

# Obituaries

## Rev Derek Prime

Much-loved pastor with a real gift for preaching

**Rev Derek James Prime,**  
Pastor, Born: 20 February 1931  
in London. Died: 28 March 2020  
in Edinburgh, aged 89.

**D**erek Prime was a lovely man, a gracious man and a gentle man – words by which his family, his many friends and the two congregations which he pastored, remember him. When he retired in 1987, after 18 years as the pastor of Charlotte Chapel in Rose Street, Edinburgh, Rev. James Philip, the Minister of Holyrood Abbey Church of Scotland, spoke about “the multitude of things that he made better”.

Derek was born in 1931 in South Lambeth, London, and attended Westminster City School. At the age of 13 some schoolfriends asked him to go with them to a Bible class at Lansdowne Evangelical Free Church in West Norwood, near his home. There he became a Christian. At the age of 15, he was baptised and received into membership. One day his pastor asked him whether he had ever thought of the ministry. The conviction grew as opportunities for ministry arose both in the forces (National Service with the Royal Scots Greys in Germany) and in the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (he graduated MA in history and theology from Emmanuel College).

The elders at Lansdowne encouraged his “call” to ministry, but suggested he get some wider experience first. So, he taught history and religious knowledge for three and a half years, at Battersea Grammar School. During a pastoral vacancy in his own church, and a year after he had become an elder there, the congregation asked him to become their pastor and he was ordained in 1957. His theology was mainstream Evangelicalism, and his expository preaching was built on extensive reading.

In 1955 he married Betty Martin. They met as teenagers at Lansdowne, and they had two boys and two girls. In 1967, he was the National President for the year of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches.

In 1969 he accepted a call to be the minister at Charlotte Chapel, starting on Sunday 9 November. Charlotte Chapel was built to seat a thousand, but during Derek Prime’s ministry it was necessary to broad-



cast Sunday morning services to an overflow meeting in the lower hall. He taught all ages, with a series of weekly children’s talks. A popular series divided John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress into 40 episodes, with flannelgraph illustrations. He captivated the attention of all by coming to a crucial point in the narrative, then saying, “we’ll find out next week”.

For the adults, his sermons went through whole books of the Bible with challenging practical applications and exhortations. By doing this he could not avoid difficult passages, showing their relevance for today.

In summer, services were held each Sunday afternoon at the Ross Bandstand in Princes Street Gardens. The chairman’s exhortation over the loudspeakers to “come and hear a prime minister” won attention. Spectators were invited to join Chapel people walking to Rose Street for the indoor evening service.

He gave time to train six men for the ministry during his 18 years in the Chapel. After working with him for two years, they moved to pastorates of their own. He also gave time to encouraging the members of the Young People’s Meeting (YPM) in their Christian discipleship. Many are now serving as leaders in various churches. Students from all over the world packed the Chapel on Sundays and many came to Christian faith through his ministry, returning to their own countries to serve Christ.

Derek Prime advised the elders, in October 1986, that he wished to relinquish the pastorate in 12 months time. He used the word “relinquish” rather than “resign”; there were no problems, hidden or otherwise, but incipient health difficulties made him realise that he could not indef-

initely maintain the pastoral office at his own high standard. The church received the news with great regret, and a packed farewell service was held on 3 October 1987.

Derek Prime had a busy retirement; he continued to live in Edinburgh, spoke frequently at churches and conferences, and acted as pastor to many in the ministry. When a new pastor was called to the Chapel, he courteously felt it right to worship elsewhere and for ten years he attended St Catherine’s Argyll and then Craiglockhart Parish Church, both on Sundays and at mid-week meetings.

Those congregations soon had the same appreciation of his involvement as the Chapel members had had for 18 years. His retirement years were saddened by the death, from cancer, of his daughter Cilla in 2003 and Betty in 2007. He returned to the Chapel in recent years with the encouragement of the current pastor.

During retirement, he wrote several books, adding to the 36 already published. By far the best known and influential of them is *On Being a Pastor: Understanding Our Calling and Work* (2004), expanded and reissued in 2013 jointly with one of his previous assistants, Alastair Begg. His final publication, in 2017, was “A Good Old Age, subtitled *An A to Z of loving and following the Lord Jesus in later years*”.

For many years Derek contributed a “Thought for the Week” to *The Scotsman*.

Derek preferred to conduct a “Thanksgiving Service for the life of...” rather than the traditional “Funeral Service for...” and the phrase was soon widely used in Charlotte Chapel. He had a gift for giving thanks for a life well lived, bringing comfort to the bereaved, expressing certainty in the resurrection, and encouraging faith in Christ, all in one service. He hoped that at the Thanksgiving Service for his life, his grandson, Paul, would sing his favourite hymn, which begins: *How sweet the name of Jesus sounds, In a believer’s ear, It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds, And drives away his fear.*

The present national emergency has delayed the opportunity for a public service, so that wish has yet to be fulfilled.

He leaves three married children, eight grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren.

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