

## WHY I LEFT ELIM

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My wife and I had been Christians for about five years when we joined a local Elim Church, which we found to be a safe and friendly place to fellowship. We were to realise later, however, that this church was far from that.

I had been studying for a degree in theology through a correspondence college and began considering finishing the degree as a full time student at the Elim Bible College. We were interviewed and accepted into the second year of the course at the start of the next academic year. It was during this period between acceptance and waiting to move up to the college campus that we began to have doubts about the denomination. A senior Elim minister (now deceased) warned us that spiritual damage was almost invariably caused at the college, and that he had called for its closure. I then met a number of students who confirmed his spiritual assessment. I was particularly warned that a member of the faculty would seek to identify any student who still believed that leadership in the church and family was a male function, and the inference was that such students would be at a disadvantage.

Consequently it was with trepidation, mixed with excitement that my family and I moved into the Bible College campus. We soon realised that all the warnings had been accurate.

I recall seeing a wonderful, serious young man of God spend an entire spiritual activity session with his head on the desk. I asked him what was wrong and he said that he had lost the reality of his faith and relationship with God. I think we all knew how he felt. To be fair to the college, they have subsequently reduced the student workload in an attempt to address this, but do not know whether the spiritual atmosphere has improved at all.

I recall that a number of students expressed how much difficulty they experienced in worshipping in the college chapel, which seemed to be a common difficulty. All the while we were experiencing the wider Elim movement, and experiencing the effects of a heritage of legalism that still stifled the movement's churches, as well as the harsh, hard-heartedness of various Elim church leaders.

One instance that particularly stands out in my mind is of an annual away-day that my year group had.

Once a year we were permitted to miss lectures for a day in order to go away on a kind of retreat to seek to recover some of our lost spiritual strength. Thus in January 2001 we arrived at Englesea Brook Chapel (forever associated with the Mow Cop Primitive Methodist revival of 1807). The class representatives had arranged for the General Superintendent of Elim, John Glass, to spend the day ministering to us. One of the exercises (yes, exercises) that we were all required to participate in was a visualisation exercise in which we were told to relax, and then begin to imagine a pastoral scene including a river and a tree. After we had spent some time creating and contemplating this image in our minds the General Superintendent began asking students the details of their scene. He used the characteristics of the picture, the size and type of tree and river to analyse the personality and outlook of the student. This was intrusive and prying.

I had previously been involved in a ministry to those caught up in the cults, occult and New Age movement, and had subscribed to journals such as that of the Spiritual Counterfeits Project and therefore believed that such techniques were contra-biblical, and could lead the practitioner to oppression by demonic powers. Indeed, if you glance through a concordance of the Bible you will find that God has little or nothing good to say about the imaginations of man. Christian experts in the occult would also affirm that across the world from the North American Shaman, the European Witch to the Hindu Brahman the exercise of visualisation is considered by them to be one of their most powerful techniques. Naturally, with the leader of the denomination teaching such practices my concern about the health of the denomination grew.

I vividly recall how shocked students who were studying the history of Elim were after they had gained access to the Elim archive. They had seen how the denomination had always been driven by disputes, harshness and legalism almost from the start, and how close it had come to becoming a British Israelite cult, facts usually air-brushed out in the populist books about the movement and its founders.

A further incident which showed the lack of godliness within the Elim leadership occurred during the interviews for acceptance into the Elim Ministry. As a qualified and experienced former senior Public Services Manager, I was appalled by the intimidating manner in which some of the interviews were conducted. I had certainly never experienced anything like it in the non-Christian world, and know that such interview techniques would be considered bad practice outside the Church. They were impervious to any suggestion that this was bad practice, and it spoke volumes about the heart attitude of these leaders. In speaking to others who have been through this process on other occasions I know that mine was not an isolated case. I was turned down by Elim, that is their prerogative, but the Lord had other plans and I was sent into battle at a small rural Evangelical church.

Joining the list of Pastors defeated by that congregation I returned to the college area with a view to taking my masters degree. Within two weeks of returning I received a request to go to see the Elim Regional Superintendent. I was somewhat nervous about this as my wife and I were still licking the wounds previously inflicted by Elim, and I considered taking a witness along. Unfortunately I didn't. To my utter amazement the Regional Superintendent said that the General Superintendent had asked him to invite me to reapply for ministry within Elim. I cannot describe the elation of this offer after the disappointments that went before, including my failure in the ministry. He took my mobile and home phone number and said he would call when the first vacancy arose. After eight months, during which I received no phone calls from the Regional Superintendent, and during which I was aware of a number of vacancies, I arranged to see him. At no time did I rebuke him or point out his broken promises, but simply said that I felt that I wasn't meant to continue the process and that I would withdraw my application. Very strangely he asked me not to contact Headquarters but to leave the form pending. I accepted this and tried to recover from yet another Elim inflicted wound.

I got on with life and dealt, once again with the challenge of forgiving Elim leadership. I settled down in a local Elim church with the aim of supporting the Pastor in any way I could, now knowing from personal experience how hard that job is, and I occasionally preached there as well.

During 2006, I spent a great deal of time in prayer and kept being drawn back to two issues. The first was my concerns about the Elim church we were attending. We began to review the things a church should be and found the Elim church falling well short. There was little worship and what there was was largely man-centred. There was neither meaningful pastoral care, nor practical or financial care for brothers or sisters in need. But the leadership were only too willing to brow beat the congregation about tithing when the drop in numbers threatened the churches ability to pay the staff and the mortgage. The Word of God was not taught; discipleship was not happening nor was there any meaningful prayer. In short it failed totally in ever area that should define a church, and yet control freakery did not permit others to exercise ministry that may have helped in some of those areas. As a final straw the church appointed a female Elder (whose husband did not believe) so even if we dismiss the scriptures that say women should not lead men, the church was still violating the scripture that call for elders to have believing spouses and children. To make matters worse they dived headlong into the forty days of purpose from the purpose driven church programme of Rick Warren.

I raised my concerns in my resignation letter, pointing out the error of Rick Warren's mentors, the late Peter Drucker and Ken Blanchard. In contravention of stated church policy I received no visit from the Eldership nor did the letter accepting my resignation seek in any way to deal with or refute the points I raised.

After this, my prayer time continued to be intruded upon by a realisation that I had a responsibility to point out to my brothers in Elim leadership how they had sinned against me, and that they had no right before God to conduct themselves the way they had. I wrote a polite letter to the General Superintendent listing the incidents and trying to show how much unnecessary pain had been caused to my wife and I. The letter I received in reply was the sort of reply one would expect from the leader of a cult. In my experience no reputable non-Christian employer, for example, would have responded in such a manner to such a letter. It seems time and again it takes a Christian, so-called, to sink below even the world's standards.

So why have I left Elim? It is because I have found them to be prone to legalism and harshness. To habitually court error, and attack those who stand firm on the Word of God. To have a leadership who consider themselves above reproach, and to be a denomination that seems to fail in every meaningful way in meeting the biblical definition of what a church should be.

Since leaving Elim, and asking God to forgive and cleanse me I have found a new joy and closeness in my relationship with God. I have found an increased clarity of spiritual vision concerning the Scriptures, and have begun to be more fruitful in his service. In fact I believe that leaving this sect has been one of the most important steps forward that I have taken since entering the Lord's service.

Editor. This is one of very many reports we have had about Elim and other Pentecostal churches.

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