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The Assemblies Address Book, 6th edn

Roy Hill (ed.)

Bristol: Christian Year Publications, 2006.

272 pp. ISBN 1-872734-30-8. £6.00

Since the late nineteenth century, lists of assemblies have been an invaluable resource, both for believers seeking fellowship and for researchers seeking concrete information regarding the spread of Brethren in the United Kingdom and Ireland. (It is worth noting that the first list was in fact produced by Exclusive Brethren in 1873.) Published by Pickering & Inglis for much of the twentieth century, the responsibility has been taken over since 1990 by Roy Hill, a businessman in the Bristol area. As previously, therefore, the list disclaims any official character. Nevertheless, its coverage is probably around 95 per cent complete, and it offers a well-produced source of information which has steadily improved in accuracy over the years.

Assemblies are listed by country and then county, with addresses (including postcodes—invaluable for those of us who use the Multimaps website), contact telephone numbers, and service times. It would have been helpful to add email addresses, as is done for the section on New Zealand (Incidentally, the inclusion of such a section in a directory covering Britain and Ireland is nowhere explained). More importantly, since the traditional pattern of morning breaking of bread and evening gospel service is no longer universal, it would be worth devising some abbreviations to indicate to visitors what happens when, so that they can be appropriately prepared.

Listed here are 647 assemblies in England, including the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man (748 in 2002), 80 in Wales (79 in 2002), 201 in Scotland (213 in 2002), 172 in Northern Ireland (same as 2002), and 27 in the Republic of Ireland (31 in 2002). These figures indicate that the centre of gravity of the movement is shifting towards Northern Ireland, where numbers hold up and a distinctive sense of identity is stronger.

A prominent feature is the extensive advertising. As well as a full range of service agencies, holiday providers, publishers, and missionary societies, many assemblies have taken out an advertisement. For me, these are one of the most interesting parts of the book. In total, 216 assemblies have advertised here (significantly, in no case have assemblies in the same town or city shared an advertisement—testimony to a sturdy belief in assembly autonomy). I have analysed the weekly pattern of meetings for the 2002 edition in my book, and will not repeat the exercise here, but it is worth noticing that seventeen still advertise an annual conference, and twenty-six monthly ministry meetings. Letters of commendation are mentioned in sixty-nine advertisements, with a variation in tone from ‘required’ (p.99) to ‘always appreciated’ (p.29). Website addresses are given by fifty, and email contact addresses by thirty-four. A variety of evangelistic activities are featured, and I was intrigued by the ‘shoppers’ service’ (p.35). Many advertisements include a picture of the building, which can be useful for visitors, or a map. Some suggest that visitors consult the noticeboard for service times but that, of course, necessitates two trips—once to find out when to go, and once to go!

What this book shows is that whilst the movement is in decline, rumours of its death are as yet greatly exaggerated. I hope that the future will also prove them unfounded.