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# **LIVING OUT THE CALL**

**BOOK THREE:**

## **REACHING OUT TO GOD'S WORLD**

Paul Beasley-Murray

Revised edition 2016

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## *To Caroline*

# Preface

Hockey can be a tough game. People can get hurt. I vividly remember getting hurt in a school hockey match – blood was streaming from my mouth and the pain was intense – but the headmaster who was refereeing the match simply shouted to me ‘Play on Beasley-Murray, play on!’. And play on I did.

Ministry too can be tough. People can get hurt. Most ministers go through at least one bad patch in their ministry. Indeed, for me the first seven years of my ministry at Chelmsford were pretty lean. For whereas in my first church in Altrincham everything I had touched seemed to turn to gold and as a consequence the church turned round and began to grow, in Chelmsford everything I touched seemed to turn to dust and the church continued to decline. It was tempting to give up, particularly when there was misunderstanding and even rejection. In that context, however, somebody simply shouting ‘Live out your call, Beasley-Murray’ would not have helped. I needed people around me to help me live out the call.

I trust that the four volumes which make up *Living Out the Call* will prove to be a positive resource to those who have been in ministry for a while and are perhaps finding the going tough. Hopefully the lessons I have learnt over 43 years in stipendiary ministry, 34 of which were spent in leading two local churches, will prove of help to some. Hopefully, too, some of the thoughts and ideas will encourage and revitalise pastors in living out the call.

But *Living Out the Call* is not just for seasoned pastors. It is also for those who are just beginning ministry. Indeed, these four volumes are based on lectures that I have given to students preparing for ministry. They need to learn that it is not enough to be called – the call needs to be lived out, and that is a constant process. Hence the present participle – ‘living’ out the call.

Please also note that *Living Out the Call* is not an instruction manual. I am very conscious that there is no one way to do ministry. Every individual is unique; and what may be appropriate for one pastor may not be appropriate for another. Likewise, every church has its own individual character and its own particular mission to fulfil. God is not in the business of cloning! This does not mean that individuals and churches cannot learn from one another. Indeed, perhaps we can find a Scriptural basis for this, for according to Proverbs 18.15: “Intelligent people are always eager and ready to learn” (GNB), which the *Living Bible* translates: “The intelligent man is always open to new ideas. In fact, he looks for them.” Over the years I have greatly benefited from seeing how others operate and subsequently adapting the insights gained to my own church. But do notice, there is all the difference in the world between ‘adapting’ and ‘adopting’. To

‘adopt’ an idea from another church fails to recognise the unique character of each church. Each church has its own special calling to be church. We can learn from one another, provided we do not slavishly imitate.

*Living Out the Call* is different from other books about ministry, not least because of the person I am.

- It reflects 43 years of ministry, 34 years of which were spent turning around two declining churches and developing them into the strong churches they are today. There are not many books on ministry written by authors with such experience. As I know well from my six years as Principal of Spurgeon’s College, it is very easy to lose touch with pastoral realities.
- It reflects a love of ministry. I have enjoyed being a pastor. In spite of some tough times, there was scarcely a day when I did not thank God for the privilege of calling me to be a pastor.
- It reflects a critical ability to learn from the experience and writings of others. This is not a book which tells the story of a pastor and his two churches. Rather, I have engaged with what others have had to say. The book reflects an unusual breadth of reading and academic robustness called for by an MA module.
- Not surprisingly from one who is still a member of the Society of New Testament Studies, it reflects a delight in relating much of my thinking to Scripture where that is appropriate.
- As one who is Chairman both of Ministry Today as also of the College of Baptist Ministers, it reflects a desire to offer something which will encourage and stimulate today’s pastors. I genuinely want to help those who are finding ministry tough to live out the call.
- As befits my personality, the style is clear, passionate and straightforward!

The initial intention was to produce just one book with the title of *Living Out the Call: Rising to the Challenge of Ministry Today*. However, my enthusiasm for ministry ran away with itself, so that in the end it became necessary to publish *Living Out the Call* in four volumes:

1. *Living for God’s Glory*  
Ministry today  
The passionate professional  
The exemplary pilgrim
2. *Leading God’s Church*  
The inspirational leader  
The empowering team player  
The effective manager
3. *Reaching Out to God’s World*  
The missionary strategist  
The charismatic preacher
4. *Serving God’s People*  
The creative liturgist  
The compassionate pastor

It has been an interesting challenge dividing up what initially was one large book into four volumes – and not least grouping individual chapters under four different headings. The results, however, have been pleasing.

- In the first volume, *Living for God’s Glory*, the topics of professionalism and spirituality go surprisingly well together and reinforce my conviction that professionalism is all about giving God our best.
- *Leading God’s People* naturally encompasses the different ways in which pastors are called to be leaders.

- *Reaching Out to God's World* proved a little more problematic: along with the need to develop a missionary strategy I felt preaching could also be included, for preaching at its best always has the world in mind.
- Although the leading of worship and the exercise of pastoral care must never be restricted to the church, nonetheless to a large extent the focus for both is on the people of God, and so they are naturally grouped under the title of *Serving God's People*.

Over the years I have enjoyed sharing the fruits of my experience and learning with pastors and theological students in many different countries. Some of the material in *Living Out the Call* represents courses I taught in 2010 and 2013 at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut, Lebanon. However, the immediate inspiration for *Living Out the Call* was invitations to teach Master's courses at Laidlaw College in Auckland, New Zealand in 2014; and at the Colombo Theological Seminary in Sri Lanka, and at Vose Seminary in Perth, Western Australia, in 2015. I dare to believe that the diversity of these settings indicates that the principles underlying these four volumes, although for the most part drawn from ministry in England, are of relevance to pastors wherever they exercise their ministry.

One further introductory comment needs to be made. Unless otherwise specified, the version of the Bible quoted is the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV). Other versions used are the *Good News Bible* (GNB), the *New International Version* (NIV) and the *Revised English Bible* (REB). I have also quoted from time to time from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson.

Finally, in producing these four volumes I am most grateful to my youngest son, Benjamin, who has helped with various technical and editing matters.

Paul Beasley-Murray, July 2015

# PART 1: THE MISSIONARY STRATEGIST

## 1. The call to mission

### Mission is of the essence of the church

Pastors are called to spearhead the mission of the church, and in so doing they need to be missionary strategists. They are not alone in this task. They need to work with other leaders to constantly define the church's mission and resultant strategy. In turn this vision of the church's mission needs to be shared regularly with the church as a whole, as also with everybody seeking membership.

Mission is our response to God's initiative. It is rooted in the action of God for the salvation of the world. This is seen in Mark 1.14,15 which summarises the whole ministry of Jesus (as distinct from presenting a phase of the ministry of Jesus) in this way: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news'." "In the proclamation of Jesus the kingdom of God is God's sovereign action for the salvation of the world. This saving action of God was accomplished through the sending of Jesus, which includes his incarnation, his ministry of word and deed, his death and resurrection, his sending the Spirit, his commissioning the church, and finally the work of salvation." Mission "accordingly, is our participation in the action of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, for the salvation of the world."<sup>1</sup>

Mission is also rooted in the Great Commission given by the risen Lord. It is significant that, whatever the form of the Commission, whether it be found in Matthew (Matt 28.18-20) or the oral tradition of Mark's longer ending (Mk 16.15), in Luke (Luke 24.46-49; see also Acts 1.8) or in John (20.21-13), the mandate is clear: the Good News of the Gospel is to be shared with people everywhere.<sup>2</sup> Mission is no optional extra. It is the fundamental task of the church. Indeed, "a church not engaged in mission is guilty of apostasy".<sup>3</sup> Mission is of the essence of the church. As Emil Brunner once memorably put it:

"A church exists by mission as a fire by burning. Where there is no mission, there is no church; and where there is neither church nor mission, there is no faith."<sup>4</sup>

Traditionally within evangelical churches mission has been defined as evangelism. However, evangelism, although an essential task of the church, is not the sole task of the church. Evangelism does not exhaust the church's mission. As I wrote in a paper for the Baptist World Alliance:

"The gospel of the kingdom of God is to be embodied in kingdom action, as it was with Jesus. Evangelism and Christian ethics are inseparable, for the word becomes visible in its power to transform people's lives, and with this transforming power goes a new sense of responsibility for the welfare of others. The church therefore as the fellowship of believers is essentially the servant church, whose service includes social action. 'As the Father sent me, so I send you' (John 20.21) declared the risen Christ in the upper room. Here the incarnate Christ is the model for mission, a model which displays the power of God transforming every aspect of human life, of body and mind as well as spirit. Jesus not only proclaimed the coming of the kingdom (Mark 1.14), he demonstrated the Kingdom in action as he drove out demons (Matthew 12.28). 'The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised' – these were as

<sup>1</sup> See Paul Beasley-Murray, *Toward A Biblical/Theological Framework for Evangelism: A statement drawn up by Paul Beasley-Murray on behalf of the Academic & Theological Work Group of the Evangelism & Education Division of the Baptist World Alliance as its contribution to the BWA's vision for encouraging world evangelization by the year 2000 AD*, (1995) paragraph 1.1.

<sup>2</sup> Each form of the Great Commission has a different perspective on the missionary task of the church: according to Mark, it is to 'go and preach'; according to Luke, to 'go and witness'; according to Matthew to 'go and make disciples'; and according to John, to 'go the Jesus way'.

<sup>3</sup> A phrase attributed to John Stott.

<sup>4</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Word and the Church* (English Translation, SCM, London 1931) 108.

much signs of the Kingdom as ‘good news preached to the poor’ (Matthew 11.2-6). Kingdom action must therefore accompany kingdom preaching!”<sup>5</sup>

Evangelism must always be part of a larger task of mission. As John Stott said:

“Words remain abstract until they are made concrete in deeds of love, while works remain ambiguous until they are interpreted by the proclamation of the gospel. Words without works lack credibility; works without words lack clarity. So Jesus’ works made his words visible; his words made his works intelligible.”<sup>6</sup>

## People need to see before they will hear

Works need to accompany words. I was reminded of this last Advent when I went to the local Anglican cathedral and along with all the other members of the congregation was given a gift of a candle at the end of the service. Our instructions were to take our candles home – and only light them once we had done an act of kindness toward another person. The challenge was to ensure that we performed this act of kindness within the next seven days! In this way we were to express our calling to be “light for the whole world”.

On my return home I checked out the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. I was particularly attracted by the translation offered by Eugene Peterson in *The Message* – although *The Message* is a paraphrase, here it well and truly hits the spot:

“Let me tell you why you are here. . . You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colours in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light-stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hill-top, on a light-stand – shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, the generous Father in heaven.”

Here we see that Christians are called to be ‘light-bearers’ by the way in which they live their lives – and not least by the way in which they perform “good works” (NRSV). It is through our good works that people are to encounter God. In the words of one commentator: “The ‘job description’ of a disciple is not fulfilled by private personal holiness”;<sup>7</sup> rather, we are to let our light shine through the “good things we do” (GNB).

Christian mission is in the first place about how we live our lives. That is challenge to some Evangelical Christians, who all too often equate mission with evangelism. But the world will never listen to the good news we have to share until it sees the light of Christ reflected in our lives; lives for instance marked by such qualities as openness, generosity, and hospitality. Only in this way will people be “impressed by what God is currently doing”.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, Jesus also points to the importance of the way in which Christians reflect God’s love as a body of people. When Jesus said “you are the light of the world”, he was not speaking to his disciples as individuals, but rather as a group. In the underlying Greek of Matthew’s Gospel, the second person plural, not the second person singular, is found. In other words, along with the individual challenge, there is also a corporate challenge to let our light shine by the way in which we live our life together. This surely was what Jesus had in mind, when he spoke of “a city built on a hill” (Matt 5.14). In the words of Marcelino, a peasant living in the Nicaraguan town of San Miguelito: “A lit-up city that’s on top of a hill can be seen from far away, as we can see the lights of San Miguelito from very far away when we’re rowing at night on the lake. A city is a great union of people, and as there are a lot of houses together we see a lot of light. And that’s the way our community will be.” Or to quote another commentator: “It is only as the church genuinely proclaims Christ as Lord, that is, not by mouthing theological platitudes but by manifesting his life in its life, that the church can truly be the light of the world.”<sup>9</sup>

To return to the basic point, without ‘works’ people will not listen to our words. People will not respond to the Good News of Jesus until they see the Good News lived out. In the words of William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army: “If you see a starving man, don’t preach to him. First fill his belly, and then he may be disposed to listen.” Essentially the same argument was made by a group of evangelicals before the ending of the apartheid regime in

<sup>5</sup> See Paul Beasley-Murray, *Toward a Biblical/Theological Framework for Evangelism*, paragraph 1.3.

<sup>6</sup> John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (IVP, Leicester 1992) 345.

<sup>7</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2007) 176.

<sup>8</sup> John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2005) 215.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew* (Westminster John Knox, Louisville, Kentucky 2000) 45.



South Africa: “Our proclamation has been swallowed up by the cries of the poor and the oppressed that it is now even impossible to hold conventional evangelistic campaigns in this war situation. These voices have become so loud that it has now become impossible to hear the church preach.”<sup>10</sup>

The fact is that people must see Jesus present in his people before they will be willing to listen to his people. In this regard it is perhaps not insignificant that in the Great Commission as found in Matthew 28 where Jesus commanded his followers to ‘make disciples’, his first word of commission was not ‘preach’, but ‘go’. Just as in the ministry of Jesus there was an indissoluble bond between mission and compassionate service, the same must be true in our ministries. In the words of Chuck Colson, Jesus “was concerned not only with saving man from hell in the next world, but with delivering him from the hellishness of this one”. Indeed, is this not what Jesus had in mind when he declared: “As the Father sent me, so I send you” (John 20.21).

## The relationship of evangelism to mission

This broader understanding of mission among evangelical Christians first came to a particular focus at the International Congress on World Evangelisation held at Lausanne in 1974. It was out of this congress that the Lausanne Covenant came, which affirmed that “evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty.”<sup>11</sup> True “in the church’s mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary”, but such evangelism must take place in the context of “a deep and costly penetration of the world”.<sup>12</sup>

In 1982 an International Consultation on the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility was held at Grand Rapids, Michigan. The resulting report likened evangelism and ‘social activity’ to “the two blades of a pair of scissors or the two wings of a bird”. As proclamation and service characterised the mission and ministry of Jesus, so they are to characterise ours.<sup>13</sup>

In 1989 Second International Congress on World Evangelisation (Lausanne II) was held in Manila, from which emerged the Manila Manifesto, which was essentially an elaboration on the original Lausanne Covenant.

In 2001 evangelical development agencies came together in Oxford from all over the world to form ‘the Micah Network’. On the basis of Micah 6.8 (“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”) they produced ‘The Micah Network Declaration on Integral Mission’. The word ‘integral mission’ is derived from a term commonly used in Latin America for what others have termed ‘holistic mission’.

“Integral mission is the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. If we ignore the world, we betray the Word of God which sends us out to serve the world. If we ignore the Word of God, we have nothing to bring to the world.”

The Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation, held in Cape Town in 2010, produced the Cape Town Commitment, which developed this idea of integral mission.<sup>14</sup> In the section entitled ‘We love the mission of God’ it states:

“The integrity of mission. The *source* of all our mission is what God has done in Christ for the redemption of the whole world, as revealed in the Bible. Our evangelistic task is to make that good news known to all nations. The *context* of all our mission is the world in which we live, the world of sin, suffering, injustice, and creational disorder, into which God sends us to love and serve for Christ’s sake. All our mission must

<sup>10</sup> *Evangelical Witness in South Africa: Evangelicals critique their own theology and practice* by ‘Concerned Evangelicals’ (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1986).

<sup>11</sup> Lausanne Covenant: paragraph 5. See *For the Lord We Love: Study Guide to the Lausanne Covenant* (Lausanne Movement, 2nd edition, London 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Lausanne Covenant: paragraph 6.

<sup>13</sup> *The Grand Rapids Report: Evangelism and Social Responsibility* (Paternoster, Carlisle 1982) 23.

<sup>14</sup> See *The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action – Study Edition* (Hendrickson, Peabody, Massachusetts 2012) edited by Rose Dowsett.

therefore reflect the integration of evangelism and committed engagement in the world, both being ordered and driven by the whole biblical revelation of the gospel of God.”

This was then followed by the commitment:

“We commit ourselves to the integral and dynamic exercise of all dimensions of mission to which God calls his Church.

- God commands us to make known to all nations the truth of God’s revelation and the gospel of God’s saving grace through Jesus Christ, calling all people to repentance, faith, baptism and obedient discipleship.
- God commands us to reflect his own character through compassionate care for the needy, and to demonstrate the values and the power of the kingdom of God in striving for justice and peace and in caring for God’s creation.

In response to God’s boundless love for us in Christ, and out of our overflowing love for him, we rededicate ourselves, with the help of the Holy Spirit, fully to obey all that God commands, with self-denying humility, joy and courage. We renew this covenant with the Lord – the Lord we love because he first loved us.”

Evangelicals still debate the precise relationship between evangelism and social action. Tim Chester, for instance, makes the following three assertions:

1. Evangelism and social action are distinct activities
2. Proclamation is central
3. Evangelism and social action are inseparable.<sup>15</sup>

Significantly, although Chester believes proclamation is central, he does not go on to say that evangelism is primary. He writes: “Given that the greatest need of people is to be reconciled with God and given that this need can only be met through the message of the gospel, it might seem logical to say that evangelism has priority. It might seem a short step from saying proclamation is central to saying evangelism is our priority. The problem is that it is not clear what ‘priority’ means in this context. It suggests a choice in which evangelism should be chosen, or competing priorities in which social action can be neglected. We prioritise by making a list and doing the activities at the top of the list. If there is no time left for items lower down the list then this does not matter because we have deemed such things as less important. The implication of saying evangelism has priority in this sense is that it does not matter if we have no time for social action.” But, as Chester goes on to say: “In our involvement in the lives of others we cannot choose to ignore their social needs.”<sup>16</sup> Mission has to be ‘integral’. Or as I would prefer to say, it has to be ‘incarnational’. Just as “the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood” (John 1.14 *The Message*), so churches have to roll up their sleeves and get “stuck in to the messiness of hurting humanity in order to bring about transformation in all its fullness.”<sup>17</sup>

Jesus’ people, declared Steven Croft, Bishop of Sheffield, need to be involving both building up the church and changing the world.

“To build the Church... is a high and holy calling and we should honour those who are called to this ministry and who invest their own lives in the life of God’s people... I am deeply weary of the tired dichotomies between evangelism and social action. We are called to both, and we neglect either at our peril. We need to preserve the wider horizon of the kingdom of God. But we also need to invest time and energy in building up and growing the Christian community. That building up of the Church is to be set within the wider horizon of working for the kingdom.”<sup>18</sup>

Precisely how this works out in practice will vary. So much depends on the context.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Tim Chester, *Good News to the Poor: Sharing the gospel through social involvement* (IVP, Nottingham 2004) 64.

<sup>16</sup> *Good News to the Poor* 65, 66.

<sup>17</sup> Fran Beckett, *Leading Community Projects: Keeping a Missional Focus* (Grove, Cambridge 2014) 7.

<sup>18</sup> Steven Croft, *Jesus’ People: What the Church Should Do Next* (Church House Publishing, London 2009) 59.

<sup>19</sup> A stimulating range of examples of mission is contained in Roger Standing’s *As A Fire By Burning: Mission as the Life of the Local Congregation* (SCM, London 2013) which contains a host of case studies of mission in a wide range of contexts, including Mission in an Urban Context (Juliet Kilpin); Mission in a Rural Context (Pete Atkins); Mission in a Large-Church Context (Simon Jones); Mission in a Small-Church Context (Samantha Mail); Mission in a Black Majority Church Context (David Shosanya); Mission in a Multi-Cultural Church Context (Susan Stevenson); and City-centre Mission (Martin Turner).

## The Isaiah Vision links service, worship and discipleship

One of the most imaginative approaches to mission is to be found in Raymond Fung's "ecumenical strategy for congregational evangelism".<sup>20</sup> There are three elements to the strategy:

1. *The local congregation, in partnership with other people pursues the 'Isaiah Agenda'*. This agenda is based on Isaiah 65.20-23, which speaks of children not dying, old people living in dignity, those who build houses living in them, and those who plant vineyards eating their fruit. Fung advocates churches going to their neighbours and saying: "The God we believe in is One who protects the children, empowers the elderly, and walks with working men and women. As Christians, we wish to act accordingly. We believe you share in similar concerns. Let us join hands."
2. *Invitation to worship*. This involves the church saying to its neighbours who share in the Isaiah Agenda: "Doing the Isaiah Agenda is hard work. There are so many needs, and so many problems. Once in a while, we need to pause. We need to get together, to share our concerns, to celebrate, to pray, to seek strength in order to go on. To worship our God. Would you join us? You know you are most welcome."
3. *Invitation to discipleship*. Fung envisages that in the process of working and worshipping together, trust and friendship will develop. There will come occasions when it is appropriate for the Christian to invite others to consider the claims of Christ on their lives. "You are invited to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Whether you are somebody or nobody, rich or poor, powerful or powerless, you are invited to enter into friendship with Jesus and fellowship with the church. You are called to turn around. Take up your cross and follow Jesus, together with us. We are ordinary people called to do extraordinary things with God."

There is much to commend Fung's strategy: the linking of social action, worship, and evangelism in such an integral fashion is excellent. Yet, this approach is questionable. In the first place 'Isaiah's Vision' in Isaiah 65 is not so much an 'agenda' to which God's people are called to commit themselves, as a picture of what happens when God brings in the Kingdom. This is not to say that God does not want us in the here and now to be concerned for the rights of young and old, of the weak and the oppressed. But to base a call to action on Isaiah 65 is not doing justice to the Scripture itself. In the second place, Fung's evangelistic strategy is limited to people of good will, to those who are already concerned for society and its needs. The fact is that the great mass of society is happily pursuing its own self-interests. People for the most part only become motivated to pursue Fung's Isaiah agenda once they have responded to the call of discipleship.

Fung's thinking has remained influential. For instance, in the Anglican Diocese of London Ann Morisy championed this concept of community ministry and mission. In her book *Beyond the Good Samaritan* she explained how community ministry unites practical social responsibility and active Christian mission.<sup>21</sup> Her concern was to empower, not just help, the casualties of society through church-sponsored community projects. These projects would offer ordinary Christians an opportunity to express their discipleship and at the same time to grow and develop in the faith. At the same time, there would be an opportunity to non-church people to volunteer their services and thus to discover the difference Christian faith can make.

## Fresh Expressions for people outside church

In many ways the 'Fresh expressions' movement is a development of Fung's Isaiah Vision. Arising out of the 2004 Church of England report, *Mission-shaped Church: church planting and fresh expression of church in a changing culture*, the two Anglican Archbishops, with the support of the Council of the Methodist Church, set up a new initiative, Fresh Expressions, to resource mission through fresh expressions of church life in every place.<sup>22</sup> Their website states:

<sup>20</sup> Raymond Fung, *The Isaiah Vision: An Ecumenical Strategy for Congregational Evangelism* (World Council of Churches, Geneva 1992) 2-4.

<sup>21</sup> *The Good Samaritan: Community Ministry and Mission* (Mowbray/Cassell, London 1997).

<sup>22</sup> In 2012 the Salvation Army and the United Reformed Church also officially joined the Fresh Expressions movement, but Baptists have not. Ian Bunce, in a private email dated 11 April 2014, commented that it could be argued that Baptists "have been doing Fresh Expressions for 400 years"; for in a way that was not true of the Church of England, mission has been part of the Baptist DNA. Present-day Baptist expressions of radical mission include the Baptist Pioneer Collective and Urban Expression.

“Fresh expressions’ is more than simply church planting. Church planting can conjure up the idea of parachuting a team of Christians into a group or neighbourhood. Church is brought into the situation from outside. Unintentionally, it can feel rather imperialistic. ‘You may not have invited us, but we are doing this anyway’. Fresh expressions (and church planting at its best) is about encouraging church to emerge *out of* the group. Lots of time is spent listening to people. The accent is on serving them with love. Nothing is done without their permission. Church – if it develops – is created *with* the people involved.

We envisage that fresh expressions will benefit people currently outside church by working actively with them, in order to serve them and help church form among them, if they want. Examples range from starting an after-school club and encouraging it to become church, to forming church among homeless people, to helping a ‘third age’ group be a stepping stone into a new form of church for its members... It entails walking with people on a fresh expressions journey if they wish. Usually the journey will look something like this:



Or to give another definition offered by the Fresh Expressions team, these new expressions of church are:

- Missional – in the sense that, through the Spirit, they are birthed by Christians mainly among people who do not normally attend church.
- Contextual – they seek to fit the culture of the people that they serve.
- Formational – they aim to form disciples.
- Ecclesial – they intend to become church for the people they reach in their contexts.<sup>23</sup>

Fresh Expression of Church has become a major player on the British church scene. In 2008 there were some 19,300 people in ‘membership’ with Fresh Expressions groups; by 2013 that figure had jumped to 71,900, and Peter Brierley estimates that by 2020 the figure may have increased to 108,200.<sup>24</sup>

In January 2014 a report on ‘Evidence about fresh expressions of Church in the Church of England’ was published.<sup>25</sup> The headlines of this research in ten Anglican dioceses were as follows:

- An estimated 24.5% of those attending fresh expressions of church are already members of a church, 35.2% are people who used to belong to church but who left for one reason or another while 40.3% are those with no previous church background at all.
- The fresh expressions of church, on average, were found to make up 15% of the dioceses’ churches and 10% of the attendance.
- 52% of the fresh expressions of church are led by people who are not ordained, 40% are led by people who are not formally authorised. Two out of three lay leaders are women, two out of three ordained leaders are men; but the men are more likely to be paid and the women working voluntarily.
- There are at least 20 different recognisable types of fresh expressions of church and the average size is 44.
- Fresh expressions of church can be found in all traditions in the Church of England. The fresh expressions of church meet in all kinds of venues at various times, days of the week and geographical settings. The world of fresh expressions of church is described as one of ‘varied and smaller communities’.
- 78% intentionally encourage discipleship, not just attract attenders. Over a third have communion services and a third have had baptisms. Half are taking some steps toward responsibility for their finances and two thirds for how they are led, very few have formal legal status within the Church of England.
- The majority, 66%, either continue to grow numerically or maintain the growth gained. Of those surveyed, 25% did grow but are now shrinking while 9.7% have come to an end. Growth patterns vary according to a

<sup>23</sup> See Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context: an Introduction to Theology and Practice* (SCM Press, London 2012) xiv.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Brierley, *Introduction to UK Church Statistics 2* (2014).

<sup>25</sup> George Lings, *Evidence about fresh expressions of Church in the Church of England: Key messages from research across ten dioceses* (The Church of England Archbishops’ Council and the Church Army, 2014).

wide combination of factors, including the kind of fresh expression, social area served and frequency of meeting.

Although the creativity and risk-taking of Fresh Expressions is much to be admired, there are three key theological concerns:<sup>26</sup>

1. To what extent is 'fresh expressions' a fresh expression of 'church' as distinct from 'mission'? The very way in which these 'fresh expressions of church' come into being means that there is an inevitable blurring of boundaries. For Anglicans 'belonging before believing' may not create theological difficulties, but for Baptists and others who have espoused the model of the believers' church, it certainly does create difficulty.
2. If 'fresh expressions' is to be more than 'fresh expressions of mission', then at the heart of the life of every such 'church' must be the teaching of the 'word' and the celebrating of the 'sacraments', however differently the teaching and the celebrating might be expressed from 'inherited' churches.<sup>27</sup>
3. It would appear that many 'fresh expressions' groups, consciously or unconsciously, have adopted the homogenous unit principle of the church growth movement and are targeting people with similar interests, ages, backgrounds, and class.<sup>28</sup> In terms of effective mission this may well be justifiable, but as we make clear in our later consideration of the homogeneous principle a mono-cultural church is not true to the all-inclusive Gospel of the Kingdom of God.

A more practical concern has been raised by David Male. He questioned the extent to which current church planting and 'fresh expressions of church' are reaching the unchurched, as distinct from those who find normal services dull and sterile, and asked: "Are we creating a safety net for Christians who are falling out of our 'evangelical system' or are they truly fishing nets?" He argued that if we are to reach then unchurched we will have to adopt a very different approach. He quoted the Roman Catholic missionary Vincent Donovan, who when asked about how to reach the youth of America, said: "Do not try to call them back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, beautiful as that place may seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have been before."<sup>29</sup> Male added: "That will change us as with those we are reaching we find ourselves in new places facing new situations trusting together that God will show us the way."<sup>30</sup>

Mark Ireland and Mike Booker in their survey of evangelistic initiatives make a number of pertinent observations on Fresh Expressions as also on Messy Church.<sup>31</sup>

- With regard to Fresh Expressions, comment that "multiple congregations in large church settings stand out as the form of fresh expression most likely to show sustained growth and least likely to decline";<sup>32</sup> and that although there are weaknesses with regard to the Fresh Expressions model (for instance, "Fresh expressions of church will not pay the bills"), nonetheless "the pretence that one Sunday service can serve all sections of the population within that parish needs to be relinquished".<sup>33</sup>
- Their survey of the Messy Church movement, which by 2015 had over 2,5000 registrations in the UK, has the interesting heading: "Messy enough? Church enough? Messy Church?" Because Messy Church tends to be a monthly event, some have questioned whether wholehearted discipleship can be nurtured by a church that meets only monthly, although this criticism loses some of its strength in the light of the increasing reality of monthly attendance at an 'inherited' church. In this regard Ireland and Booker point out that "The difference is that Messy Church is designed to meet only monthly, and those overseeing the direction of a local church in this pattern can work in a deliberate way to weave monthly main meetings into whole-life pattern".<sup>34</sup>

<sup>26</sup> We are not convinced by a fourth theological objection raised by Andrew Davison & Alison Milbank, *For the Parish: A critique of Fresh Expressions* (SCM, London 2010), who argue that by bypassing the parish system Fresh Expressions is to all intents and purposes allowing the Church of England is to decline into a sect.

<sup>27</sup> See Andrew Walker and Robin A Parry, *Deep Church Rising* 16: "Mission-shaped churches and emerging churches, for all their resourcefulness, vigour and imaginative drive, will not succeed unless they heed the lessons from their charismatic precursors in the renewal and drop anchors in the deep waters of a church that goes all the way down to the hidden reservoirs of the life-giving Spirit that, like the water that Jesus gives, gushes up like a spring to eternal life (John 4.14)."

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, *Reaching the Saga Generation: Fresh Expressions of Church for Ageing Baby Boomers* (Grove, Cambridge 2008) by Chris Harrington.

<sup>29</sup> Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (SCM, London 1982).

<sup>30</sup> David Male, 'Fishing Nets or Safety Nets', *Ministry Today* 47 (Winter 2009) 30-36.

<sup>31</sup> See Mark Ireland & Mike Booker, *Making New Disciples: Exploring the paradoxes of evangelism* (SPCK, London 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Ireland & Booker, *Making New Disciples* 114.

<sup>33</sup> Ireland & Booker, *Making New Disciples* 120.

<sup>34</sup> Ireland & Booker, *Making New Disciples* 128.

At this stage it is difficult evaluating the effectiveness of Fresh Expressions, not least because it would appear that even some of the core documents that have promoted Fresh Expressions contain ongoing contradictions and misleading information.<sup>35</sup> In this context a major piece of academic research on the effectiveness or otherwise of Fresh Expressions in the Diocese of Canterbury by John Walker has proved highly insightful. The following are some of his conclusions:

- “Fresh expressions of church are better at mission than parish churches in some highly contextualised situations, and the fresh expressions movement has enriched and reinvigorated the way many parish churches approach mission. Still, they do not and cannot compete with the depth and breadth of life and experience of parish churches, they are no better at attracting the non-churches than parish churches and both fresh expressions and parish churches grow through exactly the same process.”
- “The fresh expressions have attracted people who would have been unlikely to form a Christian identity within a parish church. For these people, the claim that fresh expressions are a necessary complement to the parochial system has undoubtedly been true.”
- “The Messy Churches... showed a higher attendance percentage of children than any other faith community, and the exponential rise of the movement in the UK has been remarkable. There is little evidence that fresh expressions are generally more effective than parish churches at attracting the non-churched.”
- “Any kind of conclusion that fresh expressions of church, new and contextual churches, liquid church or emerging church alone constitute the future of the church is as unwarranted, both sociologically and theologically as the conclusion that they are unnecessary. Rather, ‘we may find that there is a divine harmony, of which the living principle in each of these systems forms one note’, for ‘no one local church can fully express Christ and his gospel Each needs to be related to others, which have different gifts or contexts’ (F.D. Maurice and Graham Cray)..”<sup>36</sup>

## A case study: Thank God it’s Friday

My own experience of new forms of church is limited. However, on a trip to Australia, I greatly valued the opportunity of visiting a home in Melbourne where I shared in a ‘group’ meeting, which combined an innovative liturgy with good food and fellowship. At an earlier stage of its development the group had called itself ‘Table Church’, but now it no longer used the term ‘church’, and instead simply calls itself ‘Thank God It’s Friday’. Yet quite clearly at the very least it is a place to share life and faith.

‘Thank God it’s Friday!’ happens every Friday evening— although set in two venues, some attend every other week. Of the nineteen people present on the particular evening we visited, four were children; of the remaining 15, probably just seven were ‘committed’ and attended a church service on a Sunday – most of the other eight seemed to be very much on the ‘edge’ of church, with one or two being gay, another struggling to retain faith, while one or two appeared to have no faith at all. It was an interesting mix of what appeared to be a well-educated and highly voluble group of friends.

After a pre-dinner drink, we sat down to table and we began the liturgy – the opening part of which I reproduce with the words in bold said together. There was no ‘leader’ – all the sentences could be led by anyone present.

### THE WELCOME:

The youngest present: ‘Come, everything is ready! God welcomes us and so we welcome one another’.

We then went round the table mentioning each person by name, saying: **At the end of a long week we welcome you to this table.** To which each individual replied: *Amen, it’s good to be here.*

### BREAD AND WINE

The children light a candle and bring bread and wine to the table.

‘While they were at the table Jesus took a of bread and after giving thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying “Take; this is my body.” Then he took a cup of wine, and gave it to them. “This is my blood – which is poured out for many”’.

**Thank you God that ordinary things can become special when placed in your hands. Thank you that that which is broken may be made whole, and that which is given is not wasted.**

Bread was passed around.

<sup>35</sup> See Robin Gill’s Foreword to *Testing Fresh Expressions: Identity and Transformation* (Ashgate, Farnham, Surrey 2014) by John Walker.

<sup>36</sup> John Walker, *Testing Fresh Expressions* 233-236.

‘For all that is whole and sustaining’, **We give thanks**  
 Wine/juice was passed around.  
 ‘For all that is celebratory and joyful’, **We give thanks**  
**For life, for food and for friends to share it with, we give thanks. Amen!**

#### THE FIRST COURSE

On this occasion wonderful soup was served

#### SHARING THE WEEK’S HIGHLIGHTS AND LOW POINTS

This sharing was then followed by a response:

‘For all that has been life-giving and rewarding’, **We give thanks**  
 ‘For all that has been an invitation to grow and change,’ **We seek to embrace it**  
 ‘For all that we have suffered’, **We let go**  
 ‘For all that we may have inflicted’, **We are deeply sorry**

#### AFFIRMATION OF ONE ANOTHER

‘Thank you Lord for this meal’. **But we cannot live by bread alone. We have shared it together because we need each other gathered round this table. We need** (each person was named). To which each individual replied: *And I need you!*

#### PRAYERS

**Lord God, as we bring our prayers we thank you that we can share in your Kingdom of justice and peace. We come in our poverty, not in our wealth; in our blindness, not with great faith; in our weakness, not in strength. You welcome all people, so now we bring to you those who need love, light and peace.**

Night lights were lit as individuals or situations were named  
 More prayers than followed

#### THE SECOND COURSE

Tempting desserts were served

#### CLOSING WORDS

A brief form of night prayer.<sup>37</sup>

At the end of the evening all kinds of questions went through my mind. Was this really a fresh expression of church? Was this worship? Bread and wine were present, and yet were not ‘Eucharistic’ in the conventional sense. The Scriptures were not read and no ‘Word’ was shared, and yet God’s word of acceptance was clearly stated. There were prayers for others – but not prayers of worship or confession.

Was this mission? I gather that over the years people have re-found a faith that they had previously rejected. Others who have been very wary of church, have found their way back into a renewed faith. One couple, for instance, who had not been to church for a long time came along for several years and reconnected with God in a significant way and as a result are now leading a traditional church. But it would be true to say that the missional aspect of the group is very low-key.

I was deeply moved by what we experienced. I sensed God was truly present in our midst. It must be great to belong to such a group where people could be truly open with one another and know the support and encouragement of friends. Would that every church home group could be as warm and loving as this group. In many ways it really was church. Indeed, I think that I could argue that it was mission. Yet in spite of the attractiveness of this group, I find it difficult to see this ‘new expression’ of church being the most effective model for evangelism.

There is certainly a valid place for experimenting with new forms of church. As Peter Brierley has commented: “A heart for mission and a willingness to try the new” are the key to the future of the church.<sup>38</sup> But this is no reason to dismiss more traditional ways of doing church.

<sup>37</sup> This liturgy was devised by Anne Wilkinson-Hayes along with friends.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Brierley, *UK Church Statistics: 2010-2010* (ADBC Publishing, Tonbridge, Kent 2014) #0.2.

## Inherited churches can also reach people outside the church

Some enthusiasts for Fresh Expressions and Emerging Church assume that these forms of church are the only real hope for the future of the church – as if parish churches and other forms of ‘inherited’ church have had their day – the future is with the ‘new’ churches. So Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch in the introduction to their influential book, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* wrote:

“The planting of new, culturally diverse, missional communities is the best way forward for the church that views itself in a missional context... While some established churches can be revitalised, success seems to be rare from our experience and perspective. We believe that the strategic focus must now shift from revitalisation to mission: i.e. from a focus on the ‘insiders’ to the ‘outsiders’; and in doing so we believe the church will rediscover its true nature and fulfil its purpose... It does seem to us that the real hope lies with those courageous leaders who will foster the development of alternative, experimental, new communities of faith.”<sup>39</sup>

They went on to quote approvingly Gerard Kelly who writes of new experimental Christian communities: “Don’t be fooled. Somewhere in the genesis and genius of these diverse groups is hidden the future of Western Christianity. To dismiss them is to throw away the seeds of our survival.”<sup>40</sup>

As a past theological college principal who was responsible for the setting up of a pioneering course in evangelism and church planting, I have no doubt that church planting has a very real role to play in the evangelisation of our country today, not least in some of our tough inner-city areas. I have also no doubt that the Church of England together with the Methodist Church is right to encourage the experimentation of ‘fresh expressions’ of the church. Churches which stand still only fossilise and die. In a world that is changing, constant change has to be the order of the day for every church. However, I believe that ‘inherited’ churches, which are prepared to change and which do have the world in view, have a key role to play in the ongoing evangelisation of this country. This has certainly been my experience. In my first church in Altrincham I had the joy of turning round a declining elderly church of some 87 members, founded in 1872, and seeing it quadruple in size over the 13 years I was there – and nothing gives me more joy to see that this same ‘inherited’ church continues to grow and develop. Similarly, in my second church in Chelmsford, I again had the joy of seeing a declining church, founded in 1905, with an unhealthy large proportion of older members, turn the corner and experience substantial growth. What is more, at Chelmsford I discovered that larger churches with buildings have a major missionary role, and that they are able to fulfil that role precisely because of their size and because of their buildings. Effective mission is not just to be equated with the ‘new’ and the ‘small’.

Of course buildings are not of the essence of the church. The early church managed without purpose-built ‘church’ buildings – but not without buildings of any kind. In the first couple of centuries the early church was grateful to be able to use the larger villas of some their wealthier members for their meetings. Buildings can prove a hindrance to mission, particularly when they become ‘listed’ and so are difficult to adapt to the expectations of a changing world. Buildings can prove a hindrance to mission, when they have not been cared for, and when there are perhaps just a handful of members left to see to their upkeep. Buildings can prove a hindrance to mission, when the members become more attached to the building rather than to the building’s Lord. All these things I recognise. But, the answer is not to do away with buildings altogether, but rather to create buildings that can be a positive facility for mission in the 21st century.

I would not wish to repeat our experience at Chelmsford of worshipping in a school for 19 months. Although we had the services of a caretaker and therefore did not have to put out the chairs every Sunday, we still had to sort out sound and vision and goodness knows what else besides. Furthermore, a school hall is not the most uplifting of environments in which to worship God. And what about all the other activities which many churches run during the week? Without premises of their own, churches are limited in terms of what they can do for their community. The fact is that church buildings can be of great advantage not only to the worshipping life of the church, but also to the mission and ministry of the church. Home groups have a role to play, not least in the area of enhancing and deepening fellowship, but they can have their limitations when it comes to worship, evangelism and social service. Furthermore, the life-expectancy of churches which do not have buildings of their own tends to be much shorter than those which do invest in bricks and mortar. I believe it is good stewardship to invest in church buildings, and I say that as a minister who led his church through a £2 million re-development programme.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Hendrickson, Peabody, Massachusetts 2003) x.

<sup>40</sup> Gerard Kelly, *RetroFuture: Rediscovering Our Roots, Recharting Our Routes* (IVP, Downers Grove, Illinois 1999).



So I refute the accusation that inherited churches have had their day, as if creative mission is enjoyed only by the newer church plants. ‘Inherited’ does not necessarily mean ‘stuck-in-the-mud’; ‘inherited’ can mean that a church has history, buildings, programmes, and often staff – and as a result is able to engage in all kinds of innovative mission. Provided that inherited churches are prepared to change and develop, there is a very real place for them in the future of God’s church. In this respect, let me conclude this section with some wise words of Stuart Murray:

“Emerging and inherited churches are *all* on a journey out of the safe (but confined) harbour of Christendom into the turbulent and uncharted waters of post-Christendom. Bobbing alongside the ecclesial super-tankers are tiny dinghies. They look vulnerable and unimposing, but may be more sensitive to the tides and currents; they can certainly change direction faster.”<sup>41</sup>

## Pastors are leaders of missionary congregations

This then is the context in which pastors are called to be mission strategists. They are called to be leaders of ‘missionary congregations’, caring not just for people in the church, but for people outside the church too. In the words of Robert Warren, an Anglican minister who popularised this term:

“A church effectively engaged in mission will see that participating in the *missio Dei* (i.e. God’s mission) will involve shifting emphasis from a focus on the life of the local church, and a concern to keep everyone in it happy (which too easily passes for ‘pastoral concern’) to a concern for the world in its needs, joys, and struggles.”

When on 25 October 1992 I came to Chelmsford to preach ‘with a view to the pastorate’, I preached on Paul’s words found in Rom 1.16: “I am not ashamed of the power of the Gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith”. As I came to the conclusion of my sermon I said to the church:

“What kind of minister are you looking for? If you are looking for a chaplain to marry you, bury you and keep you comfortable, then forget me. But if you are looking for a leader with a passion for evangelism, who will constantly seek to mobilise this church for mission, who will never be satisfied even with a packed church, then maybe I am your man.”

But are pastors called to be more than church leaders? For Steve Chalke and his network of Oasis mission hubs, the emphasis is on the building, restoring and transformation of entire communities, where the pastor is the community leader:

“We believe that it is only when we invest in a whole community that we can expect to have an impact in the lives of its most desperate and needy members. That’s why we’re working to create a new sense of ‘village’, a new sense of belonging and interdependency; hubs.

There isn’t a blueprint for what a hub looks like or even what it does; they can be different in each location. Some of our hubs have gyms, others cafes and restaurants. They support local business, run food banks and provide debt advice, they run schools and youth groups and they engage with local politicians. A hub responds to the needs of its community and provides a space where every person can feel safe and familiar.”

## Defining mission: Going Christ's way and making disciples

In my 21 years of ministry in Chelmsford the model I developed for mission was summed up in the statement: ‘Our mission is to go Christ’s way and make disciples’.

Initially I sought to ground this concept of mission on the Great Commission as found in John 21 and Matthew 28. I stated:

“On the one hand, to go Jesus’ way is to model our mission on the mission of Jesus. Inevitably this means that our mission must be ‘holistic’, reflecting God’s love and concern for every aspect of people’s lives. Just as

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<sup>41</sup> Stuart Murray, *Changing Mission: Learning from the Newer Churches* (Churches Together in Britain & Ireland, London 2006) 123.

Jesus fed hungry mouths, washed dirty feet, and comforted the sad, so too must we. If our mission is to be patterned on the mission of Jesus, then our evangelism must always go hand in hand with costly compassionate service.

On the other hand, ‘to make disciples’ means that our mission includes winning people to Christ and to his church. However, our evangelism goes far beyond calling men and women to decide for Christ. Discipleship is in view. As Jesus himself made clear (e.g. Mark 8.34) discipleship is costly and involves an ongoing commitment to follow Jesus. Inevitably this means going against the stream of world opinion – it means making Jesus Lord of every area of our lives.”

At a later stage it seemed simpler to base this concept of mission on the ‘Great Commandment’ (Matt 22.37-40), where Jesus teaches us to love one another, and the ‘Great Commission’ (Matt 28.18-20) where Jesus tells us to ‘go and make disciples’. Although the biblical basis was slightly different, the thrust was the same. “As a church we are committed to a ‘holistic’ form of mission, whereby we seek to demonstrate the love of Christ in word and deed.”

What does this mean in practical terms? It is here that pastors need to be imaginative in their task of drawing up a missionary strategy, for. “going Christ’s way and making disciples” will mean different things to different churches. What will be appropriate in one setting will not be appropriate in another. What may be right and proper at one period of a church’s history may not be right and proper at another. No one missionary strategy can ever remain constant, even although, the overarching mission of the church will remain the same.

## **Creating a mission strategy: a family church for all ages**

Let me give an example of the way in which at Chelmsford we initially defined our overall mission, and then in the light of that mission statement began to devise a strategy.

We began by affirming that “our purpose is to go Christ’s way and make disciples.” This summary mission statement was then expanded:

“In other words, our chief task is to express God’s love in the way we live and in the words we speak, and through our lives and through our words to help others to respond to his love through a lifelong commitment to Christ and his church. Through our regular Sunday worship of God and through our fellowship with one another – as expressed not least through fellowship groups – we seek to find the strength and the resources for our mission.”

After defining the task, we went on to take a long hard look at the make-up of the church. Although we attracted a cross section of people from all ages and all backgrounds, an analysis of our membership revealed that our church’s age profile did not reflect the general age spread of our town: we had a preponderance of people over the age of 45. Furthermore, although as a church we were extremely active in running all kinds activities and events, for the most part these activities and events were geared at the two ends of the age spectrum.

After looking at the opportunities presented to us in the local community, we realised that as a church we were faced with four possible strategies:

1. We could choose to take no fresh initiatives and continue to rely on our present activities to reach those in the community who are untouched by the Gospel. This would be the most comfortable option, for nothing would have to change. Almost certainly, however, it would be a path to decline!
2. We could seek to create a church for the under-25s. We are a city-centre church surrounded [at that time] on three sides by the campus of a university. At night, the town is alive with young people looking for somewhere to go – many of these young people end up at two night clubs just up the road from the church. However, although a youth-oriented strategy might give us an opportunity to grow dramatically, it would certainly cause us to lose many of our older members, who would find it difficult to relate to a ‘youth culture’ church.
3. We could seek to create a church for the over-55s. We recognised that the total number of people in the 55+ range would grow considerably in the next ten years. With 35% of our membership in this age group one could argue that we would be well-placed to target the older end of the age-spectrum. On the other hand, such

a strategy would undoubtedly cause us to lose not only our young people but also the under-55s, who would feel unwanted and alienated by the ministry they were being offered.

4. We could seek to create a family church for all ages by initially focusing our energies and resources on the 25-45 age group, with a view to redressing the present age imbalance in the church. We recognised that at a later stage it might be necessary to refocus our energies and resources into different areas of concern.

Perhaps not surprisingly the church overwhelmingly adopted option 4. But this was not the end of the strategising, rather the end of the beginning; for we had simply chosen to go a particular way in fulfilling our overall mission. The next stage was to draw up a detailed strategy in order to implement what we believed were the Spirit inspired hopes and dreams present among us. This strategy involved drawing up measurable 'faith goals' in every area of the church's life with the 25-45 age group particularly in mind. In turn these 'faith goals' had to be presented to and adopted by the church as a whole. All this involved much time and effort – and yet it is only as a vision is truly communicated and owned by the church as a whole, that the church is truly motivated to go out and fulfil its mission.

## **Reshaping a mission strategy: a strong and vibrant city-centre church serving the community**

The church has since re-shaped its strategy, even though it has kept as its overall aim 'to go Christ's way and make disciples'. Its *Development Plan Autumn 2010 – Spring 2014* stated that "As a church we are committed to a 'holistic' form of mission, whereby we seek to demonstrate the love of Christ in word and deed." In this context it went on to describe its vision to serve the community of Chelmsford:

"As a city-centre church, we are different from most other churches. We have no particular neighbourhood to minister to – instead we see the whole city as our 'parish'. At a time when most city-centre churches are in decline, our vision is to be a vibrant seven-day-a-week city-centre church, witnessing in word and deed to the love of Jesus. We want to be strong, not for the sake of growth, but for the sake of making a greater impact on our city for Christ: certainly if we are to expand our service to the community then we will need more people."

Later within the document it listed some expressions of its mission:

### *Evangelism*

"Through the worship of the church and the witness of individuals as also through all the activities of the church we seek to reach out to our community with the Good News of Jesus.

A key component to our evangelistic strategy is the ten-week Alpha course, which we run twice a year. Currently most of the people doing our Alpha course have had little previous contact with us as a church – they come to Alpha through the website or as a result of seeing the Alpha banner displayed outside the church. However, our ideal is that many will come to Alpha as a result of the many 'bridge-building' activities we run in our church, as also of friendships developed both personally or even within home-groups. Because of the increasing gap between traditional bridge-building activities and the Alpha course, we are in the process of developing a series of 'stepping stones' to bridge the gap. We began in the summer of 2011 with 'Well Springs', a pampering course for women; we have developed 'Well Being', a holistic course for seniors, which we launched this spring

In a variety of ways we seek to present the Good News to our contemporary world."

### *Service to others*

"Our premises, redeveloped 1999-2001 at a cost of £2 million, are in regular use, morning, afternoon, and evening: 70% of activities are church-sponsored activities; 30% of activities are non-church activities – the former serve our members and friends whilst the latter represent part of our service to the community and provide opportunities for outreach.

Church activities include two clubs for people with mental health difficulties referred to us by Adult Social Care; a child contact centre for broken families referred to us by the courts; a community resource centre ('Pro-Act') for the disadvantaged (mainly black Africans) [since closed]; and a budget coaching service for people finding difficulty in managing their finances. We run a well-patronised Oasis café in our Friendship Centre Tuesdays to Fridays.

Non-church activities are made up of lettings by a wide number of groups in the community. As a result of these activities we have a high profile in the town – before the recent drop in lettings activity, at least 1,000 non-church people came through our doors most weeks.

We also serve the community through running a Baby and Toddler Group and a Dads and Toddlers group; as also through a wide variety of activities for young people, including strong Boys' and Girls' Brigade companies and non-uniformed activities for teenagers."

The Development Plan went on to list a host of actions which the leaders of the church needed to take "to ensure that the church remains true to its mission and realises its vision to be a vibrant and strong city-centre church". It detailed ways in which God's people could be further empowered to witness to others and to serve the community. It mentioned a number of aspirations, where further thinking and action would be required: for instance:

- "With the other city-centre churches we will contribute to the development of the street pastors' initiative to help young people involved in the club scene.
- We will need to be a critical friend of the City and County Councils, with a view to supporting social justice in our community
- As more people live in the city-centre, we will need to adjust to our new role as a neighbourhood church, as well as being a city-centre church
- We will need to find new ways of engaging those who wish to explore their spirituality or who have little knowledge of religious experience. The church will need its members to be prepared to find new ways of communicating the simplicity and profundity of the Gospel."

No doubt the church will keep on re-shaping its strategy, for no church can afford to stand still. The point here is that missionary strategising involves far more than dreaming dreams and seeing visions: it involves the hard work of thinking, sharing, persuading and motivating the people of God for mission.

## **2. Developing diverse mission strategies**

### **A new multi-dimensional approach to evangelism is needed**

When I was a student at Cambridge, one summer I went on a mission to Plymouth, while the next summer I went on a mission to Dorking. Although these missions involved all kinds of evangelistic meetings and services, the 'bread and butter' work was door-knocking: over the week we would go 'cold-calling' on house after house, seeking opportunities to talk to people about Jesus. In my first church, I continued that approach. One Pentecost Sunday evening I announced to would-be worshippers that there was no service that night; instead we were going out on mission, going door-knocking. On more than one occasion we invited students to come and help us with our door-knocking: one September we had the whole student body of Spurgeon's College turn up for ten days, and in that period we were able to visit 10,000 homes! Some people came to faith: as a result of visiting one home I ended up baptising a mother and her two girls. More than 30 years later the mother is still in active membership of the church, the oldest daughter is a deacon in another church, while the youngest daughter is serving as a missionary in Lebanon. In today's Britain, however, such door-knocking no longer works. It is a thing of the past.

When I was first a pastor, leading an evangelistic church seemed relatively straight-forward. It was just a matter of persuading my people to open their mouths and talk to others about Jesus.<sup>42</sup> I used to run faith-sharing courses: session 1 was 'building bridges of friendship'; session 2 was 'sharing our testimony'; session 3 was 'presenting the Gospel'; and session 4 was 'leading to commitment'.

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<sup>42</sup> With regard to the 'silent saints', Wilson Carlisle, who founded the Church Army, said: "I have got the biggest job I have ever tackled in my life. I am trying to open the mouths of the people in the pews."

The process of winning people to Jesus seemed straight-forward. To encourage people to ‘work tirelessly for the conversion’ of their friends, we handed out commitment cards featuring a bullseye, around which was the statement ‘The whole world would be converted in six years if each Christian led one person to Christ each year’, and in the centre there was room for the names of ‘six close friends who need Christ’ and ‘are my prime responsibility’. Users of the cards were encouraged to pray daily for their six unconverted friends, pray together weekly with another Christian who would likewise use the card, and organise their priorities in such a way that they could spend time with their six friends’.<sup>43</sup> The wonderful thing was that this approach worked: many people from non-church backgrounds were converted. Baptismal services were a regular feature of church life – and in those days I felt embarrassed if I were to baptise less than six people at a time.

Evangelism also involved chartering buses to take people to missions at which gifted evangelists would be preaching: we took people to hear Stephen Olford preaching in a huge tent in Platt Fields, Manchester; and later we took people over to Anfield, the home of Liverpool Football Club, to hear Billy Graham preach. And people came to faith!

But things have changed. In many churches evangelism isn’t working. True there are churches where people are coming to faith: courses such as Alpha have proved immensely popular and have been the means of many committing their lives to Jesus. Yet, if we are ruthlessly honest, overall fewer people are coming to faith. Evangelism is becoming tougher. When people come to faith today, they tend to come to faith one by one.<sup>44</sup>

What has happened? Society has changed. We are living in a post-Christian society, where many people are so much further away from the church and from understanding the basics of the Christian faith. Whereas evangelism used to be one-dimensional, in the sense that there was one basic approach for all, now evangelism needs to be ‘multi-dimensional’, involving different approaches for different people. The Gospel remains the same, but most people cannot hear what we say.

Years ago the Dutch theologian, J.C. Hoekendijk told the story of a one-time prisoner of war from Russian who gave his impressions of the church as he found it on returning to freedom:

“There is a preacher talking from behind the pulpit. We don’t understand him. A glass cover has been put over the pulpit. This smothers all the sound. Around the pulpit our contemporaries are standing. They too talk, and they call. But on the outside this is not understood. The glass cover smothers all sound. Thus we still see each other talk, but we don’t understand each other anymore.”<sup>45</sup>

Hoekendijk commented that it was not ordinary glass that separates people on the inside from those on the outside, but distorting glass! The people outside receive the strangest images of what is going on inside the church. Sadly the glass covering the church is now triple-glazed and even more distorting.

To put the same point in another way, some time ago the British began to realise that the way to be understood on holiday in Europe was not to shout louder and louder in English, but rather to begin to learn French and German, Spanish and Italian, and in that way begin to communicate in a way that could be understood. The same process needs to be undertaken by the Christian church. The Christian faith cannot be made understandable by shouting louder. It makes no sense to an increasingly non-Christian society to stick up larger and larger posters declaring that ‘Jesus saves’. We have to learn to communicate intelligibly to the variety of audiences to whom we have to speak. Evangelism today needs to be multi-dimensional.

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<sup>43</sup> These ‘On Target’ prayer cards were produced by the former Hildenborough Hall founded by the evangelist Tom Rees.

<sup>44</sup> As part of a series of snapshots of the beliefs and habits of evangelical Christians in the UK, in late 2012 the Evangelical Alliance published a research paper entitled *Confidently sharing the gospel?* There in answer to the question ‘What are the key issues that make effective evangelism difficult in Britain today?’ two sets of factors emerged:

(1) Factors that pull non-Christians away: 89% recognised that with all the leisure (and work) alternatives on offer, most people don’t want to be in church on a Sunday; 59% think that it is hard to convince people about Christianity because of what they have learnt about science; 51% think that evangelism has been made more difficult by the attacks of atheists like Richard Dawkins.

(2) Factors that push non-Christians away: 87% think that the unattractive public image of the church and its leaders is a factor; 77% agree that it is very hard for a church with a middle class ethos to communicate the gospel effectively to working class and less affluent people; 76% believe some of the ways preachers and evangelists talk about Jesus make them cringe; 68% recognised that people don’t want to join formal organisations such as churches; 62% believed people reject Jesus because the church has such narrow condemnatory views on sex; 61% identified the issue that Christians aren’t able to give easy answers to the problem of suffering; 24% felt that evangelism is being made more difficult because many churches and organisations are placing too much emphasis on social action.

<sup>45</sup> J.C. Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out* (SCM Press, London 1964) 50.

## Analysing today's marketplace of religious beliefs

There are various ways in which we can analyse the missionary challenge before us.

### A five-fold model

A model I have found particularly helpful is to divide society into five different groups:

1. The 'near fringe'
2. The 'far fringe'
3. The 'neo-pagans'
4. Followers of other mainline religions
5. The 'secularists'.

The 'near fringe' range from those who attend church services regularly, but who have not committed themselves to Jesus, to those who have lapsed in their church attendance.

The 'far fringe', although not normally darkening the door of a church, will often still regard themselves as members of the church – in an English context they happily describe themselves as Church of England. David Edwards referred to this 'far fringe' as the 'dispersed' church, likening its members to the "majority of Jews... dispersed in the Diaspora outside Israel... Although they are not regular churchgoers, they are also not convinced atheists. They like, rather than dislike, having their conduct called 'Christian'. Although they probably employ the words when swearing, they are made uncomfortable if people are seriously rude about 'God' or 'Christ'... when they watch television or listen to the radio they do not usually switch off or get indignant when the subject is religious. They are interested to read some religious news or articles in their papers or magazines, and some of them buy religious books. They want their children to get acquainted with the Bible. They like to have their children baptised, their marriages blessed, and their dead buried according to the rites of the church – partly, no doubt, because the old habits have not completely died out, but also in order to assert a serious wish to see their lives at these turning points in a Christian context."<sup>46</sup>

The 'neo-pagans', to use a phrase coined by the Dutch ecumenist Visser t'Hooft,<sup>47</sup> are yet one step further away from the Christian faith. Unable to live happily in a truly secular world 'without windows', they pursue the 'sacred' under a variety of weird and wonderful guises. The church may be in retreat, but not belief in the supernatural.<sup>48</sup> In the words of Ernest Renan: "The gods only go away to make place for other gods." As John Habgood pointed out: "The secularisation of the mind has its limits... Science and technology can generate their own mythologies, and the growth of cults and other bizarre manifestations, including the various counter-culture movements, are signs that some limits of secularisation have been reached."<sup>49</sup> The huge popularity of the 'New Age' movement is a clear sign of "the inability of radically secularised worldview to satisfy deeply rooted human needs and aspirations".<sup>50</sup>

The followers of other mainline religions are adherents of Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Sikhism and the like. Although overall still a small percentage of the total population, in some areas they form a highly significant minority, while in yet others they form the majority of the population.

Finally there are 'the secularists', who have abandoned God and religion altogether. As T.S. Eliot graphically put it:

"But it seems that something has happened that has  
never happened before: though we know not just  
when, or why, or how or where.

<sup>46</sup> David Edwards, *A Reason to Hope* (Collins, London 1978) 223.

<sup>47</sup> W.Visser t'Hooft, 'Evangelism among Europe's Neo-Pagans', *International Review of Mission* LXVI (October 1977) 355 distinguished between the 'pagan' who holds a non-Christian religious conviction and the atheist who (says he) does not believe in God: "European culture had become a debate between three forces: Christianity, scientific rationalism and neo-pagan vitalism. For a long time it had seemed that scientific rationalism would take the lead. But recently the picture has changed. The atomic threat, the terrible pollution, the lack of meaningful perspective which the technocratic civilisation had brought has led to the growth of a new irrationalism."

<sup>48</sup> See David Lyon, *The Steeple's Shadow: On the Myths and Realities of Secularisation* (SPCK, London 1985) 133: "In many ways we have exchanged the overarching 'sacred canopy' for another umbrella-like awning of 'secularism, but for a whole assortment of awnings."

<sup>49</sup> John Habgood, *Church and Nation in a Secular Age* (Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1983) 24.

<sup>50</sup> David Smith, 'Secularisation: Changing Perceptions', *Church Growth Digest* IX.2 (Winter 1989/1990) 24.

Men have left GOD not for other gods, they say, but for no god; and this has never happened before.”<sup>51</sup>

Recent research has made clear that the boundaries between ‘the neo-pagans’ and ‘the secularists’ can be quite fluid. In their 2012 report, *Post-religious Britain? The faith of the faithless*, Nick Spencer and Holly Weldin showed that in spite of their rejection of religiosity, either in belief, behaviour or identity, many of the so-called ‘faithless’ still demonstrate patterns of religious and spiritual behaviour that one would not normally expect. Around a third of people who belong to no religion and 15% of atheists said they believed in life after death; one in five of those who said they never go to a religious service and 7% of atheists said they believed in angels; more than two in five (44%) of those with no religion and almost a quarter (23%) of atheists believed in a human soul; 16% of people who say they have no religion considered themselves to be very or moderately spiritual; a quarter (24%) of the non-religious believed in heaven and 15% in hell.<sup>52</sup>

I believe that this ‘five-fold’ model is applicable not just to the UK, but to much of Europe and the Western world – although clearly the numbers belonging to each group would vary.

## An eight-fold model

Tear Fund in its 2007 report *Churchgoing in the UK* developed a more detailed eight-fold model, to which it was able to put numbers<sup>53</sup>

Church attendance and experience in the UK were divided into eight categories:

1. Regular churchgoers: 15% of UK adults go to church at least once a month
2. Fringe churchgoers: 3% of UK adults go to church less than monthly, but at least six times a year
3. Occasional churchgoers: 7% of UK adults go to church less than six times a year but at least once a year
4. Open de-churched: 5% of UK adults do not go to church but they used to attend in the past and are very or fairly likely to go to church in future
5. Closed de-churched: 28% of UK adults do not go to church, used to attend in the past but say they are not very or not at all likely to go to church in the future
6. Open non-churched: 1% of UK adults have never been to church in their life, apart from weddings, baptisms or funerals, yet say they are very or fairly likely to go to church in future
7. Closed non-churched: 32% of UK adults have never been to church in their life, apart from weddings, baptisms or funerals and are not very or not at all likely to go to church in future
8. Other religions: 6% of UK adults.

The advantage of this analysis is that it identifies more clearly the various stages of the fringe. It also brings into clearer focus the massive missionary challenge in the UK: for the combined number of people represented by the closed de-churched and the closed non-churched showed that 60% of all adults say that they will not consider going to church!<sup>54</sup> More positively it indicates that, one in every 17 UK adults is open to churchgoing, if only churches reach out to them.

If we are to reach them, however, then in the words of Eddie Gibbs, “we need to move beyond marketing to missional strategies.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> T.S. Eliot, Choruses from *The Rock*.

<sup>52</sup> The report was published by Theos (London 2012). See [www.theosthinktank.co.uk](http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk)

<sup>53</sup> *Churchgoing in the UK: a research report from Tearfund on church attendance in the UK* (2007).

<sup>54</sup> We need to ask ourselves why so many people are so closed to the Christian faith. Could one factor relate to the stance taken by many churches on the gay issue? In today’s climate the question of homosexuality is increasingly a mission issue, rather than just a pastoral issue. It is not just those who are gay who feel the church is homophobic, but so too the majority of people under-45. If we are not careful, it will not be the Cross but rather the church’s attitude to homosexual people, which could become the stumbling block to Christian believing.

<sup>55</sup> Eddie Gibbs, *Leadership Next* 43.

## A four generations model

The missionary challenge the churches can be looked at another way. Instead of looking at the distance people are from the church, we can look at the content of people's understanding of the Christian faith by using a generational model. Bishop John Finney has identified four different generations present in the UK.<sup>56</sup>

Generation 1: Adults and children both go to church, so nearly everyone has a good background knowledge of the faith... So when those children grow up and become...

Generation 2: They stop going to church, though they still send their children. All still have some knowledge of the basics of the faith... but when those children grow up and become...

Generation 3: They neither go to church themselves nor send their children. The adults still have some limited remembrance of the faith, but their children have none... and when those children grow up and become...

Generation 4: Virtually nobody goes to church and nobody knows anything about the basics of the faith.

Finney made the helpful point that: "It is essential that a church knows which generation it is seeking to address, for the evangelistic method which is most effective will vary considerably according to the generation."<sup>57</sup>

## Devising a plurality of strategies for evangelism

In the light of the diversity of belief and unbelief, it is clear that no pastor can be satisfied with one strategy, for there is no one kind of people. Roger Standing, for instance, advocates when he terms a 'mosaic' approach to evangelism:

"Like the Byzantine icon of Jesus that emerges out of the countless pieces of small tesserae in the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, so a picture of contemporary evangelism for Britain emerges out of diverse and creative engagements in evangelistic activity that seek to meet our fellow citizens in the context of their own lives. Such an approach, only when all the different pieces are taken together, presents a truly incarnational engagement with the evangelistic task that will have a hope of reaching everyone with the good news of Jesus."<sup>58</sup>

People are at varying distances from the Christian faith. In the light of this "We need to encourage and facilitate a wide range of evangelistic encounters... We must dispel the myth that if we are doing Alpha then we have evangelism covered and we can sit back."<sup>59</sup> Alpha has its limitations when it comes to reaching people who have no experience of church. James Heard, for instance, who was on the staff of Holy Trinity Brompton for five years, on the basis of his research into Alpha, concluded that the sudden conversion stories, so prominent in Alpha News, are the exception rather than the rule. Of those attending the courses in his survey, 86% were either already regular churchgoers or were from the 'open-dechurched' category; i.e. they had been baptised, had generally grown up with some church involved, had left at some point and were open to the possibility of returning.<sup>60</sup> This is not to 'knock' Alpha, but as Ireland and Booker make clear, "it does suggest that although Alpha is effective in evangelism, in the UK it predominantly draws from a fairly small – and shrinking – part of the population."<sup>61</sup>

Unfortunately all too much evangelism has assumed that people are nearer the kingdom than they actually are. In this respect John Finney makes two perceptive observations:

"The church has shrunk to being a rarely used facility which it is useful to have around when it is needed. We only call out the Gas Board when there is something wrong, and are grateful for the skill of their workers if they do a good job. But it is no more than that. We would reject out of hand any suggestion by the gas technicians that we might join the Gas Board. Hence the bewilderment of those who approach the church expecting the clergy to do a professional job in taking their wedding or baptising their baby, and find that they are being invited to join a community.

<sup>56</sup> John Finney, *The Four Generations: Finding the Right Model for Mission* (Grove Books, Cambridge 2008).

<sup>57</sup> Finney, *The Four Generations* 5.

<sup>58</sup> Roger Standing, *Mosaic Evangelism: Sharing Jesus with a multi-faceted society* (Grove Books, Cambridge 2013) 5.

<sup>59</sup> Standing, *Mosaic Evangelism* 27. Standing estimates that Alpha will only attract 10% of the population.

<sup>60</sup> James Heard, *Inside Alpha* (Paternoster, Milton Keynes 2009)

<sup>61</sup> Ireland & Booker, *Making New Disciples* 76.



But not only the methodology of evangelism is now called into question – so too the content of evangelism. Evangelism used to be about getting people to go through the ABCD of the Gospel (Admit your Sin; Believe in Jesus and especially that he died on the cross for you; Consider the cost of becoming a Christian; Decide for Christ). But today we increasingly live in a ‘sinless’ society, – individuals no longer live with a sense of sin and guilt in the way that the evangelist would wish them to do.”<sup>62</sup>

A variety of approaches is necessary if we are to be effective in making disciples. So what might be appropriate for different groups of people? What possible evangelistic approaches might we adopt? Let me make some suggestions, using an adapted version of my five-fold grouping as the basic tool of analysis – as a result of combining insights from the other two models it has become a six-fold grouping!

### 1. *The near fringe*

For those on the near fringe of the church, including Tear Fund’s ‘open de-churched’ and Finney’s Generation 2, many of the traditional forms of evangelism will probably continue to be effective.

Invitations to services at Christmas and Easter will be welcomed by many: it would appear that many of the near fringe are just waiting to be invited to do so by a friend.<sup>63</sup> In the light of this my custom was to encourage my people every Christmas to invite five people to one of the many carol services, in the hope that three would accept the invitation! As churches we need to cash in on the religious sentimentalism around with a view to presenting the Gospel in a meaningful way.

‘Back to Church Sunday’ – or the ‘Big Welcome Sunday’ as it is also known – held in the Northern Hemisphere toward the end of September has proved popular, with thousands returning to church. The strategy behind it is essentially, ‘Come back to church and check us out for yourselves. Church has changed since you were here last, you may not recognise it. Don’t ask us why it’s taken so long to get our act together, and we won’t ask you where you have been’.<sup>64</sup> One year a church in Tyneside reported up to 60 newcomers that day. Again, this would appeal to the ‘near fringe’.

The Church of England ‘Pilgrim’ discipleship course fits into this category. Entitled *Pilgrim: A Course for the Christian journey*, it encourages ‘enquirers’ to “practise the ancient disciplines of biblical reflection and prayer, exploring key texts that have helped people learn and grown in faith since the early church”.<sup>65</sup> The texts for study include the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Beatitudes. Although the course is being marketed as a “new discipleship course for all”, it will probably appeal in particular to people on the ‘near fringe’.

Older people, many of whom find themselves in this ‘near fringe’ category, can be especially susceptible to invitations to special services. For years Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford, has run a successful monthly Sunday afternoon service for senior adults – only 45 minutes in length, the service is fast-moving and adopts the format of a ‘seeker-service’, and is followed by ‘the best tea in town’!

The rites of ‘hatching’, ‘matching’ and ‘dispatching’ can prove a fertile ground for reaching the ‘near fringe’. Although there has been a sharp decline in the numbers of those wanting a Christian ceremony<sup>66</sup>, Peter Brierley nonetheless estimates that in 2015 34% of all babies will be baptised, 27% of all marriages will be in church and some 42% of all funerals will be taken by a minister from one of the mainline denominations.<sup>67</sup> Here are opportunities for evangelism as many people on the near fringe turn to the church for help. Such evangelistic opportunities must be sensitively used. In the words of Donald English, we are not “to exploit vulnerability but... meet the real need at the heart of the occasion itself”.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Finney, *Four Generations* 15.

<sup>63</sup> See *Christianity & Renewal*, January 2002.

<sup>64</sup> The wording of the Baptist Union of Great Britain’s *Roots* initiative goes as far back as 1993.

<sup>65</sup> Published by Church House Publishing, London, in 2013, the core authors are Paula Gooder, Stephen Cottrell, Steven Croft and Robert Atwell.

<sup>66</sup> A poll by Saga revealed, for instance, that 37% of over-50s are planning a humanist funeral, while 21% want some other form of non-religious farewell. ‘Facing the final curtain with a bow: fancy dress and coffin collages’, *Daily Telegraph*, June 2, 2015.

<sup>67</sup> Peter Brierley, ‘Occasional Offices’, *Future First*, June 2015 2.

<sup>68</sup> Donald English, *Evangelism Now* (Methodist Church, London 1987) 17.

Most of these suggestions relate to inviting people to church – and, of course, there is a very valid rationale for doing so. However, as Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey rightly comment, this is the reversal of the command of the Great Commission, replacing ‘going into all the world’ with ‘inviting all the world to come to us’: “We need to recognise afresh that the Great Commission represents a vast and unrelenting search-and-find operation, as Donald McGavran proclaimed to his dying day.”<sup>69</sup>

The near fringe is the easiest group to evangelise. Unfortunately much of our evangelism gets no further than this group. The Jesuit Thomas Stransky made the perceptive observation that in the USA up to 95% of those who swell church-growth statistics are ‘de-churched’ – former Methodists, Baptists, Episcopalians, Catholics etc.: “Overall in the USA evangelism seems in fact to be the Christian exchange of pews, collection plates and parking lots, as well as ‘the faith enhancement of the penitent returnees’ who found it again but elsewhere. The truly *unchurched*, those never before evangelised, the folk with no previous Christian experience or none of any religious tradition – alas, that far more difficult challenge is avoided.”<sup>70</sup>

## 2. *The middle-distance fringe*

The middle-distance fringe are what Tear Fund call the ‘open de-churched’, or what Finney calls ‘Generation 3’. People who may have some limited remembrance of the Christian faith. A traditional evangelistic sermon would go over their heads. Other ways need to be found for them to engage with the Christian faith.

Here ‘process evangelism’ comes into its own. Courses like Alpha<sup>71</sup> and Christianity Explained<sup>72</sup> are ideal for this category of people, who need time to explore what the Christian faith is all about. In my experience, although the Alpha course is ten weeks long, people often need a year or two before committing themselves to Christ. In today’s culture becoming a Christian is a massive step, and so it is only right and proper that people take their time. If the ordinary physical birth process takes nine months, we should not be surprised if the spiritual birth process takes a number of months too. Evangelism within such a context “has moved from being a call to repent from sin at the foot of the cross to travelling alongside those who are on a journey from lack of faith to Christian discipleship. It is no longer an event but a process.”<sup>73</sup>

Although these rites of passage are often easier for state churches to exploit than for free churches, opportunities abound for all. In a Baptist setting, where the candidates for a service of believers baptism are encouraged to ‘fill the church’ by inviting all their relatives, friends and acquaintances to see them baptised, each candidate can with little effort bring a dozen or more non-Christian friends. Even ‘far fringers’ can realise that it is the ‘done’ thing to turn up for such an event – and all the more if there is an invitation to a ‘party’ afterwards. Another rite of passage Baptists can exploit is the ‘dedication service’, when parents ask God’s blessing on their children and dedicate themselves to the task of Christian parenthood. Frequently this service is an in-house affair, with the guest list limited to the grandparents and a few other relatives, but with some imagination the situation can be transformed: neighbours, colleagues, and acquaintances can be invited to the service (and to the party following) and the upshot is that the congregation is swelled by thirty or more guests, many of whom would perhaps not normally darken the door of a church. Handled with sensitivity, this can be a great occasion for preaching the Gospel.

At one stage I put these rites of passage into the ‘far-fringe’ category. However, in my judgement most people on the far fringe are now too far away from the church to really understand the concepts underlying the service. They may be impressed by the friendliness of the church and by the liveliness of the singing, but they have not sufficient knowledge to make any real response.

Perhaps children’s holiday clubs and special events for young people could be put into this category. But, as Finney noted, while “they may bring large numbers... into a fleeting touch with a worshipping community,... usually they are useful for making contact with the community rather than bringing children to regular worship.”<sup>74</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Eddie Gibbs & Ian Coffey, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in Ministry* (British edition: IVP, Leicester 2001) 60.

<sup>70</sup> Thomas F. Stransky, *WCC Letter On Evangelism* no 10 (Geneva October 1988).

<sup>71</sup> The original Alpha course was designed by Charles Marnham, a curate of Holy Trinity Church, Brompton, and has since been developed by Nicky Gumbel.

<sup>72</sup> *Christianity Explained* by Michael Bennett (available in the UK through the Good Book Company, Epsom) originated in the Diocese of Sydney, Australia, and is a six week course.

<sup>73</sup> Bob Jackson, *Hope for the Church* 80.

<sup>74</sup> Finney, *Four Generations* 6.

### 3. *The far fringe*

The far fringe include many of the people attending a wide range of midweek activities run by churches, such as groups for babies and toddlers (and their parents!), football clubs for men, circuit training for women, badminton clubs, outings for the active retirees, and lunch clubs for the elderly; in addition occasional events such as quiz nights, Burns Suppers, Valentine specials, and fashion shows – all of which can attract many non-churchgoers. We used to call such activities ‘bridge-building’ events, bridging the gap between the church and the wider community, but that gap has become a gulf so wide that these ‘bridge-building events’ no longer do the job. Only rarely do people come to faith through them – something more is needed.<sup>75</sup>

This is the context in which Leesa McKay (née Barton), now an Associate Minister of Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford, has been creating ‘stepping stones’ courses. She writes: “A bridge is needed, which can take them from the place where they feel safe with Christians, to the place where they are actively seeking to understand more of the Christian faith and to encounter Jesus Christ for themselves. This bridge may often take the form of one or more ‘stepping stones’ which help people to engage with biblical truths, and understand the relevance of the gospel to their life today, without necessarily providing an opportunity for them to respond to the gospel message. As their knowledge and understanding of Christianity grows, their journey of faith will progress, leading them nearer to the place where they are ready to join a course that specifically explores the Christian message, or engage with a Christian worship service.”<sup>76</sup>

Her first stepping stones course was *Wellsprings*, ‘an eight-week course of refreshment and pampering looking at issues women face today from a Christian perspective’ with a view to enabling women on the fringe of the church to move to a point where they actually want to discover more about the Christian faith for themselves. Each of the eight areas covered involves a beauty treatment (normally offered by trainees at a local beauty parlour) and a gift.<sup>77</sup> At the end of each session there is a five minute epilogue: for example, in session six when the activity centres around cleansing, toning and moisturising skin, the epilogue focuses on the cleansing that God offers us: “Christians believe that the things we do wrong, to ourselves, or to others, clog up our lives, and prevent us from living in the freedom we were made for. But through Jesus we can find forgiveness, and be made clean and pure. As we let go of the wrong things, with Jesus we can be released into the good things that he wants us to enjoy.”<sup>78</sup>

Since then McKay with others has developed ‘Well Being’, a course aimed at retired non-Christians. Also eight weeks in length, it covers the following topics: Eat Well; Think Well; Exercise Well; We’ll Change; Well Remembered; Will Well; Survive Well; Live Well. Leesa is now planning ‘Well Man’, a stepping stones course for men.

These stepping stones fall into the pre-Alpha category. The hope is that as a result of having done *Wellsprings* or *Well Being* or *Well Man*, people might begin to ask questions about God, and at that stage would be ready to be directed to a course such as Alpha or Christianity Explored.

“There are, of course, alternatives to Leesa McKay’s ‘stepping stones’. Mark Ireland & Mike Booker, for instance, give four examples of what is available for the pre-Alpha stage they give four particular examples:

- *Start*, originally produced by CPAS but now taken over by Leading Your Church Into Growth. This is a six-session course with a consciously working-class non-book culture edge. A follow-up to *Start* is *Moving On!* a seven week interactive course.
- *Uncover*, produced by the Universities & Colleges Christian Fellowship, equips people to read Luke’s Gospel with an interested friend once a week for seven weeks. It is a is a beautifully produced tool with on-line resources that can be accessed by a smart-phone.

<sup>75</sup> According to the report *Leadership, Vision and Growing Churches* (Christian Research 2003: a private research project for the Salvation Army Central Northern Division) while 65% of churches had a parent and toddlers group this activity was least likely to result in new people attending church. It was only effective as a form of outreach if thought had been given to the step such a parent might need to take in order to find out more about the church and its message. In other words, a parent and toddlers group could legitimately be simply a valuable service to the community, or it could additionally be seen as a gateway through which some of those parents might start on a pathway to personal faith.

<sup>76</sup> See Leesa Barton, *Wellsprings* (Baptist Union of Great Britain, Didcot 2014) 4.

<sup>77</sup> The eight sessions are as follows: (1) rest and relaxation – with a foot massage and the gift of a lavender tea light candle; (2) acceptance and security – with a hand massage and a gift of hand cream; (3) worry and anxiety – with a further foot massage and the gift of a Footprints poem card; (4) failure – with a keep fit activity and a gift box of chocolates; (5) beauty/self-image – with a make-over and a gift of lip gloss; (6) healing and forgiveness – with a facial, and the gift of a face pack (7) diet and nutrition – with a selection of healthy dishes and salads, and a gift of a cereal bar; (8) self-image – with a head or face massage.

<sup>78</sup> *Wellsprings* 24.

- *Table Talk*, published by the Ugly Duckling Company, is a conversational card-game which creates space to ‘explore’ the questions of life. A variety of Table Talk packs are available. A follow up to Table Talk is Puzzling Questions, a video-based six week course.
- *Essence*, published by Share Jesus International, is a six-week course designed ‘to stimulate a deeper spiritual life, drawing from the teachings of Jesus and the Christian mystics’. The style is laid-back and experiential – and includes relaxation exercises, making bracelets, smashing pots and modelling in dough.<sup>79</sup>

Finney spoke of the need to develop what he called “the New Catechumenate – the pre-Alpha or pre-Christianity Explored”.<sup>80</sup> More recently Tim Sumpter has written of the need to develop “an infiltrational evangelism strategy”, and so “soften the walls of our churches, giving us impetus to spend more time out in the community, seeking there to sow gospel seeds in the lives of those we meet and get to know”.<sup>81</sup>

#### 4. The neo-pagans

If the church is to reach the ‘neo-pagans’, then for the most part it will only be to the extent that Christians are prepared to go to them, as distinct from expecting them to come to church. In this area evangelistic programmes have little use. The costly business of bridge-building is called for. Friendship evangelism, life-style evangelism, incarnational evangelism – Christ must be seen in and through his people.

The trouble with the majority of Christians is that they have become so committed to Christ and his church that they have lost all meaningful contact with the world. The sad truth is that the older most of us grow in the Christian faith, the more likely we are to move into a Christian ghetto. It is at this point that pastors have a responsibility for ensuring that their churches do not suck into their system all the time and energies of their people. One possibility would be to call a moratorium for a session (Advent? Lent?) on church activities and encourage people instead to enrol at the local centre for evening classes, with a view to making friends with some of the ‘happy pagans’ in the neighbourhood.

Evangelising ‘neo-pagans’ will also mean taking seriously the secular affairs of the world. The concerns of the world – whether they relate to ecology or to poverty, to educational curricula or to genetic engineering – must become the church’s concerns. What John Jonsson has called “the secluded niceties of our internal church matters of faith”, must be put on the back-burner.<sup>82</sup> All too often the church glibly sings “Christ is the answer” without ever facing up to the problems that confront the world in which we live. It is as Christians wrestle with the world’s concerns, whether in some political forum or simply around a table in the local bar, that those right outside the church will begin to see that none of the world’s great problems will ever be answered without reference to the crucified and risen Christ. To preach the lordship of Christ without involvement in the world’s political and social concerns is a meaningless exercise.

On the whole, reaching out to ‘neo-pagans’ will not involve church programmes. However, I have come across one local church initiative, which did seem to be just the thing for this group of people. Mark Tanner, when Vicar of Holy Trinity Ripon, sought to ‘bless’ his city by running an ‘Angel Festival’, and as a result over 1,000 people (in a city with a population of 10,000) walked the angel trail.<sup>83</sup> In the introduction to *City of Angels* Tanner makes a number of challenging statements which underlie his approach to innovative mission:

1. God is constantly seeking the lost: “As a vicar of a fantastic church, I found myself regularly frustrated by the ‘black hole’ effect of lively churches. This sucks our focus in to ourselves and draws our energy into caring about what we are already doing. It is the constant task of the Christian leader to point outwards and to lead by example in engaging in our basic task: to seek and to save.”<sup>84</sup>
2. God values fun: “Exclusive focus on the ‘search and rescue’ agenda all too frequently leads to a church that is deeply unattractive and lifeless. Whilst we must always be ready to wade in and rescue the lost, we do follow a party-going attractive, life-to-the-full Lord who attracted people with grace, not threats, and held out

<sup>79</sup> Ireland & Booker, *Making New Disciples* 99-103.

<sup>80</sup> Finney, *Four Generations* 15.

<sup>81</sup> See Tim Sumpter, *Freshly Expressed Church* 12-15. An example of such a strategy is running evening events in different local pubs such as Beer, Balti and the Bible; Pints of View; Points of You!; Living with Loss; Quiz Nights; and Hot Potato Debate; where ‘evangelisting’ is to the fore.

<sup>82</sup> John Jonsson, *Facing the Third Millennium*, Baptist World Alliance Resource Book on Evangelism (McLean, Virginia 1988) 2.

<sup>83</sup> Mark Tanner & Nicola David, *City of Angels: Blessing your community by hosting an angel festival* (Evangelism Series 104, Grove Booklets, Cambridge 2014).

<sup>84</sup> Mark Tanner & Nicola David, *City of Angels* 3.

invitation, not condemnation... It is not that I doubt the need for salvation; it is just that when it comes to an invitation people often respond more to the person offering it than to the thing to which they are being invited.”<sup>85</sup>

3. God blesses and calls us to bless: “We should have a standing item on our church agenda: how can we bless our community this month?”<sup>86</sup>
4. We live among spiritual hunger: “We Christians often kid ourselves that people are not interested in spiritual things, but plenty of evidence contradicts this. Open any paper or magazine and you will see horoscopes... Occult materials like tarot cards and Ouija boards are commonplace... People are fascinated by the spiritual, but they are not very interested in church, because often we are immensely dull and we are not perceived as spiritual.”<sup>87</sup>

As for running an angel festival, Tanner comments: “it appears that people can often believe in angels when they cannot believe in God.”<sup>88</sup> Apparently there are some 75,000 books in print on angels! “Crudely, angels appear to offer the perfect combination of the benefits of a religion without the disadvantages of complex demands on belief, behaviour, guilt or any form of ‘discipleship’.”<sup>89</sup> So with this in mind, the church organised a competition to encourage different groups of people to make models of angels. Significantly one of the rules of entry was that people needed to put up a sign with their angel that gave some information about the angel and included a verse from the Bible – “Undoubtedly there were people who opened the Bible having not done so for a very long time.”<sup>90</sup> An angel trail was created which began and ended at the church. The key focus of the church’s communication in the angel festival was “Angels come with a message from God: what might he be saying to you today?”<sup>91</sup> Mark Tanner concludes his account with this thought-provoking statement: “Evangelism is best understood as a process, and festivals like this are a part of that process. They are immense fun, and open many doors, but they will never be the ‘silver bullet’ – not least because angels are the bearers of the message, not the content of it. They do however, provoke interest, and interest shines a spotlight on the restlessness of the human heart, which does not cease until rest is found in God alone.”<sup>92</sup>

### 5. Followers of other mainline religions

There is no easy way to evangelise the Jew, the Muslim, the Hindu or the Sikh – that surely is demonstrated by the story of the modern missionary movement. On the other hand, the task is far from hopeless, not least when understanding and sensitivity are combined with Christian proclamation. One thing for certain, if we are to reach people for Christ in cultures so different from ours, we must use those who are familiar with these cultures.

### 6. The secularists

Along with those of other faiths, the truly ‘secularised’ are the hardest of all to reach for the Gospel. Yet even the hardest of hearts can be melted by the love of Christ’s people seen in action. The evangelistic potential of Christlike lives must never be minimised. Our lives tell a story. This truism is particularly true in the area of Christian marriage. At a time when more than one in three English marriages are ending in the divorce courts, the witness of a happy Christian marriage can be incalculable. Here is a challenge to Christian living!

## Developing a culture which raises questions

Strategies alone are not sufficient. Pastors need to encourage their people in the first place to understand the need for a variety of strategies and then to play their role in implementing the various strategies. In the first place, this means that pastors need to develop a culture of life-style evangelism among their people, which causes non-Christians, however far removed they may be from the Kingdom, to ask questions.

<sup>85</sup> Mark Tanner & Nicola David, *City of Angels* 3-4.

<sup>86</sup> Mark Tanner & Nicola David, *City of Angels* 4-5.

<sup>87</sup> Mark Tanner & Nicola David, *City of Angels* 5.

<sup>88</sup> Mark Tanner & Nicola David, *City of Angels* 10.

<sup>89</sup> Mark Tanner & Nicola David, *City of Angels* 11.

<sup>90</sup> Mark Tanner & Nicola David, *City of Angels* 18.

<sup>91</sup> Mark Tanner & Nicola David, *City of Angels* 11.

<sup>92</sup> Mark Tanner & Nicola David, *City of Angels* 21.

I was reminded of this by the wording of the place cards at an 80th birthday party I attended. On one side was the name of the guest; but on the other side, above the name of the restaurant were the two words *Intriguingly Different*. Designed as an imaginative marketing device for the restaurant, immediately my mind went to some words of the Apostle Peter: “Be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you” (1 Peter 3.15), or as Eugene Peterson puts in *The Message*: “Be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks why you’re living the way you are”. Peter presumes that if we are livingly truly Christian lives, then people will be intrigued and will automatically want to ask why.

A few years ago Graham Tomlin, now the Bishop of Kensington, wrote: “Unless there is something about church, or Christians, or Christian faith that intrigues [my italics!], provokes or entices, then all the evangelism in the world will fall on deaf ears. If churches cannot convey a sense of ‘reality’ then all our ‘truth’ will count for nothing. Unless someone wants to hear, there’s no point in shouting louder. Churches need to become provocative, arresting places which make the searcher, the casual visitor, want to come back for more.”<sup>93</sup> He went on: “Is our church just another little club for likeminded people who happen to enjoy singing, religious emotion and sermons? Or is there anything in the life or worship of our church that would make an outsider looking in want what we have?”<sup>94</sup>

Of course it is not only churches which are called to provoke and intrigue. Individual Christians too are called to provoke and intrigue; not in the first place by the things they say, but rather in the way which they live our lives. Our values expressed in the way we live, at home and at work, should provoke and intrigue others to want to know more about what it is that makes us different.

It was with this approach in mind that the Apostle Peter, addressing a group of Christian women whose husbands did not share their faith, effectively said, ‘Don’t nag your husbands to come to church’; rather ‘attract them to church by the kind of lives you live’. In this way, “your conduct will win them over” (1 Peter 3.1). In this increasingly secular age, the key to effective evangelism is not preaching, but rather a life-style that is ‘intriguingly different’

## Developing an invitational culture

For reaching out to those on the fringe of the church, this means that pastors need to cultivate an invitational culture needs to be developed among their church members. For as we have seen, while 60% of all adults say that they will not consider going to church – but that still leaves 40% who might be open to an invitation!<sup>95</sup> Indeed, I believe that many people on the fringe of our churches are just waiting for an invitation from a friend. In the light of this my custom was to encourage my people to invite five friends to one of the many carol services, in the expectation that three would accept the invitation. My experience is that many will respond to an invitation. On one occasion I said from the pulpit that I would give £5 to anybody who found that not one of their five friends would accept an invitation - but nobody came up to me later to claim a fiver!

Why are Christians so reluctant to invite friends to church? Michael Harvey who helped to start the ‘Back to Church Sunday’ movement, has conducted an extensive study on the seemingly simple subject of ‘invitation’.<sup>96</sup> He lists the following reasons:

1. I suffer in my church services and so would others
2. Our serves are unpredictable – I don’t really trust them
3. Our church is boring – it would put off my friend
4. My friend would not want to go
5. I don’t want to be rejected
6. We have no non-churchgoing friends
7. It’s the leader’s job to fill the church, not mine
8. My friend said ‘no’ when I asked him last year
9. It might damage my friendship
10. The congregation will think my friend is not ‘our’ type of person

<sup>93</sup> Graham Tomlin, *The Provocative Church* (SPCK, London 2012) 10, 11.

<sup>94</sup> Graham Tomlin, *The Provocative Church*, 13, 14.

<sup>95</sup> See Tear Fund’s *Churchgoing in the UK*

<sup>96</sup> See Michael Harvey, *Unlocking the Growth* (Monarch/Lion Hudson, Oxford 2012) and *Creating a Culture of Invitation in your Church* (Monarch/Lion Hudson, Oxford 2015).

11. My friends are not the right type of people for my church
12. The church is pretty full already – where would they sit
13. I'm shy so I would find it difficult
14. Faith is a private thing
15. I don't want to be seen as strange, a Bible-basher
16. I wouldn't know what to say – they might ask me difficult theological questions
17. They might ask me why I go to church

How do we deal with such concerns? Michael Harvey suggests the following steps:

1. Vision – some will come, and some will stay
2. Modelling – leaders need to lead by example and invite someone themselves
3. Cascading – every individual in the church should be approached one to one and invited to invite someone themselves
4. Friendship – members should be encouraged to have solid friendships of mutual trust that make invitations easy
5. Story – members should be asked to tell their stories of being asked to church
6. God's preparation – consider who you know whom God might be preparing for an invitation
7. Practise – saying the words 'Would you like to come to church with me?' They get easier to say the more often you say them, first to the mirror then to friends
8. Prayer – mobilize the congregation's prayers for the success of invitation
9. Invite – don't get lost in a quagmire of anxieties, just invite someone
10. Accompany – don't tell people they can go to church if they want to, offer to bring them and look after them
11. Introduce – people to your friends and other members of the church family
12. Assume – that they will come again and invite them to church and Sunday lunch next week as well, and the week after that

One way or another, leaders need to encourage an invitational culture. For, in the words of Bob Jackson:

“Philip's invitation to the sceptical and prejudiced echoes down the centuries – ‘come and see’ [John 1.46]. Abstract talk about a bloke from the equivalent of Rotherham who turned out to be the Son of God, did miracles, taught us how to live, died the death we were heading for because of our sin, rose from the dead and now reigns in heaven with his Father, can initially sound like a tall story today. But an invitation to an unsatisfied lonely, secular consumer to ‘come and see’ the community of Jesus Christ, feels its warmth, discover the reality of answered prayer and experience God personally can be accessible and attractive. The result of the theology can follow later.”<sup>97</sup>

To return to where we began, churches need to develop an invitational culture. In that regard we need to listen to David Voas, Professor of Population Studies at the University of Essex, who wrote in a recent Church of England research paper: “The most direct route to growth comes from members inviting and welcoming family, friends and acquaintances”. He went on: “Inviting friends to church does not come easily to most English people, which is partly why it is helpful to have non-threatening half way house events like carol services as a draw. A corollary of the social difficulty of extending invitations is the reluctance to refuse them. Ours is a culture in which asking is a powerful act: it is hard to do but correspondingly hard to decline.”<sup>98</sup>

## Developing a friendship culture

Finally, pastors need to encourage their people to make friends – for friendship is the most effective basis of evangelism. Indeed, research has confirmed that the single most important part of a believer's journey to faith is a family member or friend.<sup>99</sup> John Finney, on the basis of a survey of 500+ recent converts to Christianity across the denominations, listed the following factors in helping people to become Christians:

<sup>97</sup> Bob Jackson, *What makes churches grow? Vision and Practice in Effective Mission* (Church House Publishing, London 2015) 127.

<sup>98</sup> David Voas, *From Anecdote to Evidence: Findings from the Church Growth Research Programme 2011–2013*

<sup>99</sup> See *Churchgoing in the UK: a research report from Tearfund on church attendance in the UK* (2007) 24: “What can churches do to attract infrequent and non-churchgoers? There is no simple answer, but this research reveals that a personal invitation or encouragement from a family member or friend is much more powerful than anything that the church can do.”

39% of men and 24% of women said Christian friends were the main factor – with a further 39% saying it was a supporting factor  
 22% of men and 5% of women said that their spouse or boy/girlfriend was the main factor  
 17% said the minister was the main factor – and 43% that the minister was an important factor  
 13% of women and 3% of men said children were a main factor  
 9% said parents were the main factor – and 13% were a supporting factor  
 6% said church activities were the main factor – and 34% said it was a supporting factor  
 4% said evangelistic events were the main factor – and 13% a supporting factor.<sup>100</sup>

A Scottish blog on friendship evangelism claimed that surveys in the US and the UK showed that 77% of people started attending church because of an invitation by friends (as distinct from 6% who started to attend church because of publicity).<sup>101</sup>

But as Roger Standing recognises: “Whilst it is encouraging to be able to tell a congregation that the majority of people who will come to faith over the next period of years are already known to them, it is a sobering reality check too. It means that the most effective reach of our evangelism is frequently limited to the boundaries of our own relational and social networks; to people like us. If we are to extend our outreach beyond the natural and pre-existing framework of a congregation’s life it will require both intentionality and understanding.”<sup>102</sup>

Making friends should not be difficult, and yet so many Christians appear to find this difficult, when it comes to people beyond the church.<sup>103</sup> Laurence Singlehurst believes that mission is ultimately the question of ‘How big are our hearts?’. He writes: “Why doesn’t every Christian think of themselves as a pastor with a congregation not of fellow Christians but unchurched folk. So if every Christian had a small congregation of three people where they live, three where they work, or four where they work and one where they live, then they do the two things that pastors do which is: love people unconditionally regardless of whether they respond or not, and secondly seek their spiritual welfare.” If every church member were to love in that way, then churches in the UK would immediately start to grow. But there is a catch: “The simple reality for many British churches is that we are not just holding enough hands, the love of our churches does not go far enough.”<sup>104</sup>

The importance of friendship was underlined for me when while I was writing this book, I was listening to some newly accredited ministers share their experience of ministry. What impressed me was that story after story was told of how a simple act of friendship, such as lending a lawnmower or cooking a meal for some older people, had opened up amazing Gospel opportunities for people who had no connection with the Christian faith whatsoever. On reflection, winning to Jesus Christ people who want nothing to do with the church, may be not such an impossible task after all!

But people need to be given time to make friends. This in turn means that pastors need to ensure that they give their people time to build relationships with neighbours and colleagues. When it comes to evangelism, there is no point in members spending most of their free time at church. The fact is that a busy church does not necessarily make for an effective church.

<sup>100</sup> John Finney, *Finding Faith Today: How does it happen?* (Bible Society, Swindon 1992).

<sup>101</sup> See sandyfordhenderson.net: dated 03/04/2014.

<sup>102</sup> Roger Standing, *Mosaic Evangelism* 6,7.

<sup>103</sup> See the responses of evangelical Christians in *Confidently sharing the Gospel?* (Evangelical Alliance, London 2012): 81% had seen friendship evangelism work effectively, but 43% said ‘I don’t come into contact with many Christians. 74% said ‘none of my non-Christian contacts seem interested in talking about spiritual things’, but 29% had in the last week become involved in a conversation about some aspect of Christian belief with non-Christians, and almost 90% said that they had experienced a conversation during leisure or work activities turn to spiritual or religious questions. 48% – at least to some extent – feel ‘I am just too scared to talk about my faith with non-Christians’; and 87% said that they recognise that most Christians in Britain lack confidence in talking about their personal testimony. See also Paul Wilkinson, ‘Fear prevents churchgoers from inviting friends’ (*Church Times* January 30, 2015) who quotes Michael Harvey, a co-founder of the Back to Church Sunday campaign, who on the basis of a recent survey speaks of there being a ‘a culture of fear’ on the part of Christians: The respondents imply that they are waiting for the perfect moment... to invite... The name of the game is safety, and not the risk of faith. Unless we start to address that visceral fear, we can do as many initiatives as we like and people will still be afraid.”

<sup>104</sup> Laurence Singlehurst, *The heart of our mission* – blog.



## **Leadership is the key**

It is not sufficient to analyse society and to postulate possible responses. What is needed is missionary strategists, pastors who will not only be able to analyse and reflect upon the missionary challenge facing them and their churches, but who will also be able to mobilise the people of God for adventurous and imaginative mission.

## Sermon: Provocatively attractive for God (1 Peter 3.1-16)

Just before he died Conrad Hilton, the founder of the international chain of luxury hotels, was asked if he had any last words of wisdom for the world. He replied: “Leave the shower curtain on the inside of the tub.” The last words of Marie Antoinette, the wife of King Louis XVI of France, were similarly unimpressive. As she approached the guillotine, she accidentally stepped on the foot of her executioner. Consequently her last words recorded for posterity were “*Pardonnez-moi, Monsieur*”. Lady Nancy Astor, the first woman MP, spoke her last words when, on her death bed, she momentarily awoke to find herself surrounded by her family, and asked: “Am I dying or is this my birthday?”

According to Matthew the last words of Jesus were: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (<sup>105</sup>Matt 28.19). According to Luke: “You will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1.8). The wording may be slightly different, but the thrust is the same. Jesus left his followers with a task to fulfil – the task of telling others of him.

Down through the centuries the church has got on with that task with great success and enthusiasm, with the result that billions of people have come to discover the difference that Jesus can make to life. Did you know that at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 there were 800,000 Christians in China? Although Mao did his best to kill off the church, by the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 there were 2 million Christians. Since then the church has exploded, and today, there are somewhere between 120-180 million Christians in China.

Here in the UK we have not been so successful. In the last century we have experienced enormous church decline. We need to do a good deal better, if we are going to be effective in our task of telling others of Jesus. The question is how?

This is the context in which I want us to look at 1 Peter 3. We can sum up the message of his third chapter in three words: Be provocatively attractive!

### 1. *Wives – be attractive!*

Peter begins the chapter by addressing a group of Christian women in the church whose husbands did not share their faith. “Don’t nag your husbands to come to church”, says Peter, instead, “attract them to church by the kind of lives you live”. In this way, “your conduct will win them over” (3.1).

I shall never forget the day our eldest grand-child was born: we had gone to Newmarket to see the horse-racing. The next day we went to see Jemima. We think Jemima is a lovely name. Jemima was one of Job’s three daughters, and Jemima along with her sisters are described as the three most beautiful women in all the earth (Job 42.14). I proudly told this to the African nurse looking after Jemima. But she knew her Bible: and she reminded me that the Bible places more worth on ‘inner beauty’. That is precisely what Peter says here. Instead of paying a small fortune on beauty parlours or on designer dresses: “Your beauty should consist of your true inner self, the ageless beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of the greatest value in God’s sight” (3.4).

Ladies, you can’t win your husbands into the kingdom by nagging them. You can only win by attracting them; by demonstrating to them in the lives you lead the difference that Jesus makes.

### 2. *Churches – be attractive!*

Peter turns to talk to the churches to which he is writing: we know from his opening greeting (1.1) that he was writing to churches in modern Turkey. To them he says: ‘Instead of trying to impose your beliefs on others, attract them to faith by the kind of lives you lead’. What counts, he says, is “good conduct” (3.6; see 3.1).

All too often churches repel, rather than attract. If churches are going to attract others, then says Peter: “You must all have the same attitude and the same feelings; love one another as brothers and sisters, and be kind and humble with one another” (3.8). Let me unpack that verse – I am fascinated by the lifestyle Peter deems to be attractive:

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<sup>105</sup> I preached this sermon at Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford, on October 28, 2012. The Scriptures quoted are from the GNB.

1. “You must all have the same attitude” (*homophron*). By this Peter doesn’t mean that we should all read the same paper, all enjoy the same music, all vote for the same party, and all watch the same TV programmes. That would be appalling. We would be a bunch of clones. He is saying, ‘let harmony reign’. In music, harmony is when different notes put together make a pleasant sound. Put negatively, ‘let there be no discord’. Churches where people argue with one another repel, rather than attract.
2. “You must all have the same feelings” (*sumpathes*): literally, you must all be ‘sympathetic’. The feelings of which Peter speaks are feelings of sympathy for others in need. It is the churches that care for the weak and the vulnerable which attract – the churches which are all wrapped up with self which repel.
3. “Love one another as brothers and sisters” (*philadelphos*). Did you hear of the church that was gothic in architecture, arctic in temperature, where the deacons walked up and down the aisles like polar bears? A church that is cold repels; a church that is warm and welcoming attracts.
4. “Be kind” says Peter. Literally, ‘have healthy bowels’ (*eusplagchnos*). Before you jump to the conclusion that Peter is commending All Bran, remember that in the 1st century the seat of the affections was not the heart, but the bowels. Be kind, be compassionate, be tender-hearted. Legalism in church life repels, kindness, tenderness attracts.
5. “Be humble (*tapeinophron*) with one another”. Peter is here picking up a ‘smear’ word, and giving it a positive meaning. For in the ancient world ‘humility’ was not a virtue. Humble people who didn’t brag about themselves and their exploits were regarded as wimps without spunk. In our world, all too often the people who seem to make it in life are those who play games of one-upmanship. But one-upmanship repels; modesty which values the worth of others is what attracts.

### 3. *Parents – be attractive!*

Nowhere does Peter in his letter talk about children and parents. But on a day when three families have brought children for a service of thanksgiving, blessing and dedication, it is worth making the point that children from Christian families also need to be attracted to Christ, and that attraction in the first place will be found in the lives their parents lead. Thank God, children from Christian homes often find it natural to believe in the love of God for them; but that belief needs to be confirmed by what they see of God’s love in their homes.

Look at what Peter says and apply it to a home rather than to a church. “Do not pay back evil with evil or cursing with cursing; instead, pay back with a blessing” (3.9). If children are to believe in a God who forgives and blesses, then they need to see those same attributes in their parents. Homes where there is backbiting and criticism will repel children from believing in a God of love; but homes where relationships are marked by positivity and peace-making, will attract.

### 4. *Let others be provoked and ask – why?*

Our lives should not only attract, they should also cause others to wonder why our lives are different from others. Our lives should give non-Christians food for thought. This is what Peter has in mind when he writes: “Be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you, but do so with gentleness and respect” (3.15-16). Do note that Peter does not say: “Be ready at all times to take the initiative and share your faith.” No, he says: “Be ready at all times to answer.... to explain.” Peter presumes that if we are living truly Christian lives, then people will automatically want to ask why. What is it that makes us tick? What is it that makes us different? What is it about the Christian faith which makes us live our lives in the way we do?

A book on evangelism has the wonderful title of *The Provocative Church*. There Graham Tomlin writes: “Unless there is something about church, or Christians, or Christian faith that intrigues, provokes or entices, then all the evangelism in the world will fall on deaf ears. If churches cannot convey a sense of ‘reality’ then all our ‘truth’ will count for nothing. Unless someone wants to hear, there’s no point in shouting louder. Churches need to become provocative, arresting places which make the searcher, the casual visitor, want to come back for more.”<sup>106</sup> He goes on: “Is our church just another little club for likeminded people who happen to enjoy singing, religious emotion and sermons? Or is there anything in the life or worship of our church that would make an outsider looking in want what we have?”<sup>107</sup> I would love to think that people who come into our church because some outside body has put on an event, ask themselves the question: ‘What is it that motivates this church? What is it that is so special about God that these church people give so generously of their time and of their money?’ I would love to think that when people who don’t

<sup>106</sup> Graham Tomlin, *The Provocative Church* (SPCK, London 2002) 10, 11.

<sup>107</sup> Graham Tomlin, *The Provocative Church* 13, 14.

normally come to church visit us on a Sunday, they ask: 'What is it that causes these church people to be so open and welcoming? What is it that makes them tick?'

It is not only the church which is called to be provocative. We as individual Christians are called to be provocative; not in the things we say, but in the way which we live our lives. Our values expressed in the way we live, at home and at work, should provoke others to want to know more about what it is that makes us different. Our life-style is crucial to our evangelism.

There does, of course come a stage when we do need to speak. As Peter says, we must "be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope that you have in you" (3.15). Each one of us needs to be able to "explain" what Christianity is really all about. For as Alister McGrath, an Oxford theologian, has rightly said "Most people have very confused understandings of what Christianity is about! They don't reject Christianity because they have given it careful consideration and decided that it is wrong. In most cases, they encounter a caricature of Christianity and reject that instead." If you find it difficult to explain, then there is a simple solution: just invite them to come with you to Alpha.

Although there is a place for telling others about Jesus, there is no place for imposing Jesus on others. We should attract people to Jesus by the kind of lives we lead. We should provoke people to ask 'why'. It has been said: "A saint is someone whose life makes it easier to believe in God." Does your life make it easier for others to believe in God? How attractive, how provocative is our life-style at work? Or at home? God wants us to be provocatively attractive!

### 3. Going for growth

At the heart of mission is to be found the church. It is in the worship of the church that the people of God find motivation and energy for mission. It is through the teaching of the church that the people of God gain their understanding of mission. It is through the fellowship of the church that the people of God are sustained in mission. It is to a large extent through the life and witness of the church that the people of God express their mission. It is into the church as well as into Christ Jesus that converts are baptised. It is through the teaching of the church that these new Christians are nurtured and equipped for mission.

With the church having such a key role to play in the purposes of God, it is not surprising that many have been concerned for “that nature, function, structure, health and multiplication of churches as they relate to the effective implementation of Christ’s commission to ‘Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples’ (Matt 28.19-20).”<sup>108</sup>

#### The church growth movement

The church growth movement in its traditional form owes its origins to an American called Donald McGavran, who in the 1930s was a missionary in India. He asked two simple questions in particular: 1. Why do some churches grow, while others in a similar context do not? 2. Why does the same church grow at one time and not at another? McGavran’s research led to his writing a number of books, culminating in his magnum opus, *Understanding Church Growth*, written in 1970.<sup>109</sup>

In 1961 McGavran founded the Institute of Church Growth in Eugene, Oregon. In 1965 this Institute moved to Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, to be part of the School of World Missions. Its objective was “to train ‘career’ missionaries and make them more effective in spreading the Gospel and in planting new churches”. I.e. at that stage Church Growth had the ‘developing’ world in its sights! Church growth insights were first applied to the USA in 1972. The key leader in the domestic application of church growth principles, was Peter Wagner, a Fuller professor. Wagner has been a prolific author. Probably his two most important publications were *Your Church Can Grow*<sup>110</sup> and then later *Leading Your Church to Growth*.<sup>111</sup>

In *Your Church Can Grow* Peter Wagner elaborated upon a list of ‘seven signs of a healthy growing church’: viz. A pastor who is a possibility thinker and whose dynamic leadership has been used to catalyze the entire church into action for growth; a well-mobilised laity which has discovered, has developed and is using all the spiritual gifts for growth; a church big enough to provide the range of services that meet the needs and expectations of its members; the proper balance of the dynamic relationship between celebration, congregation and cell; a membership drawn primarily from one homogeneous unit; evangelistic methods that have been proved to make disciples; and priorities arranged in Biblical order

Very quickly British ministers became interested in what Peter Wagner had to say. In my case it was in the summer of 1978 that I read *Your Church Can Grow*, and as a result I attended a church growth course in Detroit taught by Peter Wagner. On my return from the USA, I decided to test out Wagner’s hypotheses within a British context. From this came *Turning the Tide*: an assessment of Baptist Church Growth in England, co-authored with Alan Wilkinson, in which we developed a disciple-making team-driven model for church growth.<sup>112</sup> Peter Wagner himself kindly wrote the preface in which he described *Turning Tide* as “the most objective, scientific study of Church Growth principles that I have ever seen”.<sup>113</sup> As a pastor I longed to see my church grow and develop, and with that in mind I found many of Wagner’s insights helpful. To a large extent it was as a result of the model of church growth which Alan Wilkinson and I developed, that the church at Altrincham quadrupled in size during my period as pastor.

As far as I have been concerned, church growth is not an option – it is a necessity. The fact is that the church is always one generation from extinction. Without new disciples there is no future for the church.

<sup>108</sup> Taken from the British Church Growth Association’s definition of church growth.

<sup>109</sup> *Understanding Church Growth* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1970).

<sup>110</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Regal, Glendale, California 1976).

<sup>111</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church To Growth* (Regal, Ventura California 1984).

<sup>112</sup> *Turning the Tide: An Assessment of Baptist Church Growth in England* (Bible Society, London 1981).

<sup>113</sup> *Turning the Tide* v.

Yet not everybody was enamoured with church growth as a concept. In spite of massive church decline in the UK, in some circles consciously ‘going for growth’ has been deemed unacceptable and theologically ‘naff’. As a result over the years interest in ‘church growth’ waned. However, as we shall see, in the last few years the Church of England has developed a new interest in church growth which is very different in style from the ‘first phase’ of the American-dominated church growth movements. However, before exploring the recent ‘second phase’ of church growth, I want to look at both the criticisms and the benefits of the traditional church growth movement, highlighting some of the important insights the church growth movement offered, and developing that I called the three ‘moods’ of church growth.

## Criticisms of the church growth movement

Church growth has had a bad press. The American Methodist, William Abraham, for instance, criticised the church growth movement for its poor theology and for its corrupting pragmatism, and believes that it represents “a conspicuous failure to face up to the demands of the Christian Gospel”.<sup>114</sup> In particular he singled out five aspects of the church growth movement which call for condemnation:

1. The homogeneous unit principle rides roughshod over the radically inclusive character of the people of God.
2. The New Testament concept of discipleship is undercut.
3. The call to repentance is non-specific.
4. The primary horizon of the Kingdom of God is ignored.
5. The reality of injustice and oppression in the world is soft-pedalled.

Abraham really even suggested that the church growth movement may be a form of “bogus Christianity”!

British Methodism has not been any kinder. Richard Jones, for instance, argued that the church growth movement represents “a narrow doctrine of God”. In terms of the church growth movement, God is only interested in the church; he is not interested in hunger, racism, war, poverty, ecology and injustice.<sup>115</sup> Jones said that church growth theory avoids the four great crunch issues confronting Christian mission in Europe:

1. Dialogue with other faiths
2. Criticism of Western culture
3. Struggle for Christian unity
4. A need for a Christian apologetic.

He concluded: “Church Growth takes us into a rather triumphalist world, where the Christian soldiers need only to organise and enthuse themselves better and then go over the top, advancing evermore. Too easy by half.”

Eugene Peterson was equally critical. He wrote: “Every time the church’s leaders depersonalise, even a little, the worshipping/loving community, the gospel is weakened. And size is the great depersonaliser. Kierkegaard’s criticism is still cogent: ‘the more people, the less truth’. The only way the Christian life is brought to maturity is through intimacy, renunciation, and personal deepening. And the pastor is in a key position to nurture such maturity. It is true that these things can take place in the context of large congregations, but only by strenuously going against the grain. Largeness is an impediment, not a help... Classically, there are three ways in which humans try to find transcendence – religious meaning, God meaning – apart from God as revealed in the cross of Jesus: through the ecstasy of alcohol and drugs, through the ecstasy of recreational sex, through the ecstasy of crowds. Church leaders frequently warn against the drugs and the sex, but, at least in America, almost never against the crowds. Probably because they get so much ego benefit from the crowds.”<sup>116</sup> Yet there is a degree of irony in his criticism: for the church of which Peterson was pastor had grown to some 500 members!

It must be acknowledged that there is much truth in the general thrust of these criticisms. The way in which the church growth movement has developed in parts of North America has led to a trivialisation of the Gospel.<sup>117</sup> There has been

<sup>114</sup> William Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (UK edition: Hodder & Stoughton, London 1989) 81.

<sup>115</sup> Richard Jones. ‘Church Growth Theory’, *Epworth Review* XVI (May 1989) 27-35.

<sup>116</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (Harper One, New York 2011) 157.

<sup>117</sup> See, for instance, Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: an exploration into vocational holiness* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1992) 37: “It is interesting to listen to the comments that outsiders, particularly those from Third World countries, make on the religion they observe in North America. What they notice mostly is the greed, the silliness, the narcissism.

an unwelcome crassness on the part of some of the early leaders of the church growth movement: I shall never forget attending in 1980 a church growth course in Detroit taught by Peter Wagner, at which we were all handed calculators and told to exercise faith by determining rates of growth for our churches over the coming years!

It has also to be acknowledged that the passion for evangelism and numerical growth evidenced by the pioneers of the church growth movement was not accompanied by a like passion for social action and incarnational growth. For Wagner, for instance, evangelism took priority over what he termed “social service... designed to relieve immediate needs of people”.<sup>118</sup> He ruled out ‘social action’ and classed “the more radical demand to change the structures of society so that the poor and the oppressed will get a fairer piece of the social pie” as “politics”, in which individuals, but not churches may get engaged.<sup>119</sup> Wagner’s thinking was clearly a product of right-wing politics. What would Amos and Hosea have had to say about Christians who refuse to get involved in justice issues?<sup>120</sup>

Some of the ways in which the homogenous unit principle has been promoted have been a denial of the Gospel. Let me explain. A homogenous unit is “a section of society whose common characteristic is a culture or a language.”<sup>121</sup> Or to put it more simply, ‘birds of a feather flock together’. Like attracts like. Donald McGavran, the father of the church growth movement, observed that “people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers”.<sup>122</sup> Up to that point I am with McGavran. In my judgement there is no reason why we cannot use the homogenous unit principle in evangelism.<sup>123</sup> Indeed, to a degree that happens in every church: young people reach out to young people, older people to older people, women to women, and men to men. By extension we could justify black Africans reaching out to black Africans, Arabs to Arabs, Asians to Asians. Perhaps more controversially, we could justify people of particular socio-economic classes reaching out to their peers. But a major theological difficulty arises when McGavran and Wagner go the next step and argue for the creation of ‘one-people’ churches.

So, for instance, Wagner used the homogeneous principle as one of his seven ‘vital signs’ of a healthy growing church. He stated: “The membership of a healthy growing church is composed basically of one kind of people.”<sup>124</sup> Although McGavran denied it, this is segregation – or certainly it is perceived as segregation.<sup>125</sup> The tragedy of the American church is that the most segregated day and time within a week is Sunday morning at 11 o’clock. Inevitably in some areas churches are homogenous, for the simple reason that they are ministering in an area where everybody comes from the same background. But to promote the homogenous church as an ideal cannot be right, even if the principle may appear to ‘work’. Churches by definition are places where everybody is welcome. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3.28). In the light of this Jürgen Moltmann declared: “National churches, racial churches, class churches, middle class churches, are in their practical life heathenish and heretical.” He went on, to reflect the will of God a community must consist of “the unlike, of the educated and uneducated, of black and white, of the high and the low”.<sup>126</sup> Moltmann is right. The glory of the church is our unity in diversity. It is this unity which is a sign of the in-breaking of the Kingdom. In our multi-cultural cities and towns a church which deliberately sets out to be made up of one group of people runs counter to the very essence of the Kingdom. We are called to live the Kingdom in our life together, for in

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They appreciate the size and prosperity of our churches, the energy and the technology, but they wonder at the conspicuous absence of the cross, the phobic avoidance of suffering, the puzzling indifference to community and relationships of intimacy.” In *The Pastor* 158 Peterson even likens church growth to being more “more like church cancer – growth that was a deadly illness, the explosion of runaway cells that attack the health and equilibrium of the body”.

<sup>118</sup> Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* 156, where examples of such service are “healing the sick, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, counselling the emotionally disturbed, finding work for the unemployed etc.”.

<sup>119</sup> Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* 158.

<sup>120</sup> See also Paul Beasley-Murray, *A Biblical/Theological Framework for Evangelism*, paragraph 4.4: “If Jesus is Lord of all, and not just a personal Saviour... then no aspect of life today can be beyond his jurisdiction. Perhaps the lordship of Christ can serve as the bridge between the traditional evangelical understanding of gospel preaching, which has personal salvation in view, and the more radical understanding of mission, in which salvation is seen at work in the struggle for economic justice and for human dignity.”

<sup>121</sup> Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2nd edition 1973) 85.

<sup>122</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* 199.

<sup>123</sup> Similarly Peter Cotterell, *Church Alive* (IVP Leicester 1981) 40: “The homogeneous unit... is a reality. It is necessarily found in unredeemed society, and since evangelism must take place in unredeemed society, it is apparent that evangelism ought to take note of the role of the homogeneous unit... But when people become Christians, when they join a local congregation, they have to learn a new way of life. They must learn biblical ideas which are not exclusive. In the church all are welcome.”

<sup>124</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow: Seven Vital Signs of a Healthy Growing Church* (Regal, Glendale, California 1976) 110.

<sup>125</sup> According to McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* 211: “Segregation is a sin because it is an exclusion enforced by one group on another. ‘One-people’ churches are not, since they are the choice of a group as to language and customs and do not come about through a desire to exclude ‘inferiors’ – quite the contrary.”

<sup>126</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Gospel of Liberation* (English Translation: Word, Waco 1973) 91.

the words of Lesslie Newbigin “the only hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.”<sup>127</sup>

So, I have some real criticisms of the church growth movement. But it also needs to be said that some of the criticisms are not just unfair, they are downright prejudiced. Bob Jackson, who has done a good deal of research into attendance patterns in the Church of England, summarises four arguments which are sometimes used to suggest that the study of church growth is not a proper subject for Christians to engage in:

1. *The kingdom matters*. Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God. The church, so the argument runs, should therefore pay more attention to God’s work in the world than counting of heads in church. But, as Jackson makes clear: “In the New Testament the Church is seen both as a sign of the kingdom and as a means of the kingdom of God doing its work in the world around us.”<sup>128</sup> Furthermore: “The Church is the Bride of Christ – a loving partner in whom the risen Christ takes a deep pleasure, whose worship he revels in and whose co-operation in the work of the kingdom he covets. How can Christ take pleasure from the wasting away of his Bride? How can he fail to rejoice in her growth and rejuvenation?”<sup>129</sup>

2: *It’s about quality, not quantity*. What matters most in the coming of God’s kingdom, it is argued, is the quality of what is done and said, not the quantity. Jesus taught us to see the mustard seed – the smallest type of seed – as a sign of the kingdom. He seemed uninterested in popular acclaim – in fact he often escaped from the crowds. This is true. But as Jackson argues: “Quality is the best way to achieve quantity. The prayer he taught us to pray for the harvest was all about quantity: “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field’ (Matt 9.37,38 NIV).”<sup>130</sup>

3: *Small is beautiful*. A relatively small number of Christians, by the sheer quality and courage of their faith, turned the Roman empire upside down. By contrast in countries where church attendance is relatively high, for example in the USA or Northern Ireland, the impact on morality and values seems to be very limited. However, as Jackson argues: “The fact that churchgoing on a large scale may not transform a nation does not mean that it does not do any good... We do not have to choose between a Church that is large and a Church that is faithful – we should work for one that is both large *and* faithful.”<sup>131</sup>

4: *The church is for others*. The true calling of the church [some say] is to care for others, not to market itself. However, as Jackson again argues: “The greatest benefit the Church has to offer non-members is that which is most precious to Christians – the eternal love of God in Christ found in the worshipping, kingdom-building life of the Christian community.”<sup>132</sup>

The fact is that a concern for church growth is a reflection of the heart of God.

## The second phase of the church growth movement

In the past few years there has been what Archbishop Justin Welby has called the ‘second phase’ of the current church growth movement: “Twenty to thirty years ago when the notion was coined afresh in the modern ear, it focused very much on matters of technique. To this day we are too easily tempted to follow some formulae that our church will grow – rather than flying in the passion of love for Christ with every sinew of our being, and noting how the slipstream draws others into relationship with him and with all who belong to him”.<sup>133</sup>

One of the proponents of this ‘second phase’ is David Goodhew, the Director of Ministerial Practice at Cranmer Hall, an Anglican theological college in Durham, who edited two fascinating books on church growth. In his first book, *Church Growth in Britain: 1980 to the Present*, he pointed out that while most people assume that Christianity in Britain is in decline, there has in fact been some substantial and sustained church growth in Britain: for instance the number of new churches started since 1980 is substantially greater than the total number of Roman Catholic churches in England and equivalent to one third of all Church of England churches. However, as a crude generalisation, church

<sup>127</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (SPCK, London 1989) 227.

<sup>128</sup> Bob Jackson, *Hope for the Church: Contemporary strategies for growth* (Church House Publishing, London 2002) 17.

<sup>129</sup> Jackson, *Hope for the Church* 18.

<sup>130</sup> Jackson, *Hope for the Church* 19.

<sup>131</sup> Jackson, *Hope for the Church* 20.

<sup>132</sup> Jackson, *Hope for the Church* 21.

<sup>133</sup> Foreword to *Towards a Theology of Church Growth* (Ashgate, Farnham, Surrey 2015) edited by David Goodhew.



growth diminishes the further away you get from London. For while the Anglican Diocese of London during the last 20 years has expanded by over 70%, many dioceses outside London are shrinking rapidly. The nearer a church is to London, the more likely it is to be a growing church!<sup>134</sup>

In his second book, *Towards a Theology of Church Growth*, he argues that numerical growth should be a central concern for churches. He writes:

“Seeking the numerical growth of the church is intrinsic to being faithful to Christ. Far from being a theologically disreputable ‘bigging yourself up’, working to grow the church numerically is good and godly. The numerical growth of local churches is not the only aspect of growth in the Christian life, but it is a central part of growth”.<sup>135</sup>

There is therefore nothing wrong in reflecting on how we can be more effective in growing churches. So to quote from Alister McGrath’s essay in the same book:

“The church’s evangelistic tasks extend beyond the mere ‘sowing of the seed’. What can be done to break up the ground and make it receptive to the seed taking root? How can weeds be removed, to give the growing seed more space and light? What can be done in the face of external threats?”<sup>136</sup>

A healthy concern for church growth is not to be equated with cheap grace. As Goodhew rightly notes, “growth in the Christian life is never just about ‘bums on seats’”.<sup>137</sup> Church growth which is true to the Gospel is always counter-cultural – but to be counter-cultural does not necessitate embracing a ‘theology of decline’; rather it means that we need to be “creatively subversive”.<sup>138</sup>

A further contribution to this ‘second phase’ of the church growth movement is *What makes churches grow? Vision and practice in effective mission* by Bob Jackson, Director of the Church Growth Centre attached to St John’s College, Nottingham.<sup>139</sup> It is a book full of hope and new life – and statistics: “It’s about how the Church of England is growing under the radar of the media, the critics and, sometimes, the bishops”.<sup>140</sup> Up until 2014 Anglicans in the UK seemed to be in terminal decline, but there has been a turn-around and the Church of England is beginning to grow. Cathedrals are growing, and so too are the so-called ‘greater churches’. Thanks to Fresh Expressions of Church and Messy Church, the overall number of congregations is growing.

But how should we assess the size and growth of a church? Jackson replies: “By the number of its people, the depth of its faith, and the power of its ministry... Healthy growth comes in holiness, effectiveness and numbers all together”.<sup>141</sup> Yes, growth is not just about numbers, but it does include numbers.

God apart, ultimately church growth is down to leadership. Leadership is about intentionality and strategy. Instead of being a ‘magic roundabout’ church endlessly replicating the past, ‘gospel-train’ churches are called for, where “the members tack stock of where they are, assessing what the church is like and what it does. Then they catch a vision of where they want to be – of what God is calling them to be and do”. Then they develop a ‘travel plan’ and start to travel the line is it constructing into the future.<sup>142</sup>

Over against the current trend in the Church of England to have ‘multi-benefices’, where a vicar might have to look after seven or more churches, there should be a leader for every church. “If you are on a cruise and learn that the captain is actually skipper of seven ships and he is on a different one today, your confidence might begin to wobble as you round Cape Horn”.<sup>143</sup> Every church therefore needs a ‘focal’ minister. However, such leaders don’t have to be ordained or paid. What’s more, they need to have a distinct job-description. “The cure of souls is not to be vested in the focal minister but in the whole local church community. The role of the focal minister is to lead the mission of the church and galvanise the ministry of all”. Training will have to be given to focal leaders, but not the traditional

<sup>134</sup> See his ‘Introduction’, 3-20, in *Church Growth in Britain: 1980 to the Present Day* (Ashgate, Farnham, Surrey 2012).

<sup>135</sup> ‘An Introduction’, 6 in *Towards a Theology of Church Growth*.

<sup>136</sup> Alister McGrath, *Theology, Eschatology, and Church Growth*, 95 in *Towards a Theology of Church Growth*.

<sup>137</sup> Goodhew, ‘An Introduction’ 5.

<sup>138</sup> Goodhew, ‘An Introduction’, 34.

<sup>139</sup> Bob Jackson, *What makes churches grow? Vision and practice in effective mission* (Church House Publishing, London 2015).

<sup>140</sup> *What makes churches grow?* xiii.

<sup>141</sup> *What makes churches grow?* 3,4.

<sup>142</sup> *What makes churches grow?* 74.

<sup>143</sup> *What makes churches grow?* 100.

training provided by a theological college – rather training needs “to equip for mission rather than ecclesiastical promotion”.

I loved his emphasis on the need for “a new sacramentalism driven by people passionate about baptising new believers. This is the primary sacrament. The Eucharist feeds members of the body of Christ but baptism creates them. Repetition of the Eucharistic feeding of the people of God is the easy bit. The baptism of infants is not that difficult either, even if infants do cry. But baptism of the newly believing is the primary sacramental challenge to the priestly calling of the Church...Baptism will be accompanied by serious initiation into the faith of the Church and the commitment of believers, so driving its future spiritual and numerical growth.”<sup>144</sup> Not even a Baptist could have said it better!

## Benefits of the church growth movement

The church growth movement has made some valid contributions to contemporary mission thinking. Let me highlight just three such contributions:

1. The Great Commission has been put back on the map.
2. The church has been put centre-stage.
3. Distinctions have been made between various kinds of growth.

Firstly, the church growth movement has put the Great Commission (Matt 28.18-20) back on the map, in the sense that it has pointed churches afresh to their task of making disciples. Mission is broader than simply making disciples; but it certainly includes making disciples. A church that is ‘gung ho’ on social action but has no concern for evangelism is as unbalanced as a church which puts all its efforts into evangelism but is totally oblivious to the needs of the poor and the oppressed.

In the light of the Great Commission, a church that fails to make disciples is a church that fails. Not all churches have taken this on board. In the colourful words of two Southern Baptists: “Thousands of evangelical churches in America today are on the pill. They do not want to grow. Consciously or unconsciously they have repudiated reproduction”.<sup>145</sup> The fact is that growth, as parents of teenage children often know to their cost, can be uncomfortable! A price has to be paid for growth, and sadly far too many churches are not prepared to pay that price. This point is well made by Lyle Schaller:

“The majority of members in the vast majority of Protestant churches on the North American continent are more comfortable with stability or decline than with the changes required to move up off a plateau in size. The status quo has more appeal than growth. Numerical growth simply is not a high priority in most churches! Taking care of today’s members is a higher priority than reaching people beyond that fellowship.”<sup>146</sup>

What is true of churches in the States is true too of churches in the UK. Otherwise, why is it that so many churches are not growing? It only takes a net increase of one member per year to be a growing church. To be a growing church we do not need to experience revival — all we need to do is to begin to be obedient to the Great Commission!

Secondly, the church growth movement has put the church centre stage by its emphasis on ‘body evangelism’. Evangelism that is true to the New Testament involves not only commitment to Christ but also commitment to his people. For many Christians there is nothing radical in such a statement. But for some evangelicals, such a statement is revolutionary. ‘Crusade’ evangelism in its classic form was only interested in ‘decisions’: the success of Billy Graham’s evangelistic preaching was measured in the number of ‘decisions made for Christ’. But a so-called decision for Christ is only the beginning of a process, which can often lead absolutely nowhere. American statistics show that there is a mortality rate of 75%; i.e. only one in four make it to the point of church membership. It has been rightly said that “A great deal of evangelism is ineffective, because it does not lead to incorporation into the church. It is like spending all one’s effort in delivering a baby only to abandon it in the delivery room... Conversion without nurture is infant genocide.”<sup>147</sup> Where is that nurture to take place? Not in some para-church grouping, but in the local church itself.

<sup>144</sup> *What makes churches grow?* 275.

<sup>145</sup> Charles L. Chaney & Ron S. Lewis, *Design for Church Growth* (Broadman Press, Nashville 1977) 184.

<sup>146</sup> Lyle Schaller, *44 Steps off The Plateau* (Abingdon, Nashville 1993) 23.

<sup>147</sup> Robert J. Hillman, *The Church Growing Up and Growing Out* (Unichurch Publishing, Sydney, Australia) 41.

Thirdly, the church growth movement has helpfully distinguished between various kinds of growth. From the start there has been the recognition that there is more to growth than numbers. Initially the distinction was made between ‘numerical growth’ and ‘spiritual growth’, and then later church growth theoreticians talked of ‘incarnational growth’ and ‘organic growth’.

- a) Numerical growth centres on the adding of new Christians to the community of the Body of Christ.
- b) Spiritual or conceptual growth focuses on the deepening of individual understanding and enactment of the Christian faith.<sup>148</sup>
- c) Incarnational growth relates to the costly, loving, self-giving involvement of the church with all levels of society.
- d) Organic growth leads to the building of deep, loving, interpersonal relationships within the Body of Christ.<sup>149</sup>

There has also been the important distinction between biological growth, transfer growth, and conversion growth.

- a) Biological growth is the result of Christian children coming to faith and active church membership. According to Peter Wagner, in the American context any church can grow by 25% per decade just by biological growth!<sup>150</sup>
- b) Transfer growth represents the movement of Christians from one church to another. Such growth can result from people moving homes; it can also simply involve people moving churches. But from the perspective of the church left behind, such transfers are not growth but loss. Controversially Arn and McGavran said: “Well fed sheep cannot be stolen – if they can be stolen, it is not sheep stealing!”<sup>151</sup> Transfer growth can be helpful in getting a church moving again, but ultimately the church is about making disciples, as distinct from receiving transfers.
- c) Conversion growth results when ‘pagans’, i.e. those outside any church, are brought to repentance and faith and join the church. This is what evangelism is really about.

The Church Growth movement has done the wider church a service in emphasising the importance of the church’s task in making disciples, in winning people for Christ and his church. It must be right and proper for missionary strategists to encourage their churches to ‘go for growth’. Growth is healthy. Growth is a sign of life. Growth is what God intends for his church. Significantly, where pastors want their churches to grow, more often than not their churches grow.<sup>152</sup>

But it is important to set the challenge to growth within the context of the Great Commission. The Risen Lord does not say “Go and grow bigger and better churches”, but rather “Go and make disciples”. Growth may be the consequence of making disciples, but it is not actually the objective. It is important that we get our focus right.

An interesting parallel may be drawn with the profit motive in the world of business. A one-time chairman of McKinseys, a large US management consultancy firm, said: “Profit is not an end in itself, but is merely the reward of good management.” Perhaps in church terms we need to say: “Growth is not an end in itself, but is merely the reward of good stewardship”! Of course businesses need to make money, and of course churches need to grow. But just as a healthy business must not be dominated by making short-term profits, neither can a church – if it wants to remain healthy – be dominated by the numbers game. That is precisely what Rick Warren has said: “I believe the key issues for churches in the 21st century will be church health, not church growth... Focusing on growth alone misses the

<sup>148</sup> Loren B. Mead, *More Than Numbers: The Ways Churches Grow* (Alban, Washington D.C. 1993) 44-46 gives particular emphasis to what he terms “maturational growth”. He encourages congregations to view themselves as “a new kind of seminary... Members need to be challenged beyond religious dilettantism to serious long-term engagement with the stuff of the faith”. He imaginatively refers to life situations as “field placements” and says, “Members can present case material from daily experience and receive help in critically analyzing the theological and missional dimensions.”

<sup>149</sup> See further Orlando E. Costas, ‘Church Growth as a Multidimensional Phenomenon’, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* V (Jan 1981) 2-8; also *Christ outside the Gate* (Orbis, Maryknoll, New York 1982) 43-57.

<sup>150</sup> See Paul Beasley-Murray, ‘A Godly Upbringing? “Biological Growth”, Baptism & Church Membership’, *Church Growth Digest* XIII (1991/92) 6-8.

<sup>151</sup> Win Arn and Donald A. McGavran, *Church Growth Principles* (Vital Publications, Bayswater, Victoria, Australia 1976) 47.

<sup>152</sup> See *From Anecdote to Evidence: Findings from the Church Growth Research Programme 2011-2013* (The Church of England 2014) 10: “The survey results show a strong correlation between those clergy who prioritise numerical growth and those clergy whose churches grew in numbers. When asked a question about which type of growth was their top priority, only 13% selected numerical growth (the other options being spiritual growth/discipleship and social transformation): however this choice is significantly associated with actual growth recorded in the findings.”

point. When congregations are healthy, they grow the way God intends. Healthy churches don't need gimmicks to grow – they grow naturally.”<sup>153</sup>

There are three dangers when church growth is pursued for its own sake:

1. It leads to an inevitable confusion between conversion growth and transfer growth. The pastor who aims at growth *per se* runs the risk of being as satisfied with drawing people from other churches as winning people from outright paganism.
2. It leads to putting the expansion of the church before the salvation of the world, whereas in fact the theological context of church growth is not the church at all, but rather the world. The pursuit for church growth should be motivated by concern for those without the Word of life.<sup>154</sup>
3. It leads to the worship of the institution rather than to the worship of the Saviour. David Wasdell wrote with some perspicuity: “Motivation for church growth which loses sight of the glory of God and pursues growth for its own sake, smacks of institutional aggrandisement and is a subtle form of idolatry. The church exists, serves, evangelises and grows to the glory of God, and it is in the light of that fundamental purpose that all secondary tasks and means are to be judged.”<sup>155</sup>

Yet, with these important caveats, it still is right for missionary strategists to ‘go for growth’. But how is that growth to be achieved?

## Important insights into achieving growth

The church growth movement has been responsible for encouraging the growth of churches through three particular insights. None of these insights is limited to the church growth movement, but people like Peter Wagner have taken a key role in drawing attention to them.

### *Leadership*

First, there is the importance of leadership. The first sign of a vital health growing church, said Peter Wagner, is “a pastor who is a possibility thinker and whose dynamic leadership has been used to catalyze the entire church into action for growth”. Somewhat provocatively he wrote: “Pastor, don't be afraid of your power.”<sup>156</sup> On the basis of his observation of churches across the USA, he concluded: “Pastoral authority, earned through a loving relationship with the family of God, is... an important ingredient for growth.”<sup>157</sup> As we have already seen, this view of the pastor as ‘the primary catalytic for growth’ was confirmed by Alan Wilkinson and I in a study of 350 English Baptist churches. We established that leadership, vision, and possibility thinking all represent key gifts of a pastor in a growing church.<sup>158</sup> Lyle Schaller defined leadership as the key role of pastors who want to see their churches grow: “The pastor must have a strong future-orientation. The pastor must be able to see opportunities where others see problems and conflicts. The pastor must be willing to accept and fill a strong leadership role and serve as the number-one leader in the congregation.”<sup>159</sup> The Natural Church Development movement lists ‘empowering leadership’ as the first of its eight quality characteristics of a growing church.<sup>160</sup> In so far as we have already devoted a chapter to the pastor as a ‘visionary leader’ no more needs to be said, suffice that in the UK at least the church growth movement was largely responsible for creating a climate where leadership was seen as at the heart of the pastoral role.

<sup>153</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* 17.

<sup>154</sup> See Paul Beasley-Murray, *Toward a Biblical/Theological Framework for Evangelism*, paragraph 3.3 “The universal nature of the gospel is a challenge to a certain type of church growth teaching, where the institution tends to be at the centre, whereas in fact it is the world which we are to have in view. There is a world to win, and not just a church to build. True, rightly understood, the church is a means to this larger end – but how easy it is to be comfortable with the means, to be satisfied with bigger and better churches, rather than to be haunted by those who are being lost to all eternity.”

<sup>155</sup> David Wasdell, *Tools for the Task: Growth in Context* (Urban Church Project, London, no date)

<sup>156</sup> *Your Church Can Grow* 55-58.

<sup>157</sup> *Your Church Can Grow* 62, 62.

<sup>158</sup> Paul Beasley-Murray & Alan Wilkinson, *Turning the Tide* 35, 36.

<sup>159</sup> Lyle E. Schaller, *Growing Plans* (Abingdon Press, Nashville 1983). Although Schaller was writing specifically about larger churches, he made the same point more generally in *44 Steps Up Off the Plateau* (Abingdon, Nashville 1993) 61 as he talked of the need for “visionary initiating leadership”.

<sup>160</sup> See Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Development Handbook* (British Church Growth Association, 1998).

### *The mobilisation of the laity*

Secondly, there is the importance of mobilising the laity. Wagner's second vital sign of a healthy growing church is "A well mobilised laity which has discovered, has developed and is using all the spiritual gifts for growth."<sup>161</sup> According to Win Arn, a former president of the Institute for American Church Growth, 30% of church members have 1-2 hours a week to give to the church; 39.3% have 3-5 hours; 25% 6-7 hours; and 5.7% 8+ hours. Arn concluded: "Ten members in ministry are equivalent to one full-time staff person. Yet most churches are under-utilising their available people-power by 70-80%. If a typical church of 200 members was to see each member find their place of ministry, the church would add the equivalent of 16 full-time staff person."<sup>162</sup> I question some of these figures. Life in the UK has become very pressurised, with the result that many people are increasingly 'time-poor'. But the general point is clear. For a church to grow, it needs to take advantage of the gifts and energy of its people.

This means that gifts must be identified and developed. As we have seen earlier, this fact comes particularly to the fore in Rick Warren's concept of SHAPE. "Whenever God gives us an assignment, he always equips us for what we need to accomplish it. This tailor-made ('custom') combination of capabilities is called your SHAPE: viz. Spiritual gifts, Heart, Abilities, Personality, Experience." According to Warren, each one of us needs to do five things: unwrap our spiritual gifts, listen to our heart, apply our abilities, use our personality, and employ our experience.<sup>163</sup> To put it another way: God does not want us to serve him out of a sense of a duty; but because we have a passion to serve others through using the gifts and abilities which we have, the personality and experience which are ours. In a very real sense, Christian service is about self-fulfilment: we are doing that for which God has made us.

Serving God not only makes a difference to the individuals concerned, it also makes a difference to the church. As the 'Natural Church Development' movement has recognised "Gift orientated lay ministry" is a characteristic without which no church will grow.<sup>164</sup>

### *Giving cell groups a key role*

Thirdly, there is the importance of 'cell groups', (often called small groups, home groups, life groups, fellowship groups) normally consisting of between five and twelve members. They are absolutely vital for a church to grow, and the more a church grows, the more important they become.

Cell groups are vital for both spiritual and relational growth. To quote some words I once crafted to promote such groups:

"People are looking for community. They are looking for a place to belong. When people are coming to us on a Sunday, they are looking not just for inspirational worship and good quality teaching – they are primarily looking for friendship, for a place to live life together. Life groups are first and foremost about friendship, about community, about sharing life together. Life groups are where people can relax with one another, laugh with one another, and even weep with one another. Life groups are about being real with one another. Life groups are about caring for one another, being there for one another, praying for one another and offering practical support. Life groups are about reading the Bible together and discovering how God's Word applies to our everyday lives. Life groups are about encouraging one another to share the good news of Jesus with others. In life groups we pray for friends and colleagues – and for opportunities to share our faith story with them. Life groups are about extending friendship to others. Life groups want others to join them, even if it means that after a year or so the group may have to divide into two and form two further life groups."

Cell groups are also vital for numerical growth. Without such groups churches at a certain stage begin to experience the 'bath hole' phenomenon. Let me explain:

"For part of my time as a student I lived in college 'digs'. In those days students didn't enjoy ensuite facilities; rather we had a bedroom-cum-study, and shared a bathroom. My landlady did not encourage daily use of the

<sup>161</sup> *Your Church Can Grow* 69.

<sup>162</sup> 'Lay Ministry... Potential for Growth', *Church Growth Digest* (Winter 1986/87) 10, 8.

<sup>163</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* 369-375.

<sup>164</sup> Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Growth Development Handbook*.

bath; rather baths had to be a weekly observance! So on a Saturday night I would sit in the bath, and forgetting my landlady's desire for economy, I would fill the bath to the brim. What a luxury!

On one occasion I conducted an experiment. With the taps full on, I pulled out the bath-plug to see what would happen. Would the bath empty, or would it overflow? Interestingly, the level of water in the bath remained constant.

Over the years I have discovered that this bath-hole phenomenon can be replicated in churches. It is very easy to be a church where Sunday by Sunday new people come in, and yet the church never grows: for while people are coming in, others are going out. To use another metaphor, people come in through the front door, but at the same time people leave through the back door. For a church to grow, there must be a way of putting in the bath-plug – or shutting the door.

In my experience the key to integrating and retaining new people are home groups. As a rule of thumb we can say that the more a church engages in home groups, the more likely it is to be a growing church. In a church of any size, home groups are vital, for in a larger church home groups tend to be the only place where people are loved, valued and affirmed."<sup>165</sup>

Cells are vital. Ideally churches should not have cell groups, but rather be made up of cell groups.

## The three moods of church growth

As I reflect on the impact that the church growth movement made on me, and indeed others of my generation perhaps, the most significant contribution that Peter Wagner and others made was not their analysis of what makes a growing church, but rather the conviction expressed by the title of Wagner's seminal book, *Your Church Can Grow*. This conviction was mind-blowing, for at that time in the UK decline not growth was the order of the day. For me at least Wagner's book brought about a sea-change in terms of mood. As a result I wrote some reflections on the mood of church growth movement, which I later termed 'Three keys to effective church growth'.<sup>166</sup>

### *Obedience*

The first key to successful church growth is obedience. A church will only grow in so far as it is obedient to the Great Commission found in Matt 28.19, 20: "Go and make disciples of all nations." These words of the Risen Lord Jesus, termed by the Duke of Wellington, the "marching orders of the church", are no optional extra, but form part of the indispensable mission of any church.

From an idealistic perspective one would hope that it would be entirely unnecessary to speak of obedience. Evangelism should be something entirely natural. Michael Green said that evangelism could be defined as "overflow": this "gives the right nuance of someone who is so full of joy about Jesus Christ that it overflows as surely as a bath that is overflowing with water. It is a natural thing."<sup>167</sup> Lesslie Newbigin said something very similar:

"Mission begins with a kind of explosion of joy... The mission of the church in the pages of the New Testament is more like the fallout from a vast explosion, a radioactive fallout which is not lethal but life-giving. One searches in vain through the letters of St Paul to find any suggestion that he anywhere lays it on the conscience of his reader that they ought to be active in missions. For himself it is inconceivable that he should keep silent. 'Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!' (1 Cor 9.16). But nowhere do we find him telling his readers that they have a duty to do so."<sup>168</sup>

<sup>165</sup> Paul Beasley-Murray, *Blog* February 16, 2012.

<sup>166</sup> See Paul Beasley-Murray, 'The Mood of Church Growth Obedience', *Church Growth Digest* I (Spring 1980) 6-7; 'The Mood of Church Growth: Pragmatism', *Church Growth Digest* I (Summer 1980) 2-3; and 'The Mood of Church Growth: Optimism', *Church Growth Digest* I (Autumn 1980) 5.

<sup>167</sup> Michael Green *Evangelism through the local church* (Hodder & Stoughton, London 1990) 8.

<sup>168</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel and the Pluralist Society* 116. Newbigin goes on: "It is a striking fact, moreover, that almost all the proclamations of the gospel which are described in Acts are in response to questions asked by those outside the church. This is so in the case of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, of the testimonies given by the apostles and by Stephen under interrogation, of the encounter of Philip with the Ethiopian, of Peter's meeting with the household of Cornelius and of the preaching of Paul at Antioch" (116,117).

If the Gospel is good news, then it is only natural to share it. Just like no young father would ever dream of keeping the news of the safe arrival of his first-born to himself, so it is unnatural for a young Christian to keep to him/herself the news of finding Jesus. There is a natural overflow. But there are times too when the sharing of the Good News of Jesus becomes an act of will. In the words of the Baptist World Alliance Seoul Covenant: “It is our joy and responsibility inspired by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses throughout the world to Jesus Christ.”<sup>169</sup>

### *Pragmatism*

A second key to successful church growth is pragmatism. Church leaders must be prepared to use their minds when it comes to methods and strategies for leading their church to growth. They must be prepared to think hard and carefully evaluate the effectiveness of their church’s mission. However uncomfortable the exercise may be, they must have the courage to step back and take a cool hard look at how successful they are being in actually “making disciples”. According to David Womack “The question we should be asking of a church is not “How can we make this church grow’, but ‘What is stopping this church growing?’”<sup>170</sup>

Some people are fearful of the pragmatic approach, because they believe it will lead to the Holy Spirit being organised out of the church. This is a false spirituality. God wants us to use our minds as well as to look to him in prayer. (See Psalm 32.8,9.) God has created us to think – and not to think is in fact to spurn his gifts. The pragmatic approach is far from being unspiritual. A failure to use one’s mind is not a sign of spirituality, but rather the reverse. A pragmatic approach to the church and its mission is not a sign of expediency, but a necessary aspect of Christian stewardship.

### *Faith*

The third key to effective church growth is ‘faith’. Some church growth theoreticians speaks of the need for ‘optimism’, but optimism can be a worldly viewpoint. Faith, which inevitably involves optimism, is surely what is required.

One of the great dangers of the church growth movement is that it may lead to a somewhat mechanistic approach: ‘do this and your church will grow’. But no method guarantees success, except we put our confidence in the Lord. Faith is the indispensable catalyst (see Matt 13.58). Some years ago *Decision*, the former magazine of the Billy Graham organisation, ran an editorial on church growth. It singled out “expectancy” as a sign of a growing church. “In many of.. [the 17 growing churches reviewed] a holy expectation was present whenever the congregation gathered. People wondered, ‘Who will be next?’” No doubt other factors were present too, but faith expressed through expectancy clearly played a vital role.

I confess that Robert Schuller, the colourful former pastor of Garden Grove Community Church in Southern California, was not exactly my cup of tea. Nonetheless he hit the nail on the head when he defined faith in terms of possibility thinking: “Possibility thinking makes miracles happen... Possibility thinking is simply opening your mind to God to unfold the ways in which his will can be accomplished... Possibility thinking is the maximum utilisation of the God-given powers of imagination exercised in dreaming up possible ways by which a desired objective can be attained.”<sup>171</sup> A growing church is a church that dreams dreams, believing that with God all things are possible. After all, do not the Scriptures state that our God “is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or think”? If Schuller doesn’t appeal to you, then how about Carey’s great maxim: “Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God.”<sup>172</sup> Note the order: before we attempt, we must first expect!<sup>173</sup>

<sup>169</sup> The Seoul Covenant adopted by the 1990 Baptist World Alliance Congress is primarily a call to the task of world evangelisation: it had the somewhat unrealistic aim “that by AD2000 every person will have the opportunity to respond to the message of God’s love in Jesus Christ in an authentic and truthful way”.

<sup>170</sup> David Womack, *The Pyramid Principle Of Church Growth* (Bethany Fellowship, Minneapolis, Minnesota 1977) 49.

<sup>171</sup> Quoted by C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* 53.

<sup>172</sup> On May 30, 1792 William Carey preached at a Baptist Association meeting in Northampton. His text was Is 54.2, 3: “Make the tent you live in larger; lengthen its ropes and strengthen the pegs”. He urged his congregation first to: “Expect great things from God”, and then to “Attempt great things for God”. As a result the Baptist Missionary Society was formed and the modern missionary movement came into being.

<sup>173</sup> See Hugh Beasley-Murray, *A Biblical/Theological Framework for Evangelism* paragraph 2.2: “Evangelism is only possible as the church moves out in the power of the Holy Spirit... The word of the Lord to Zerubbabel is in this context salutary: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit’, says the Lord Almighty (Zechariah 4.6). We may plant and water, but it is ‘only the Lord who gives growth’. 2.3: “Important as planning and method, strategies and techniques may be, it is God who through his Spirit

## 4. Empowering God's people for mission in the workplace

### Mission begins on Monday

There is more to mission than growing a church. As Christians we are called to be salt and light in the world.<sup>174</sup> Mission begins on a Monday!<sup>175</sup> It is there in the wider world where as Christians we are called to live out our discipleship, and claim the world for Jesus. When the first Christians proclaimed 'Jesus is Lord', they were not in the first place saying 'Jesus is my Lord', nor even 'Jesus is Lord of the church', but 'Jesus is the Lord of the world' (see Phil 2.9-11; Col 1.15-20). Christians, if they are to be true to their faith, must not retreat into their ecclesiastical ghettos, but take their stand in the world, for it is the Lord's. In the words of a World Council of Churches document: "The real battles of faith today are being fought in factories, shops, offices and farms, in political parties and government agencies, in countless homes, in press, radio and television, in the relationship of nations."<sup>176</sup>

As we live out our discipleship, we engage with the world as Jesus engaged with the world. As John put it in his Prologue: "The word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1.14). In a sermon preached on this passage, Terry Drummond of the Industrial Christian Fellowship commented: "If we are true to their implications we find ourselves both lay and ordained involved in the creation of an alternative culture to that of the society we all inhabit."<sup>177</sup>

Christian ministry and mission is not about what Christians do with their spare time, but what about they do they do with the whole of life. So Neil Hudson, currently working for the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, with their focus on encouraging church leaders to help their members relate their mission to their working lives, writes that in any given week a maximum of ten hours may be given to church activities, with a further 48 hours given to sleeping, which leaves 110 hours per week for work, family and leisure: "this 110-hour space is our primary arena for mission and discipleship." Although Neil Hudson may have over-egged the figures – on average people sleep around 8 hours a night (56 hours a week in total) and then perhaps another two hours a day are spent in non-contact tasks such as washing, dressing, cleaning (say 14 hours per week in total), which reduce the time for work, family and leisure to well under 100 – the point is clear and well-made. In the light of this Hudson asks: "How can we best use the ten hours that we spend together to equip one another to live well in the other 110?"<sup>178</sup>

### Mission in the workplace

For most Christians their primary place of Christian service is in the world beyond the church. The task of pastors is to empower God's people to fulfil their calling in the world, or as the Apostle Paul puts it "to equip the saints for the work of ministry" (Eph 4.12).<sup>179</sup> The Australian John Mallison perceptively commented: "Never overlook the fact that some will be called to a place of service in the community, in local government, civic leadership or a trade union, and never feel called to work in the programmes of the church. The church needs to affirm and support those with this call.

works miracles of sovereign grace in the hearts of men and women. The evangelisation of the world will not be achieved through mass manipulation, but through prayerful dependence upon God's Spirit."

<sup>174</sup> See R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2007) 174: "The two most significant uses of salt in the ancient world were for flavouring and the preservation of food, and either or both those uses would provide an appropriate sense here: the disciples are to provide flavour to the world they live in... and/or they are to prevent its corruption. The two ideas are not incompatible; disciples are to help make the world a better place". With regard to the calling to be light in the world, the context indicates that "the 'job description' of a disciple is not fulfilled by private personal holiness, but includes the witness of public exposure. (France, *The Gospel of Matthew* 176).

<sup>175</sup> See Mark Greene, *Thank God It's Monday: Ministry in the Workplace* (Scripture Union, Milton Keynes; 1st edition 1994; 3rd edition 1997).

<sup>176</sup> Cited by Mark Greene, *The Great Divide* (London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, London 2010) 20.

<sup>177</sup> Terry Drummond, 'Lay Discipleship myth or reality?' preached at the AGM of the Industrial Christian Fellowship 21 November 2001. See the ICF website.

<sup>178</sup> Neil Hudson, *Imagine Church: Releasing Whole-Life Disciples* (IVP, Nottingham 2012).

<sup>179</sup> The focus here is first and foremost on 'ministry' or 'service' (*diakonia*) within the church: or as Eugene Peterson puts it, "He [Christ] handed out gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist and pastor-teachers to train Christians in skilled servant work, working within Christ's body" (*The Message*). See Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Apollos, Leicester 1999) 305: "The exalted Messiah gives ministries of the word to equip God's people for work in his service so as to build up the body". However, by extension we can surely refer it to 'service' within the wider world (see Markus Barth, *Ephesians 4-6*, Doubleday, New York 1974, 481: "The task of the whole church and of every saint is to carry out a work of service for the praise of God and the benefit of all who need it.")



Our task is not to pull all the godly out of the world and put them to work for the church.”<sup>180</sup> The following are some steps pastors might take to empower their people to live out their calling.

*Pastors need to ensure that their preaching and teaching are not divorced from the world of work.*<sup>181</sup>

According to Mark Greene 50% of Christians say that they have never heard a sermon on work.<sup>182</sup> Yet there a host of work-related issues which could form the basis for preaching. Topics could include a theology of work, vocation, ministry at work, witness at work, dealing with bosses, being in authority, success, failure, ambition, leisure, rest, money, debt, pressure and time management. Mark Greene has produced a useful resource for preachers, *Fruitfulness on the Frontline: Making a difference where you are*, which was written with a view to “equipping the 98% of Christians who are not engaged in paid church work.” Here he develops a helpful ‘framework’ for fruitfulness, which involves modelling godly character; making good work; ministering grace and love; moulding culture; being a mouthpiece for truth and justice; and being a messenger of the gospel.<sup>183</sup>

*Pastors need to develop a more worldly concept of ministry.*

Is work just a way of earning money, or is it a way in which we contribute to the needs of others? “If you can’t say a deep ‘Yes’ to the work by which you earn your living”, said Kenneth Adams, “you cannot say a deep ‘Yes’ to your life as a whole because work forms such an important part of life”.<sup>184</sup> Preachers have the task of enabling their people to come alive, and in the process discovering that their work can be a form of ministry. The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers needs to be lived out beyond the confines of the church. In the graphic words of Edward Patey: “All orders are holy. Plumbers are as much in holy orders as the clergy, serving God and their fellows... Electricians, park-keepers, doctors and typists are all working as much with the things of God as the priest with the sacrament.”<sup>185</sup> Or as Gibbs and Morton put it: “There is no fundamental difference in calling between an Archbishop and his chauffeur, between a prime minister and a parish minister – providing they are both in each case faithful and committed Christians.”<sup>186</sup>

Unfortunately, we tend to make unhelpful distinctions between these various callings. As Mark Greene says with tongue in cheek: “SSD [the ‘Sacred-Secular Divide’] leads us to believe that really holy people become missionaries, moderately holy people become pastors, and people who are not much use to God get a job.” He goes on: “Beyond that, SSD teaches us that there is a hierarchy of holiness even among the 98% of non-church-paid Christians. SSD teaches us that people involved in the caring professions – nurses, social workers, teachers – are holier than those involved in industry or commerce. Indeed, it’s because of SSD that the church has historically treated business with some distaste, failing to recognise that the poor need jobs, not just aid, and that there is no poverty without wealth generation. As one businessman put it: ‘The church appreciate my tithe but not the enterprise that gives rise to it’.”<sup>187</sup> A creative way of helping people discover that their work can be a form of Christian ministry is given by an American Baptist, Richard Broholm, who attempted to look at what people do in terms of the three-fold office of Christ’s ministry as ‘priest’, ‘prophet’, and ‘king’. For example, in terms of the priestly or pastoral ministry of Christ’s body, he wrote: “What we have often failed to see is that the contractor who builds houses, the lab technician who tests for

<sup>180</sup> John Mallison, *Grid* (Summer 1987).

<sup>181</sup> A useful resource is the five-volume *Theology of Work Commentary* (Hendrickson, Peabody, Massachusetts 2015), part of the Theology of Work Project, in which the Scriptures are viewed through the lens of work.

<sup>182</sup> Mark Greene, *The Great Divide* 6. He also says “Why have they probably not asked for one?”

<sup>183</sup> Mark Greene, *Fruitfulness on the Frontline*, (IVP, Nottingham 2014). Other preaching resources in the Faith and Work series include Ian Coffey, *Working It Out: God, you and the work you do* (IVP, Nottingham 2008) and Paul Valler, *Get A Life: Winning choices for working people* (IVP, Nottingham 2008).

<sup>184</sup> ‘The Workplace’ 218, 219 in *Treasure in The Field* edited by David Gillett and Michael Scott-Joynt (Fount, London 1993).

<sup>185</sup> Cited by Mark Gibbs & T. Ralph Morton, *God’s Frozen People* 15.

<sup>186</sup> Mark Gibbs & T. Ralph Morton, *God’s Frozen People* 14.

<sup>187</sup> Mark Greene, *The Great Divide* 11. But wealth-creators are not at the bottom of the list! See David Field and Elspeth Stephenson, *Just the Job* (IVP, Leicester 1978) 19: “The tendency to catalogue jobs in some kind of spiritual football league is deeply engrained on the Christian mind. Way out at the top of the list come those who have ‘vocations’ – including, no doubt, missionaries and clergy, followed at a short distance by RE teachers, doctors and nurses. Halfway down, we meet those with ‘ordinary jobs’ (such as businessmen, electrical engineers and secretaries who do not work for Christian organizations). Then right at the bottom, and in serious danger of relegation, are those involved in much more dubious pursuits – pop musicians, perhaps... and barmaids.”

cancer, and the postal worker who bridges the gap between other distant friends are all engaged in a caring ministry even though it is unlikely they will ever intimately know the persons they serve.”<sup>188</sup>

*Pastors leading public worship need to ensure that their praying goes beyond the needs of the church, and that it has the world in view – not least the worldly ministry of God’s people in view.*

Kenneth Adams pointed out that in the Index of Prayers in the 1980 *Anglican Alternative Service Book* “not one prayer, in that long list of things we should pray for, concerns our ordinary work.”<sup>189</sup> *Common Worship* is a little better: it contains two prayers for ‘Rogation Sunday’, of which one is ‘For those. Who work on land and sea’ and the other ‘for those engaged in commerce and industry’. Richard Higginson reported on some research on the topic of things prayed about in church services which revealed the following league table of prayer items:

Frequently: clergy, church workers, and missionaries.

Quite often: those in the caring professions: teachers, doctors, nurses and social workers.

Now and again: those in positions of national leadership, or responsible for the maintenance of law and order; politicians, police, and the armed forces.

Almost never: those involved in the commercial world: e.g. sales people, accountants and engineers.<sup>190</sup>

Fortunately there are some good resources to help those leading in worship to connect with the world of work.<sup>191</sup>

*Pastors can interview people about their work.*

Over the years I have regularly interviewed within the context of public worship church members about their work and then we have prayed for them and their work. The jobs represented have been varied: we interviewed people involved in in community service such as social workers, teachers, policemen, prisoner officers, health visitors, doctors and nurses; but also people working in the ‘rag trade’ and in banking, on building sites and in call centres, managing shops and overseeing ‘diversity’ programmes in a large business. Normally the questions were limited to four:

What will you be doing this time tomorrow?

How does your faith influence your work?

What opportunities do you have to share your faith?

How can the church best pray for you?

Although the focus was on the individual, as people listened to the interview they also began to reflect on their own work and how their faith impacted upon their work.<sup>192</sup>

*Pastors should ensure meeting agendas are kingdom-centred, not church-centred.*

If the focus of the church meeting or the meeting of the Parochial Church Council is the kingdom of God, then this means that there is no issue which lies outside the orbit of such meetings. All the major issues of life are of relevance – including those issues which face people at work as also in the local community. There are too many churches where the focus is on the nuts and bolts of church life. The Baptist church meeting, for instance, is not a church ‘business meeting’ – or, if it is, then the business we are called to conduct is in the first place God’s business, and not the trivia of church life. Issues of detail need to be delegated and entrusted to the leaders of the church. In the church meeting we need to be mindful of the injunction of Jesus: “Be concerned above everything else with the Kingdom of God and with what he requires of you” (Matt 6.33 GNB).

<sup>188</sup> Richard Broholm, ‘Towards Claiming and Identifying our Ministry in the Work Place’, 151-152 in *The Laity in Ministry* (Judson, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania 1984) edited by George Peck & John S. Hoffmann.

<sup>189</sup> Kenneth Adams ‘The Workplace’ 218.

<sup>190</sup> Ian Coffey, *Working It Out* 175.

<sup>191</sup> See David Adam, *Power Lines: Celtic Prayers about Work* (SPCK, London 1992). See also the Iona blessing (written by George Macleod?): “O Christ our master carpenter, who through wood and nails has won for us our whole salvation, wield well your tools in the workshop of our lives, that we who come to you rough-hewn, may by you be fashioned into a truer beauty, for your name’s sake.”

<sup>192</sup> Similarly Stevens and Collins, *The Equipping Pastor* 137-138.

*Pastors should encourage the church's small groups to relate the world of work to their Christian faith.*

For example, a home group might decide to put aside its traditional pattern of Bible study, and instead of beginning with a text begin with where people are. As a means of supporting one another's ministries it could encourage individuals to talk about their work. To do this at any depth it would probably have to devote an evening to each person.

Some years ago, within a North American context, David Crabtree suggested that the following questions might be asked of one another:

Describe how you spend your day?

What is satisfying for you in your work? What is stressful?

What is the impact of your work on your health, on your family, on your financial life?

How does your workplace need to change? How can you help, or not?

What are the ethical and justice or fairness issues you have to deal with at work?

Does it make any difference that you are a Christian in your workplace? How does your faith connect to your work?<sup>193</sup>

Within a British context the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity has developed 'Life on the Frontline', a six-week course for equipping 'whole-life' disciples. It starts from the basis that 98% of the church spends 95% of their time on their 'frontlines' in the world, and suggests ways in which as Christians we can engage with our 'frontlines'. In the words of the blurb, 'What if we gathered to worship on Sunday as God's missionary people and scattered on Monday as his missionaries in the world? What if we gathered again with stories of what God has done?'<sup>194</sup> It is a highly creative way of upholding and encouraging God's people in their individual ministries in the world.

*Pastors can set up support groups for particular occupational groups.*

It could, for instance, prove more helpful for a group of teachers in the church to get together and talk about their work from a Christian perspective, than for an individual teacher to share his or her problems in a home group made up of people coming from a variety of occupations. Such mutual support groups can be ongoing; on the other hand, they can be short-term or just one-offs.

*Pastors can set up dedicated 'Christians at Work' groups with a view to helping people 'make connections – share the pressures – and encourage a vision'.*

Julian Reindorp, an Anglican priest, has written extensively on how over many years he ran every other Saturday morning (9.15-10.15) during term such a group, with the following aims: to develop an informed Christian mind; to clarify issues for ourselves and others; to create a moral checklist; and to help people live with impossible situations.<sup>195</sup> Reindorp tells of how he was first led to set up such a group: "One Sunday morning, we were clearing up after the main Eucharist, and the head server said to me: 'You know, Julian, when I retire I want to do more church work'. George's day job was as convenor shop steward of the Ford plant in Dagenham, one of the key trade union jobs in the British car industry at that time. I realised that George saw his church work as what he did on Sundays. From then I decided to do all I could to help George and others like him to see that, to use Alex Devasunder's words, 'It was their working lives that were a key focus for their discipleship. And it was there that faith would be tested and developed and where Christ could be found and followed'." Reindorp goes on: "At work there are very few easy

<sup>193</sup> Davida Foy Crabtree, *The Empowering Church: how one congregation supports lay people's ministries in the world* (Alban, Washington D.C. 1992) 9.

<sup>194</sup> The six sessions deal with the following topics: 1. What is my frontline and why does it matter? 2. What happens when life on our frontline feels difficult? 3. How do church activities equip us for the frontline? 4. How do you know what to do on your frontline? 5. How does our Frontline shape our prayers? 6. How can we sustain our commitment to one another?

<sup>195</sup> See Julian Reindorp, 'Equipping Christians At Work', *Ministry Today* 15 (February 1999) 20-22; 'Equipping Christians At Work', *Ministry Today* 23 (October 2001) 14-20; and *Equipping Christians At Work* (Industrial Christian Fellowship, London 2000).

decisions, and some incredibly complex ones. People's assumption is that the Christian faith, and perhaps the church, and almost certainly the clergy, don't really understand the complexity and tension that people face at work."<sup>196</sup>

*Pastors can run a stewardship campaign with a difference.*

Instead of approaching the theme of Christian stewardship with the church's needs in view, we could centre on the possibilities inherent in individuals. After appropriate teaching, we could pass out cards for members to write their names and the answer to a simple question such as: "If time and talent and training were not obstacles (these three can all be found!) what would you really like to do for God in the church or the world?" Stevens and Collins commented: "The answers will be a pleasant surprise."<sup>197</sup>

*Pastors can run church membership classes which encourage new members to see their ministry as primarily ministry in the world.*

Here I have in mind membership classes not just for new Christians, but also for older Christians transferring in from other churches. Both young and old in the faith would benefit from an opportunity to reflect on their mission and ministry in the world. People could talk about their gifts, and the way in which they could best be used in the service of Christ, whether in the church or beyond the church. Clearly such membership classes would also include an introduction to the local church, the way it works, its ethos and understanding of itself. What a difference it would make if all the instruction were not simply church-centred!<sup>198</sup>

*Pastors can visit their members in their workplace.*

Not only could this be enlightening to the pastor, but it would also affirm people in their daily work, as the following 'letter to my pastor' makes clear: "Visit us in our workplace, learn about our work, and pray for us. Simple enough. But from the business leaders I know who've spoken to me bitterly – and sometimes longingly – about how they wish their pastors cared about what they did every day, this activity alone would be huge. People want to know that their work has significance, and that their pastor sees and appreciates their daily labour. This year, make it your goal to do this just for 15 people. Take your calendar, write down 15 names, block off 3 days to visit just 5 of us per day, and see if we're not delighted to hear that our pastor wants to visit us at work. We may even be more effective for the gospel with your help."<sup>199</sup>

*Pastors will not have all the answers to work issues their people may raise, but they can point people to helpful resources for linking faith with the wider world of work.*

The website of the Industrial Christian Fellowship has a host of articles and papers to download.<sup>200</sup> Ridley Hall, Cambridge, has a 'Faith in Business' centre, which runs workshops and conferences, and publishes a quarterly entitled

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<sup>196</sup> Julian Reindorp, 'Equipping Christians at Work', *Ministry Today* 23 (October 2001) 15-16. He includes an insightful comment by Peter Hall, then Bishop of Woolwich, writing in his March 1993 Diocesan Letter: "Religious people are peculiarly unwilling to recognise that most choices are between greater or lesser evils. Because we believe in goodness and love as absolute values, we imagine that we can make choices in which such absolutes are open to us. They rarely are. They never worked for Jesus, who was born into a world to live out fully God's love for mankind. Even by being born, it led to other children in Bethlehem being slaughtered. His mission hurt his own family – for his mother, it was like 'a sharp sword'. If our Lord found that whatever course he chose was going to hurt somebody, how can we, his followers expect to be free from such consequences? The people with whom we need to share our faith certainly know that they cannot avoid it. They feel condemned by a faith which suggests they can make choices untied by evil. They know their hands are dirty and will go on being so. They need a Gospel that unflinchingly recognises that."

<sup>197</sup> Stevens and Collins, *The Equipping Church* 135.

<sup>198</sup> Crabtree, *The Empowering Church* describes the content of a four-week long series of membership classes with the following sequence of content: 1) The church's way of work: "how we are organised, history, understanding of membership and its meaning". 2) Gifts identification: "When we do gifts identification now, it is done as a service to the person, not just as a self-serving talent hunt on the part of the church" 3) Introduction to the Ministry of the Laity. 4) A frank talk about faith and money.

<sup>199</sup> 'Letter to my pastor' dated January 1, 2014 (Denver Institute for Faith and Work website).

<sup>200</sup> See [www.icf-online.org](http://www.icf-online.org)

Faith in Business Quarterly in association with the Industrial Christian Fellowship.<sup>201</sup> There are also a surprising number of really good books on faith and work ideal for summer reading – why not list some of them in the church magazine or newsletter?<sup>202</sup>

*Pastors can give their people time to live in the real world – as well as to live at home.*

All too often there seem to be no natural breaks in our church year. Yet we need to take breaks, otherwise we are in danger of being consumed by the church. We do well to pay attention to Robin Greenwood: “I have known people who are at church when they ought to be facing up to tasks at work or at home... I fell into the trap of many clergy in small or precarious parishes, of working for the building up of the church, frequently at the expense of the development of the full life of its members... We need to find strong ways of affirming all church members in their particular paths of discipleship, especially where these paths take them very far from the church’s life and experience.”<sup>203</sup>

The above, then, are some ways in which pastors might encourage their people and so empower them to fulfil their role in the world. Let me end this section with a quotation from Hans Ruedi-Weber’s *Salty Christians*:

“In churches all over the world... the majority of those who have made the *sacramentum* [baptismal vows] do not actually join Christ’s struggle for the world. After taking ‘the military oath’, many of them become deserters, conforming themselves to the world, and not being transformed by the renewal of their minds (Rom 12.2). Others go on permanent leave, only returning occasionally for a military inspection. They lead a double life, following two different sets of ethics – one for their private, Sunday life, and one for their life in the workaday world. Still others always remain recruits in the barracks, becoming more and more refined in the use of the spiritual armour of God, but never leaving their Christian camp in order to fight for reconciliation for the world. Under these circumstances, no wonder the battle soon begins in the barracks!”<sup>204</sup>

## Conclusion

As mission is of the essence of the church, so mission must be at the heart of the pastoral call. With William Carey, the cobbler who became the pioneer of the modern missionary movement, pastors need to be passionate for the world beyond the church. Strange as it may seem to us now, in 18<sup>th</sup> century England few if any had a concern to win the world for Jesus. When at a ministers’ meeting Carey proposed that they discussed the question as to whether the command given to the disciples to teach all nations was still binding, the senior minister present, John Rylands, snapped: “Young man, sit down. You’re an enthusiast!” Religious enthusiasm was the last thing the Christians of that period wanted. But rightly understood, enthusiasm is a quality generated by the Spirit – literally the word ‘enthusiasm’ refers to ‘possession by God’. In this sense pastors need to be enthusiasts – men and women fired up by God with a passion to reach the world around them.

Pastors cannot win the world to Christ; nor should they even attempt it. Their prime task in this respect is to mobilise the people of God for mission. As leaders of the people of God this in turn involves drawing up creative and imaginative strategies for mission. There is little sense in adopting the ideas of other people, however effective these ideas may have proved elsewhere; for each church is different. Effective strategies are strategies which are appropriate for the particular situation an individual church faces. Hence, even the most brilliant of ideas of others needs to be adapted in order to become truly relevant in another church setting. Indeed, even the ideas set out in this chapter are not to be taken over lock, stock and barrel. Tailor-made strategies for mission are needed.

Being a missionary strategist is far from easy. There are no shortcuts to drawing up and implementing effective strategies for mission. Hard work at every stage is necessary. Yet where ‘inspiration’ and ‘perspiration’ come together, there much satisfaction is to be found, and pastors live out the call.

<sup>201</sup> See [www.ridley.cam.ac.uk](http://www.ridley.cam.ac.uk)

<sup>202</sup> Richard Higginson, the Director of the Faith & Work Centre, has for instance written: *Transforming Leadership: A Christian Approach to Management* (SPCK, London 1996); *Questions of Business Life* (Authentic, Milton Keynes 2002); *Faith, Hope and the Global Economy* (IVP, Nottingham 2012).

<sup>203</sup> Robin Greenwood, *Reclaiming the Church* (Fount, London 1988) 138-139.

<sup>204</sup> Hans Ruedi-Weber, *Salty Christians* (Seabury Press, New York 1963) 12.

## PART 2: THE CHARISMATIC PREACHER

### 5. The call to preach

#### Preaching is at the heart of ministry

Preaching is at the heart of ministry. Many would maintain that the preaching of the Word of God is “the primary task of the Church and of the Word of God”.<sup>205</sup> It is, says Eugene Peterson, the “one thing needful” for any pastor: “Let the ‘one thing’ get buried in the frenzy of multi-tasking, we need continual reaffirmation of the ‘one thing’ as both glory and mystery anchors our vocation.”<sup>206</sup> P.T. Forsyth, a Scottish theologian of a former generation, declared: “With its preaching Christianity stands or falls”<sup>207</sup> More recently Michael Quicke has written: “If it were possible to run a spiritual seismometer over Christian history to record its major tremors, every quake would correspond to a renewed sense of God’s presence in preaching.”<sup>208</sup> Preaching is ultimately where ‘it’ happens – where God is at work, transforming lives of individuals and of communities. Preaching within the context of the local church is the cutting edge of the Kingdom.

It is not for nothing that many ministers in North America are known as ‘preachers’. In Barna’s survey of more than one thousand senior American pastors, preaching tops the list as far as the primary joys of pastoring are concerned.<sup>209</sup> Preaching for many pastors is their number one priority.

For Baptists and the Free Churches in general, preaching has been the primary ‘sacrament’ through which God has made himself known and ministered his grace. Whereas in Anglican churches there is normally a central aisle because the altar is central, traditionally in Nonconformist churches there is no central aisle, for the pulpit is central. People seeking to gain admission to Baptist theological colleges speak of their ‘call’ to preach. At ordination the call to preach heads the duties of a minister. Generations of Baptist ordinands were asked: “Do your promise to execute your charge with all fidelity, to preach and teach the word of God from the Holy Scriptures?”<sup>210</sup> Today the question has been re-phrased, but still preaching is to the fore: “Will you proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ through word and deed, making disciples and seeking the coming of the kingdom?”<sup>211</sup> After the ordination prayer the new minister is presented with an ordination Bible: “Here is the living word of God: words to encourage the weak, restore the lost and build up the body of Christ. Read them and teach them, proclaim the gospel of Christ, that the people of God may be a gospel people.”<sup>212</sup> When ministers are seeking a call to a local church, they have to stand before a congregation and preach ‘with a view to the pastorate’. And once they are called, then Sunday by Sunday they are expected to preach.

Preaching was at the heart of the ministry of Jesus too. Mark describes the beginning of Jesus’ ministry with the words “Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming [AV ‘preaching’] the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news’” (Mark 1.14, 15).<sup>213</sup> According to Luke, Jesus began his ministry at Nazareth by reading from Isaiah 61.1-2: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight

<sup>205</sup> So D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Hodder & Stoughton, London 1971) 19. Similarly, amongst many others, Roger Standing (*Finding the Plot: Preaching in Narrative Style*, Paternoster, Milton Keynes 2004) 5, 6, the current Principal of Spurgeon’s College founded by that great ‘prince of preachers’, C.H. Spurgeon, writes of “the primacy of preaching”: “Preaching the good news of the kingdom of God remains the primary responsibility of his church.”

<sup>206</sup> Eugene Peterson in his preface to *The Glory of Preaching: Participating in God’s Transformation of the World* (IVP Academic, Downers Grove, Illinois 2009) by Darrell W. Johnson.

<sup>207</sup> P.T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (Independent Press, London 1907) 1 begins with the words: “It is, perhaps, an overbold beginning, but I will venture to say that with its preaching Christianity stands or falls.”

<sup>208</sup> Michael Quicke, *360 Degree Preaching: Hearing, Speaking, and Living the Word* (Paternoster, Carlisle 2003) 32.

<sup>209</sup> George Barna, *Today’s Pastors* 65.

<sup>210</sup> *Orders and Prayers for Church Worship: A Manual for Ministers* 297.

<sup>211</sup> *Gathering for Worship* 124.

<sup>212</sup> *Gathering for Worship* 130.

<sup>213</sup> “When the good news is preached, it is decision time: The time is fulfilled” (Lamar Williamson, *Mark*, John Knox Press, Atlanta 1983, 41).

to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour", and declares: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4.21). Later to those who wanted Jesus to stay in Capernaum, he said: "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose" (Luke 4.43; see Mark 1.38).

Not only did Jesus proclaim the good news of the Kingdom, he expected his disciples to do so too. He trained and commissioned them to continue the task of 'preaching' (Mark 3.14; Luke 9.2). Preaching was at the heart of the Apostle Paul's ministry: he described himself as "a herald and an apostle and a teacher" (1 Tim 2.7; 2 Tim 1.11), and in turn he expected Timothy to be a preacher too: "I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message" (2 Tim 4.1, 2).

Today's pastors stand in the tradition of the apostles. If we are to be true to our calling, we dare not "neglect the word of God" (Acts 6.2). We too must "devote ourselves to prayer and to serving [AV the ministry of] the word" (Acts 6.4).<sup>214</sup> True preaching is not the only task of the pastor, but it is central to our calling. Preaching still remains the normative way in which God makes himself known. The words of Paul are as relevant today as ever: "But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?... So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Rom 14.14, 15, 17).<sup>215</sup>

True, preaching is not the only way in which God makes himself known. As James Dunn noted, the question "How are they to believe in one of whom they never heard?" reflects a society "where the chief means of mass communication was oral communication of the gospel by written means is not yet envisaged."<sup>216</sup> Derek Tidball, attacking the so-called 'idolatry of the pulpit', makes a similar point: "Down the centuries God has clearly used other forms of communication as well as the sermon." He instances theological disputation and debate, as in the Reformation; Bible translation and the directed, unmediated use of Scripture; dramatic enactments, such as those pioneered by the prophets; writing, such as contemporary evangelistic books, which take their cue from the Gospels; even visionary experiences and dreams, for which there is much biblical precedent."<sup>217</sup> For him "the sermon is a vital tool by which God speaks, but one among others."<sup>218</sup>

We need to acknowledge that the preaching of today, and rightly so, is different in form and style from New Testament preaching. We sometimes forget that much of Paul's preaching took place in people's homes, and was very much 'small scale'.<sup>219</sup> The form and style of preaching has always been changing, for the context in which men and women preach has always been changing.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> It is interesting to speculate on the connection between prayer and preaching. F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Tyndale Press, London 2nd edition 1952) 152 stated that "As in 1.14 (see 2.42) the regular worship of the church is what is meant. Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1971) 263 understood Luke to mean "that the Apostles their prayers are active for the well-being of the community". On the other hand David G. Peterson *The Acts of the Apostles* (Apollos, Nottingham 2009) 23 believes that the prayers are linked to the preaching: "Prayer was a necessary accompaniment because it expressed dependence on the Lord to give boldness in speaking the word, to protect its agents, and to provide opportunities for the word to be heard and believed (see 4.24-32; 12.5-17; 13.1-3; 20.28-36; Col 4.2-4; 2 Thess 3.1-20)." John Stott similarly commented that prayer and preaching "form a natural couple, since the ministry of the word, without prayer that the Spirit will water the seed, is unlikely to bear fruit" (*The Message of Acts*, IVP, Leicester 1990) 121. Theologically I warm to Peterson and Stott – but on strictly exegetical grounds I think Bruce is more likely to be right.

<sup>215</sup> I love John Stott's commentary on this passage: "The essence of Paul's argument is seen if we put his six verbs in the opposite order: Christ sends heralds; heralds preach; people hear; hearers believe; believers call; and those who call are saved. And the relentless logic of Paul's case for evangelism is felt most forcibly when the stages are stated negatively and each is seen to be essential to the next. Thus unless some people are commissioned for the task, there will be no gospel preachers; unless the gospel is preached, sinners will not hear Christ's message and voice; unless they hear him, they will not believe the truth of his death and resurrection; unless they believe these truths, they will not be saved" (*The Message of Romans*, IVP, Leicester 1994, 286, 287).

<sup>216</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans 9-16* (Word, Dallas 1998) 621.

<sup>217</sup> Derek Tidball, *Preacher, keep yourself from idols* (IVP, Nottingham 2011) 32, 33.

<sup>218</sup> Tidball, *Preacher, keep yourself from idols* 34. To give a personal example: the morning service I attended last Palm Sunday had no sermon; instead there was a mime artist who for almost thirty minutes presented the message of the Cross through the eyes of the centurion – it was an amazingly powerful form of Gospel communication.

<sup>219</sup> See Stephen Barton: "Instead of Paul, the 'Billy Graham-style' specialist in mass evangelism, the picture we get is much more local and small-scale, centring above all on evangelism and nurture in individual households. But this is not a case of Paul as advocate of the 'small is beautiful' principle of 20th century lifestyle discussion. Not only was the private household (the *oikos*) an accepted centre in antiquity for teaching and intellectual activity, but it was also seen as a critical part of the network of structures, roles, and relations that made up the larger city-state (the *polis*). So the conversion of households had potentially subversive political implication." – 'Paul as missionary and pastor' 45, in *The Cambridge Companion to St Paul* (Cambridge University Press 2003).

## Preaching is proclamation

In many Christian circles today the words ‘preaching’ and ‘teaching’ are used synonymously.<sup>221</sup> However, there is a difference. First and foremost preaching is the ‘proclamation’ of what God has done for us all in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. The preacher has news to announce, not views to share. The preacher proclaims a ‘Gospel’, not a philosophy. The key New Testament term for a preacher is that of a ‘herald’. So, in the context of commenting on Paul’s command to Timothy to ‘proclaim the message’ (2 Tim 4.2), Ben Witherington notes that “A herald in a city such as Ephesus was a person who announced public auctions and sales, new taxes, the manumission of slaves, the beginning of public games, the orders of kings, and the onset of religious ceremonies.... He came later to be called the ‘town crier’. His role was simply that of announcer.... The basic task of the herald was to publicly announce something to people who had not yet heard the news.”<sup>222</sup> The preacher stands in the line of the prophets who declare ‘Thus saith the Lord’. The message that they have to declare is not of their creation – but owes its origin to God alone. Preaching is not primarily “self-expression of subjective experience or feeling disclosure or autobiography or ‘telling one’s story’ so to neglect Scripture”.<sup>223</sup> It is God’s story; God’s message.

It is precisely because preaching is God’s story that preaching has a power that no other form of oral communication possesses. In the words of Paul to the church at Corinth: “We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but those are being called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1.23-24). As Paul develops his argument it is clear that the power lies not just in the Cross, but in the message of the Cross, which “despite seeming foolish, has divine power that other messages lack”.<sup>224</sup>

Inevitably proclamation contains ‘teaching’, but proclamation goes beyond teaching. Paul Scott Wilson put it this way: “Having information about someone is valuable, but it is no substitute for actually meeting the person and hearing that person speak. Proclamation introduces people to God. Like a sacrament, it offers God to the people. Acts of proclamation speak the heart of the gospel to listeners in loving, passionate, infectious ways such that in and through them they encounter God, who meets them not as ideas, but in the Spirit as a person who loves them and empowers them to be his disciples.”<sup>225</sup>

## Preaching calls for theological reflection – and application

On January 7, 1855 Charles Haddon Spurgeon, then the minister of New Park Street Chapel, Southwark, opened his morning sermon as follows:

“It has been said by someone that ‘the proper study of mankind is man’. I will not oppose the idea, but I believe it is equally true that the proper study of God’s elect is God; the proper study of a Christian is the Godhead. The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father.

There is something exceedingly *improving to the mind* in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. Other subjects we can compass and grapple with; in them we feel a kind of self-content, and go our way with the thought, ‘Behold I am wise’. But when we come to this master-science, finding that our plumb-line cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle eye cannot see its height, we turn away with the thought that this vain man

<sup>220</sup> In this regard see a description of Baptist worship in 1689 in Amsterdam given in a letter home by Hugh and Anne Bromehead: “We begin with a prayer, after read some one or two chapters of the Bible; give the sense thereof and confer upon the same; that done, we lay aside our books and after a solemn prayer made by the first speaker he propoundeth some text out of the Scripture and prophesieth out of the same by the space of one hour or three quarters of an hour. After him standeth up a second speaker and prophesieth out of the said text the like time and space, sometimes more, sometimes less. After him, the third, the fourth, the fifth etc., as the time will give leave. Then the first speaker concludeth with prayer as he began with prayer, with an exhortation to contribution to the poor, which collection being made is also concluded with prayer. This morning exercise begins at eight of the clock and continueth unto twelve of the clock. The like course of exercise is observed in the afternoon from two of the clock unto five or six of the clock. Last of all the execution of the government of the Church is handled.” –Champlin Burrage, *The Early Dissenters in the Light of Recent Research* (Cambridge University Press 1912) 172-177.

<sup>221</sup> See Christopher Ellis, *Gathering* 131-133.

<sup>222</sup> Ben Witherington III, *A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1-2 Timothy and 1-3 John* (Apollos, Nottingham 2006) 216.

<sup>223</sup> Thomas Oden, *First & Second Timothy & Titus* (John Knox Press, Louisville 1989) 135.

<sup>224</sup> Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* 90.

<sup>225</sup> Paul Scott Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire: Putting God at the Center of the Sermon* (Abingdon, Nashville 2008).



would be wise, but he is like a wild ass' colt; and with solemn exclamation, 'I am but of yesterday, and know nothing'. No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thoughts of God...

But while the subject *humbles* the mind, it also expands it. He who often thinks of God, will have a larger mind than the man who simply plods around this narrow globe... The most excellent study for expanding the soul, is the science of Christ, and him crucified, and the knowledge of the Godhead in the glorious Trinity. Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the soul of man, as a devout, earnest continued investigation of the great subject of the Deity.

And, whilst humbling and expanding, this subject is eminently *consolatory*. Oh, there is, in contemplating Christ, a balm for every wound; in musing on the Father, there is a quietus for every grief; and in the influence of the Holy Ghost, there is a balsam for every sore. Would you lose your sorrow? Would you drown your cares? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead's deepest soul; so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief; so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead. It is to that subject that I invite you this morning..."

So spoke the young Spurgeon, then only 20 years old! Spurgeon has often been called the 'Prince of Preachers'. But Spurgeon was not just a preacher; he was a theologian, who rooted his preaching in Scripture. For all his wit, Spurgeon was not in the business of entertaining the saints, but of applying God's Word to the hearts and minds of his listeners.

Preaching calls for theological reflection – and application. In the words of Gerald Bray: "As long as the Christian church continues to exist there will be theological reflection, because without theology the Bible and its message cannot be preacher or understood, let alone applied, as it must be if the gospel is to be surely implanted in the hearts and minds of believers."<sup>226</sup>

## Preaching is 'logic on fire'

I love the description of preaching by Martyn Lloyd-Jones: "What is preaching? Logic on fire....A theology which does not take fire, I maintain, is a defective theology; or at least the man's understanding of it is defective. Preaching is theology coming through a man who is on fire. A true understanding and experience of the Truth must lead to this. I say again that a man who can speak about these things dispassionately has no right whatsoever to be in a pulpit; and should never be allowed to enter one."<sup>227</sup>

Here we see that preaching involves 'logic'. It involves carefully reasoned argument. Luke tells us that when Paul was at Ephesus, he "argued persuasively about the kingdom of God" (Acts 19.9). Indeed, Luke tells us that "he argued daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus" (Acts 19.10), and according to the Western text he did so "from eleven o'clock in the morning to four in the afternoon". Paul's preaching at Thessalonica (Acts 17.1-4) and Athens (Acts 17, 17) was similarly characterised by arguing, proving, proclaiming and persuading. Yes, effective preaching involves the use of logic as defined by *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*: "a chain of reasoning", "a means of convincing someone or proving something; the inexorable force or compulsion of a thing".

Along with reason, there must be passion. 'Fire' must also be involved in the preparation of the sermon. If preachers are to impact their congregation, then both mind and heart need to be engaged. A lifeless sermon should be a contradiction in terms. "Proclamation" declared Paul Scott Wilson, "makes God the centre of the sermon and offers the fire of the Holy Spirit in transforming power"<sup>228</sup> If the preaching is to set fire to people's hearts, then the heart of the preacher must be alight too.

Some people are afraid of passionate preaching. It smacks of emotionalism. But "passion in the pulpit... is a matter not of emotion in the first instance but of good theology, strong faith, and personal integrity."<sup>229</sup> Yes, emotionalism for the sake of passion is like Paul's "noisy gong or clanging cymbal" (1 Cor 13.1) but passion aroused by the wonder and truth of the Gospel is another thing. To quote Paul Scott Wilson yet again: "When preachers have something important to offer, that is, God's saving grace and power, excitement is natural. Preaching then can be a lifeline to the dying person, 20/20 vision for those who see but are blind, and justice for all who are oppressed. Preachers are then

<sup>226</sup> Gerald Bray, *God has Spoken: A History of Christian Theology* (Apollos, Nottingham 2014) 1,225.

<sup>227</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* 97.

<sup>228</sup> Paul Scott Wilson, *Setting Words On Fire* 1.

<sup>229</sup> Paul Scott Wilson, *Setting Words On Fire* 4.

right to be excited, have fire in the belly and use words on fire. Those of us who try to communicate the gospel without fire might seem odd, like someone saying ‘I love you’ in monotone, with an averted and deadpan facial expression.”<sup>230</sup>

## Preaching is ‘truth through personality’

Preaching is also the communication of truth through personality. This great definition was coined by Phillips Brooks (1835 – 1893) who exercised a powerful ministry as rector of the Church of the Holy Trinity in Boston, Massachusetts. In 1871, at the age of 42, Brooks delivered the Lyman Beecher Lectures in Preaching at Yale.<sup>231</sup>

According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, the term ‘personality’ means ‘the assemblage of qualities or characteristics which makes a person a distinctive individual; the (especially notable or appealing) distinctive character of a person’. Before actually reading Brooks’s lectures, I confess that I had equated these ‘qualities’ or ‘characteristics’ with the natural attractiveness or winsomeness of the preacher, as if the effectiveness of the preacher has something to do with the preacher’s charisma or dynamism. In these terms a good preacher is a preacher with ‘personality’. But Brooks had something else in mind:

“Preaching is the communication of truth by man to men. It has in it two essential elements, truth and personality. Neither of those can it spare and still be preaching. The truest truth, the most authoritative statement of God’s will, communicated in any other way than through the personality of brother man to men is not preached truth. Suppose it written on the sky, suppose it embodied in a book which has been so long held in reverence as the direct utterance of God that that the vivid personality of the men who wrote its pages has well-nigh faded out of it; in neither of these cases is there any preaching. And on the other hand, if men speak to other men that which they do not claim for truth, if they use their powers of persuasion or of entertainment to make other men listen to their speculations, or do their will, or applaud their cleverness, that is not preaching either. The first lacks personality. The second lacks truth. And preaching is the bringing of truth through personality. It must have both elements.”<sup>232</sup>

He then went on to elaborate on his understanding of ‘personality’:

“Truth through Personality is our description of real preaching. The truth must come really through the person, not merely over his lips, not merely into his understanding and out through his pen. It must come through his character, his affections, his whole intellectual and moral being. It must come genuinely through him. I think that granting equal intelligence and study, here is the great difference which we feel between two preachers of the Word. The Gospel has come *over* one of them and reaches us tinged and flavoured with his superficial characteristics, belittled with his littleness. The Gospel has come *through* the other, and we receive it impressed and winged with all the earnestness that there is in him. In the first case the man has been but a printing machine or a trumpet. In the other case he has been a true man and a real messenger of God.”<sup>233</sup>

For Brooks the effective preacher is a preacher whose character has been shaped by his experience of God. To quote Brooks again: “It is to be a message given to us for transmission, but yet a message which we cannot transmit until it has entered into our own experience, and we can give our own testimony of its spiritual power.”<sup>234</sup> Preachers are not just objective “messengers” of God’s truth, they are subjective “witnesses” to the saving truth of God.<sup>235</sup>

It was set against this understanding of personality that Brooks wrote:

“Beware of the tendency to preach about Christianity, and try to preach Christ. To discuss the relations of Christianity and Science, Christianity and Society, Christianity and Politics, is good. To set Christ forth to men so that they shall know Him, that is far better. It is good to be a Herschel who describes the sun; but it is better to be a Prometheus who brings the sun’s fire to the earth.”<sup>236</sup>

<sup>230</sup> Paul Scott Wilson, *Setting Words On Fire* 4.

<sup>231</sup> Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (H.R. Allenson Ltd, London 1877).

<sup>232</sup> Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* 5.

<sup>233</sup> Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* 8.

<sup>234</sup> Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* 14.

<sup>235</sup> Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* 15.

<sup>236</sup> Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* 21.

Brooks's *Lectures on Preaching* now feel very dated. Yet although the language belongs to another era, the thrust of what he had to say is relevant as ever: the preacher's personality must reflect the ongoing experience of Christ.<sup>237</sup> In other words the preacher must be marked by authenticity. Here the image of a 'herald' is inadequate. A herald is simply passing on a message, whereas a preacher is intimately involved in the message. Preachers need to be men and women of strong and vibrant faith, who from their experience can speak of forgiveness, grace, and healing. In this respect Brian Harris is right: "Preaching is not primarily mouth to ear, but heart to heart."<sup>238</sup> Harris goes on: "I have chatted with enough people about why they did or did not respond to a sermon to realise that, for large numbers of people, the answer has little to do with the sermon's content and a great deal to do with whether they did or did not relate to the preacher."<sup>239</sup> What counts is not the 'chemistry' of a relationship, but rather a relationship where empathy, experience, and authentic faith are perceived to come together.

In terms of the modern sense of 'personality', I am not sure how colourful a preacher Brooks was. According to his biographers, he was shy, spoke rapidly, had a stiff sermon delivery and terrible eye contact – he usually stared at the sounding board above his head. Yet he became one of the great 19th century 'princes of the pulpit'. In part this may have been due to his careful preparation, in part because of his pastor's heart, but in part too because of the way in which he spoke with sincerity and intensity. His personality reflected his experience of God.

## Preaching is God at work

According to Darrell Johnson, the senior pastor of First Baptist Church, Vancouver, Canada: "Whenever a human being, Bible in hand, stands up before a group of other human beings, invites the gathered assembly into a particular text of the Bible and as faithfully as possible tries to say again what the living God is saying in the text, something always happens. Something transformative, empowering, life-giving happens."<sup>240</sup>

Preaching is far more than normal discourse. God is at work. N.T. Wright said something similar: "The preaching of the word stands alongside the gospel sacraments as one of the normal and vital ways in which the living God is active and at work in the lives of his people and the wider church....It is meant to be an occasion, when, so to speak, *God happens*: when that strange and yet familiar moment comes upon us, and we know that we have been addressed, healed, confronted and kindled by the one who made us and loves us."<sup>241</sup>

Or to quote Michael Quicke: "Preaching is nothing less than sharing the in-breaking of God's news to create new people in new community. Christian preaching, at its best, is a biblical speaking/listening/seeing/doing event that God empowers to form Christ-shaped people and communities... Preaching is about God communicating his will and purpose with power and immediacy to effect change.... Preaching, at its best, is a God happening, empowered by Father, Son and Holy Spirit."<sup>242</sup>

These are bold claims. There have been times in my ministry when the congregation has become very quiet and I have become conscious that people are listening – truly listening – with an unusual intensity to what God is saying. There have been times when God has clearly been at work, sometimes against all the odds. I shall never forget preaching one Sunday morning in Wuhan, China. Although I gave of my best as I preached of God's amazing love for us, I was conscious not only that I was having to use a volunteer translator; but also that I was a Westerner speaking into a very different context. To my surprise, when the sermon ended, nineteen people came forward to profess their desire to put their faith in Jesus. As I said to a friend that day, I would go to China any day to get that kind of response.

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<sup>237</sup> Brooks went on to say in his second lecture about 'The Preacher Himself': "The Christian ministry is the largest field for the growth of a human soul that this world offers. In it he who is faithful must go on learning more and more for ever. His growth in learning is all about up with his growth in character. Nowhere else do the moral and intellectual so sympathise, and lose or gain together. The minister must grow. His true growth is not necessarily a change of views. It is a change of view. It is not revolution. It is progress. It is a continual climbing which opens continually wider prospects. It repeats the experience of Christ's disciples. Of whom their Lord was always making larger men and then giving them the larger truth of which their enlarged natures had become capable" (*Lectures on Preaching* 70, 71).

<sup>238</sup> Brian Harris, 'Preaching in weakness: Reflections on the self in preaching' 192-202 in *On Eagles' Wings: An Exploration Strength in the Midst of Weakness* (Wipf and Stock, Eugene, Oregon 2008) edited by Michael Parsons & David J. Cohen.

<sup>239</sup> Brian Harris, 'Preaching in weakness' 192.

<sup>240</sup> Darrell Johnson, *The Glory of Preaching*.

<sup>241</sup> N.T. Wright in his introduction to Donald Coggan, *A New Day of Preaching: The Sacrament of the Word* (SPCK, London 1996) 2.

<sup>242</sup> Michael Quicke, *360 Degree Preaching* 27.

From my own experience I know that it was as an eight-year old child listening to an evening sermon on the opening words of the Lord's Prayer ('Our Father') that brought me to the moment when on my return home I knelt down and asked Jesus to come into my heart as my Lord and Saviour. I know too that my father, the preacher on that Sunday, had himself at the age of 15 come to faith through the preaching of a sermon:

"One evening the preacher took the theme of the meaning of Christ's death. For the first time in my life I, who had seen crucifixes since I was a child, learned that the cross was for my sake; that the love of Christ shown on it embraced me as truly as it did anyone, and that I personally could know forgiveness for ever and eternal life. When that dawned on me it was like the coming of day. I could not hold back from Christ. I went forward to express my desire to receive Him – and went home walking on air."<sup>243</sup>

Time and again amazing things do happen through the preaching of the Word. But was Darrell Johnson right when he said "something always happens"<sup>244</sup> Later Johnson says: "I believe that whenever human beings leave a preaching moment (a preaching-of-the-Word-of-God moment) they will do so with

- A clearer vision of the living God in Jesus (who according to himself is the subject of any text, and therefore, of any sermon on any text) [John 5.39; Luke 24.27,44];
- A better understanding of the gospel of Jesus, the good news of what God has done, is doing and will do in Jesus;
- An 'alternative reading of reality', a different, more redemptive way of understanding the concrete circumstances, challenges and fear in their lives;
- A new way of thinking, feeling, acting and reacting shaped by the clearer vision, better understanding and alternative reading;
- A new power enabling them to walk in the new reality into which the preached text has brought them."<sup>245</sup>

With all that I happily identify. I too have experienced God at work. But there have been times when I have gone to church and listened to a sermon, and, in spite of all my hopes, nothing seemed to happen. I have even been known to fall asleep in a sermon – and to my embarrassment I was sitting on the front row for all to see! The story is told of a vicar, who was taking a small boy around his church and showing him the war memorial stones. "These are the names of those who died in the Services." The boy asked: "Did they die at the morning service or at the evening service?"

When nothing seems to happen, is that the fault of the preacher? This appears to be the implication when Michael Quicke in his definition of preaching as "preaching at its best, is a God happening", says "'At its best' expresses a realism that much preaching sadly falls short".<sup>246</sup> No doubt in some circumstances, it is true that the preacher has turned what might have been a 'God-event' into a merely human event. But is it always so? There have been times when I have prepared faithfully, preached my heart out, and at the end of the service have felt like weeping because nothing had seemed to happen. Nobody had responded to the Gospel invitation. Nobody had said at the door that God had spoken to them. Preaching can be an incredibly emptying experience. Yet I have discovered that it has often been precisely on those apparently 'empty' occasions that God has been at work.<sup>247</sup>

Why are lives not always transformed by our preaching? It could well be the fault lies in the preacher. On the other hand, the fault could lie in part with the congregation. For where people do not expect God to speak, God often does not speak. In this respect I am struck by the way in which Paul described the reception of the Gospel by the Thessalonians: "You received the word of God... not as a human word but as it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers" (1 Thess 2.13). God's word was able to "work" in their hearts because they "accepted" it as God's word for them.<sup>248</sup> What was true of the believers at Thessalonica was true just a few weeks later at Corinth: it was "those who believed" who discovered the power and wisdom of God and so were saved (1 Cor 1.21). Significantly the Gospel writers tell us that there were occasions when Jesus could do no mighty work "because of their unbelief" (Matt 13.58; see Mark 6.5,6). Faith is the catalyst in preaching too. Why was it that the Holy Spirit fell in Caesarea even before Peter had had time to end his sermon (Acts 10.44)? Surely it was the sense of expectancy that

<sup>243</sup> Paul Beasley-Murray, *Fearless for Truth: A Personal Portrait of the Life of George Beasley-Murray* (Paternoster, Carlisle 2002) 13.

<sup>244</sup> Darrell Johnson, *The Glory of Preaching* 8.

<sup>245</sup> Darrell Jones, *The Glory of Preaching* 11.

<sup>246</sup> Michael Quicke, *360 Degree Preaching* 27.

<sup>247</sup> As Brian Harris, 'Preaching in Weakness' 202 notes: "The finite self is sometimes the vehicle for the infinite God. Attempts at explanation fail. Paul comes closes, 'But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us' (2 Cor 4.7). If this is weakness, it is a weakness to be embraced and celebrated."

<sup>248</sup> The verb used here by Paul (*energeo*) appears as an adjective in Hebs 4.12 where God's word is described as 'active' or 'powerful' (*energes*).

was present which made the difference: in the words of Cornelius: “Now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say” (Acts 10.23).

But there may well be another reason: viz. the sovereignty of God. Derek Tidball writes: “I have known what is sometimes called ‘the romance of the pulpit’, that touch of God’s Spirit which gives you a fluency beyond your usual powers and wings your words effortlessly into people’s lives and transforms them. Yet it is not ‘the sermon’ that does this, but the Spirit. The same sermon preached on a different occasion may well not have anything like the same effect, as Jonathan Edwards knew. He had preached his revival sermon ‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God’ before and after that special day when it provoked such a reaction in Enfield Connecticut on 8 July 1741, but it never had the same impact as it did on that day. It is not ‘preaching’ as such which is the secret, but the sovereignly free Spirit who chooses on occasion to use a preacher.”<sup>249</sup>

## 6. Preaching today

### Has preaching had its day?

Some people wonder whether preaching has had its day. Although in evangelical circles at least, preaching has often become the virility test of ministry, preaching is in a parlous state at the moment. Too many preachers are boring, long-winded, and irrelevant.

Not that there is anything new in all this. In 1857 Anthony Trollope wrote:

“There is, perhaps, no greater hardship at present inflicted on mankind in civilised and free countries, than the necessity of listening to sermons. No-one but a preaching clergyman has, in these realms, the power of compelling an audience to sit silent and be tormented. No-one but a preaching clergyman can revel in platitudes, truisms and untruths, and yet receive, as his undisputed privilege, the same respectful demeanour as though words of impassioned eloquence, or persuasive logic, fell from his lips.”<sup>250</sup>

Trollope does not overstate his case. The mind boggles at how un-self-aware some ministers must be; otherwise they would have packed up preaching a long time ago!

The question therefore arises: has preaching had its day? Just as churches are rapidly scrapping their pews today, should they scrap their pulpits too?<sup>251</sup>

Preaching, it is said, because it is non-cooperative communication, is no longer suitable for our time. It is like using a paraffin lamp in the age of electric light.<sup>252</sup> The sermon has been described as “a monstrous monologue by a moron to mutes”. Not only is preaching often boring, it is also frequently remarkably ineffective. American research has indicated that immediately following the worship service, fewer than one-third of the persons tested could give a reasonably clear statement of the primary ‘question’ of the sermon or the ‘answer’ suggested in the message. In another research project the results were even worse: 21% of the 271 persons (who all felt that the sermon was either “superior” or “good”) could reflect the preacher’s central message clearly and accurately.<sup>253</sup> And, of course, none of this research indicated whether or not those who did remember what the sermon was about, actually changed their minds or behaviour as a result of what they heard!

I’m reminded of the wonderfully perceptive comment of the 19th century preacher, Henry Ward Beecher, who complained that “the churches of the land are sprinkled all over with bald-headed old sinners whose hair has been worn off by the friction of countless sermons that have been aimed at them and have glanced off and hit the man in the pew behind.” It’s all too possible to hear what the preacher is saying, and yet fail to apply it personally.

In the light of such criticisms and comments, it is tempting to ditch preaching altogether. Haven’t we preachers got better things to do with our time? Just think of all the hours that are put into sermon preparation week by week. Then

<sup>249</sup> Tidball, *Preacher, keep yourself from idols* 337.

<sup>250</sup> Quoted by J.R.W. Stott, *I Believe in Preaching* (Hodder & Stoughton, London 1982) 53-54.

<sup>251</sup> Actually in the UK most Baptist churches seem to have done away with their pulpits. Today it does not seem right to be ‘six feet above contradiction’.

<sup>252</sup> H.D. Bastian, cited by Klaas Runia, *The Sermon under Attack* (Paternoster, Exeter 1983) 9.

<sup>253</sup> Klaas Runia, *The Sermon under Attack* 10-11.

multiply these hours by the number of sermons preached in the country. It was estimated that in England and Wales alone some 50,000 sermons are delivered each week. Think of all the positive things that could be done with the time currently devoted to preaching!

According to Stuart Murray “the dominance of preaching is a Christendom vestige, related to clericalism, massive buildings, unchallengeable proclamation and nominal congregations.”<sup>254</sup> For him, ‘monologue’ sermons have the following major drawbacks:

- They deflect church leaders from other activities required in a post-Christendom context.
- They depend on exceptionally gifted communicators who are scarce.
- They de-skill audiences.
- They have limited impact on personal and community development.
- The excessive frequency of sermons gives no opportunity for people to work through their implications before hearing another.
- People leave churches because they are weary of dogmatism and rhetorical performances, and of being spoon-fed and patronised.<sup>255</sup>

Murray believes that monologue presentations should be limited to once a month at the most. Instead, for him interactive learning is the key.<sup>256</sup>

I am not convinced. First of all, Murray’s criticism of the preachers and preaching is one-sided: I do not, for instance, believe that preaching is the main reason why people leave the church. Secondly, the interactive learning which he proposes is not a panacea: inter-active learning is already a feature of many home groups, but as Murray notes, this has “not transformed congregations into mature learning communities”. Thirdly, the kind of Sunday participation which Murray would encourage is only possible within small churches.

Undoubtedly many sermons are boring. We have all counted the number of pipes in the organ or panes of glass in the window. Indeed, maybe we’ve been gently anaesthetised and fallen asleep. Edmund Jones tells of a minister who received a query from the former Civil Defence Unit asking how many people could be accommodated in his church in the event of an attack. “I don’t rightly know”, he replied, “but we sleep 300 comfortably every Sunday!”<sup>257</sup>

However, the abuse of the medium does not invalidate the medium. The fact that much preaching falls far short of the mark, does not necessarily mean that all preaching should therefore be scrapped. There are times when preaching can be remarkably effective. Many a Christian can testify to a time when, quite unexpectedly, God broke through and addressed them directly by means of a sermon. True, this is not an experience that happens to everybody every Sunday, but even that does not invalidate the ordinary preaching that goes on Sunday by Sunday.

All this was well illustrated in a correspondence that took place a number of years ago in the former *British Weekly*. It began with the publishing of this provocative letter:

“Dear Sir, It seems ministers feel their sermons are very important and spend a great deal of time preparing them. I have been attending church quite regularly for 30 years and I have probably heard 3,000 of them. To my consternation, I discover I cannot remember a single sermon. I wonder if a minister’s time might be more profitably spent on something else?”

The *British Weekly* received a storm of responses. The correspondence was finally ended by the following letter:

“Dear Sir, I have been married for 30 years. During that time I have eaten 32,850 meals – mostly my wife’s cooking. Suddenly I have discovered I cannot remember the menu of a single meal. And yet... I have the distinct impression that without them, I would have starved to death long ago.”

I find this argument convincing. Not all preaching has to be remembered to be effective. On the other hand, we must not be fooled into believing that there is no room for improvement. Far from it: there is much room for improvement. But this does not mean that the basic institution of preaching has had its day and is now ready to be scrapped.

<sup>254</sup> Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* 265.

<sup>255</sup> Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* 264, 265.

<sup>256</sup> Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* 266, 267.

<sup>257</sup> Edmund Jones *Expository Times* 92 (1980-81) ‘Preparing The Weekly Sermon’ 228.

If preaching has had its day, then what else would we put in its place? How else would the Gospel be communicated? For a good number of years, small groups have been very much in vogue in church life. Most churches have now switched to home groups in place of the traditional mid-week meeting. Some churches have even experimented with discussion groups instead of an evening service. But are discussion groups the solution for the sermon? Surely not. The discussion group might supplement the sermon, but can never replace it. As we have said, the Gospel is about news, and not views. The preacher is God's herald and proclaims the great acts of God in Christ. There is a place for 'one way' communication. The implications of the Good News can no doubt be discussed, but the 'news' itself is beyond dispute and needs to be made known. This is the task of the preacher. In the splendid words of the great Scottish preacher, James Stewart,

“The Church needs men [and women!] who, knowing the world around them, and knowing the Christ above them and within, will set the trumpet of the Gospel to their lips, and proclaim His sovereignty and all-sufficiency.”<sup>258</sup>

It is not without significance that the churches that are growing today are, in the vast majority of cases, the churches where preaching and teaching are taken seriously. “Is it not clear”, asked Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “that the decadent periods and eras in the history of the Church have always been those periods when preaching had declined?”<sup>259</sup>

A defence of preaching, however, does not involve a defence of preachers. The fact is that in many places the church today is experiencing a dearth of good preaching. Haddon Robinson did not exaggerate: “Most modern preaching evokes little more than a wide yawn. God is not in it.”<sup>260</sup>

What has gone wrong? Michael Quicke identifies the following negative factors affecting preaching:

1. A loss of holistic engagement with Scripture (preaching that captures head and heart, intellect and imagination, emotions and will).
2. A poverty of Holy Spirit power. There is “an absence of spiritual authenticity in much preaching. To misquote 1 Thessalonians 1.5 there is preaching simply with words and not in power, in the Holy Spirit, or with full conviction.”
3. An increased pressure on pastors: “As administrative tasks gobble up increasing amounts of time, other duties suffer, especially sermon preparation.”
4. There are fewer good models to follow.
5. Changing times can appear to cause preaching – and preachers – to seem irrelevant.<sup>261</sup>

None of these negative factors, however, are terminal. There is no reason why preachers cannot rise to the challenge and become once again effective preachers of the Word. But for this to happen, then we will have to give of our best. As Thomas Oden said: “This heralding does not occur without work, study, prayer, meditation, and effort – all enabled by grace. Resistances are not overcome by chance or laziness but by work.”<sup>262</sup>

## Preaching demands commitment from today's pastors

Every time I sit at my desk, I am challenged by a text displayed on a wooden stand which I bought on one of my trips to the USA: “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim 2.15). Not surprisingly for an American piece of religious bric-a-brac, the text is taken from the Authorised Version. As modern versions of the Bible make clear, the Authorised Version is at this point a little misleading. Paul's immediate concern was not for Timothy to devote himself to study, but to devote his energies to

<sup>258</sup> J.S. Stewart, *Preaching* (Hodder & Stoughton, London 2nd edition 1955) 12.

<sup>259</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and the Preachers* 24. See also Paul Beasley-Murray, “‘The Word of God Grew’: a Lukan perspective on church growth” (*Church Growth Digest* XIV.1, Autumn 1992) 13 where I argued that on the three occasions that Luke used the unusual expression ‘the word of God grew’ (Acts 6.7; 12.24; 19.20) he was not so much referring to increased proclamation of the word (although undoubtedly that was involved), as rather the growth of the church. I quoted Ernst Haenchen who in his monumental commentary stated, “‘The Word of the Lord’ is none other than the mission church itself, for which an abstraction like Christianity’ had not yet been invited” (*Acts of the Apostles*, Oxford 1971, 568). I went on: “From a practical perspective this unusual expression relating to the growth of the word of God may contain lessons for those of us concerned with church growth today. If churches are to grow today, then it will be to the extent that they are communities where the word of God is effectively proclaimed.”

<sup>260</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Expository Preaching: Principles and Practice* (British edition: IVP, Leicester 1986) 18.

<sup>261</sup> Michael Quicke, *360 Degree Preaching* 38-43.

<sup>262</sup> Thomas Oden, *First & Second Timothy & Titus* 138.

“laying out the truth plain and simple” (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*). So the NRSV reads: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.” Similarly the GNB reads: “Do your best to win full approval in God’s sight, as a worker who is not ashamed of his work, one who correctly teaches the message of God’s truth.”

I checked out the main verb (*spoudazo*) in my Greek New Testament Lexicon.<sup>263</sup> There the meaning is defined as “be zealous” or “eager”, “take pains”, “make every effort”. The same verb appears in 2 Tim 4.9 (“Do your best to come to me soon”) and 4.21 (“Do your best to come before winter”). It implies commitment, effort, even sacrifice.

“Do your best”. It was precisely this challenge which caused me to earmark every Tuesday for sermon preparation. That morning I did not look at my emails, I did not make phone calls, I was focused on God’s word for Sunday.

I find it significant that Paul speaks of the preacher as a “worker”; perhaps “labourer” might be a better translation. If I want to gain God’s approval, then my preparation for preaching will involve hard work on my part. Sermon writing is very different from writing for the church newsletter – the level of effort and concentration is of a different order.

Much has been written about what Paul had in mind when he urged Timothy to “rightly divide the word of truth”. Literally the underlying Greek word (*orthotomeo*) means to ‘cut straight’ – but the actual origin of the metaphor is disputed. To quote from my Greek lexicon again, this word is only found elsewhere in Prov 3.6 and 11.5 where it “plainly means ‘cut a path in a straight direction’ or ‘cut a road across country (that is forested or otherwise difficult to pass through) in a straight direction’, so that the traveller may go directly to his destination”. If this is the underlying meaning of the metaphor, then the emphasis is on the word of God reaching its destination. Preaching has to be faithful to “the word of truth”, but above all the preaching needs to be clear to the listener.

As I reflect upon Paul’s exhortation, it seems to me that the issue is the reception of the message as distinct from the transmission. Accuracy in exegesis is not enough: what counts is understanding on the part of our hearers. That takes effort on behalf of the preacher. Certainly, that is what takes the effort for me. As a result my sermons tend to be ‘simple’ rather than ‘learned’. For communication is the ultimate challenge for the preacher.

## Preaching today must still have the Gospel in view

One of my earliest memories as a young preacher was of entering an old wooden pulpit and seeing there a plaque with the words of John 12.21 (AV): “Sir, we would see Jesus”. Over the years I have seen a good number of other pulpits with such a plaque. What a challenge for preachers today – to ensure that our preaching enables our hearers to “see Jesus”.

That first request to “see Jesus” was made by “some Greeks”. Like many people today, it would appear that they were searching after truth. They couldn’t take seriously their own legends of gods and goddesses romping around Mount Olympus, and yet they couldn’t discount the idea of God himself. They knew that there had to be something more to life than eating, drinking, and making merry. So, perhaps attracted to Judaism’s lofty monotheism and its simple moral code, they came to Jerusalem and were present for the Jewish Passover festival. But their hunger for God appears not to have been satisfied by the ritual and ceremony of the Temple. Instead their interest was aroused by Jesus. Maybe they had witnessed the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, riding in triumph on a donkey, surrounded by the enthusiastic shouts and palm-waving of his disciples; or maybe they had heard of Jesus’ raising Lazarus from the dead. So they asked Philip to take them to Jesus. In the words of Mark Stibbe: “Their religious quest” was “for true sight/insight’ about Jesus”.<sup>264</sup> Whether or not they actually met Jesus, we do not know. However, John suggests that it was this request to see Jesus which caused Jesus to speak about his death and resurrection: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12.24); “now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself” (John 12.31, 32). To “see Jesus” – to gain true insight into the person of Jesus – is to see that through his death and resurrection there is life for all.

In the time of the early church, the preaching of the good news of Jesus, crucified and risen, was primarily directed toward those outside the church (see, for instance, Acts 8.15, 25, 40; 10.36; 14.7, 21; 16.10). It has often been pointed

<sup>263</sup> W.F. Arndt and E.W. Gingrich, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 4th edition 1952).

<sup>264</sup> Mark Stibbe, *John* (Sheffield Academic Press 1993) 136. R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (Doubleday, New York 1966) 466 goes a step further, for he notes that “in the Johannine context ‘to see’ may well mean ‘to believe in’.”



out that in the New Testament there is a distinction between preaching or ‘proclamation’ (*kerugma*) and ‘teaching’ (*didache*).<sup>265</sup> The former was the public proclamation of the good news of Jesus to the non-Christian world; the latter was teaching directed toward the church.

Today, however, the ‘edges’ of the church are less sharp. Or to put it another way, when Christians meet for worship, there are often ‘seekers’ present too, who consciously or unconsciously are searching for something more in life, and who in the words of Mike Hill, Bishop of Bristol, are “ripe for the Gospel”.<sup>266</sup> In larger churches such seekers are to be found every Sunday. In smaller churches, it may be just Christmas or Easter, a guest service or a baptismal service, when people are present who do not belong to our church communities. On those special occasions when non-Christians are present in large numbers, I find it an awesome responsibility to have to preach the Gospel. This may be the one and only occasion that some may darken the door of a church, the one and only opportunity they may have to hear the Gospel. How can I present it in ways which are meaningful and relevant to them? How can I ensure that my preaching, as also the service as a whole, is not a stumbling block to the Gospel?

At the very least the presence of visitors in our midst means that all that is said and done needs to be ‘seeker-friendly’. A few years ago seeker-friendly evangelism meant holding ‘seeker services’ which did away with the normal worship of the church. It was argued that “only the most determined seekers, or those seekers who have been exposed to a church culture in the past... will be able to penetrate the mysteries offered in a worship service intended for believers.”<sup>267</sup> So special services were designed to enable the visitor to feel comfortable and at home in a church context:

“As you arrive you’ll be given a programme and you can sit and listen to live music, which may be classical, jazz or rock. The service will continue the musical theme with either a soloist or a small group singing. You may be asked to join in a particular song of worship (words will be on the programme) as you stay seated. If you prefer, please feel free just to observe.

Each service will be different but the basic element of music, drama, contemporary song and audio-visual presentations will be maintained. You may be led in prayer by someone on the stage and a relevant passage from the Bible may be read after a brief introductory explanation. There’ll be a talk on the issue of the day – hopefully you’ll find that not just easy to listen to, but informative and personally relevant.

Our aim is to give you a totally new experience of church from what you may have had in the past...A church service for the non-religious, non-church attender. A church service that’s relevant to you as you cope with the pressures of modern life.”<sup>268</sup>

Much as I am impressed by such a presentation, I have never been convinced that a ‘seeker-friendly’ service has to do away with the worship of the church. For Christian worship can be winsome.

“When Christians are to be found really worshipping God, loving Him, excited with Him, and when their worship makes them into a caring community of love, then questions will certainly be asked, leading to excellent opportunities for sharing the good news of Christ.”<sup>269</sup>

My mind goes to the story of the conversion of the Ukraine, and how the prince of Kiev sent several of his followers out to find the true religion. In their travels, they visited a mosque where they reportedly found ‘no joy’. Further searching of various religions and worship practices revealed nothing satisfactory. But in Constantinople they worshipped in a Christian church. Here they experienced a worship that drew them to God and converted them to Christ. “We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth”, they wrote. “We cannot describe it to you: only this we know, that God dwells there among men, and that their service surpasses the worship of all other places.”<sup>270</sup> Their experience was the experience envisaged by Paul, where within the context of a worshipping congregation the

<sup>265</sup> See C.H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (Hodder & Stoughton, London 1936).

<sup>266</sup> See Mike Hill, *Reaching the unchurched* (Scripture Union, London) who said that the characteristics of such seekers include: a sense of dis-ease with the ‘givenness of life’ as it is; a desire to explain the world as it is experienced; a recognition that left only with my own inner resources to deal with life’s problems, I am in a very fragile state; a feeling of vulnerability often hastened, e.g. by illness or bereavement, conception, birth or relationship difficulties; a state of loneliness, physically or emotionally; those whose ‘life-script’ has given them a sense they are unacceptable; and those who are looking for a new start or ‘clean sheet’.

<sup>267</sup> Martin Robinson, *A World Apart: Creating a Church for the Unchurched* (Monarch, Tunbridge Wells 1992) 74.

<sup>268</sup> Part of a printed invitation to ‘First Sunday’, the Seeker Service of Altrincham Baptist Church, Cheshire.

<sup>269</sup> David Watson, *I Believe in Evangelism* (Hodder & Stoughton, London 1979) 166.

<sup>270</sup> Robert Webber, ‘Evangelism through Worship’ *Decision* (July-August 1989) 23. See also Paul Beasley-Murray, ‘Worship and Presence Evangelism’ *Global Church Growth* 30 (Jan-Mar 1993) 11, 12.

unbeliever is overwhelmed with a sense of God's presence, so "that person will bow down before God and worship him, declaring, 'God is really among you'" (1 Cor 14.25).<sup>271</sup>

But worship apart, one thing is for sure: in a context where non-Christians are present, the good news needs to be proclaimed in a way which relates the crucified and risen Lord Jesus to the perceptions and felt needs of its hearers. The language used in such a presentation will hopefully be jargon-free. But in essence there should be no difference in method between preaching to Christians and preaching to non-Christians. There are not 'evangelistic' sermons as over against 'expository' sermons. Some expository sermons are 'evangelistic' in nature, while others may have the 'edification of the saints' in mind. Both, however, need to be rooted in Scripture and rooted in the contemporary world.

Even in smaller churches where perhaps no 'outsiders' are apparently present, God's people still need to hear that God loves them. They may not need to hear 'evangelistic' sermons; but they certainly need to hear 'evangelical' sermons: that is, preaching which is "the articulation of the *euangelion* of what God has done, is doing, and will do in Jesus Christ".<sup>272</sup> For life can be tough; behind their masks many Christian people today are hurting. They need constantly to be reminded that whatever their outward circumstances, one thing is for sure: God loves them, and the proof of that is his Son. In the context of the world's suffering we need to preach Christ crucified and risen. In the words of James Stewart:

"Be very clear about this, that what men and women need, face to face with the mystery of pain and trouble and tragedy, is not a solution that will satisfy the intellect, not that primarily at any rate, but a force that will stabilise the soul; not a convincing and coercive argument as to the origins of evil or the reasons why such suffering is permitted on the earth, but a power that will enable them to 'stand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand'; in short, not an explanation, but a victory."<sup>273</sup>

## Expounding God's Word for today

Expounding God's Word today means that we take his Word seriously. In the title of H.H. Farmer's book, the preacher is 'the servant of the Word'.<sup>274</sup> We are not in the business of sharing our views on the week's news, but rather of expounding God's Word. The task of the preacher is not to entertain the congregation, but to enable God's people to hear God speak. Unfortunately much evangelical preaching is light-weight and undemanding, full of funny stories and jokes. Richard Bewes, a former rector of All Soul's, Langham Place, London, observed: "Plenty of preaching in the West today is of an entertaining, joke-ridden nature; it is as if the church and the theatre have neatly swapped roles. It is the theatre that tends now to take on the big themes that speak to the dilemmas of humanity, while the biggest-selling tapes at Christian conferences will often be from the speakers with the best jokes and banter."<sup>275</sup> This is a travesty.

"All true Christian preaching is expository preaching" declared John Stott, and in my judgement rightly so.<sup>276</sup> The Bible is the source of the preacher's authority. Our only claim to be heard is that our message is rooted in the Word of God. If as preachers we preach our own opinions, our congregations may listen to them politely, but at the end they have every right to reject them. But if the content of our preaching is Bible-centred and Bible-driven, then our preaching has a God-given authority; we become God's heralds, his ambassadors, his agents.

The importance of expository preaching has recently been underlined by Jonathan Lamb, the chief executive of Keswick Ministries: "The only true form of preaching is biblical preaching. And by biblical preaching, we mean preaching that places the Bible at the centre, exposing the Bible's force and power. In almost all situations, I would even want to go a step further: biblical preaching is preaching that expounds a Bible passage. Of course, there is an important place within the church's diet for thematic or topical preaching, but this too is usually best developed through the careful explanation of a main passage, supplemented by other biblical material."<sup>277</sup>

<sup>271</sup> See also Paul Beasley-Murray, *Faith and Festivity* (Marc/Monarch, Eastbourne 1991) 117-122.

<sup>272</sup> Richard J. Neuhaus, *Freedoms for Ministry* 157.

<sup>273</sup> James Stewart, *Preaching* 67.

<sup>274</sup> Herbert H. Farmer, *The Servant of the Word* (Nisbet & Co, London 1941).

<sup>275</sup> Quoted by John Drane, *After McDonaldization* 115.

<sup>276</sup> John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching* 125.

<sup>277</sup> Jonathan Lamb, *Preaching Matters: Encountering the Living God* (IVP, Nottingham 2014) 22.

Taking God's Word seriously inevitably leads to expository preaching. Haddon Robinson has defined expository preaching as

“The communication of a biblical concept derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers.”<sup>278</sup>

More simply put, expository preaching is ‘unpacking’ God's Word and making it clear for all to see. Expository preaching is truly biblical preaching. Preaching is truly biblical, said Leander Keck, “when (a) the Bible governs the content of the sermon and when (b) the function of the sermon is analogous to that of the text. In other words, preaching is biblical when it imparts a Bible-shaped word in a Bible-shaped way.”<sup>279</sup>

Let me hammer this point home. Expository preaching involves expounding God's Word as found in the Bible as distinct from imposing our ‘word’ upon a biblical text. Biblical preaching involves *exegesis* – a reading out; rather than *eisegesis* – a reading in. Expository preaching wrestles with the message contained within the text; it does not allow the text to become a peg for our ideas and preconceptions.

There is more to expository preaching than having a text. “Some brethren”, remarked Spurgeon, “have done with their text as soon as they have read it. Having paid all due honour to that particular passage by announcing it, they feel no necessity further to refer to it. They touch their hats, as it were, to that part of Scripture, and pass on to fresh fields and pastures new... Surely the words of inspiration were never meant to be boot-hooks to help a Talkative to draw on his seven-leagued boots in which to leap from pole to pole.”<sup>280</sup> As it is in many churches the text can be likened to the national anthem played at a football game – “it gets the thing started, but is not heard again during the afternoon.”<sup>281</sup> Instead of being properly nourished on God's Word, in many churches people are served up with “religious junk food that leaves people bloated and self-satisfied”, with the result that those listening “have no opportunity to grow as integrated persons and disciples”.<sup>282</sup>

Gordon Rupp told the delightful apocryphal story of three of the disciples who, when Jesus and the fishermen apostles had gone, decided to try their own hand at preaching from a boat. So they pushed out the little craft and addressed the people standing on the shore. But they had forgotten to tie the mooring rope and so as they spoke they drifted further and further away, became less and less audible, began to shout louder and louder and gesticulate more and more wildly until they fell backwards into the lake. “As a parable it is perhaps nearer to Monty Python than the New Testament but it has a point,” commented Rupp. “A biblical text is at least a mooring rope.”<sup>283</sup>

We may also add that expository preaching involves more than citing Scripture texts throughout the sermon. I well remember listening to one elderly minister preach; he peppered his address with more than fifty Scripture quotations. But the quotations added nothing to the preaching. He took proof texts from Scripture to support his thesis; he failed to submit himself and his sermon to the Word of God, in the sense that the Scriptures failed to shape his sermon. The old saying is still true: a text without a context is a pretext.

The benefits of expository preaching have been well set out by John Stott:<sup>284</sup>

1. *Exposition sets us limits.* It restricts us to the Scriptural text, since expository preaching is biblical preaching.
2. *Exposition demands integrity.* What every Bible student must look for is the plain, natural, obvious meaning of each text, without subtleties.
3. *Exposition identifies the pitfalls* we must at all costs avoid. Since the resolve of the expositor is to be faithful to his text, the two main pitfalls may be termed forgetfulness and disloyalty. The forgetful expositor loses sight of his text by going off at a tangent and following his own fancy. The disloyal expositor appears to

<sup>278</sup> Haddon Robinson, *Expository Preaching* 20.

<sup>279</sup> Leander Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit* (Abingdon, Nashville 1978) 106.

<sup>280</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (First Series, Passmore & Alabaster, London 1897) 75.

<sup>281</sup> Haddon Robinson, *Expository Preaching* 20.

<sup>282</sup> John Drane, *After McDonaldization* 115.

<sup>283</sup> Gordon Rupp, *THE WORD and the words* (Diamond Jubilee Lecture of the London Baptist Preachers' Association, London 1972) 10.

<sup>284</sup> John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching* 126-133.

remain with his text, but strains and stretches it into something quite different from its original and natural meaning.

4. *Exposition gives us confidence to preach.* Like the ancient Jews we have been “entrusted with the oracles of God” (Rom 4.2).

A fifth advantage, not mentioned by Stott, is that expository preaching enables the preacher to remain fresh. When we conscientiously expound God’s Word Sunday by Sunday, we discover that we are always finding new truths to impart. But left to our own devices, we soon run out of bright ideas. “The preacher who expounds his own limited stock of ideas becomes deadly wearisome at last. The preacher who expounds the Bible has endless variety at his disposal. For no two texts say exactly the same thing.”<sup>285</sup>

I appreciate that expository preaching is not the only way to preach. Michael Quicke rightly says: “No one can be dogmatic about what a sermon should look like or can generalise from his or her own experience how all preaching should be... There has never been one ordained pattern, and in our age of turbulent change, we should expect just as much diversity as we find in the New Testament.”<sup>286</sup> Preaching forms are always changing, and yet I can only say that I doubt whether I could have lasted as a preacher over all these years if I had not committed myself to expository preaching. Brian Harris in his essay ‘Whither Preaching?’ looks, for instance, at topical preaching, which enables preachers to choose what they want to preach about, and in this way perhaps appear to be more relevant. However, says Harris, “topical preaching often lapses into idiosyncratic preaching. One senses the glazed stupor that settles over a congregation as the preacher announces that yet again her favourite topic will be the focus for the week. Topical preaching and poor exegesis are also often synonymous. One has to find a way to fit the text into one’s theme.”<sup>287</sup>

Narrative preaching is currently much in vogue, but it requires a good deal of imagination and creativity while yet remaining faithful to the text. Preachers have confused telling stories for their own sake with true narrative preaching where the story is controlled by the text.<sup>288</sup> Harris himself opts for expository preaching: “If we wish to raise biblically literate believers, we should take seriously the discipline of expository preaching.”<sup>289</sup>

Let it be said loud and clear: orthodoxy is no guarantee of Bible-shaped preaching. There are many preachers who happily subscribe to the authority of the Scriptures, and yet fail to put their high view of Scripture into practical effect. They stand there with an open Bible in their hands, but in fact never open up God’s Word to his people. Faithful preaching which is not relevant preaching is useless preaching.

So what in practical terms does taking God’s Word seriously mean? It means that those who preach must be prepared to study the Scriptures, and to study them in depth. For the sake of our own personal integrity, it means that we must have wrestled with the text, and ensured that we have really understood what the writer was seeking to say in the first place. For those who are able, this will mean reading the passage in its original Hebrew or Greek. It will certainly mean comparing one English version with another to gain the various nuances present in the text. We shall want to see how God has guided his people in the past in understanding the text (2 Pet 1.20). We shall therefore want to read several commentaries on the passage in question. Not just popular commentaries, although they can be helpful because of the illustrations they may provide, but scholarly commentaries too. We shall consult the concordance. We shall want to use every tool that is at our disposal in getting to grips with the text. We shall not be satisfied until we have plumbed the depths of the passage in question.

## Relating God's Word to today

It is not enough understand what God said hundreds of years ago. We need to know what God through his Word of old is now saying today. In the first place, we need to hear what he is saying to us as preachers. John Goldingay wrote: “I doubt whether preaching that searches and nurtures generally results from attempting to discover what the Bible has

<sup>285</sup> James Stewart *Preaching* 96.

<sup>286</sup> Michael Quicke, *360 Degree Preaching* 24.

<sup>287</sup> Brian Harris, ‘Whither Preaching?’ 195 in *Vose Seminary at Fifty* (Mosaic Press, Victoria, Australia 2013) edited by Nathan Hobby, John Olley and Michael O’Neil.

<sup>288</sup> See Michael Quicke, *360 Degree Preaching* 104.

<sup>289</sup> Harris, *Whither Preaching?* 196.

to say to them. It issues from realising what the Bible has to say to me.”<sup>290</sup> Only in second place, do we then need to hear what God is saying to his people.

God’s Word must be brought to bear upon life as it is today. It must be applied creatively, sensitively, and relevantly. In the words of Jim Packer: “As preaching is God-centred in its viewpoint, Christ-centred in its substance, so it is life-centred in its focus and life-changing in its thrust. Preaching is the practical communication of truth about God as it bears on our present existence.”<sup>291</sup> In other words, preaching must be more than talk about biblical texts.<sup>292</sup> The German preacher-theologian Helmut Thielicke told young aspiring preachers:

“As long as I discover no connection between the gospel and the problems of my life, then it has nothing to say to me and I am not interested. And that is precisely why the gospel must be told in new ways to every generation, since every generation has its own unique questions. This is why the gospel must constantly be forwarded to a new address, because the recipient is repeatedly changing his place of residence.”<sup>293</sup>

That is why it does no good for us to preach again great sermons from past eras. At one stage I had on my shelves a complete set of Spurgeon’s sermons as also all Alexander Maclaren’s sermons. But these sermons are unpreachable. In their day Spurgeon and Maclaren made a great impact on their contemporaries: crowds flocked to hear them in London and Manchester respectively. But their sermons, though once highly relevant, are now dated. It is not that the Word of God has become dated; it is that the context has changed.

How do we root our sermons in the real world of today? First of all, by keeping abreast of what is happening in the world of today. “What do you do to prepare your Sunday sermon?” Karl Barth was once asked. He answered: “I take the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other.” Similarly, precisely because he wants to speak relevantly to the ordinary unchurched person, Bill Hybels, the senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, Chicago, has told how in addition to reading a daily paper, watching the television and listening to the radio, he reads *Time*, *Newsweek*, *US News & World Report*, *Forbes* and usually *Business Week*.<sup>294</sup> We may not be a Karl Barth or a Bill Hybels, but this does not discharge us from an obligation to be familiar with the culture of our day. Preachers dare not retreat into a religious ghetto if they wish to preach effectively. I believe it a cause of concern that there are pastors who do not, for instance, read a daily paper. It is not enough to say “I don’t have the time”. We need to make the time to hear what other people are thinking and saying. Just as Ezekiel sat down among his contemporaries and experienced something of their pain (Ezek 3.15), so too do we.

Inevitably this creates a tension with the preacher. Preaching must on the one hand relate to the real world in which our hearers live. On the other hand, preaching, if it is to be biblical, must be anchored in the Word of God. This tension has been well expressed by Ian Pitt-Watson:

“Every sermon is stretched like a bowstring between the text of the Bible on the one hand and the problems of contemporary human life on the other. If the string is insecurely tethered to either end, the bow is useless.”<sup>295</sup>

It doesn’t matter how ‘sound’ the sermon might be, how faithful the preacher is to the text, if the sermon fails to connect to the world of today, then the sermon fails. Preaching involves the preacher – and the congregation – living in two worlds, the world of the Bible and the world of the here and now. The two must be inextricably linked if the sermon is to hit its mark.

Preaching, according to Bishop Stephen Neill, may therefore be likened to weaving:

<sup>290</sup> See John Goldingay, ‘The Spirituality of Preaching’, *Expository Times* 98 (1976-1977) 198. On the other hand, there is also a place for what Goldingay calls “vicarious listening”.

<sup>291</sup> J.I. Packer ‘Why Preach?’ 10 in *The Preacher And Preaching* (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., Phillipsburg, New Jersey 1986) edited by S.T. Logan.

<sup>292</sup> W.A. Beardslee, J.B. Cobb, D.J. Lull, R. Pregeant, T.J. Weeden & B.A. Woodbridge, *Biblical Preaching on the Death of Jesus* (Abingdon, Nashville 1989) 71.

<sup>293</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *How Modern Should Theology Be?* (English translation: Collins Fontana, London 1970) 10.

<sup>294</sup> Bill Hybels, ‘Speaking to the Secularised Mind’, 36 in *Mastering Contemporary Preaching* (British edition: IVP, Leicester 1991) by Bill Hybels, Stuart Briscoe & Haddon Robinson.

<sup>295</sup> Ian Pitt-Watson, *A Kind of Folly: Toward a Practical Theology of Preaching* (St Andrew Press, Edinburgh 1976) 57.

“There are the two factors of the warp and the woof. There is the fixed, unalterable element, which for us is the Word of God, and there is the variable element, which enables the weaver to change and vary the pattern at his will. For us that variable element is the constantly changing pattern of people and situations.”<sup>296</sup>

The skill of the preacher lies in combining faithfulness to the Word of God and sensitivity to the world. Preachers of a more conservative theological persuasion tend to be good at being biblical, but less successful at being contemporary; while preachers of a more liberal theological persuasion tend to be good at being contemporary, but less successful at being biblical. Effective preaching involves being at one and the same time both biblical and contemporary.

For the pastor, preaching must not only be rooted in the real world out there, it must also be rooted in the real world as represented in the congregation. The two are not always the same. One of the frustrations of itinerant preaching is that normally the visiting preacher does not know the local congregation and the issues it is facing. Preaching in such a context is like firing off a hail of bullets in all directions in the hope that one or two of them will hit the target. The joy of pastoral preaching is discovering that not only does God’s Word speak into the general contemporary scene; there is also a specific word for the local church too.

Hence, when it comes to sermon preparation, not only do we need to be listening to voices in the world, we need also to be listening to voices in the congregation. Pastoral preaching is, for instance, always the better, for pastoral visiting.

David Schlafer described what is involved in listening to a congregation:

“Listening to a congregation does not mean that the preacher will try to figure out what the people want to hear. Nor does it mean that members of a congregation will be shocked by (or apprehensive about) the use of personal confessions or life secrets from the pulpit. A preacher does not listen to parishioners in order to seek out foibles against which to rail, anonymously or in the abstract. Rather, in regular parish activities, casual conversations, and formal appointments, preachers listen for the heartbeat of the parish – its fears, hopes, joys, stresses, blind spots; its rough and cutting edges. If this listening is intent and ongoing, a preacher will be able to offer a relevant word in moments of crisis, as well as to draw attention to subtle shifts in parish mood and direction that need to be encouraged or help up to scrutiny.”<sup>297</sup>

Preaching relevantly will therefore mean that no sermon can ever be repeated without revision.<sup>298</sup> If preaching is proclaiming God’s Word into a particular situation, then inevitably such preaching has a sell-by date. The temptation for busy pastors who move to a new church is to draw upon their stock of old sermons; but to do so without listening afresh to the voices of the day is a recipe for ineffectiveness.

## Blessing God’s people today

Not so long ago I was reading an article on ‘The Practice of Preaching and the Spiritual Life of the Preacher’ by Bruce Epperly, when suddenly I felt as if I had been hit between the eyes.<sup>299</sup> For all of a sudden I came across what for me at least is a new way of looking at preaching. For Epperly describes preaching as ‘blessing the congregation’. He writes: “My vocation is to bless this congregation and give them words of hope, consolation, affirmation, challenge and confirmation.”

I too have always wanted to give my listeners “words of hope, consolation, affirmation, challenge and confirmation”. There is nothing new about describing the purpose of preaching in those terms. But I had not set out to “bless” my congregation through my preaching. I had always thought of the ‘blessing’ as the benediction which comes at the end of the service. But not Epperly. He goes on:

“Perhaps the most essential practice for preachers is the act of blessing. Throughout my process of preaching, I remember the community to whom I am preaching. I pray for their well-being and spiritual growth. I pray that I

<sup>296</sup> Stephen Neill, *On the Ministry* (SCM, London 1952) 74.

<sup>297</sup> David J. Schlafer, *Surviving the Sermon: A Guide to Preaching for those who have to Listen* (Cowley Publications, Boston, Massachusetts 1992) 48.

<sup>298</sup> There is nothing wrong with preaching on the same text again. Over 40 years of ministry I have preached on John 3.16 at least 20 different times; what’s more six of those times were at Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford. But it was not always the same sermon. I have preached four totally different sermons on John 3.16, and even when I had repeated one of those four sermons, the sermon was always tweaked in the light of the next context in which I found myself.

<sup>299</sup> *Congregations* 40.2, 2013.

might speak a word of grace, healing and inspiration to them. I see them as God's beloved and ask that God fill them with joy and grace. I continue this practice as I walk to the podium, take a few cleansing and centring breaths, and then, as I gaze upon the congregants, take one more deep breath and symbolically and prayerfully breathe God's blessing upon them."

My own practice has been different. As I stand before the congregation, about to preach, I normally lead the people in a short prayer, asking that that God will speak to us today. I often begin the 'prayer for illumination' (as distinct from a prayer of 'blessing') with a slightly amended form of either Psalm 119.18 or Psalm 119.105: "Open our eyes that we may behold wondrous truth out of your word" or "Your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path". The end result of my preaching is probably no different from the end result of Epperly's preaching – and yet there is a difference of emphasis.

Maybe there are times when preaching is not a means of blessing. I have recently been reading through the Book of Jeremiah, and thought to myself how grateful I was not to have had his message of doom to proclaim. But, living as we do the other side of the Cross and Resurrection, we have good news to share. So why is it that some Gospel preaching can be so negative? And why is it that some preachers take every opportunity to lay into their congregations for their perceived short-comings. What a difference it would have made if preachers saw their sermons as a means to bless their people. And what a difference too, it might make, if the members of our congregations came to church wondering how God was going to bless them today! Yes, Epperly is right, preaching is a means of God's blessing his people. I like that emphasis.

## 7. Preparing to preach

Effective preaching involves more than inspiration: it also involves the hard grind of painstaking sermon preparation. Yet ultimately preaching is only truly effective as God himself takes our words and empowers them by his Spirit. Effective preaching therefore demands that our preparation includes a sense of expectancy that God will use us in his service. In other words, we need to preach memorably, with due care, and with a sense of spiritual expectancy.

### Preaching memorably

In our preparation we need to give shape to our preaching, so that God's Word is allowed maximum impact on our hearers. Only so will preaching become fixed in people's minds and hearts; only so will it become, in the best sense of the word, memorable.

Preparing a sermon involves three stages: it involves listening to the voice of God in Scripture, listening to the voices in the world of today, and then fixing the listening process in a way which enables people to hear clearly what God would say to them through the preacher. Shaping the sermon involves hard work.

There is no one God-given way in which sermons must be shaped. In some traditions a good sermon has three points together with an introduction and a conclusion. However, there is no reason why a sermon should not have four points or five points, or two main points each with two sub-points. Sermons assume many forms. The important thing is that the preacher does not engage in a leisurely discursive ramble, but rather that there is a structure which serves to ram home the points that need to be made on the basis of the passage for the day.

Structure gives clarity to preaching. Napoleon is said to have had three commands for his messengers: "Be clear! Be clear! Be clear!" Preachers too need to be crystal clear. Our congregations need to be able to leave the service under no illusion about what was said.

Structure gives purpose and power to preaching. It enables preachers to develop an argument and apply it so that there is only one conclusion. For preachers, like barristers, are advocates: they are seeking a verdict. Preaching is not about God and about twenty minutes. True preaching has a very definite purpose in mind. In the words of R.W. Dale, the great Congregational preacher,

“‘To carry the vote and fire the zeal’ of our congregations, this, gentlemen, is our true business. If we are to be successful, there must be vigorous intellectual activity, but it must be directed by a definite intention to produce a definite result.”<sup>300</sup>

Preaching, said H.H. Farmer, is “a knock on the door... It is a call for an answer... Yet how many sermons I have heard which lack this summoning note almost entirely. They begin, they trickle on, they stop, like the turning on and turning off a tap behind which there is no head of water.”<sup>301</sup> It is only a well-structured sermon which enables preachers to fulfil the maxim of Richard Baxter and “screw God’s truth into their minds”.<sup>302</sup>

## Preaching with PowerPoint

The very first ministers’ conference I attended was in 1973 when Tom Houston, then the Director of the Bible Society, used an overhead projector (OHP). I was captivated by the opportunities for communication offered by this machine, with the result that a kind church member hearing of my new enthusiasm offered to buy the church an OHP, if the new minister would use it. And use it I did. In particular I used it for preaching. From then on I rarely preached without an OHP. I was convinced that people would be more likely to remember my sermons if they were able to see them as well as hear them.

There is little doubt that my sermons improved as a result of using an OHP. They became sharper and clearer. They had to: there is no place for muzzy thinking on an acetate sheet. The headings of my sermons became pithier. I realised it wasn’t enough to write on the acetate a phrase such as ‘Salvation only in Jesus’; rather I needed to turn it into a statement: ‘Only Jesus saves!’

Furthermore, it is a general truth that people remember more of what they see than what they hear. As one headline put it: “A message from your brain: I am not good at remembering what I hear”.<sup>303</sup> A University of Iowa study has confirmed that all too often what we hear goes in one ear and out the other. What a difference it then can make to a church service to see the key points of the sermon!

Today OHPs have gone out of fashion. Instead, PowerPoint is today’s favoured medium for communication. In some circles PowerPoint has gained a bad image. It has been said that ‘Power corrupts, and PowerPoint corrupts absolutely’. Other critics talk of there being ‘more Power than Point’ and of ‘PowerPointlessness’. There is, of course, some substance to such criticisms. My mind goes to one of the first PowerPoint sermons I ever experienced, where letters, words and pictures were flying in from every conceivable direction. The presentation was so impressive that the words of the preacher were totally lost on me. However, the abuse of a medium does not invalidate a medium. Gizmos are not of the essence of a PowerPoint presentation. When I did a PowerPoint course at our local university, I was told that gizmos are for children’s presentations: gizmos, said my instructor, do not belong to any presentation of serious import. Rightly used, however, PowerPoint is a great tool for today’s preachers.

I find the resistance of some preachers to the use of PowerPoint surprising, for as the world of education has discovered, PowerPoint is a great tool for teachers. Although sermons involve proclamation and not just teaching, they do involve teaching. Like the synagogues of old, our churches are ‘houses of instruction’. So let’s make sure that we teach well! But, some object: ‘You can’t preach at the same time as you use PowerPoint – preaching involves looking at and engaging with the congregation, whereas using a PowerPoint involves the preacher having to fiddle around with a lap-top’. But that is not necessary. Whenever I have used PowerPoint, I have ensured that the ‘tech’ team has not just my PowerPoint presentation, but also a copy of my sermon, duly marked up, indicating when the next PowerPoint slide needs to be shown. In this way, when I am preaching I am no longer having to worry about the mechanics, but rather am focusing on God’s word for the day. PowerPoint can most definitely enhance the preaching experience.

Why then do some preachers not use PowerPoint? I wonder whether it has to do with time, as also with a lack of organisation. There is no doubt that the preparation of a decent PowerPoint presentation can add several hours to a preacher’s preparation. So what should preachers do? Fortunately, in my particular case, the dilemma was resolved through the good services of one of my church members. Every Thursday morning I used to give her a copy of my script for Sunday, and she then produced not just a PowerPoint presentation, but also gave a marked up copy of the

<sup>300</sup> R.W. Dale, quoted by James Stewart, *Preaching* 248-249.

<sup>301</sup> H.H. Farmer, *The Servant of the Word* 65, 66.

<sup>302</sup> Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* 160.

<sup>303</sup> *National Geographic Daily News*, March 12, 2014.



script to the PowerPoint operator, indicating at which point changes were to be made to the screen. Because I normally keep fairly close to my script (although there are times when I feel ‘inspired’ to elaborate and wander off the original point!) it always worked. As a result, in my judgement, the sermon was the better!

## Preaching with due care

If we are to give of our best to our preaching, then priority will have to be given to the sermon in the week leading up to Sunday. It takes time and effort to produce powerful sermons which address the concerns of both the Bible and of the world. Such time and effort are only possible where preaching is the pastor’s priority. There are many other tasks crowding in upon us, but preaching is at the heart of the pastoral call. This high calling is well expressed by William Sangster:

“Called to preach! That is the basic thing at the last... Commissioned of God to teach the word! A herald of the great King! A witness of the Eternal Gospel! Could any work be more high and holy? To this supreme task God sent His only begotten Son. In all the frustration and confusion of the times, is it possible to imagine a work comparable in importance with that of proclaiming the will of God to wayward men?”<sup>304</sup>

In sheer numerical terms, it makes sense to give preaching a priority. For when one bears in mind the number of people present, and multiplies that number by the twenty or so minutes of the sermon, and then divides the resulting figure by sixty minutes, that then gives the number of years one would have to spend speaking to one person at a time!

What does this mean in practical terms?

1. We will not leave the preparation of a sermon until the Saturday, let alone to early Sunday morning. Sermon preparation takes time. Harry Emerson Fosdick reckoned to devote one hour’s work to every minute of his Sunday sermon, and he had a staff of researchers. Few, if any of us, are in that fortunate position to devote that amount of time. James Black urged his readers to “finish a sermon within eight hours”. He added: “At the beginning, however, for your own future good, you cannot put too much groundwork into your own preparation.”<sup>305</sup> Black’s advice does not seem to me to be excessive. A sermon is more than a mere morning’s work.
2. We will write out our sermons in full. I am aware that some preachers only write out headings for their sermons, but I am far from convinced of the wisdom of this practice. Preaching is an art and a science in which every word counts. Only the most gifted of extempore preachers can get away with not writing out their sermon. It is often precisely the most gifted preachers who have taken the most trouble in the writing out of their sermons. Writing out the sermon not only helps us to think straight; it also ensures that we do not slip into the same old well-worn phrases and words. Opinion varies about whether or not it is good to take the full manuscript into the pulpit. In my earlier days I used to reduce my manuscript to notes, and take the notes with me into the pulpit. Now I take into the pulpit the full manuscript, suitably highlighted in various colours. This doesn’t mean that I have to read the manuscript. It is already part of me. Nor does it stop me from departing from my manuscript if I feel prompted by the Spirit to develop a point in a way which had not previously come to mind. The full manuscript does mean that I am able to do justice to every part of the sermon on which I have worked and honed to the best of my ability in the past week.
3. We will not be too wordy or long in our delivery, but rather preach succinctly and to the point.

But what is a long sermon? Ezra read from the Book of the Law “from early morning to midday” (Neh 8.3); while Paul at Troas “continued speaking until midnight” (Acts 20.7 and then after a brief interruption by Eutychus, who in every sense of the word dropped off to sleep, Paul continued until day-break. How much of a guide should Ezra and Paul be today?

In days gone past people were happy with long sermons. “In my judgement,” maintained P.T. Forsyth, “the demand for short sermons on the part of Christian people is one of the most fatal influences to destroy preaching in the true sense of the word... Brevity may be the soul of wit, but a preacher is not a wit. And those who say they want little sermons because they are there to worship God and not hear man, have not grasped the rudiments of the first idea of Christian worship... A Christianity of short sermons is a Christianity of short fibre.”<sup>306</sup> But there is a danger in long sermons, as Charles Simeon long ago perceived: “Endeavour to rivet their attention on your message for a reasonable

<sup>304</sup> William Sangster, *The Craft of the Sermon* (Epworth Press, London 1954) 14, 15.

<sup>305</sup> James Black, *The Mystery of Preaching* (Marshall, Morgan & Scott, London revised edition 1977) 47.

<sup>306</sup> P.T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching* 72.

time; but remember, that the mind, and especially among the generality of persons, or the uneducated, will only bear a certain amount of tension.”<sup>307</sup> If that was true then, it is even more true today. The conventional wisdom is that shorter is better if you want to share your message with audiences in an age of instant communication; in an age where everything in the media is communicated in limited bite-sizes. Yet, surprisingly, in many places sermons are not getting shorter but longer. In an American survey of preaching from 1998 to 2006, sermons of 20 minutes or less decreased from 41% to 36%; while in the same period, the percentage of congregations reporting sermons of 21 to 45 minutes increased from 52% to 56%.<sup>308</sup>

I tend to agree with the biblical scholar F.F. Bruce, who used to say that if preachers had anything worthwhile to say, they could say it within 20 minutes; if they had nothing to say, then they would need at least 40 minutes! On the other hand I have been known to preach for 30 minutes. Maybe we should end with John Stott’s rule of thumb: “ten minutes are too short and forty minutes are too long.”<sup>309</sup>

One qualification: in speaking of the length of a sermon, I have in mind the normal Sunday sermon. There are other occasions when sermons may well need to be much shorter: preaching on television, preaching at a carol service, preaching at a wedding or a funeral – these are just a few examples when even a 20 minute sermon would not be appropriate.

If we would be effective preachers, then we need to work at our sermons. We need to give sermon preparation a priority in the week, even if it means that other things then go by the board. No pastor has ever been the poorer for having prepared with due care – no church for that matter either. We do well to heed the wisdom of James Black culled from his experience:

“Resolve early to make your preaching the big business in your life... If only a man gives his best, he will experience from the hands of any average congregation a loyalty that shames him in his own heart, and a love from simple souls that should make him better than his best.”<sup>310</sup>

## Preaching for a response

In recent times I have come to the conviction that as preachers we should never speak of Jesus without encouraging people to discover the difference that Jesus makes to living. Even in sermons intended primarily for God’s people, there should be a challenge for people who have yet to surrender their lives to Jesus.

This came home to me when I was preparing a sermon on the words of Jesus about not throwing your pearls before swine (Matt 6.7). In my initial draft I had written of ‘the immense value of the Gospel’, but had not invited my listeners to discover the good news for themselves. My text was not a natural spring-board for preaching an evangelistic sermon: for Jesus was primarily urging his followers to be discerning when it came to sharing the good news of the Kingdom with others. However, conscious that in my congregation there were always people who had yet to commit themselves to Christ, I felt I had to include a ‘Gospel word’. As a result on the basis of this strange text I developed a three-fold challenge:

1. A challenge to discover ‘the precious gift’ of all that Jesus offers.
2. A challenge to share this good news with friends and colleagues who might be receptive to our message.
3. A challenge to love even the hardened cynics, for love can melt even the hardest of hearts.

<sup>307</sup> Charles Simeon quoted by Robert Patterson, *Short, Sharp and Off the Point* (Marc Europe/Kingsway, Eastbourne 1987) 45.

<sup>308</sup> On 24 April 2005 ‘mystery worshippers’ visited 70 London churches and timed the sermon. The ten churches with the longest sermons were: Pierres Vivantes, Hyde Park (80 mins); Kingsway International Christian Centre, Hackney (60 mins); Hillsong, Dominion Theatre, Tottenham Court Road (53 mins); Westminster Chapel, Buckingham Gate (52 mins); The Redeemed Christian Church of God, Tooting (45 mins); Covent Garden Evangelical, Neal Street (43 mins); Metropolitan Tabernacle, Elephant & Castle (42 mins); West Croydon Baptist Church (35 mins); Church of the Nazarene, Clapham Junction (35 mins); Westbourne Grove Independent Baptist, Notting Hill (34 mins).

The ten churches with the shortest sermons were: Hinde Street Methodist, Marylebone (5 mins); St Alfege, Greenwich (5 mins); Westminster Abbey (6 mins); St Margaret’s Westminster (6 mins); St Stephen’s, Lewisham (6 mins); St John the Evangelist, Waterloo (7 mins); Brompton Oratory, Kensington (7 mins); Our Lady and St Joseph, Hackney (8 mins); The American Church in London, Tottenham Court Road (8 mins); St Mary the Virgin, Hayes, Middx (8 mins).

<sup>309</sup> John Stott, *I Believe In Preaching* 294. There is also a good deal of truth in the advice of one wit: “If after ten minutes you do not strike oil, stop boring!”

<sup>310</sup> James Black, *The Mystery of Preaching* 4.

In the light of those three challenges I wrote the following prayers of response:

1. A prayer for those who have yet to discover the 'pearl of great price'. "Lord Jesus, I now see the amazing difference you can make to my life. In you there is forgiveness for all that has been wrong in my life; in you there is meaning for living; and in you there is hope of life eternal. With great joy I open the door of my heart to you: come in to my life and be my Saviour and my Lord – and I will gladly follow you all the days of my life."
2. A prayer for those who find it difficult to share their faith: "Lord Jesus, far from throwing pearls before pigs, all too often I fail to tell anybody of the difference you have made to my life. Forgive me for keeping the good news to myself. Help me to forget my shyness, so that when the time is right I can tell friends and colleagues of your amazing love for me."
3. A prayer for those who find it difficult to love those who are different to us. "Lord Jesus, sometimes I find it difficult to love those who seem to stubbornly turn their backs upon you and your ways. Forgive me for my narrow-heartedness. Help me to love – and in loving reflect your love to all."

Preaching, which is true to Jesus, surely always demands a response. With that conviction in mind, instead of ending with my former general 'prayer of response', my sermons now tend to end with two prayers of response: one enabling people to respond for the very first time to the love of God in Jesus; and the other, for people who have already made that response.

Let me illustrate this further from prayers I wrote following three sermons I preached on Romans 8.

First, following a sermon on Rom 8.1-4:

1. A prayer for those who have yet to experience the freedom Jesus offers from sin and from the condemnation that sin occurs. "Lord Jesus, this morning with sadness I acknowledge that I am a sinner; for there are so many good things I have not done, and so many selfish and hurtful things I have done. But with joy I also acknowledge that you gave your life for me on the cross that I might be set free from sin and sin's condemnation. So now I open the door of my heart to you: come into my life as my Saviour to cleanse me; come in as my Lord to control me; and I will serve you all the remaining years of my life."
2. A prayer for those who have prayed this prayer in the past: "Lord Jesus, you have set me free in order that I might serve you. And yet so often I have failed to serve you. Forgive me I pray and fill me with your Spirit that I may truly live for you this coming week."

Following a sermon on Rom 8.5-17:

1. First, a prayer for those who have yet to know God as Father. "Lord Jesus, you died on the Cross that I might find my way to the Father. This morning I open the door of my heart to you: come into my life as my Saviour and cleanse me from the sin that has come between me and God; and by your Spirit's power bring me into your Father's presence, so that I may discover him to be my Father too."
2. A prayer for those who have entrusted their lives to Jesus: 'Father God, thank you for the joy and security of being your children. Forgive us for those times when we have blocked your Spirit working in our lives. Help us truly to live as your Spirit tells us too, and so live lives which befit your children.'

Following a sermon on Rom 8.18-25:

1. A prayer for those who came to church without this morning without hope, feeling perhaps overwhelmed by the suffering and distress of this life – and yet now discovering that there is a new world coming where tears will be no more. "Lord Jesus, thank you that by cross and resurrection you have dealt with the powers of sin and death. Yes, Lord, thank you that as a result of your death on the cross, you offer me forgiveness for my sin; that as a result of your resurrection you offer me hope of life beyond the grave. Lord Jesus, this morning I want to receive that forgiveness, that promise of life. So I open the door of my life to you. Come in as my Saviour to cleanse me of my sin; come in as my Lord to control me; and I will serve you all the remaining years of my life."
2. A prayer for those who have already opened their hearts to the Lord Jesus. "Father God, thank you for the wonderful hope that is ours; we look forward to the day when we shall be free from all the suffering and pain of this world. In the meantime, help us to draw alongside people who struggle with suffering and pain; help us by the very way in which we care to be signs of your kingdom."

The prayers were simple, but carefully crafted. The first prayer of response for each sermon was similar in structure and used the imagery of Rev 3.20. Surprisingly, every time I had a double prayer of response, the congregation gave an equally hearty 'Amen' both to the first prayer as much as to the second prayer.

I have wondered whether it was right after every sermon to encourage people to open up their lives to the Lord Jesus; after all, the vast majority are well and truly committed to the Lord. But in justification of this approach, I say to myself: 'It's like the notices: every Sunday I always welcome people who are visiting us for the first time, and in doing go through the same kind of patter, for although it will be familiar to the members, for those visiting us it will be fresh'. I don't want anyone to miss out responding to Jesus, simply because they did not know how to do so.

## Preaching expectantly

However well we prepare, ultimately we need to recognise our limitations and look to God to bless our efforts. Having done our best, we can only entrust our work to the Lord who declared that his word shall not return "empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55.11).<sup>311</sup> Such trust in God is not to be equated with some kind of fatalistic resignation. If we trust God, then we shall believe that in one way or another he is going to bless our preaching.

The story is told of a young minister who came to Spurgeon and said with some concern: "I don't seem to have many converts." "Surely you don't look for a convert every time you preach" replied Spurgeon. "Oh no, of course not", the young minister answered. "That is why you are not having them", Spurgeon retorted.

True, for a sermon to have its full effect there must also be faith on the part of the hearer. But the preacher too must have faith. The faith of a preacher acts as a catalyst for the Holy Spirit to work in the lives of the congregation. Preachers, as well as their hearers, can hinder God's work by their unbelief (see Matt 13.58).

Effective preaching is expectant preaching. James Stewart rightly challenges us when he stated:

"Every Sunday morning when it comes ought to find you awed and thrilled by the reflection – 'God is to be in action today, through me, for these people: this day may be crucial, this service decisive, for someone now ripe for the vision of Jesus'. Remember that every soul before you has its own story of need, and that if the Gospel of Christ does not meet such need nothing on earth can. Aim at results. Expect mighty works to happen. Realise that, although your congregation may be small, every soul is infinitely precious. Never forget that Christ himself, according to His promise, is in the midst, making the plainest and most ordinary church building into the house of God and the gate of heaven. Hear his voice saying, 'This day is the Scripture fulfilled in your ears. This day is salvation come to this house'. Then preaching, which might otherwise be a dead formality and a barren routine, an implicit denial of its own high claim, will become a power and a passion; and the note of strong, decisive reality, like a trumpet, will awaken the souls of men."<sup>312</sup>

As preachers we need to personalise Eph 3.20 and believe that our God "by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine." God is able – there is no limit to his divine power. But this power only becomes operational in our preaching when we believe. God's power is released when we open our hearts to him and trust him to truly bless the preaching of his Word. In this context the words of Paul in Eph 1, 18, 19 are significant: "I pray that your inward eyes may be illumined, so that you may know... how vast the resources of his power are open to us who trust him" (GNB). Stuart Briscoe told of how he came to apply the great Pauline doxology of Eph 3.20,21 to preaching and commented: "I will never forget the sense of exhilaration that filled me as I began to preach, expecting the indwelling Spirit to be at work in and through the preaching."<sup>313</sup>

How does this work out in practical terms? How can we cultivate such a spirit of expectancy? In part the solution is down to us and to the kind of spiritual discipline we exercise on a Sunday morning as in the quietness of our studies or church offices we seek God's blessing on the day. In part too the solution is to surround ourselves with our fellow leaders and together look expectantly to God to bless the service in general and the preaching in particular. I found

<sup>311</sup> We need to be careful in how we apply this text to preaching today. In the first place the prophet is referring to the "new thing" that God was about to do in his own time through Cyrus. Secondly, more generally, as Claus Westermann (*Isaiah 40-66*, English Translation, SCM, London 1969), 289, 290, noted, the two processes set side by side and compared are not of the same nature: "The word expressly spoken to the needs of a particular situation and meeting with faith or lack of faith in it, understanding or lack of understanding, is an entirely different matter from rain or snow in the world of nature." The only thing which they have in common is that "something is effected and achieves its purpose." A little later he wrote: "God's word does not magically call a new state of salvation into being. The only way by which it effects what God designs it to do is the hearkening to, and acceptance of, the message of salvation. Verses 10f are indeed the substantiation of the invitation given in v6 to accept by so doing."

<sup>312</sup> James Stewart, *Preaching* 42.

<sup>313</sup> D. Stuart Briscoe, *Fresh Air in the Pulpit* (British edition: IVP, Leicester 1994) 23.

that the meeting together with my leaders prior to the service not only warmed my spirit, it also confirmed my faith, so that as I stepped out into the church, I stepped out confident in the power of the Spirit to preach God's Word.<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> In this one small way perhaps I may dare to draw a parallel with Spurgeon, who used to say to himself as he mounted the steps to his high pulpit, "I believe in the Holy Ghost, I believe in the Holy Ghost, I believe in the Holy Ghost."

## Sermon: God's passion for the lost (Luke 15.1-7)

### *An absurd parable*<sup>315</sup>

Has it ever struck you how absurd some of the parables are? Take the parable of the lost sheep. There it's not just the lost sheep that is silly, but so too the shepherd. Listen again to the story: "Suppose one of you has a 100 sheep and loses one of them – what do you do? You leave the other 99 sheep in the pasture and go looking for the one that got lost until you find it" (v4). Do you? Is that the action of a sensible shepherd? Surely not! That is the last thing you do. For if a shepherd were to leave the 99 to their own devices while he ran off after the 100th sheep, doesn't he run the very real risk of losing, if not the 99, then a good number of the 99.

Not surprisingly, some have thought that there must have been two shepherds – one went off in search of the lost sheep, while the other stood guard over the 99. Alternatively, some have thought that before running after the lost sheep, the shepherd put the 99 away in a sheepfold or a cave, before going off after the lost sheep. But there is no reference to another shepherd – nor to a sheepfold. The parable as it stands suggests that the shepherd left the 99 sheep. Why? Why risk the 99 sheep for the sake of just this one?

One suggestion has been that there was something special about the lost sheep. Perhaps it was "*the largest*" sheep which went astray. But, according to Luke's Gospel, there was nothing special about this sheep. It was just another sheep. Although clearly its loss would have meant something, it wouldn't have been a devastating loss. After all, it was quite a large flock – there were still 99 others left. But no, the shepherd in the parable wasn't willing to lose even one sheep. With the result that he was prepared to risk everything for the sake of finding that sheep.

Then what does he do when he finds the sheep? He throws a party. In the words of Jesus: "Then you call your friends and neighbours together and say to them, 'I am so happy I found my lost sheep. Let us celebrate!'" (v6). Here again, the shepherd appears to go over the top. Any ordinary shepherd would have experienced just a quiet feeling of relief at having recovered his lost sheep. But not this shepherd. He throws the mother of all parties as if he had recovered 99, rather than just one. Indeed, the party might have been more expensive than the lost sheep – for a good deal of wine will have flowed, and maybe even a fatted calf killed.

The more you think about it, the more you realise it is actually quite an absurd parable. But then, Jesus had a point to make – and sometimes you have to be absurdly extreme to make the point.

With this absurd parable in mind, let's turn to the context in which this parable was first told. As we do so, I think you'll agree with me that in some ways Jesus' critics were quite sensible. To them it was not just the parable of Jesus which was absurd, but his behaviour too.

Listen again to Luke: "One day when many tax collectors and other outcasts came to listen to Jesus, the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law started grumbling, 'This man welcomes outcasts and even eats with them!'. So Jesus told them this parable..." (vv1-3). Our difficulty is that today when we read these words, we immediately want to side with Jesus. We know that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were the 'bad guys'. But wait a minute. Can't you see that the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law had actually quite a sensible point of view? They were but reflecting the clear teaching of Scripture that God's people have to be careful about the company they keep:

- Prov 1.10, 15: "When sinners tempt you, my son, don't give in.... Don't go with people like that my son. Stay away from them."
- Psalm 1.1: "Happy are those... who do not follow the example of sinners or join those who have no use for God."
- The same kind of thinking is found in 2 Cor 6.14-18, where Paul warns the Corinthian Christians from associating with evil people: Paul quotes from Isaiah 52.11 where the Lord says: "You must leave them."

There is sense in that point of view. Many of us say the same sort of thing to our teenage children: 'Stay away from that lot – they'll only drag you down'. Quite sensibly, we don't want our children to associate with bad company.

The Pharisees too were only being sensible. It made sense for God's people not to have anything to do with "tax collectors and outcasts". Neither group of people had any morals: "tax collectors" were always on the fiddle, they

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<sup>315</sup> I first preached this sermon in Chelmsford on September 14, 2008, before simplifying it and preaching it in Wuhan, China; in Colombo, Sri Lanka; and then in Beirut, Lebanon. It is one of my 'travelling' sermons. The Scripture quotes are from the GNB.

were always feathering their nests at other people's expense; the "outcasts", literally the "sinners", included the 'ladies of the night', prostitutes who were more than happy to sell their bodies for a little bit of cash.

Jesus understandably confused if not enraged many God-fearing people of his day. "This man welcomes outcasts and even eats with them" (v2). Notice the little word "even". In the first century to eat with a person was to accept a person. For religious people like the Pharisees the idea of having table-fellowship with patently immoral people was down-right absurd. It did not make sense

So, what do we learn from this incident?

### *1. God is absurdly passionate about the lost*

Jesus responded to his critics with a story about a shepherd. In ancient times rulers and kings were often likened to a shepherd. Not surprisingly in the Bible God is likened to a shepherd too: e.g.

- Isaiah said that God "will take care of his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs together and carry them in his arms; he will gently lead their mothers" (Isaiah 40.11).
- Ezekiel contrasted God with the false shepherds of his day: he has God saying, "I, the Sovereign Lord, tell you that I myself will look for my sheep and take care of them in the same way as shepherd take care of their sheep that were scattered and are brought together again... I will look for those that are lost, bring back those that wander off, bandage those that are hurt, heal those that are sick..." (Ezek 34.11-16)

The Pharisees and the teachers of the Law would have undoubtedly have seen an allusion to God as Jesus spoke of a shepherd caring for his sheep. But what would have amazed them would have been the passion of this shepherd for the sheep that was lost – a passion that was so great that the shepherd was prepared to risk the 99 for the sake of the one lost sheep.

God's passion for us is absurdly inclusive. He loves not only the righteous, but also the unrighteous. He loves not only the respectable who have never really strayed away – but also the rebels, those who have turned their back on God and wandered away. The Good News is that although we may be lost, we are never lost from the love of God. God is passionately concerned for each one of us, whatever we may have done.

God has come to us in Jesus, who as the Good Shepherd goes in search of the lost sheep, and who once he finds the silly sheep, puts it over his shoulder, takes it home, and then throws a party. It sounds absurd, but it is true.

### *2. Our passion for others should be equally absurd*

We in turn should be equally passionate for the lost – as God gave his all for us, so we too should give our all to others. It has been said, the church is the only institution which exists primarily for the benefit of its non-members. Think about it: your church exists primarily not to meet the needs of its members, but to meet the needs of those who never darken its doors.

- Think about that in terms of the use of your minister's time: if your minister is to be a true shepherd of the flock, then first and foremost God would not have him be not a chaplain to the 99, but evangelists to the one.
- Think about that in terms of how you respond to newcomers to the church. In the light of this parable we should be more concerned about speaking to newcomers than speaking to our friends. Are we?
- Think about this parable in terms of how much effort you go to invite friends and neighbours to church: for this parable is not about allowing people to join us, but rather being pro-active and going out and inviting people to come and be part of God's family.

God is passionate about the lost – and he wants us to be equally passionate about the lost. Our love for the lost should be as absurdly passionate as God's!

### *3. God wants us to respond to his passionate love*

Although the thrust of the parable is on God's amazing love for the lost, we should not lose sight of the fact that God's love demands a response. For although God loves the sinner with an amazing passion, he does not love the sin. So

Jesus ends the parable with the words: “In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine respectable people who do not need to repent” (v7).

God loves us – but before we can entrust ourselves to the love of God, we need to repent, i.e. to “turn away from our sins”; we need to cease living life for ourselves, and to begin to live life for God. Just as the prodigal son had to come to his senses and turn back home – so each one of us needs to come to our senses and turn back to God.

At first sight the words of Jesus appear to be strange. For while he talks about the one sinner who repents, he also talks about the 99 who do not need to repent. Is that really true? Surely the whole teaching of the Bible underlines the fact that we are all sinners and all need to repent? The answer is yes and no. Yes we are all sinners; even the most respectable of us. So Sunday by Sunday we come to confess our sins and ask for God’s forgiveness. The Lord’s Prayer with its petition “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us” is not just for beginners, it is for us all, whatever stage we have reached in the Christian life. But there is a difference between the life-changing, radical re-orientation which happens at conversion, and the ongoing need for Christians to re-set their compasses in order to follow Christ more nearly. Jesus in the parable is speaking of the lost sheep, the rebel who has yet to respond to God’s love.

As I look around me this morning, I see what I presume is a mixed congregation. Most of you have already responded to God’s love – most of you belong to the 99 sheep in the pasture. But there may be some here who have yet to respond in penitence and faith to God’s amazing love. It may be that there is something in your past, or indeed your present, which causes you to wonder whether God can really love you; whether God can love you sufficiently to forgive you. The Good News is that God loves you passionately. Indeed, the more outside the Kingdom you are, the more he loves you. When we do repent, when we do turn back to God, there is always forgiveness. As God said through the prophet Isaiah: “Though your sins are scarlet, they may become white as snow” (Isaiah 1.16).

What’s more, after the pain of repentance comes the party. “I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 respectable people who do not need to repent.” There is nothing God loves more than when the lost are found.

Alas, many of the Jews of Jesus’ day got it wrong. The rabbis had a saying: “There is joy before God when those who provoke Him perish from the world”. But no, God does not rejoice in the destruction of sinners, but in the salvation of sinners. Nothing gives God greater joy than welcoming the sinner home.

God’s passion for the lost is indeed truly amazing!



## 8. Preaching Sunday by Sunday

So far we have talked generally of preaching and of preparing to preach. How does all this work out Sunday by Sunday?

### Creating sermon series is a great discipline

For me the key to Sunday preaching is preaching short sermon series. I know that I differ from many, who prefer to work their way through the lectionary and preach on the passage for the day. But although there is an internal logic to the lectionary, that logic is not always discernible to the hearer. Lectionary preaching tends to appear to be ‘bitty’, whereas preaching through a book of the Bible or on some biblical theme gives the preaching an overall coherence. Certainly my experience is that the congregation much prefers to be able to work away at a series, rather than jump from one theme to another.

Congregations also like variety. For this reason there is a lot to be said for limiting the length of a series, and if necessary returning to the book or to the theme at a later date. Taking a year or two to work through a Gospel can lead to unbalanced preaching. If we are to be true to the example Paul set in his Ephesian ministry and preach “the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20.27),<sup>316</sup> then we need to have a balanced diet, whereby we expose our congregation to Old and New Testament alike, to history and to prophecy, to gospel and to letter. Precisely how that balance is achieved, must be left to the individual preacher to decide.

According to Stephen Neill: “If you found that of your texts for the year, 40% were drawn from the Gospels, 25% from the rest of the New Testament, 25% from the Old Testament, you might feel that you had been reasonably faithful to your obligation.” Neill went on: “You will note that leaves you five or six Sundays in the year, but no more, to preach on special topics without necessarily taking a text from the Scriptures”.<sup>317</sup> I confess that with that last point I totally disagree. At no point is there justification for not rooting a message within Scripture. My own rule of thumb was to ensure along with observing the great festivals of the church – Christmas, Easter, Whitsunday, and Ascension (normally on the Sunday after, rather on the day itself) – and such seasons as Advent, Lent, and Trinity, we tended to observe a tripartite balance between Gospel, Letter, and the Old Testament.

How might such sermon series look? Let me illustrate by giving some examples of my preaching. Sometimes I simply preached my way through a book of the Bible – or if not the whole book, then part of a book.

Once we looked at the opening chapters of Genesis through the prism of ‘human basics’: In the beginning God (Gen 1.1-2.4); Between ape and angel (Gen 1.26, 27); Work a blessing? (Gen 2.15); Spare rib? (Gen 2.18-25); Tragedy strikes (Gen 3); East of Eden (Gen 4); Captain Noah and his floating zoo (Gen 6-9).

In the context of arousing people’s faith at a time when we were going through a building project I preached a short series on the God of the Exodus: God is already at work (Ex 2); God is with us (Ex 3); God is sovereign (Ex 7-12); God goes before us (Ex 13.17-22); God saves (Ex 14); God provides (Ex 16); and God answers prayer (Ex 17.8-16).

One year over a number of Sundays following Pentecost I preached on ‘The Spirit has come – insights from Ephesians’, and we looked at the promise of the Spirit (Eph 1.13-14); the presence of the Spirit (Eph 2.21-22); the power of the Spirit to love (Eph 3.16) and life in the Spirit (Eph 4.25-32).

Preaching through Acts is always a delight. Over the years I have adopted a number of approaches. Sometimes I have focused on people: Lydia the business woman (Acts 16.11-15); the prison governor at Philippi (Acts 16.16-40); Jason and his friends (Acts 17.1-9); students at Berea (Acts 17.10-15); Dionysius and Damaris (Acts 17.16-34).

Sermons from Paul’s letters have included a series just on Romans 8: Free to live (8.1-4); Living as children of God (8.5-17); Living in hope (8.18-25); Living with the help of the Spirit (8.26-30); We shall overcome (8.31-39). On

<sup>316</sup> Strictly speaking ‘the whole purpose of God’ relates to God’s whole purpose of salvation (John Stott, *The Message of Acts* 326) or what David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* 567, calls the ‘world-embracing dimensions’ of the Gospel. But, as Peterson notes, declaring “the whole purpose of God” is parallel to “proclaiming the kingdom” (20.25) which could well be broader in scope.

<sup>317</sup> Stephen Neill, *On the Ministry* 67.

another occasion we looked at 2 Corinthians under the title of ‘God at work in our lives’: God helps us in all our troubles (2 Cor 1.1-11); God can be trusted (2 Cor 1.12-2.4); God uses us to make him known (2 Cor 2.12-17); God sends his life-giving Spirit (2 Cor 3); God makes all the difference (4.1-12); God will bring us home (2 Cor 4.14,16 - 5.10); God creates new life (2 Cor 5.17); God’s amazing grace demands a response (2 Cor 8-9); and God’s grace is always sufficient (2 Cor 12.1-10).

Hebrews is a tough letter to preach through, although I have preached a good deal from it. In one series we looked at the ‘lettuces’ (let us) of Hebrews: let us take care (4.1); let us have confidence (4.16); let us approach the throne and receive mercy (4.16); let us go forward (6.1); let us hold fast (10.23); let us consider how to provoke one another (10.24-25); let us run with perseverance (12.1-2); let us always praise God (13.15).

Peter too is a great letter to preach. One autumn I enjoyed linking various passages with events in the life of the church: e.g. at a baptismal service – God wants us to take a pledge (1 Pet 3.18-22); at a Ministry Fair – God wants us to serve him (1 Pet 4.8-11); at a service of thanksgiving and blessing for children – God wants us to be attractive (1 Pet 3.1-17); at an All Saints Day celebration – God wants to give us hope (1 Pet 1.3-9); on a Remembrance Sunday – God wants us to follow Jesus’ example (1 Pet 2.18-25); and at another service of thanksgiving and blessing for children – God wants us to be people of faith (1 Pet 5.6-11).

Many an August, when attendances can be somewhat intermittent, I have preached a sermon series on ‘Psalms we have loved’; e.g. Psalm 51 – a psalm of repentance; Psalm 13 – a psalm of thanksgiving; Psalm 77 – a psalm that questions; Psalm 27 – a psalm that questions; and Psalms 42-43 a psalm of hope. Another summer we focused on ‘Night Scenes in the Old Testament’: Jacob’s ladder (Gen 28); Israel’s Passover (Ex 12); Gideon’s triumph (Judges 7); Samuel’s call (1 Sam 3); Nehemiah’s inspection (Neh 2); Belshazzar’s feast (Dan 5).

Like any other pastor, I have preached my way through the 10 Commandments; the Servant Songs of Isaiah; the Songs of the Nativity; the Beatitudes; the Lord’s Prayer; the Sermon on the Mount (‘Red letter words’); Parables in Matthew; Parables in Luke; the ‘I ams’ of Jesus; characters around the Cross; the Seven Words from the Cross; the missionary journeys of Paul; the seven churches of Revelation.. We have looked at the different Gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus, of the passion of Jesus, of the resurrection of Jesus. We have looked too at benedictions: a priestly blessing (Num 6.24-26); a three-fold blessing (Rom 15.13); a Trinitarian blessing (2 Cor 13.14); and a holy blessing (1 Thess 5.21-23); and at resurrection doxologies (Eph 3.20, 21; Hebs 13.20-21; Jude 24, 25; Rev 1.5, 6). Then there are the ‘one another’ texts: love one another (John 13.34-35); accept one another (Rom 15.7); care for one another (1 Cor 12.25); bear one another’s burdens (Gal 6.2); speak the truth to one another (Eph 4.15); encourage one another (1 Thess 5.11); and pray for one another (Jas 5.16).

I have enjoyed preaching thematic series, but always with a specific Scripture text. So on several occasions I have preached a series of apologetic sermons, looking at objections to the Christian faith. For instance: “All religions lead to God” (John 14.6); “Jesus was just a good man” (Mark 2.1-12); “Once dead, always dead” (1 Cor 15.20-28); “Christians are a bunch of hypocrites” (Mk 2.13-17); “Church is boring” (Psalm 96); “No God of love would allow suffering” (Rom 5.1-11); “No God of love would send people to hell” (John 3.16-21); “You can’t believe the Bible” (Luke 1.1-4); “Virgins don’t have babies” (Matt 1.18-25); “Christmas? It’s a fairy story” (John 1.14).

Often at the beginning of the year I have preached series outlining the vision of the church: for example, we want to be a church... with a passion for evangelism – let’s bring others to Jesus (John 1.40-41); with a passion for one another – let’s love as Jesus loved us (John 13.34-35); with a passion to grow – let’s develop our friendship with Jesus (John 15.1-17); with a passion to serve – let’s serve others (John 13.1-17). Another year we looked at our values as a Jesus community: we want to be warm and welcoming (Rom 12.9, 10, 15); excited and enthusiastic (Rom 12.11); risk-taking and God-trusting (Hebs 11.8); sacrificing and resourcing (Rom 12.1-8); transforming lives and changing culture (Matt 5.13-16 & Rom 12.2).

One Easter we looked at the message of the resurrection through a series from the letters of the New Testament: celebrating faith in the resurrection (Rom 10.9); looking forward to resurrection (2 Cor 5.1-10); experiencing the power of resurrection (Phil 3.7-11); affirming the hope of resurrection (1 Pet 1.3-5); and encountering the God of resurrection (Rev 1.9-20).

One might imagine that preaching a series of sermons worked out some months in advance might result in sermons which failed to respond to the issues of the day. Yet time and again experience shows that God can speak powerfully and relevantly through passages chosen well ahead. Even within the context of a pre-determined preaching plan God’s Word is not bound (see 2 Tim 2.9). On the other hand, there is no reason why from time to time pastors may not set

aside their preaching plan and address an issue which has arisen in the life of the church or in the life of the wider world. Nor does preaching sermon series mean that one is unable to observe special Sundays connected with the Christian Year. Inevitably there must be flexibility. On the other hand, preaching series gives both the congregation and the preacher a helpful structure within which there is plenty of room for learning and growth on the part of both.

## Receiving feedback is always salutary

The preacher has never truly arrived, but is always in the process of developing and becoming. Preachers therefore must be willing to listen and learn from others. Sadly, for the most part members of the congregation rarely comment on the sermon. Indeed, according to some North American research, more than 78% of listeners say that they have never discussed a sermon with their preachers.<sup>318</sup>

As part of our weekly discipline as a ministerial team at Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford there was always a Monday post-mortem on the Sunday services, when we could reflect on our preaching and see how we could have improved in either the content or the delivery of the sermon. But not every pastor has another colleague with whom the Sunday preaching may be evaluated; and even if we all were part of a ministerial team, might there not be a place for our general hearers to give us feedback on their perception of our sermons?

In this respect I was challenged by David Schlafer, who suggested the formation of a sermon reflection group with a view to addressing the following set of questions:<sup>319</sup>

1. How does this sermon manifest the preacher's ability to listen?
2. How does this sermon speak for and with the Christian community, even though it is being delivered by a single individual?
3. How does this sermon show us God and the world, rather than simply tell us what we ought to do or be?
4. How does this sermon call forth an awareness of God's already-present grace, rather than merely exhort us to catch up with it?
5. How does this sermon encourage the ongoing process of God's redeeming work in the hearts and lives of hearers?
6. How does this sermon function as a "performative utterance"? To what extent is it an extension of the enfleshed saving Word, rather than simply a report of what happened 'once upon a time'?
7. If the sermon does not seem to do much of any of these, how is it trying to do so or how might it do so?

Schlafer suggested some further questions as catalysts for reflection and insight.<sup>320</sup>

1. How did this sermon connect to
  - the liturgy of the day?
  - events that have been in the news this week?
  - ongoing issues of concern in the culture?
  - joys, problems, and sorrows of those in the parish community?
  - your own raw edges?
  - other sermons that have been preached in previous weeks?
  - the ministry of your church in the world?
2. Describe in as much detail as possible the "plot" of the sermon? Into what kind of journey did it invite you? What were the different stages of that sermon journey?
3. Are there ways in which the sermon left you feeling – confused? – angry? – grateful? – empty? – nourished? – questioning? – in significant disagreement? – confirmed and centred? – eager to talk about it? – alienated? – connected to others?
4. If you had been preaching on this text, how would you have approached it differently?

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<sup>318</sup> See Lori Carrell, 'Listeners' Response', *Alban Weekly* October 27, 2014. Carrell's research reveals that congregational members listen to their preachers expecting inspiration; look to their preachers for spiritual leadership; rely on their preachers for spiritual content; and expect long-lasting impact!

<sup>319</sup> Schlafer, *Surviving the Sermon* 128-129.

<sup>320</sup> Schlafer *Surviving the Sermon* 130-132.

## 5. How did the sermon ground you more fully in God's love?

To sit in a sermon reflection group and listen to members evaluate the sermon in the light of such questions might well not be the most comfortable of experiences. Yet, it could prove to be a most helpful experience. Criticism can be positive and up building.

Ultimately, we are accountable not to our congregation, but to God. This places an awesome responsibility upon us. God is the ultimate listener of our sermons. James Stewart related how Bishop Gore used to give his final charge to candidates on the eve of their ordination in these impressive words: "Tomorrow I shall say to you, 'Wilt thou, wilt thou, wilt thou?'" But there will come a day to you when Another will say to you, 'Hast thou, hast thou, hast thou?' God grant us unwavering fidelity to our high theme, lest we be ashamed to stand at last before the face of the Son of Man."<sup>321</sup>

Similarly the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard expressed the theme of the preacher's accountability when he wrote:

"It is a venturesome thing to preach; for when I mount to that sacred place – whether the church be crowded or as good as empty – I have, though I may not be aware of it, one hearer in addition to those visible to me, namely, God in heaven, whom I cannot see, but who verily can see me.

This hearer listens attentively to discover whether what I say is true. He looks also to discern whether my life expresses what I say. And although I possess no authority to impose an obligation upon any other person, yet what I have said in the sermon puts *me* under obligation. God has heard it!

Most people have a notion that it requires courage to step out upon the stage like an actor and to encounter all eyes fixed upon you. And yet this danger is in a sense, like everything else on stage, an illusion.

For personally, the actor is aloof from it all; his part is to deceive, to disguise himself, to represent another. The preacher of Christian truth, on the other hand, steps out in a place where, even if all eyes are not fixed upon him, the eye of omniscience is.

The preacher's part is to be himself. And he's in an environment, God's house, which requires of him only this: that he be himself, and he be true."<sup>322</sup>

## Preaching is a 'joyful tyranny'

Over the years I must have preached thousands of sermons; and have done so with great joy. My first sermon I preached as a 16 year old in a Leicestershire village: it was harvest thanksgiving, and I found it difficult to concentrate because a bumble bee was buzzing around the corn and flowers arranged around the pulpit. Since then I have had the privilege of preaching all over the world. However, the greatest privilege is to preach as a pastor. True there can be a buzz, even a thrill, in being the 'guest preacher' for the day – especially when the congregation has been large and the venue has been exotic. But itinerant preaching does not truly satisfy: time and again this form of spiritual 'hit and run' feels like a 'performance'. In no way does it compare to preaching to people one knows and loves. Inevitably sermons preached by pastors to their people are much more personal; to a large extent the sermons were shaped by the needs of one's people. As a result, most of my sermons cannot easily be preached within another context. They are very different from the 'travellers' which an itinerant preacher might hawk around.

It is a demanding task to preach Sunday by Sunday within the same church, with at least one if not two new sermons to prepare a week. Donald Coggan, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, talked of "the joyful tyranny of being a minister of the Word". He went on:

"Preaching *is* a tyranny. I refer not only to the fact that Sunday comes round with an inexorable regularity and makes demands which must needs be met. I refer also to the fact that we know that we must not offer to the Lord a second-rate offering; only the best we can produce will do. I think of the demands which this makes on a man's freshness and devotion and reading and thinking and praying. A tyranny indeed. But a *joyful* tyranny – who would be without it who has been called and commissioned? I suppose a mother finds the care of her

<sup>321</sup> James Stewart, *Preaching* 87.

<sup>322</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, quoted in *Leadership* 15 (Winter 1994) 3.

family in the early years demanding and tyrannical. But deprive her of her brood and you have the epitome of bereavement and misery.”<sup>323</sup>

How true those words are. In spite of the weekly deadline, I enjoyed the weekly discipline of studying God’s Word, discovering His word for today, and then shaping the sermon in such a way that the word became clear to all. Now, that task is no longer mine. True, I may still be invited to preach occasionally, but I will never again be preaching as a pastor to my people; and that I miss.<sup>324</sup>

## Conclusion

Preaching is at the very heart of Christian ministry. A prime task of any pastor is to ‘feed the sheep’ and seek the lost. All the more need therefore for selectors for Christian ministry to ensure that those whom they select have a preaching gift. Hence the expression ‘the charismatic preacher’. However, as with other gifts, a preaching gift needs to be developed. Gifting needs to be allied to hard work. “Becoming an effective teacher is simple”, commented Marlene LeFever. “You just prepare and prepare until drops of blood appear on your forehead.”<sup>325</sup> There are no short-cuts to living out the call!

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<sup>323</sup> Donald Coggan, *On Preaching* (SPCK, London 1978) 3-4.

<sup>324</sup> See Paul Beasley-Murray, ‘Preaching a joyful tyranny’, *Blog* March 27, 2014.

<sup>325</sup> Marlene LeFever, *Leadership* VIII (Summer 1987) 19.

## About the author

Ordained in 1970, Paul Beasley-Murray taught in the Protestant Theological Faculty of Congo/Zaire from 1970 to 1972. From 1973 to 1986 he was pastor of Altrincham Baptist Church, Cheshire, which quadrupled in size during his ministry. From 1986 to 1992 he was Principal of Spurgeon's College, London, during which time the student enrolment doubled. From 1993 to 2013 he was senior minister of Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford, which experienced significant growth and he led the church through a £2 million redevelopment programme. He is currently Chairman of both the College of Baptist Ministers and of Ministry Today.

A prolific author, he has over 350 articles to his credit, for the most part reflecting on the practice of ministry. His writings currently in print are *Radical Believers: The Baptist Way Of Being The Church* (Baptist Union 1992, and translated into Czech, German and Norwegian; revised edition 2006); *Radical Disciples: A Course For New Christians* (Baptist Union 1996; revised edition 2005); *Happy Ever After?* (Baptist Union 1996; revised edition Amazon 2016); *Radical Leaders: A Guide For Elders & Deacons In Baptist Churches* (Baptist Union 1997; revised edition 2005); *The Message Of The Resurrection: The Bible Speaks For Today* (IVP 2000: also published in the USA and translated into Burmese, Chinese, Romanian and Korean); *A Loved One Dies: Help In The First Few Days* (Baptist Union 2005; revised edition Amazon 2016); *Joy to the World: Preaching at Christmas* (IVP 2005 – also available in a special OM edition in India, Nepal, Oman, Qatar, UAE, Bahrain and Kuwait); *Transform Your Church! 50 very practical steps* (IVP 2005); *Baptism, Belonging and Breaking Bread: Preparing for Baptism* (Baptist Union 2010); *Leading Teams in Larger Churches* (2010): [www.teal.org.uk](http://www.teal.org.uk); *A Retreat Lectionary* (Society of Mary & Martha 2012); *Church Matters: Creative Ideas for Mission and Ministry* (Amazon 2016).

Paul publishes a weekly blog, Church Matters, which can be subscribed to via his website [www.paulbeasleymurray.com](http://www.paulbeasleymurray.com). Responses to these four volumes are welcome and may be emailed to [paulbeasleymurray@gmail.com](mailto:paulbeasleymurray@gmail.com).