

BEING A HEALTHY CHURCH

Sabbatical reflections

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FOREWORD

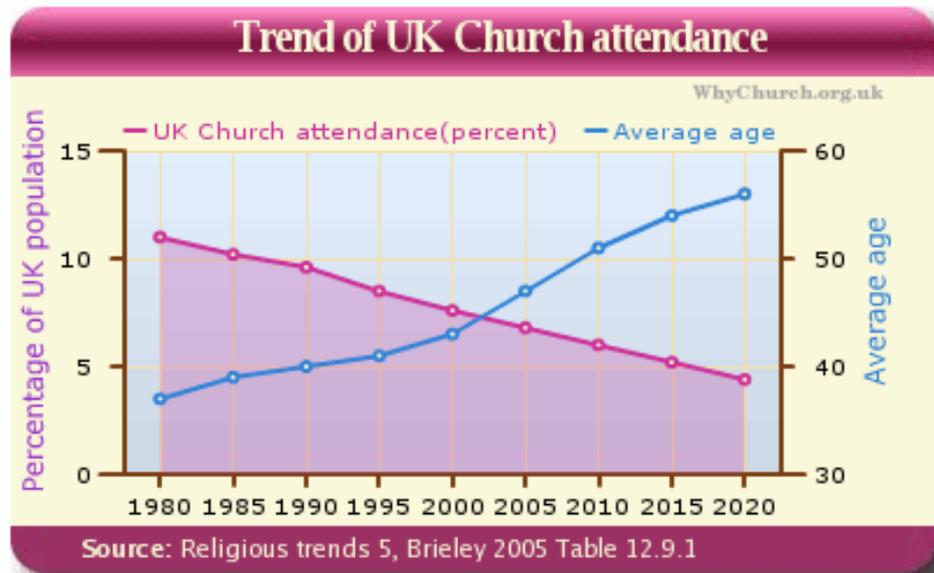
It has been my hope and aim for the past seven years to place before the people God has given me a way of being church that will be both relevant to the place, time and background of our particular situation while at the same time being distinctly Jesus centred. This twin call, to relevance and distinctiveness, is at the heart of my understanding of what it means to be God's people. We must be both these things if we are to present the Good News to a broken, needy world.

It has been my privilege in recent months to spend some time in Cameroon. I went there with a specific aim in mind. I wanted to stand back from my home situation and view it from a distance. I hoped that by looking back and reflecting on my ministry and mission from another, quite different culture I might see things in a fresh light. This did not happen in a vacuum. For some time I had been thinking about these same things, particularly in the light of the postmodern revolution that has been raging in Britain (though largely, even studiously, ignored by many Christians). My thinking had come to a point where I felt I needed to step outside the familiar, to see how others faced their particular situation and perhaps gain new insights. This is indeed what has happened and I am especially thankful to Beeston Baptist Church for allowing me time to pursue this aim.

What follows is not an account of my time in Cameroon, nor a reflection on that place, but I would like to thank the pastors, elders and members of Redeemer Baptist Church, Bamenda, for taking me into their hearts and homes and allowing me to see Jesus in an African light.

INTRODUCTION

It is widely known that church attendance is declining in the UK. The most recent authoritative survey of religious trends, carried out in 2005, found that 6.8% of the UK population claimed to attend church regularly. By 2011 this will have fallen to below 6%, half the number that made the same claim in 1980. The reasons for this decline are many and complex, but one thing is very clear – the world is changing and the church must respond.



Faced with a fast changing world, churches in Britain have responded in a number of ways. Some have shut their eyes and doors on such change, seeing the new world around them as a spiritual desert to be shunned. Others have circled the wagons and clung to the old certainties in the hope that the cavalry of revival is just over the horizon and will soon swoop down and rescue the remaining faithful few. Such churches have remained distinct in their doctrine and practice, but the world has come to see them as largely irrelevant to their situation.

Other Christian groups have responded to the new order by reaching out and whole-heartedly embracing the new ways of thinking and being, but have, in the process, cut their ties with historic, Biblical Christianity. They have remained relevant, often touching the needy lives around them in very practical ways, but many have lost their Christian distinctiveness.

In practice, this is not an either-or situation. Churches take up various positions. However, these two options of relevance and distinctiveness, are not a continuum along which we must take up a balanced position but rather are two aspects of what it means to be 'church'. God does not call us to compromise truth in order to dialogue with others, nor does he ask us to love others only in so far as they will accept our standards of faith and practice. In this, as in all things, we are to follow the example of Jesus who was, at the same time, full of both truth and grace.¹

¹ John 1:14

A church will be a place where people can both hear and experience the Good News. What would such a church look like? This has been a question on my mind and heart for some time and was foremost in my thinking when I flew out to Cameroon.

THE ESSENTIALS OF A HEALTHY CHURCH

Two things are essential in the life of a healthy church. These are not extremes to be held in balance – both essential. Firstly it will be true to the Gospel. The Gospel, the Good News, is the word of life in a death-dealing world. It is a message of hope, of reconciliation, a word that opens up a new future. It is a story to be told and a truth to be proclaimed. There will be no church where this word of life is not faithfully proclaimed. Without the Gospel word the best church will be ineffective, even dangerous, creating a false impression of God's kingdom rule.

Secondly, church will be a place where the word of life is lived out. There will be a visible, tangible expression of the kingdom, expressed through our relationship with God, each other and the wider world, so that people not only hear the word of life but can also experience it. This church community is to be an example of kingdom life. Without such life the most Bible based church will be ineffective, giving the impression that faith is no more than intellectual assent to mere words and ideas.

THE GOSPEL AS GOD'S WORD

Key ideas: Without God's word there is no Good News – God's word shapes God's people – God's word confronts the world.

Key Scriptures: John 8:31ff; 2 Timothy 3:16f

The Gospel is a word, so the church must be word centred. Without this word there is no Gospel. This has been so from the beginning when God said, "Let there be... and it was so." The world starts with a word, continues with a word and will reach its fulfilment with a word. "I tell you the truth," Jesus said, "whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life."² A true disciple of Jesus is one who 'abides in his word'.³

² John 5:24. See also Romans 10:17; Ephesians 1:13; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23

³ John 8:31; Matthew 4:4

God extends his rule through his word. It is through the proclamation of the Gospel word that people come to faith. When Luke describes the early expansion of the church he writes, 'So the word of God spread.'⁴

Being word centred is not an alternative to Spirit centred. A word centred church will be a church where God, by his spirit, dwells. Neither should word centred be confused with 'intellectual'. Centring our lives around God's word is not the same as giving assent to a set of propositions. We centre our lives around the word of God by encountering the Word of God, that is, Jesus. God's word leads us into relationship with him and with others who share that relationship.

Being word centred, however, is to be seen in contrast to experience centred. Many in today's world, even today's church, want to experience the kingdom of God. Such a desire is not wrong – the Good News is meant to be lived – but Christian experience is not to be the guiding principle, nor can experience sit in authority over the word of God. Spiritual experience that does not arise from God's word is not Christian experience. True Christian experience arises through the Spirit as we encounter Jesus, revealed to us through the word of the Gospel.

The word of God shapes his people. We are not to conform to the world's ways. Being word centred means allowing the word of God to challenge and change us. Our actions and attitudes are to be under the authority of God expressed through his word.

This should not be seen as dangerous fundamentalism, but it is truly radical. Fundamentalism places particular interpretations above question, making tradition superior to the word and leaving no room for growth. Being radical means taking the word seriously, of subjecting all, including the teaching of notable Christian worthies, to Scripture.

Such radicalism can be risky and can lead to error. To safeguard against this the proper place for the interpretation and application of the word is within the local congregation. Each congregation has the responsibility to interpret God's word in the light of their own situation. It is not the role of the minister, or any other church leader to tell the congregation what they should believe. Nor is there any 'super-church' authority (such as denomination

4 Acts 6:7

leaders) who can insist on certain teachings or interpretations being accepted as orthodoxy.

As God's people gathered together as a fellowship of believers we are to engage with the word of God. It is by all members of the local congregation working together, looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith⁵, guided by the Holy Spirit⁶ and under the authority of the word, that they remain faithful.

The word of God confronts the world. This confrontation is called 'mission'. A Gospel people, shaped by the Gospel word, will be a missionary people for we cannot be committed to the Gospel without being committed to proclaiming the Gospel.

By and large, Christians do not see that what they do every day in schools, workplaces, clubs or homes as significant for God, nor that the people they spend time with in those everyday contexts are the people God is calling them to pray for, bless and witness to. Mark Green and Tracy Cotterell write, "We pray for our Sunday school teachers but not, for example, for schoolteachers working 40 hours a week in schools among children and adults who on the whole don't know Jesus. We pray for overseas missionaries but not for Christian electricians, builders, shop assistants and managers in our towns... We have simply not been envisioned, resourced and supported to share the Good News of Jesus in our everyday contexts."⁷

It is easy to think of the church as hard pressed when just a few gather Sunday by Sunday, but the real mission of the church takes place Monday to Saturday as the Gospel word is made real in the world.

THE GOSPEL AS GOD'S COMMUNITY

Key ideas: Christian identity – created for relationship – Christian mission and the 'alternative society'

Key Scriptures: Acts 4:32-35

Gospel community is central to Christian identity. In today's society the individual, their needs and choices, are held to be paramount. God's way, however, is one of mutual relationship and interdependence. The centrality of

5 Hebrews 12:2

6 2 Peter 1:20f

7 Green and Cotterell, *Let My People Grow*, LICC, 2005

community rises out of a foundational Christian understanding of God who has always existed in the community of Father, Son and Spirit. By calling his broken world back into community God is re-establishing not just the creation order but reforming the divine image. This means that community is not an optional extra but forms the heart of the Good News.

For most of history and for much of the world the question “Who am I?” has been answered in terms of the community to which I belong. This sense of belonging not only confers identity, it demands loyalty. In Britain and much of the west today such an answer is quite foreign to our thinking. The starting point has become the individual. Who I am is up to me. It will depend on how I see myself. Indeed it is possible for there to be more than one 'me'. I may present one face at work, another at home, another at church and as many as I like in the virtual world of computers and cyberspace. The result of this self-constructed identity is insecurity on a scale never seen before. Churches, as with anywhere else, are full of people trying to earn the right to maintain and keep their various self-images and gain approval for the face they present.

Some see this change as a strength. I no longer need to pretend to be something I am not in order to fit in, I am free to be whoever I want to be and no one has the right to demand otherwise. But the Gospel word in this situation is that I am not an isolated individual. I am created for relationship. The key defining relationship for Christians is our relationship with God. Who am I? I am a child of God, the bride of his Son and the dwelling place of his Spirit. And that identity is given me by grace. This automatically brings me into relationship with others who share this identity.

By becoming a Christian I belong to God and I belong to my brothers and sisters. It is not that I come to God and then make a decision to become part of the church. By being 'in Christ' I am intimately bound to all others who are also 'in Christ'. This is who I am.

The New Testament word for community is *koinonia*, often translated by the now anaemic word 'fellowship'. *Koinonia* is linked to the words 'common', 'sharing', 'participation'. We are the community of the Holy Spirit⁸

8 2 Corinthians 13:14

in community with the Son⁹: sharing our lives,¹⁰ sharing our property,¹¹ sharing in the gospel¹² and sharing in Christ's suffering and glory¹³. The collection of money by the Gentile churches for the poverty-stricken church in Jerusalem is an act of *koinonia*.¹⁴ Our community life is celebrated and reinforced in 'communion' where we participate (*koinonia*) together in the body and blood of Christ: 'Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf'.¹⁵

Gospel community is central to Christian mission. God is a missionary God. He is one who takes the initiative and goes looking for that which was lost. God's primary missionary method is his covenant people. We are his image, made for the purpose of being his representative. Throughout Scripture, beginning with God's call to Abraham, God has been building an 'alternative society', a people who will show to the world a better way to live. The purpose of this new community is not simply to be different from anything the world has to offer, it is to be *seen* to be different – a city built on a hill top.

In Old Testament times this was attempted through a national group, but now the barriers of race, gender, social background, together with all other dividing walls of hostility,¹⁶ have been broken down and the role of the Servant of the Lord falls to the community of faith, the church.

The church is to be a light to the world. Jesus asks us to let that light 'shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven'¹⁷. Church that is no more than a set of responsibilities, juggled among other sets of responsibilities, can never carry the weight of Jesus' mandate. Only life that is infused and transformed by a communal identity can be lived 'before men'. It is this kind of life that can only be explained in a way that brings praise to our Father in heaven.

9 1 Corinthians 1:9

10 1 Thessalonians 2:8

11 Acts 4:32

12 Philippians 1:5; Philemon 6

13 2 Corinthians 1:6-7; 1 Peter 4:13

14 Romans 15:26; 2 Corinthians 9:13

15 1 Corinthians 10:16f

16 Ephesians 2:14

17 Matthew 5:16

The *Imagine Report*¹⁸ concluded: “The UK will never be reached until we create open, authentic, learning and praying communities that are focused on making whole-life disciples who live and share the Gospel wherever they relate to people in their daily lives.”

We need to plan and pray for gospel community. This means creating a church in which such relationships are normal, celebrating day-to-day gospel living in the secular world and discussing how we can use our daily routine for the gospel.

THE VALUES OF A HEALTHY CHURCH

A healthy church will have well defined, understood and shared values. As a Baptist church we already subscribe to a group of five core values.¹⁹ They express how we seek to put our words into practice and how we aim to live out our common life.

Because of the way we understand the biblical message, our Baptist emphasis is on trusting and following Jesus together in Christian discipleship. Our identity as Christian people is determined by the life of Jesus. We believe that this involves living in radical commitment to him. Taking this seriously will challenge all the assumptions and practices of our life together. We are called to follow him, doing as he did and giving ourselves to God's loving purposes in the world.

Our core values must therefore flow from and reflect the nature of God as revealed in Jesus Christ – who he is, what he does, what he desires. These values should determine the nature and purpose of the Church, that we are a believing and hope affirming community. We exist to bear witness to Jesus Christ in the world, to share in his mission, to make known his faithful and saving love for all creation, and to express his concern for the wholeness and harmony of all that he has made.

We follow Jesus not simply as individuals. As Baptists, we emphasise the significance of the gathered church. Our understanding of church is not as hierarchy or organisation, but essentially as Community in Christ. Relationships are critical to the working out of our salvation; hence our emphasis on the aspects of community life.

¹⁸ *Imagine – What The People Said*, LICC, 2009

¹⁹ *5 Core Values For A Gospel People*, BUGB, 1998

A PROPHETIC COMMUNITY

Following Jesus in confronting evil, injustice and hypocrisy and challenging worldly concepts of power, wealth, status and security.

Throughout his ministry Jesus confronted injustice and hypocrisy. He also challenged human concepts of power, wealth, status and security. Radical commitment to Jesus therefore implies a suspicion of the dominant trends in society, religion and culture.

Jesus made seeking the reign and righteousness of God a clear priority, and called his followers not to let human culture squeeze them into its own mould. By his example, he taught them to challenge false values that hinder God's mission and threaten the integrity of creation.

As Baptists, we emphasise the importance of conscience, and of carefully listening to the voice of conscience. Having a dissenting history, we should be unafraid to live distinctively and prophetically.

AN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY

Following Jesus in transcending barriers of gender, language, race, class, age and culture and identifying with those who are rejected, deprived and powerless.

Since Jesus exemplified the Kingdom values expressed by the Old Testament prophets, and specifically identified caring for the needy as service to him, we should reflect his unfailing love for the fallen, the excluded, the poor and hungry, the oppressed, voiceless and powerless.

Our life together will transcend barriers of gender, language, race, class, age and culture creating communities which welcome and accept those on the margins of life and learn from them. As Baptists, we need to recover the Reformation emphasis on the priesthood of all believers.

A SACRIFICIAL COMMUNITY

Following Jesus in accepting vulnerability and the necessity of sacrifice and seeking to reflect the generous, life-giving nature of God.

Following Jesus means following a crucified Saviour, who laid down his life in service. This creates distinctive communities. Too easily God's passion for the world is domesticated and the offence of the cross is lost. Faith becomes

separated from the poverty and particularity of Jesus, with dire consequences for mission.

Baptist communities will resist the temptations of worldly power and triumphalism. We will recognise the importance of vulnerability and the necessity of sacrifice as the path to resurrection and new life. We will embrace the call to live with paradox and failure. We will seek to reflect the generous life-giving nature of God.

A MISSIONARY COMMUNITY

Following Jesus in demonstrating in word and action God's forgiving and healing love and calling and enabling people to experience the love of God for themselves.

Since Jesus authenticated the ultimate reality of God's love by giving himself for the life of the world, and commissioned his followers to go as witnesses locally, nationally and globally, we believe as Baptists, that we must be true to our roots by being a missionary people. Such a vocation gives us a radical view of the world and our daily life within it. Corporately and individually we are obliged to seek to bring other people to a personal experience of God's saving love and to a faith-relationship with him and to demonstrate in our words and actions God's forgiving and healing love.

A WORSHIPPING COMMUNITY

Following Jesus in engaging in worship and prayer which inspire and undergird all we are and do and exploring and expressing what it means to live together as the people of God, obeying his Word and following Christ in the whole of daily life.

Since Jesus spent regular times in prayer and worship, stressed that he must always be about his Father's business, and enshrined the wide-ranging significance of this in the Lord's Prayer, we are called to be like him. In order to grow into the sort of community described in this document, we must recognise the primacy of worship and prayer, both individually and corporately.

This will nurture our relationship with God and awaken us to the wonder of his salvation. It will open our hearts and minds to the renewing power of the Holy Spirit, making us more ready to obey his Word and honour

him in all aspects of our daily lives. It will also enrich our life together as the people of God by guiding and under-girding all we are and do.

THE MISSION OF A HEALTHY CHURCH

When God created the universe he looked at all he had made and saw that it was very good,²⁰ so much so that when it was complete he took his rest and contemplated the significance and wonder of his handiwork. It was his intention to share this wonderful creation with his creatures, particularly mankind, whom he had formed 'in his own image'²¹ This original intention was soon marred almost beyond recognition by the wilful act of the very creatures who should have been the main beneficiaries of God's work. Immediately God set out on a mission of reclamation and restoration²², traced in the opening chapters of Scripture through a series of stories that tell not only of the spread of sin, but also the spread of God's grace and culminating in the call of Abram, who was to be the means of blessing to the fallen world²³.

Throughout the following generations God progressively unveiled his plans. He would restore all things, fulfilling his original purpose for his creation. His chosen people were to bear witness to God's plan before the world. They were to give a glimpse of what living in God's kingdom was like. Their task was not to redeem, restore or rescue – God would do that – rather they were to be 'a light to the nations'²⁴. By that light nations would find their way to God and his salvation²⁵. That his people failed, and continue to fail, in this task has not stopped God from fulfilling his plan and purpose.

In the Incarnation, the events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God has moved decisively in history, stepping into his creation, confronting and overcoming all that stood in his way²⁶. God's plan for his covenant people has stayed the same – they were still to be his witnesses²⁷ – but no longer are they marked by a national identity, now they are 'a household of faith'²⁸, Abraham's children, not by natural descent, but because

20 Genesis 1:31

21 Genesis 1:27

22 Genesis 3:15. This is sometimes referred to as the 'Proto-evangel', the first good word.

23 Genesis 12:1-3

24 Isaiah 42:6; 49:6

25 Isaiah 60:3

26 Colossians 2:9-15

27 Acts 1:8

28 Galatians 6:10

they share his faith²⁹. God's people, who we now call the church, are still 'a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light'³⁰.

What are we witnesses to? Jesus himself answers that question when he tells his first disciples, "You will be *my* witnesses."³¹ The mission of the church is to share with the world the Good News of Jesus who is the one who fulfils God age-old plan to restore all things to himself.

If we are to grasp this continuing mission in our fast-changing society we will have to face some far-reaching questions that will necessitate some new, radical, thinking and action. The task of witnessing to God's purpose, fulfilled in Christ, remains the same, the Good News remains unchanged, the community of faith remains God's primary tool in spreading that Good News. What has changed is the context in which we seek to fulfil our God-given mission. Long cherished ideas no longer seem to work as they once did and people are no longer asking the questions to which we have tried and tested answers. What is needed is a fresh approach to mission that will have significant implications for ministry, worship, community and spirituality.

A FRESH APPROACH TO MINISTRY

I have always believed that if I want God to change things he will start with me. If God wants to revitalize and re-align the people he has given me he will need to revitalize and re-align me first, for although I do not have the power to change other people, I am able to hold them back. So before there can be a fresh approach to the life of the church, I have to make a fresh approach to ministry and re-evaluate God's call.

A CHRIST-CENTRED MINISTRY

Key ideas: Knowing and following Christ – resisting Christianity with commitment

Key Scriptures: Philippians 3:7-14

No ministry can be called 'Christian' if it is not centred on Christ. The pressures of everyday life in a church can easily obscure the real heart of

29 See Romans 4:3

30 1 Peter 2:9, see also Exodus 19:5f

31 Acts 1:8

ministry. Paul says that he was called to, “Proclaim [Christ], admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.”³² What all too often happens is that this glorious ministry becomes no more than running a church, and as important as this may be, it is not the same thing.

Our post-modern society is constantly tempting us away from a Christ-centred life. Current theologies, theories and practices are seducing churches into becoming centres for private, individual compensation for the impersonal life of the everyday world. As John Drane put it, the church is being 'MacDonaldized'³³, pressurised into providing a consumer-orientated product that is a kind of privatized Christianity without commitment.

A Christ-centred ministry will be a Christ-like ministry. Jesus' ministry was marked by both a holy distinctiveness and a compassionate relevance. Jesus drew people to himself because he was open and accepting. He never turned anyone away who came to him. It was only those who were sure of their own standing before God that Jesus castigated. I need to constantly ask myself how Christ-like am I, seeking together with Paul, and all who would follow Jesus, “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.”³⁴

A PEOPLE-ORIENTATED MINISTRY

Key ideas: God's primary missionary tool – Friendship as affection plus respect

Key Scriptures: Isaiah's 'Servant Songs'

To speak of a people-orientated ministry is not to elevate human need above all other considerations. Scripture is not only concerned with humanity, but also with the non-human creation. God's plan and purpose is to restore all of creation to its original, 'very good', status. However, his primary tool in accomplishing this aim is through his covenant people.

A people-orientated ministry should not be simply understood in terms of spending more time and effort in pastoral related issue. As long ago as the 1970s questions were being raised about the nature and effect of traditional

32 Colossians 1:28

33 John Drane, *The MacDonaldization Of The Church*, DLT, 2000

34 Philippians 3:10f

pastoral practices: “The more competent our skills in caring for the congregation the less the congregation care for themselves.”³⁵ Such traditional practices are in danger of developing a culture of dependency (when the minister is proficient in his job) or disappointment (when he does not match the congregation's expectations). For both minister and congregation it is a lose-lose situation.

In developing a people-orientated ministry friendship is a key issue. Such friendship may be defined as affection plus respect. I may show affection but not respect. This is especially true when one thinks oneself to be the superior partner in a relationship, while the other is the deserving (or even undeserving) needy. Similarly, I may feel myself to be respected but not necessarily liked. Friendship combines these two.

When people are friends, including minister and members of the fellowship, questions of job description and expectations become irrelevant, what matters is the good of the friend. A ministry of friendship is to live as Jesus lived.

A KINGDOM-SEEKING MINISTRY

Key ideas: Seeking to reveal – living by kingdom values

Key Scriptures: Matthew 5-7

If ministry is to be Christ-centred and people-orientated it is also to be kingdom-seeking. “First and foremost, seek God's kingdom and his righteousness.” Jesus tells us³⁶. God's kingdom is the realm in which God's rule is acknowledged and lived out – it is creation as God intended it to be. This is what God is working towards as his plan unfolds. Although it was marred by the Fall, God's kingdom was foreseen by the prophets, it broke into this world in Jesus and it will reach its fullness when Christ returns. As Jesus' witnesses we are to show the world what living in the kingdom of God is like.

Keeping the kingdom and its values in the limelight is both the way and task of ministry. Firstly, I must personally seek God's kingdom. This is a life-long commitment. It is not an intellectual pursuit that simply desires to understand the Biblical teaching and theology of the Kingdom of God. It is a way of life that constantly asks a simple question: What are the kingdom

35 See Moltmann, *The Open Church*, SCM, 1978

36 Matthew 6:33

values in this situation (event, happening, question, suggestion, relationship, meeting)?

Secondly, it is the task of ministry to keep kingdom values at the heart of the life of the fellowship. This may well be the most important aspect of ministry, standing above leadership or vision. A leader may, if he neglects the kingdom, drive through his own agenda by the force of his own will, or allow others to do so in the interest of keeping the peace. Seeking God's kingdom and encouraging others to do the same enables all to discover God and his will for themselves and enables the fellowship to move together as one.

A FRESH APPROACH TO WORSHIP

Key ideas: Worship shapes our shared life – worship as mission – worship from 'below'

Key Scriptures: Acts 2:42-47; 1 Corinthians 14:24f

Sunday by Sunday God's people gather together. We do this for a number of reasons, some more Scriptural than others, but always it involves some element of worship. Over the past year or so I have had a growing conviction that worship is not simply one of a number of ingredients that go into the formation of a 'service', it is the very core of what we are about. It gives shape and texture, as well as content and context, to our shared life. Our worship has a profound effect on our prayer life, our understanding of Scripture, our fellowship and our mission.

In worship we seek to experience God's love, hear God's voice and engage with God, one another and the world.³⁷ Our worship grows out of our understanding of God. If our God is small and plays little part in our everyday lives our worship will reflect this by being shallow and insignificant. If we know and experience God, both as individuals and as a fellowship, as “The LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin”³⁸ then our worship will be deep and life-giving. Our worship reveals and demonstrates God's alternative to this world of drudgery, guilt and death. In worship the inevitability of our past is broken through, the constraint of evil is abolished and death is disarmed.

³⁷ See *Growing a Healthy Church*, Beeston Baptist Church, 2008

³⁸ Exodus 34:6f

Worship, then, is a powerful tool in mission. When a visitor shares worship with us do they experience God's love, hear God's voice and engage with God in a life-giving way? Do they share in the joy of the Spirit in our worship? Do they experience of the presence of God as the most joyful thing in the world?

However, worship is not only about joyful praise. True worship recognises the full width and depth of human experience. In worship we meet both the Crucified and Resurrected One, we share not only in his victory but also in his suffering. Yet much worship is too often devoid of any genuine human contact or participation. Involvement in worship may be limited to singing a few songs. Worship needs to expand from formal ceremony to become the feast of the Resurrection: this will not be accomplished through performed events, including sermons, but through spontaneous input growing out of real-life experiences of both individuals and the fellowship. Such worship cannot happen from the 'front' – it happens when the whole fellowship worships from 'below'.

A FRESH APPROACH TO COMMUNITY

Key ideas: A church of the people – friendship – changing our society

Key Scriptures: Romans 15:7

Like worship, community cannot be imposed from the top down. It is the outcome of the desire of the gathered church for a deeper experience of walking with Jesus. For many, however, even in church what hurts the most is the lack of human relationships. We find occasions to associate with others (church or small groups) but these relationships cease when we leave the meeting. But what if there were a place where we not only listened but where we might also speak and find a hearing?

What is needed is a church *of* the people rather than *for* the people. Such a church does not exist without open, trusting relationships – that is friendship. The concept of friendship is, strangely, often lacking in churches. Friendship is often substituted with 'love', a difficult concept to define. Friendship is more concrete than love. An example: Mr Smith prefers church B to church A. When asked why he replies, "In church A they loved me, but in church B they were friendly to me. In church A they made themselves

useful to me, but in church B they needed me. In church A they invited me to their dinner tables, but in church B they invited me into their kitchens.”³⁹

We do not submit to a friend. We neither look up to nor down on a friend. We can look a friend in the face. In friendship we are content to be ourself, just as we are, readily accepted and respected. When some one likes another, then they respect that person in his or her individuality, even delighting in their peculiarities. You can depend on a friend, and as a friend you become someone on whom others can depend. A friend remains a friend even in misfortune, even in guilt. Between friends there is no prejudice that defines one or the other, and no ideal image after which one or the other must strive. Between friends there exists only the promise to walk with each other and to be there for each other.

It is this friendship that forms the basis of Christian community, for it is this friendship that is the true expression of Christ's image in us. One trusts and confides in a friend. One helps a friend, with no thought of reward. We want to communicate our joy to our friends and we share their joy without envy. Friends also share each other's pain. Such community is becoming increasingly difficult to find in the world – it is truly counter-cultural – yet it lies at the heart of what it means to be the people of God. Such a group of friends will have a profound impact on our society.

A FRESH APPROACH TO SPIRITUALITY

Key ideas: Fellowship with a passionate God

Key Scriptures: Philippians 3:8-14; Luke 4:18f (with Isaiah 61:1ff); Isaiah 58:6-12

Possibly the greatest temptation faced by God's people is to forget that we are chosen and called for a purpose other than their own blessing and benefit. We may recognised God's grace in choosing us, but neglected to witness to that grace. We become increasingly self-centred, concerned only for doctrinal orthodoxy and our own well-being, looking on the rest of the world with a mixture of pity and suspicion.

It is too easy to fall into the trap of doing no more than praising God for his grace and mercy that saves from sin, forgetting that God does not

³⁹ With apologies to Brecht's *Calendar Stories*

simply save, but that he saves for a purpose. Many generations of preachers have encouraged sinners to turn to Christ for cleansing and forgiveness, accepting the unmerited favour of God on their behalf, but have neglected to tell their congregations that God's is also seeking justice and righteousness for *all* of his creation, and calls his people to work with him to bring about that aim.

It is easier to see why so many fall into such temptation when we consider that so much of what is preached and taught in churches is to do with either (a) propositional truth or (b) ethics and morality. That is, knowledge and practice, easily divorced from a life of passionate devotion to God, one another and the world. In such circumstances Christianity becomes no more than outward conformity, of which the Pharisees are the Biblical example *par excellence*.

Jesus never spoke in such terms, except to tell some Pharisees that although they should not neglect these things, there were more important considerations.⁴⁰ His call is not to conformity, but to a journey, to walk with him day-by-day, carrying a cross. It is a call to lose our own life so that we may gain his,⁴¹ for where Jesus is there is life. For many, even within the church, this call to follow is too much⁴². They prefer to keep a firm grip on their own life. But the person who wants to keep hold of their life in this way is not living at all, they are in fact already dead. The secret of life is that whoever would keep their life will lose it (and is already losing it), but whoever is willing to risk their life and surrenders it to Jesus, will gain it.

Talk of risk, gain and loss reminds us that our walk with Jesus is not a dispassionate thing – quite the opposite. The Christian life is a passionate life. The Gospels reveal to us a passionate Jesus, one who was deeply touched and moved by what he saw around him, and who responded with compassion, and even anger at times. This is no surprise for God had already revealed himself as a passionate God in his dealings with Israel. How can we, if we are in covenant with this passionate God, not share in his passion. Our whole life should be shaped by his passion, by the love of and desire for the kingdom of God in the world – for a world where the sick are healed, lepers are accepted and sin is forgiven not punished.

40 Matthew 23:23

41 Luke 9:23-25

42 Luke 9:57-62

A HEALTHY CHURCH AND...

I do not believe that the church can continue for much longer in its present state. Put bluntly, it will last as long as this present generation lasts. Simple statistics about the rapid decline in church attendance across the UK hides an important detail. It is not elderly people dying that is causing the decline but younger people who no longer see church as being in any way relevant to their lives. Congregation are not only getting smaller, they are getting older. This does not bode well for the future of the church.

Of course, the church will not fail – God will see to that – but I would point to the seven churches of Asia Minor in Revelations, once the centre of Christian mission to the eastern Mediterranean, have been part of the Muslim world for centuries. Churches come and go and unless we are willing to concede that God has finished with Beeston and Jesus has nothing further to say in this place, we need to seek meaningful ways of bringing the Good News to our town.

So I want to offer some suggestions as to practical steps we can take. These steps build on what we are already doing, but will take us further. I have not included too much detail as flexibility is a key issue. We are a small church and as such we should be better placed to respond to changing circumstances than a bigger, more structured church. Indeed, I believe we are exactly the tool God wants to perform his task in this place at this time. The only question is, are we willing to follow where he leads?

MINISTRY

Key ideas: Friendship, leadership, the priesthood of all believers,

Key Scriptures: John 15:14f; Hebrews 13:17

The task of ministry to which I am called is to be set aside by the fellowship to go before God on behalf of the whole fellowship, and the wider community, with their desires, dreams, disappointments, pain and joys, and listen to what God has to say and then to bring those words back to the church and wider community. To do this I have received particular training that helps me with the techniques (theology, hermeneutics, Bible study skills, etc.), but primarily it is a calling from God, empowered by his Spirit and recognised by his people. It is a ministry of prayer, reflection, study and proclamation. It is no

small thing and relies on the prayer and support of the fellowship. It does not relieve the fellowship of their calling or responsibilities as God's people, but is intended to enhance them.

To fulfil this calling I need to change and strengthen various aspects of my own life with regard to worship, community and spirituality, and particularly in the areas of friendship and leadership. These last two have special relevance to my call to carry the people God has given me into his presence and to bringing God's word to those same people.

Praying for the congregation is more than simple using a prayer list on a regular basis. It is about knowing people, being willing and able to share in their lives. It is more than just listening, more than gaining information (though it obviously includes that). It is about being a friend. The call to ministry is not a call to separation but to show by word and life the truth of the Incarnation. Jesus involved himself with people and calls all his disciples, even ministers, to follow his example.

Being a leader among friends may not seem to be an easy thing, but again, when we look at Jesus we see he was able to be both. Jesus' model of leadership was somewhat different from that of the world, nevertheless, he still provided leadership and the call to ministry still implies a call to lead – it is the outcome of carrying God's people (and the wider community) into God's presence.

Practical steps

I will endeavour to:

- *Place a greater emphasis to developing and maintaining friendships*
- *Diligently seek God's face and faithfully proclaim his word*
- *Lead by example*

I call on the church to:

- *Pray regularly and earnestly for the ministry of this church*
- *Take active steps to discern the particular ministry to which God is calling them, both individually and as a fellowship*

WORSHIP

Key ideas: Worship as festival and feast; sharing joy and pain

Key Scriptures: Colossians 3:16; 1 Corinthians 11:17ff

Sunday services are expected to be many things. They are times for the faithful to gather together to share their stories and to seek prayer and guidance from their fellow believers. They are occasions to celebrate God's goodness and praise him for all he is and does. They may be times of lament and shared sadness and/or uncertainty when we come before God in doubt and longing. They are a means of leading the not-yet Christian into God's presence, of teaching the faithful and challenging the world. We cannot do all these things simultaneously, nor adequately give expression to each in ninety minutes.

It is time to rethink these elements. For example, it is uncommon for non-Christians to seek answers to their spiritual questions by attending church. This is normally, and best, done through personal relationships with Christian friends. By the time they are ready to attend church these seekers are usually several steps along the road. Except for special occasions (eg, 'Back to church Sunday') there may be no need to include evangelism in services. This shifts the emphasis toward worship in our Sunday morning gatherings. It is quite likely that making services less evangelistic (and therefore less threatening to the not-yet Christian) they will become more welcoming.

Our services are more usually events *for* the people rather than celebrations *by* the people. This needs to change. There needs to be a shift in emphasis from 'hearing' the Gospel (from the front) to 'speaking' the Good News to each other. Time and space should be made available for open, spontaneous expression from all so that not only the minister and a select few speak and pray. There should also be more space to greet and share with one another informally. This can happen if refreshments, currently served at the end of the service but perhaps better available beforehand, are seen as a part of the service, not an optional extra.

The key issue is that of Communion. The Lord's Table should be at the centre of our worship. Recently I have become convinced of the value and power of this sacrament and have come to believe that it is right and proper to share around the Table every Sunday morning. Although such worship may be inclined towards praise, which is right and proper, it also makes space for the range and depth of feeling and experience that worshippers bring week by week.

Such changes to Sunday mornings would have an effect on other church events. First among these would be the Sunday evening service which will become (if it isn't already) the primary time for communal Bible study. Secondly we should more actively encourage all, not just formal members, to be part of at least one of our small groups where there would be opportunity to share at a deeper level and to pray more effectively for each other.

Practical steps

I will endeavour to:

- *Lead the church in worship that is meaningful to the fellowship*
- *Seek out and encourage those who God has gifted for worship in particular ways*

I call on the church to:

- *Play an active part in the worship of the church*
- *Make every effort to build one another up by being willing to share with others what God is doing in their lives.*
- *Share regularly with one another around the Lord's Table*

COMMUNITY

Key ideas: Being visible, open and voluntary

Key Scriptures: Matthew 5:14-16

Apart from the five core values that we ascribe to we could add that we desire to be a visible, open and voluntary community. As a *visible* community we will let our light shine before others, so that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven⁴³. We need to ensure that we use all appropriate means to let our friends, family, neighbours and colleges know that here is a group of people who want to bless them through word and friendship. This is not something to be ashamed of but rather part of the life of a witnessing community.

Being visible means playing our part in the life of the wider community. We should be involved in the life of the town through all means possible. This does not mean over-stretching our resources, but show a willingness to share what we have with all, joining with others who seek

43 Matthew 5:16

similar ends (even if not for similar reasons), and being 'salt and light' in our town.

Being visible also means being willing to be seen to be followers of Jesus. It means sharing our stories, and God's Big Story, wherever and whenever the opportunity arises. We will do this not because we ought, or because we are proud of our particular expression of church. We will do this because we are a group of friends, friends of each other and friends of Jesus. We will do this because it is a joy and a privilege to be part of a fellowship that offers a real alternative to the broken, death-dealing world most have to endure.

We will also be an *open* community. As an open community we will encourage all not only to belong but also to participate. Such openness has two distinct aspects. In relation to the wider world it is easy to accept others like ourselves, who want what we want, but it is a different matter to accept those who are different from us, who want something other than we do. Being visible will bring us into contact with others not like us. Being open will make a place for such among us, without preconditions, censure or pressure. All we ask is that we walk together.

Openness will also apply within the fellowship. We will not be a place where some have all the say and others who have nothing to say. We will seek ways to make it possible for all to share. Some do not like to speak out, while others have no such problem. Among friends we know who these are and we will all work together to ensure God's word is heard among us. This is particularly important in two areas of church life, worship, where we share what God is doing among us, and at the church meeting as we seek together to discern the mind of Christ.

A *voluntary* community is a group drawn and held together by a shared vision and desire to see that vision fulfilled. People participate together to help each other find God's calling and gifting in our lives, and will discern together how God wants them to put these things into practice. As a voluntary community we will not only allow but encourage such participation. We will be a place where we will help each other understand God's word to us and work together so that we may live God's life both as individuals and as a fellowship.

Practical steps

I will endeavour to:

- *Ensure appropriate ways for everyone to play their part in the shared life of the church*

I call on the church to:

- *Bear one another's burdens, even when it is unpleasant and there is no agreement*
- *Work together to ensure that all have the opportunity to have their voice heard*

SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Key ideas: Making disciples – life as a mystery to be explored – a passion for life – helping one another grow – believe-behave-belong and be baptised

Key Scriptures: Ephesians 4:11-16

We are called to make disciples.⁴⁴ To make disciples is more than to make converts. It is more than instruction in Bible knowledge, doctrine or church history. It is more than encouraging the development of 'Christian' habits, such as personal prayer and Bible reading. It is about developing a completely new world-view – a way of seeing things that challenges and changes our most basic understanding of how the world works⁴⁵. Such a paradigm shift does not come easily and many Christians never move beyond wearing Christian overalls over their worldly clothes rather than changing their clothes altogether⁴⁶.

This process of making disciples is called spiritual formation and was probably the most neglected area of church life, particularly among evangelicals, until quite recently. Happily, this situation is now changing and both individual Christians and whole churches are taking the call to Biblical discipleship more seriously.

If we are to grow spiritually we must allow God to direct not just our minds but our hearts, soul and strength also⁴⁷. Such growth should not be seen in dispassionate, easily quantifiable terms. Life is a mystery to be explored, not a problem to be solved.

44 Matthew 28:19

45 Romans 12:2

46 Paul addresses this issue in Romans, especially 8:1-17.

47 Luke 10:27

Such passion is not restricted to church services – it is a passion for life, and life in all its fullness that only Jesus can give⁴⁸. It is a passion that seeks out God's kingdom wherever it is found and endeavours to bring God's rule where it is not. Nor is it found only in Christian activities. A passion for God's justice may well lead to commitment to *Amnesty International* or *CND*. A passion for God's world may include active participation in *Friends of the Earth* or *Greenpeace*. A passion for the local community may mean membership of the local history society or social club.

Each of us is told that as we go into the world⁴⁹ we are to take Christ with us. This spiritual passion is not easily taught but we can provide an environment where it is modelled, encouraged and nurtured. By sharing together in closer fellowship (including those things we do to pursue God kingdom outside the church) and in Christ-centred, life-giving worship we will have the opportunity to build one another up in our walk with Jesus. There are, however, some steps we can take to encourage spiritual formation.

TEACHING PEOPLE THE GOSPEL WORD

Although spiritual growth is not a matter of knowledge alone, it does include knowledge. Spirituality devoid of Biblical understanding is vacuous at best and more likely to be dangerous. God's people need a firm grounding in the Gospel word. This can only be partially done in Sunday morning services. We already have other opportunities to learn and apply Scripture, particularly Sunday evenings, house groups and Engage. Participation in these and similar groups needs to be encouraged.

We also need to teach and encourage one another⁵⁰, making sharing together a natural part of or common life. Such one-to-one sharing is not only Scriptural, it touches the post-modern heart which is suspicious of authority, including (especially) preachers, but is open to one another's stories. A spirituality that is lived out and talked about in the normal surrounds of everyday life will challenge and motivate Christian and not-yet Christian alike.

48 John 10:10

49 The Great Commission is not to go into all the world. A better translation of Matthew 28:19 would be, "As you go into all the world, make disciples..." See, eg, *God's Word Translation*, Baker Publishing, 1995.

50 Colossians 3:16

WELCOMING PEOPLE INTO THE GOSPEL COMMUNITY

In the past there was a recognised progression into the life of the church. One believed the tenets of the faith, supported that claim to belief by appropriate behaviour and was then allowed to belong to the community of faith. The pattern of believe-behave-belong is no longer so rigid. People may wish to play a part in a church without sharing in its belief or behaving in a prescribed way. We need to ensure that we are willing and able to meet and welcome people at any point on their spiritual journey and encourage them to take the next steps as they discover for themselves God's love, acceptance and forgiveness⁵¹.

The key issue here is baptism. Christ demands radical obedience. This obedience begins by demanding full identification of the believer with Christ through baptism. Even as Baptists we are inclined to play down the importance, symbolism and significance of baptism. Our own constitution allows for it to be replaced by a simple declaration of faith, making it an optional extra. Yet in Scripture the call of the Gospel was always “repent and be baptised”⁵². It can be no accident that Paul's great chapter on baptism as an identification with Jesus (Romans 6) comes straight after his teaching on justification (Romans 5).

In many cases Baptism has been reduced to 'something good for you'. To be baptised into Christ means to identify with his suffering, to enter into his death, and to be raised to new life with him. In this way the Christian participates in the victory of Christ over evil. Baptism implies repentance and renunciation; its form symbolizes the main facts of the gospel; its content signifies an entrance into the new community and a mark of the reception of the Spirit. In baptism we die to the world with Christ and are raised with him to new life, we are washed in the waters of regeneration from all guilt, we are baptised into the body of Christ, and receive the Holy Spirit. This suggests that conversion and baptism are not mere emotional experiences, but are entered into on the basis of commitment.

Our message begins with the preaching of the kingdom, the future and ultimate reign of God. But the kingdom of God is more than a future hope; it is a present reality as well. In our preaching, teaching and practice we should recapture this New Testament sense of commitment.

51 See *Challenge To The Church*.

52 Eg Acts 2:38

Practical steps

I will endeavour to:

- *Give clear teaching on discipleship, prayer and the Christian life*
- *Look for ways to engage with God, his word and his world*

I call on the church to:

- *Seek ways of deepening their experience of God*
- *Not only welcome people into the church but actively seek to make them part of the fellowship*
- *Take seriously the call to discipleship, particularly to follow Jesus through the waters of baptism*

CONCLUSION

We have seen that God is a missionary God – he goes looking for that which was lost. A mission-orientated church is one that makes itself available to God and the world and so engages with God in his plan to redeem the world by extending his kingdom rule. To be mission-orientated is to be in tune with God who, through the mystery of the Incarnation, becomes one with his creation and so reveal himself and win his creatures back. We, too, are to be incarnational in our ministries, worship, community and as we walk with Jesus, revealing in our lives the reality of God's love, justice and mercy. This is true missionary work. This is what each and every Christian is called to be and do.

Mission is outward looking. Its chief concern is that which is lost. But we do not simply proclaim truth, we call others to share in our walk, to share the life of Jesus. Our mission is orientated toward producing change, it is active and involves the expenditure of resources, including time, energy and money.

My own vision, given, I believe, by God, is that Beeston Baptist Church will be fellowship of believers, drawn together under the leadership of Christ, founded on God's word, seeking to live in passionate devotion to God and in true friendship with one another. This is no different that the vision many Christians have had through the ages. I want to find ways that are both relevant and distinctive in which to live this vision. To do so I believe we will have to change,

Making changes to the structure of our services will not mean an automatic change in the hearts of the worshippers. Introducing such changes will require time, teaching and a willingness to explore new possibilities (and to make mistakes). However, I do believe that such changes as I have set out here will have real benefits for us all and will be a more powerful witness to visitors among us.

Kevin Dare
Beeston Baptist Church
June 2011

APPENDIX - BUILDING ON THE PAST

As I thought through the issues raised in this paper during my Sabbatical I was often encouraged by the consistency of not just my own thoughts over the past seven years, but also the thinking of Beeston Baptist Church over a longer period. This Sabbatical has been more of a chance to bring various threads together rather than break new ground.

Below is a list of church papers, documents and events that have lead to this present paper.

- *JCBC Vision Group Interim Report* (2001)
- *Vision Statement* (2001)
- *Sharing the Dream* (2005)
- *The Mission on our Doorstep* (2006)
- *The challenge to the church* (2006)
- *Just Imagine* (2007)
- *Growing a Healthy Church* (2008)
- *Summer of Prayer* (2009)
- *Vision 2010* (2009/10)

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