

The Imps



The forerunner to the Anchor Boys and the Beavers

by Bruce Porter

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Forward

The 'IMPS' a forward by Rev'd Neil Bennett

I first met Bruce in the autumn of 1998. I was serving as a Deacon in the Church that my wife Karen and I had been married in that same year in the summer. Bruce had been asked to help the Church as we entered a time of interregnum. Bruce and I hit it off instantly. He seemed very impressed that a young version of me would put themselves forward to serve on a diaconate. I was also fairly young in faith terms, having only become a Christian some three years prior. And I was extremely impressed with him. His knowledge of how to navigate what was a difficult time for us as a Church was brilliant. He united the Church at a time when it might, otherwise, have experienced substantial difficulties.

Now, why do I begin the forward to this book by telling you this? Well, I think it goes some way in helping you understand the impact that the IMPS had, nationally, by helping you to grasp that Bruce is a problem solver if he sees something that needs fixing, he fixes it. If someone has a problem, he will try his very best to help. When people are going

through difficult times, Bruce is always available to walk the difficult path with them. And when a certain age group had no provision, 5+ in terms of uniformed organizations, Bruce saw something that needed fixing. Someone had to do something.

Bruce, supported by his wonderful wife Eunice, was that someone.

What you are about to read, at times, might seem almost impossible to imagine. It is true that the story of the IMPS is, frankly, amazing. This boys club, which first met on the 1st September 1954 celebrated 21 years in 1975, the year I was born. By 1975 then, the IMPS had grown to 254 groups throughout England and Wales.

Sounds amazing, doesn't it? Well, it is pretty amazing and there is so much more to this story, please read on.

The IMPS was always going to be successful with Bruce at the helm, why? Because Bruce had a deep-seated conviction, made very real to him in the prayer chapel of St Paul's Cathedral, during a lunch hour. Bruce knew that He was being called, by God, to form the IMPS into the National movement it became but the story didn't end there.

Bruce went on to work as a youth worker, gaining accreditation and forming the group called

‘Pegasus’ meeting in Bruce and Eunice’s home. It became a place where young men and women found a welcome, connection, belonging, and, for many, a home. Many of those young people went on to accomplish extraordinary things thanks to the love shown to them by Bruce and Eunice.

After finishing youth work Bruce felt a call to full time Church ministry, having already served for many years as a Christian youth worker. Tasso Baptist Church in Fulham was Bruce’s first charge. The Church, having not been of a sufficient size to pay Bruce, soon became filled with new people and eventually the Church was able to extend to Bruce a paid post as their Pastor.

From Fulham Bruce served as Pastor at West Ealing Baptist Church. Bruce and Eunice, eventually, moved to Hillingdon where Bruce became Pastor of Salem Baptist Church. It is here that our lives crossed as Bruce, a little reluctantly at first, agreed to train me for Baptist ministry. The years that followed were some of the most amazing times I have had in my, almost, twenty years in full time Christian ministry.

I like so many others owe Bruce and Eunice a great debt of gratitude, and I hope that I have been able to pen something of that in this forward.

What a story awaits you. Read on and maybe through the pages of this book you might receive encouragement, a challenge, to step out of your comfort zone, who knows!

I warmly commend this book to you.

Rev'd Neil Bennett CPCAB Level 4 Diploma,
CerTh, DipTh, DipTh, BTh, MTh

Introduction

I, Bruce Porter, felt strongly for those children who were too young to join the Cubs - the junior section of the Scout movement and the Lifeboys – the junior section of the Boys Brigade whereas the girls were able to join their Junior sections at an early age. As a leader in the Boys Brigade, I welcomed boys into our Lifeboy section from five years of age, only to be told if I continued to do so, they would demand our local branch was closed.

However, my concern for the five plus was so strong that I started a new group called the Imps. This was very successful, and interest was quickly received from people in many parts of England and Wales and the events that followed are, I hope, clearly reported in this publication.

The Imps was a National Youth Organisation with the following aim:

‘To bring children together in the knowledge and love of God through fellowship and service and to extend Christ’s Kingdom.

Structure

All our units were Church based, and many Churches used the Imps as a feeding ground for the Junior Boys' Brigade and Cub Scouts. The children could wear uniforms supplied by our Headquarters if desired and the Churches were free to decide whether their group should adopt the uniform or not.

Leaders were appointed by the individual Churches who were free to run their groups without any restrictions imposed by the organisation's Headquarters.

The Organisation was a Registered charity No. 228905 and was a full member of the National Conference for voluntary Youth Services.

Activities

Activities were broadly divided into four categories;

-  Instructional
-  Musical
-  Physical
-  Spiritual.

The Need for a New Movement

By 1954 we had within the British Isles been wonderfully blessed with the formation and growth of many good Christian organisations which catered both for the spiritual and physical development of the Youth of Britain. However, although the girls' organisations had always catered for the younger girl, the boys' movements had only catered for those of eight years of age and over. Thus, the provision for the younger boy had been practically non-existent.

It was a well-known fact that the educational and social service experts maintained that the children of that day and generation matured at a much earlier age. It was also generally accepted that the first seven years were the most impressionable years of a child's life.

The need for introducing the young to the fellowship of the Christian Church has never been greater than today, at a time when there was so much hatred and malice in the world, and we have only to look around to see what can become of those youngsters who do not receive the necessary training and encouragement.

For a very long time the two major boys' organisations in the country had catered for boys from eight years of age although they had received many requests both from within their movements as well as from outside. These had been rejected for many reasons and perhaps the most sound of these was that it is difficult to run any one group which caters for such a wide age range. Thus, it became very apparent that something was needed whereby the younger boy was provided for.

Early Beginnings

In the parish of St. Barnabas, Dulwich we had the heart-breaking experience of regularly turning boys away for no other reason except they were not of the minimum age require to join the organisations within the parish.

Our love for boys stimulated deep concern for this younger age group and with the support of Canon Brown, Mr Wall and Mr Curtis, I decided to start a play hour for young boys. Miss Irene Thomas agreed to help me and jointly we planned for our first meeting which took place on September 1st, 1954.

After considerable planning we met in the Village Hall, eagerly awaiting the arrival of our first recruits. Some boys were brought by Mrs (Nan) Hearn and others by Miss Valerie Swann; both these ladies accepted an invitation to stay and join the staff. Shortly afterwards Miss Thomas had to resign owing to business commitments but fortunately there followed, during coming years, a faithful band of leaders, too many to mention, but

all who made their mark in the history of this new venture.

The club continued simply as a play hour for young boys, growing immensely popular as time went on and eventually other local branches had to be opened to cope with the ever-increasing intake.

It was thought that a very apt name for these young, energetic and mischievous boys would be 'THE IMPS'.

The small club known as the IMPS aroused much local interest and soon three other groups, all holding allegiance to the original group, were formed. These groups in turn aroused wider interest and we received many enquiries with reference to the Imps by those who were interested in forming their own groups.

Although we gave these enquirers the information concerning the running of our own group, we had nothing more to offer in the way of an established movement. It was my own feeling that one day such a movement would be formed but at this time I had no idea that our Lord would use me as an instrument by which this would be achieved.

In Dulwich and the surrounding districts. we continued the work and then one year at a parents' evening we were faced with a new problem. Three parents all moving from the district wanted to know if we could arrange for their sons to join Imps in their new locality. Both they and the boys were bitterly disappointed when told that until they reached eight years of age, there would be no movement in their respective areas which the boys could join.

Eventually, after spending much time in prayer, I decided to inform the leaders of the Anglican, Methodist, Baptist and Congregational churches, together with many national Christian societies and movements, of details regarding the Imps and of the apparent need for such an organisation, a need which we strongly felt as a result of our short experience in the work to which we had laid our hand.

After receiving entirely favourable replies, one of which came from Dr Fisher, then Archbishop of Canterbury, in which he stated that he thought that launching the Imps on a larger scale was an excellent project, I began to think much more seriously about the future of the Imps.

The responsibilities of such a task, I knew, would be many. I was also aware of my own inadequateness, but I knew that with the Lord all things were possible. Nevertheless, for a short time I still held back, until one day I felt the need to escape from the bustle of city life, and in a few moments, I found myself in the Prayer Chapel of St. Paul's Cathedral. It was whilst in this Chapel that I received the green light, and I was then able to walk away from the Cathedral knowing what, by the Grace of God, was His will for me – namely the formation of the Imps as a National organisation.

A National Movement is Born

Having been made fully aware of God's will, I received much encouragement and support from my assistant at that time, Mr Barrie S Vestey. Together we drafted a rough constitution and then invited a group of people from varying walks of life to attend meetings for the purpose of discussing this draft and making it an official document. These meetings were chaired by Mr Leonard Moules, the British Home Secretary of the World Wide Evangelisation Crusade and Mr A Yeo, a deacon of Chatsworth Baptist Church.

Once the Constitution had been finished, we had the task of appointing the Movement's first executive, future executives being elected. The first executive meeting was held in the July of 1960 at which the Rev F A Goodwin was appointed Chairman for the ensuing year and Mr Vestey and myself were appointed assistant General Secretary and General Secretary respectively. It was our duty to be responsible for the administration of the movement on behalf of the Imp executive.

One of our first duties was to invite certain men to become President and Vice-President of the movement. We were soon able to announce that Lt. Gen. Sir John Glubb, K.C.B, C.M.G, D.S.O.,O.B.E.,M.C. had accepted the position of President and that the Lord bishop of Southwark - the Right Reverend Mervyn Stockwood, and the Principal of Spurgeon's College - the Rev Dr. Beasley-Murray, M.A., B.D., M.Th had accepted the positions as vice-Presidents.

Before long some five hundred circulars had been sent to many Churches giving full details of our movement in the hope that new groups would be formed. Also the movement was advertised in the church newspapers of the major denominations. From these methods, contacts were made and new groups formed: enquiries came pouring in from all parts of the British Isles and finally from six other countries. For a new movement these enquiries from overseas brought certain complications and it was necessary to consider special condition regarding the constitution for the formation of such groups. For this reason and because we had no representatives in these countries the official formation of these prospective groups was not possible at that time.

In July 1960, the Imps became an official movement for young boys. Its purpose, as recorded in its aim, was to bring young boys into the knowledge and love of God through Fellowship and Service and to extend Christ's Kingdom.

Coming months showed signs of a steady growth. The uniform, as approved by the executive committee, was similar to that previously worn by the four original groups and included a royal blue sweater. The badge had as its background the Bible with a cross on it and the name of the movement.

It was felt that the boys should have their own motto and for this purpose 'Help my neighbour' was chosen as it was felt that here was something for the boys to achieve and a means by which these young boys could be encouraged in putting others before themselves.

Although a Headquarters Office was created, the work was undertaken entirely by volunteers. My own marriage in 1961 resulted in my having a qualified teacher as a partner without whose encouragement and support I could not have undertaken the task of developing the organisation. Eventually the strain of leading the organisation and

following my own occupation became physically too much for me and I decided this was the time to undertake the direction of the organisation in a full-time capacity.

This had to be undertaken as an act of faith as at this time no funds were available for any salaries.

Among the voluntary supporters was Mr. Adriano who became treasurer for a number of years and through which position, made a vital contribution to the organisation. Another volunteer was Mr. Swann who, apart from being one of our most faithful executive members, undertook many important roles in connection with our work including vice-chairman of the national executive. The Rev Frank Goodwin was succeeded as chairman by the Rev Frederick Poad who served the movement for many of the most difficult years. Eventually he was succeeded by the Rev Gordon Snelling under whose chairmanship we saw many changes.

The Rev. Michael Walker then followed as chairman and was succeeded by the Rev Norman Barr. All these gentlemen have been a tremendous encouragement.

An idea given to us by Mr Adriano as treasurer resulted in us forming a trading company which undertook work on behalf of the movement and raised the majority of the finance needed to administer the organisation in its present and even expanding form. The majority of the work undertaken in the name of our trading company was done by a team of senior citizens who originally undertook the work in a voluntary capacity but who latterly received a small payment which enabled them to supplement their very small incomes.

As this work grew, I was able to leave the practical supervision firstly to Mrs Miller and later to Mrs Wake. Both of these ladies and the team of senior citizens have played an important part in the movement. This extra finance together with the grants received from the Inner London Education Authority made it possible in more recent years for the executive to appoint me as a salaried worker, thus relieving considerable tension. Mr David Dowie was appointed in July 1972. His appointment brought to a very welcome end many years of lonely leadership. Without his partnership in the work and his companionship I doubt whether I would have continued leading the organisation right up to the 21st celebration which was a special year in the history of our organisation. A very real

debt of gratitude is due to him and to all who made his appointment possible.

The movement had been admirably served by one of my greatest friends, Mrs Nan Hearn who had faithfully been responsible for the uniform and equipment department at the headquarters and this, at nearly 80 years of age, was no small task. Valuable assistance was also rendered by my former secretaries Mrs Pauline Horne and Mrs Janet Smith followed by Mrs Pauline Matthews.

If one were to attempt to name all those who have served the movement during the first 20 years, the list would be endless. Special thanks, however, must be recorded to the countless number of leaders up and down the country who have faithfully run our units and without whose service there would have been no movement at all.

Further Developments

Although the organisation was originally started to cater for young boys, it became apparent that in many areas there was a need for mixed groups catering for both boys and girls and after seeking the advice of specially formed panel of advisors, constitutional changes were made to allow for mixed group.

The formation of special holiday projects to cater for children during school holidays, whether they were members of our organisation or not, had also been a further development which had met a very vital need.

It was most encouraging to see many new units formed and to know that wherever they were situated, whether in a large city, a large town or a rural area, they were all fulfilling a very real need and were responsible for teaching the young the necessary qualities that will result in their becoming useful citizens and hopefully many of them dedicated Christians.

The Future

The task ahead was a big one and the responsibilities many, however, our short experience had taught us a considerable amount. A new movement or society has always many problems and difficulties to overcome and we had various teething troubles. However, the Psalmist says of our Lord, 'I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go. I will guide thee with mine eye.' Trusting in this knowledge we could go ahead with complete confidence.

We had many plans in connection with our programme for extension. These plans had not been made rashly but thoughtfully and prayerfully. Many of us believed that apart from the present consistent enquiries, we could expect a snowball and when it came we must be ready, for it would be a pity if we were not fully equipped at such a time.

As already mentioned, we had achieved much success in expansion, nevertheless, we had not been so fortunate in the raising of the necessary funds with which to run our movement, but we believed if everyone played their part in this sphere, then the Lord would surely provide.

In the world today we live at such a speed that there are obviously many dangers. Therefore, we believed that this work to which we had set our hand had never been so needed and vitally important. However, introducing the organisation to the Churches up and down our land should not be left entirely to those engaged in the work of our movement but should be the task of those who are in any way concerned for the spiritual life of the future generation.

In 1975 we celebrated our 21st birthday in a display of activities in the Royal Albert Hall in London. By this time, we had 245 groups across England and Wales and many of them took part in the display.

Among the guests present, were officers of the Boys Brigade and the Scout movement. As the years rolled by, both of these organisations realised the importance of catering for this age – the Scouts formed the Beavers and the Boys Brigade, the Anchor Boys. So, we realised that our work was concluded. At last we had encouraged both movements to see the necessity and the need for catering for the younger boys. We valued their good work and did not wish to oppose it or to duplicate it. All our Imp groups were in Churches where there were either Cubs or Lifeboys so our

Imps, when reaching the appropriate age joined those organisations with our support.

So, it was apparent to us that our task was completed. The Imps groups joined with their local Beavers or their local Anchor Boys.

Why were the Imps formed? It is true to say that it was partly because of our love for the young and because of the very apparent need for a new movement such as ours, We believed it was the Lord's will that we should begin this work but we also believed that the time had come to support the Scouts and the boys Brigade as they both reduced the age that boys could join their movements.

We had been like tools in the hands of a skilled Carpenter who used us to accomplish His will and we thank God for the privilege and the enjoyment we received working with 5 – 9 year olds and for seeing the two major organisations for boys take care of this work in the future.

This enabled me to train and become a full- time qualified Youth Leader. Those years, supported by Eunice, my wife, became very happy ones. Our large Victorian house became a Youth Club and the

members of both young ladies and young men grew to over one hundred. After being invited to take Youth services in a number of Churches, I was eventually called to become the pastor of Tasso Baptist Church in Fulham. After eight years I became the pastor of the West Ealing Baptist Church where I stayed for four years before being called to be minister of Salem Baptist Church in Hillingdon, where we enjoyed fourteen years of very happy and strong ministry.

As my parents left us their home in Devon, Eunice and I moved to the edge of Newton Abbot and now I pastor the Willows Community (Baptist) Church which at the age of 85, I still serve as the Minister.

Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto Him be the glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus unto all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.