

# A nice, tidy overseas adventure



**Charles Anderson, who has taught New Testament and Biblical Hebrew at Oak Hill for the past five years, reflects on what he has learned about faith and culture as he prepares to return home to the United States**

'It'll just be three years. We'll move there, I'll finish, and we'll come back.'

Such were my words to my wife Erin and our plans when we moved to England for PhD study in September 2004. A nice, tidy overseas adventure for three years, after which we would return to the States with that craziness out of our system.

Here we are, eight years later, four kids in tow, finally returning. We are excited to move back to the US, where I will help with leadership training at a church in Missouri, and we can be closer to family, yet we leave with palpable sadness. Our season in England has meant so much to us.

These five years of ministry at Oak Hill have proved rewarding and formational. We have learned tea should always be drunk with milk, and that everyone is surprised at

Americans who don't drink coffee. When someone says, 'Thank you for that interesting paper', they aren't actually appreciative, and they didn't really like it. And although an English accent makes you sound 25% smarter in the States, sadly, here, an American accent probably pulls me down 25%.

Yet some of the most important lessons I will take back revolve precisely around the theme in this edition of *Commentary* of faith in a secular society. The church in Britain has recognised soberly it now inhabits a post-Christian world; accordingly, the great need is evangelism. Churches, and the individual Christians in them, have a welcome focus on sharing the gospel with non-believers.

The need is pressing precisely because there are so many out there who do not know the Lord Jesus. More

than we experienced in the States, in the UK, evangelism is a recurrent focus and seen as central to mission and overall maturity. Services are constructed with an eye on being intelligible to the outsider. Christianity Explored courses regularly offer a safe place to engage with Jesus.

Oak Hill sends faculty and students on missions each year across the country to develop as evangelists. In the States, with its more widespread religiosity and cultural Christianity, that need can become dulled. We hope to take back with us not just that passion for evangelism, but even more, the clear sense of its mandate.

In line with the priority of evangelism comes a realistic expectation about what cultural change is possible. In the States, the seemingly widespread public allegiance

to Christianity contributes to a notion that change comes from electing the right officials who enact God-fearing laws. To hear some American Christians speak, the mandate is not for evangelism but legislation. If gay marriage were abolished, or prayer in schools restored, then the secular tide may be reversed and the nation's initial Christian promise restored.

In contrast, perhaps because secularism is more established in the UK (whether despite or because of an established church), British Christians have different aspirations. Unchristian policies should be resisted, and recent headlines offer many examples, but such manoeuvres typically are not elevated to the same level of importance, as they seemingly have in the States.

I want to be careful not to paint with brush strokes that are too broad for either side of the ocean. Countless American Christians rightly prioritise evangelism. Most of those who place great faith in politics would recoil at the charge they have elevated it over outreach. It may be that the better approach in the UK simply reflects the church's weakness, and with greater numbers, the approach would be similar here.

Moreover, there is something important in public theology, in contending for better, more just, more righteous government. Yet, on the whole, a lesson for us as we return to the States is to exhort and encourage ourselves and others to focus on

evangelism and not seek change primarily through the ballot box.

A second lesson for us as we move comes, if I may, from a different angle. I have often heard British people speak of the need for more Bible teachers. Theological college is for training people to teach the Bible. Teaching implies a more cerebral approach, that if the right information is communicated and received, then a minister's job is done. Biblical exposition consists in faithfully, even creatively, setting out what a passage means and then largely leaving it to the hearers to relate it to their lives.

What is minimised is biblical preaching. I am only sketching out the matter roughly, but good preaching includes nearly everything from Bible teaching yet goes further. It works hard to apply the truths explicitly and concretely to peoples' lives. That starts with our very first words in preaching. Not enough of our sermons work hard in the introduction to expose why our hearts need to hear the grace of the passage. Such need is more assumed than uncovered.

Opening illustrations tend to make an analogy for the main point of the sermon rather than prick us to realise how we are fallen and need God to work in us. To take it a step further, I wonder if this is an area where British reserve is an impediment, and we need more preachers who will open up and share from their lives.

Then, at the tail end, our sermons fail to explore at much length how

specifically people might work out biblical truth in their own lives. There has been a tendency to tuck on application at the end in a rather cursory fashion. And usually it remains somewhat abstract, at the general level of how we should think differently, yet not delving down to our affections, nor how to put that thinking into practice.

Doubtless what I have painted is a caricature. More importantly, the trajectory on this issue is a positive one. The importance of reaching the heart in our preaching is increasingly on the radar. Witness the rise of interest in biblical counselling and the work of the Christian Counselling and Education Foundation, or the increased preaching training we offer. Nonetheless, we need far more Bible preaching in the UK, and my convictions in this have been strengthened by our time here.

We move home, I trust, different people, better people, with more than just amusing stories about those crazy Brits. By living outside the States, paradoxically we have gained a clearer view on what it means to live faithfully for Christ in the States. We are better equipped to appreciate the strengths and discern and bear with the weaknesses than before.

And on this side, God has cultivated our hearts for our British brothers and sisters who have patiently cared for us, taught us, corrected us, in short, loved us, in a way that has made our sacrifices to serve here seem light and momentary.