

## GROWING HEALTHY CHURCHES

What makes my heart beat fast is engaging with local leaders in local churches, because I believe that the local church is the hope of the world. If they get it and get on with it, churches can become the redemptive centres that Jesus intended them to be. Dynamic teaching, creative worship, deep community, effective evangelism, and joyful service will combine to renew the hearts and minds of seekers and believers alike, strengthen families, transform communities and change the world. (Bill Hybels)

Church is God's mission agency in the world, his chosen vehicle for the continuing advance of his Kingdom, a sign to everyone of his saving power and presence in a lost world.

There is no more exciting biblical picture of this than that given by Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4. Dynamic picture in which:

- Everyone understands their own unique gifting and place in God's economy (7)
- The church fulfils 4 core functions (11)
  - Apostolic – breaks new ground for the Kingdom all the time and has a clear sense of being sent and commissioned by God;
  - Prophetic – confronts world with challenging and reassuring word from God;
  - Evangelistic – missional, making God's good news known in an accessible way whereby lives are changed through a saving encounter with Jesus;
  - Nurturing – believers are taught and socialised in the ways of the Kingdom of God, equipped to live purposeful and faithful and fruitful lives.
- The church grows quantitatively and qualitatively (12-13) even into the full stature of Christ; Christ becomes more evidently present as the church progresses;
- The presence of Christ is manifest in our midst and we work in a glorious partnership with Him (16)
- There is a stability and a maturity as we become more and more like Jesus and experience more and more of his fullness; we truly experience what it means to be the Body of Christ on earth and function in that way for others.

Disappointment and frustration with church. Experience falls short of ideal. What needs to be done?

I am a recent convert to gardening. New Veg bed: better crop in second year because of several factors

- Manage perennial weeds
- Put border round edge to stop encroachment of weeds
- Increase quality of soil by manuring
- Crop rotation

Soil same; seeds same; weather same.

Biotic Principle – inherent capacity of organisms to reproduce & survive. Vital for this inherent principle to have free rein i.e. to be unfettered by external restraints. This process of reproduction can be hindered by 'Environmental Resistance'.

Can't force growth but important to keep external resistance to a minimum in order to create best possible conditions for growth, or, at least, to realise maximum potential of 'soil' we are given. Some things are beyond our capacity to control; however, other things are well within our capacity to affect and even change.

What are key things which need to be in place in order for church to be healthy and to have best opportunity to thrive? What do we most need to invest in? C Schwarz research (slightly expanded).

## 1. Empowering Leadership (Jesus)

### • **Sowing Vision**

If you want a certain kind of world you enlist a certain kind of person. Looking at the contemporary church you would almost have to conclude that its founders were administrators and managers or at best theologians and teachers. Yet we find that God chooses visionaries and dreamers. In fact, God promised that when he poured out his spirit on his people, they would *become* visionaries and dreamers. They would proclaim not only what God was doing, but also what he intended to do in human history.

The first century church was founded on the adventurous journeys of men like Paul and Barnabas. It was never intended to be a place of safety from the rapidly changing world. The church should be the greatest revolution ever initiated on this planet. She moves from generation to generation through the dreamers and visionaries who believe that nothing is impossible with God. And like prophets, they call God's people to live their lives as if God is truly God. (McManus)

People need to know the main thing. What are we basically about as a church or as a group or ministry? When we have vision energy is increased and people are moved into action. Vision puts the match to the fuel that most people carry around in their hearts and yearn to have ignited. We leaders must keep striking that match by painting compelling Kingdom pictures.  
(Bill Hybels)

The leader may be the one who chose the image from those available at the moment, articulated it, gave it form and legitimacy and focuses attention on it, but the leader was rarely the one who conceived of it in the first place. *Bennis & Nanus (Leaders)*

Leaders need to prioritise the receiving, enfleshing and effective communication of vision.

- Constant reminders, values etc; Vision Sundays
- Welcome evenings etc

Every church member has a responsibility to play full part in owning and sharing and living out of vision (different players in the vision process).

### • **Empowering others**

Concentrate on empowering other people for ministry, helping them to attain the spiritual potential God has stored up them.

E.g. of Jesus who prioritised the extension of ministry, giving away ministry and equipping others.

Different from the omnicompetent 'superstar' approach to ministry

In an organisation leaders must be brought in from the outside. In a movement, leaders emerge from within. A genuine movement is a leadership culture. It values the identification, development and empowering of new leaders. In the first century there were no other churches to take leaders from. Everybody had to be home grown.

This has implications for:

- General approach to ministry. More risky but more productive.
  - Identifying those who will effectively lead key ministry areas
  - Leadership development e.g. Growing Leaders, Leading Like Jesus etc
    - Get together with group of local churches if not enough resources
- Identifying small group in whom we will invest
- Mentoring 1 or 2

- **Leading ourselves well**

- Settle your own ownership issues; it is Jesus' church not yours. Give it back to him!
- Develop strong & consistent inner life
- Take responsibility for your own leadership development.

**EXERCISE:**

For those who are leaders:

'What proportion of my time and energy is devoted to sowing vision and raising up other leaders? What steps do I need to take in order to be able to give this higher priority?'

For those who are church members:

'What can I do in order to equip and enable my minister/leader to be more effective in the task of sowing vision and empowering others, or otherwise to facilitate the development of others?'

## **2. Gift-orientated ministry (Eph 4, 1 Cor 12)**

Assumption that God determines which people should best assume which ministries.

In many churches in the west, ministry is done *for* Jesus but not *by* Jesus – and therein lies a big difference. If we evaluated our churches not by attendance or buildings but by how recognisable Jesus is in our midst, our influence would be more far-reaching and our strategies would be far more dynamic. (Coles)

Ordinary people accomplishing the extraordinary. Spiritual gifts are not the icing on the cake or self-indulgent 'extras' but rather the essentials of ministry. Move away from 'office' or 'position' based ministry to a more charismatic and God-directed form of ministry.

Very different from the common 'volunteerism' which is so ingrained in so many churches.

- Modelling gifts and accepting own personal limitation
- Releasing gifts through teaching about them and giving space for people to encounter God in ministry times
- Discovering gifts e.g. use of SHAPE course
- Training, overseeing etc of gifts e.g. Training days
- Permitting new ministries to emerge which have not yet been thought of. E.g. Bus ministry.
- The equipping of every member for ministry

I think that we are guilty of protecting new believers from depending upon God. If we were to follow Christ's example and deploy new believers immediately in ministry, we would see how quickly they are forced to pray, trust in God, listen to the Holy Spirit and find answers. This would solidify their commitment on a much deeper level. They would have an unbreakable bond to the head of the body: Jesus Christ. They would also learn to suffer for Christ's sake, which is part of the important pattern that Jesus set for us (Phil :27-9). (Coles)

- Multiplying ministry as a way of resourcing and blessing the wider church. See your church as a seedbed for ministry.

### 3. Passionate Spirituality (1 Thess 1)

Are Christians in this church 'On Fire'? Do they live committed lives and practice their faith with joy and enthusiasm?

Different ways in which passion is stimulated:

- Inhabiting the Biblical story
  - The Bible as the narrative of the people of God. More than just teaching the truth, but helping people grow in new identity. Cf Acts 4 – understanding present in light of past history.
  - NT Wright and lost Shakespeare play
  - Teaching systematically
    - Planning a teaching programme and covering all the bases
      - Feeding for today but also for a lifetime
      - Church's year
      - Teaching people from the Bible but equally how to read Bible for themselves
      - 3 year cycle
      - Father, Son, HS, Kingdom of God, People of God/Church, Gospel, Epistle, OT narrative, discipleship/holiness, social ethics, mission & evangelism, prayer,

In a world of techno-sophistication that daily erodes the last vestiges of wonder in ordinary life, hungry souls long for a message from God. The mandate of the preacher is to live with such integrity in the presence of God and to study the Word with such energy and giftedness that when he or she finally stands to speak, those who listen will experience an in-breaking of the invisible world that literally brings their frantic lives to a stop, and sends them away transformed by their response to the gospel.

( Johnson & McDonald – Imagining a Church in the Spirit)

- We need to foster opportunities for people to encounter God, giving space for ministry, testimony and other engagement.
- We need to take people to places where they can encounter something more. New Wine etc.  
e.g. Saltburn, Marple and the impact of NW Wine summer conferences.
- We need to bring in others from elsewhere
- Developing whole life approach to discipleship e.g. TTT. Demonstrate that God is concerned for every area and aspect of life.

Church, *ekklesia*, referred to assembly of people called to decide matters affecting the common welfare; the town meeting of God. Early observers of Christianity were not struck by its religious (in privatised sense) qualities (early Xians derided as atheists!!). What struck outsiders was its total way of life (culture) - followers of the Way. Distinctiveness of Christians, as opposed to other Roman religious groups, was that their practices were not confined to sacred occasions/locations, but were integral to the formation of communities with a distinctive self-awareness. Original Christians were about creating and sustaining a distinctive and unique culture (Clapp)

#### EXERCISE

What one thing could we do in order to stimulate greater passion for God and for his service in the life of our church?

#### **4. Functional Structures (Moses & Jethro Ex 18)**

There is a very negative relationship between traditionalism and growth/quality of church life. Dead matter and living organisms are not distinguished by substance but by structure!

In organic church thinking it is imperative you create structure only when necessary. Life should dictate structure not the other way round. Do not begin with a structure and an organisation. Begin with life and let the structure emerge naturally, driven by the needs and demands of the life.

Occasionally, even healthy bodies need some external support e.g. a sling, cane or cast, to help heal an injury. They are not the norm and are only considered temporary until health is restored. If you find that you have external structures holding up your church, look to bring health and internal strength to the church so that the external structure becomes obsolete and you can set it aside. (Coles)

Do your structures exist to serve Mission or does church exist to serve structures?

If you were starting from scratch is this the way you would structure things?

What are the essential values and aims which your structures demonstrate?

The vital importance of structures which facilitate mission. Take a fresh look and radically restructure.

- Awayday for Church leaders, PCC etc (is my church worth joining) – examine structures in light of agreed core values, Scripture etc.

One of most vital structural factors is the appointment of departmental heads for individual ministry areas in the life of a local church.

- Gradually identify people of influence in key areas e.g. worship, prayer ministry, children, youth, evangelism, discipleship, mercy ministry, admin, training, equipping etc.
- Put in place structures which facilitate an ongoing multiplication of ministry
- Regularly ask question 'are they working?'
- Do structures exist for themselves, people for structures or vice versa? Can you draw it simply?
- Would it work if your church had 50 members or 500?

## 5. Inspiring worship services (Pentecost – Acts 2)

When worship is inspiring it draws people to church 'all by itself'.

Whenever HS is truly at work and he is given freedom to act, he will have a profound effect upon every aspect of a gathering.

One of things most within our capacity to affect

- Appearance of building
- User friendly
- Eye on the outsider
  - No robes
- Good welcome of Chris Woods
- Expectancy
- Well prepared preaching
- Presence of HS
  
- Worship that connects
  - Space for ministry/engagement with God
  - Intimacy
  - Liturgy which is appropriate. Connection with past, future tilt.
  - People sense a need to connect with something mysterious beyond themselves

**Worship** all too often seen as opportunity to escape from Monday to Friday world. It took place in a 'sanctuary'. To insist that we go to church to be 'fed' is to say 'I go to church to be treated like a baby.'

Worship is where we learn to see the world as it really is. We are only able to interpret world in any way through being inducted into canons of a particular culture.

*Craig Dykstra:* In worship we see and sense who it is we are to be and how it is we are to move in order to become. Worship is an enactment of the core dynamics of the Christian Life. That is why worship is its central and focusing activity. To grow morally means to have one's whole life increasingly be conformed to the pattern of worship.

*Aidan Kavanagh:* Liturgy is the Gospel of Christ become a real people

NT understands life in the Church as a kind of resocialisation, an enculturation according to the standards of the Kingdom of God rather than this world. Allowing the narrative of God to shed light on our lives now; seeing ourselves in the light of Scripture. Worship is a way of seeing the world in the light of God.

*Worship is the most powerful tool we have for satisfying the hunger of famished, injured souls, for breaking down spiritual strongholds of pride and unbelief, and for ushering in the gift of true joy. How can we refuse to use it? (Morgenthaler)*

*Good worship stimulates evangelism for we end up speaking of a God whom we have encountered and who has encountered us. (Gibbs)*

## 6. Need-orientated evangelism Developing an outward focus

Missional Focus to all we do and are. Mission dictates the shape of our common life.

'Church exists by Mission as Fire exists by burning' (Brunner)

'It is not the Church of God which has a Mission but the God of Mission who has a Church'

- Emphasis on going out rather than on expecting others to 'come in'.
- Use already existing relationships as contacts

Of far greater significance than the mission of the peripatetic preacher . . . was the **conduct** of the early Christians, the language of love on their lips and in their lives . . . In the final analysis it was not the miracles of itinerant evangelists that impressed the populace - miracle workers were a familiar phenomenon in the ancient world - but the exemplary lives of ordinary Christians.

- Vital importance of sowing; without it watering and reaping are useless- you end up with mud pies. We invest huge resources in the growing phase of life but not enough in the sowing.
- Identify & invest in the spiritually hungry rather than babysitting the unfruitful.
  - Facilitate encounter (word & deed) cf. healing on the streets
  - Invitation to participate

For the earliest Church, evangelism was not a matter of inviting individuals to recall what they somehow already knew. It was, rather, a matter of inviting them to become part of nothing less than a new humanity, reborn of the last Adam who was Jesus the Nazarene. It was a call to life in Christ, and not to be alone but to be with others who are in him, to constitute with them an organic unity and, with them, to transcend division, conflicts, bondages.

Evangelism for the first Christians involved attracting and inviting people into a new culture which was widely regarded as nothing less than a third race. (Clapp)

Mt 28 is not an appeal for the conveying of information but for the induction of people into a different way of life and a corresponding departure from an old way which made them what they were. (Bosch)

- Place of small groups
- Focus on questions and needs of non-Christians

Importance of Disciple-making

- Clear initiation structures

- Prioritise youth and children (most people become Christians under 16)

## **7. Holistic Small groups**

Most important principle

Church consciously promotes multiplication of small groups. Our experience of growth.

Must be holistic i.e. have a discipleship focus

Continually developing new leaders as by-product of group system

Evangelism etc not simply discussed centrally as a programme but experienced practically in life of group.

Discipleship is radical – transfer of life not rote learning of abstract concepts.

- Small group leaders become the key people
- Church focuses around small groups
- Invest in them and stop other things

*The never-churched need to be enveloped by small communities of believers so that they can see the impact of the gospel in their relationships and experience some of the benefits through intentional spillover. Within the context of the Christian communities, the disillusioned, cynical and uninterested are respected and accepted, and are converted into 'awakened seekers'. (Gibbs)*

### **8. Loving relationships**

Amount of laughter in church is more important than holding a seeker service or prayer walking the parish.

- Model them
- Hospitality
- Demonstrate good conflict resolution
- Always affirm and always be ready to say sorry

Easier to grow a small church

Try to imagine NT without a once a week service. There is much evidence that believers got together with their church families daily, not once a week – and the gathering had more to do with a meal together than with sanctimonious liturgy. (Coles)

I am convinced that the local church can be a place where every believer experiences the fullness of life for which Jesus died and where every believer can experience healing and transformation. It can be a place where every believer can pray in such a way that history changes and where every believer can die to himself and become a source of unbelievable sacrifice and generosity. The church can become a place where for every believer relationships become the core value of life, helping the lonely find acceptance and those without Christ experience unconditional love. (McManus)

*Ian Parkinson, July 2007*