.-
'He lifted me up out of a horrible pit, out of the mud and mire – and set my feet upon a rock and
gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth; a hymn of praise to God.
Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord.'

I close this account of my life so far with a quote from a great American 'preacher' called John
Wayne -

In a film as Sheriff Rooster Coburn who was retired from being as law-man because he drank so
much when being asked to be Sheriff again when lawlessness broke our in the city he replied -
I'm Retired – Released – and Rejoicing.

Here is my prayer for the future – ie as long as the Lord needs me here -
Psalm 71 v9 'Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone'.

My resolve is summed up in vv14-18
'But as for me, I will always have hope; I will praise you more and more. My mouth will tell of your
righteousness, of your salvation all day long though I do not know its full measure. I will proclaim
your righteousness, and yours alone. Since my youth O God, you have taught me, -and to this day I
declare your marvellous deeds. Even when I am old and grey do not forsake me,'

At the age of 87 there might still be another chapter to this story, but one day I know I will meet the
Lord Jesus and when I do the scriptures tell me I will be like Him (1 John 3v1-3)

My prayer is that each day till then I might become more like Him than I have ever been before.

The first text I ever preached from was 2nd Corinthians 5v17
'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.'

Nothing has changed because Jesus is the same 'Yesterday – Today and Forever'.

Norman Hiley May 2014