

Building Missionary Churches

Convictions

Mission must take centre stage in the life of a local church. I am convinced that we must build mission focused communities and *avoid any separation between normal church life and our mission agenda*. This historical separation has led to an increasingly pastoral church and an ever increasing number of para-church organisations.

During my last sabbatical I looked at apostolic ministry in the New Testament, examining the New Testament in the context of mission. On the basis that "the apostle Paul wrote in the context of mission" (*Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* - Thomas Schreiner) I enjoyed retracing the steps of the apostolic bands through the book of Acts, and the letters that were written in response to the challenge of embryonic churches being established. What a joy, with no deadline or the pressure of the next sermon hanging over me! This overview approach reinforced my understanding that the atmosphere of the New Testament is full of missionary zeal.

The promise of the Spirit in Acts 1 is with the purpose of giving believers power to be witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. When the Spirit comes in Acts 2, Peter preaches the gospel; he does not focus on the manifestations or the fact that it made them feel good. Rather, we have Luke's wonderful summary phrase, "and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved". The Jerusalem based church was full of evangelistic fervour.

The feel and atmosphere of the book of Acts is one of apostolic extension, new spheres of operation, gospel preaching, Spirit empowered witness, church planting, signs and wonders, gospel breakthrough, times of huge challenge and progress - against the backdrop of persecution.

It's about the Church!

The prophetic burden of Restoration includes rediscovering the missionary zeal of the New Testament in everyday church life, or as the prophet Isaiah says, "It is too small a thing for you to be My servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring My salvation to the ends of the earth." Restoration is more than a quality of church life; its ultimate purpose is to build churches that take the gospel into the local community and to the ends of the earth.

Out of my passion to build mission-focused communities has grown a deep concern about the separation of what I see as normal church life and mission. My concern relates to so called para-church organisations – mission-focused organisations disconnected from church life. *I honestly believe that these organisations are set up with a desire to reach people for Christ, but while in the short / mid term they see real evangelistic fruit, in the end they continue to propagate weak missional churches.*

How can this be so? Let me explain. Some of the most gifted, mission-focused leaders leave the local church to join a mission-focused para-church organisation, which consequently pushes the church into a more pastoral mode. The church wants to identify with the individual on mission out of friendship and a genuine heart for mission, so it funds the para-church activity, thereby reducing the inward investment in the local church. Then, when such an organisation turns up

in town to do a mission and people are saved, where do they end up? Often in an under-resourced, pastorally-focused community.

Consequences and Costs

Those who make it through into discipleship see the model presented in the local church: if you are serious about mission, you leave this place and join a para-church group, and so the cycle continues. Many times the new believer never makes it into church life, as their allegiance is to the mission organisation through which they were saved. University Christian Unions can be another example of such a separation. Students enjoy CU at university but if they become disconnected from local church life, when university ends they drift and may be lost to the church.

If we continue to operate outside a biblical model we do not address the core issue, which is - how do we make local churches mission focused?

Christian giving is a case in point. Too often the local church is deprived of financial resources necessary to fulfil its God given vision, not because Christians are not generous but because of an imbalance in their giving. According to David Barrett (International Bulletin of Missionary Research - January 05) at the time of his survey, 38% of all Christian worldwide giving went to the local church, and 62% to para-church organisations. While this imbalance continues we should not be surprised to find this has adversely affected church life.

I am aware that organisations such as Wycliffe Bible Translators do specialist work that a local church cannot do; my concern is more to do with what I see as part of normal church life. While many of our heroes of the faith like Hudson Taylor established what we now call para-church organisations, my point is simple - is this a biblical model? We must work to restore the church to its God-given purpose.

Don't settle for second best!

I agree with Howard Snyder in his paper to the Lausanne Congress when he said,

"The Church is the only divinely-appointed means for spreading the gospel... further, evangelism makes little sense, divorced from the fact of the Christian community... The evangelistic call intends to call persons to the body of Christ - the community of believers, with Jesus Christ as its essential and sovereign head."

Let's not settle for second best. Let's build mission focused churches, joined in heart to apostolic ministry so that together we can reach the nations.

While I sympathise with para-church leaders, or even the recent 'emerging church' leaders, in their desire to reach our generation and present Christ in a relevant way, and while I understand their frustration with the lack of mission effectiveness in church life, I have difficulty with their solution to the problem. I once attended a meeting with a number of senior leaders in the nation to discuss the 'emerging church' phenomenon. To my dismay, while I sympathised with their analysis of church life in our country, I found the suggested solution frightening - it seemed to be based more on being culturally sensitive, than on rediscovering New Testament Christianity.

Let's get to the root of the problem and build mission focused communities, rather than trying to build an alternative structure, which perpetuates the issue.

What's Required

To build mission-focused communities requires continued focused leadership in the local church. If we are to have integrity in our challenge to the role of para-church organisations, then we must continue to take a close look at ourselves to ensure that we are practising what we preach. Local churches have a tendency to drift towards a pastoral mode, taking their agenda from believers, rather than the lost.

During the last ten years of leading a local church based in South East London, we have transitioned the church to ensure that mission is the primary drive in all we do. As a consequence, to our delight, we are seeing increasing numbers of people saved, and while I would love to report that we are seeing people saved and added daily, we can say that we are beginning to see people saved and added every week.

To build mission-focused communities we need to continue to grow in our understanding of apostolic ministry. I heartily commend Dave Devenish's book - *What on Earth is the Church for?* - a must read. He brilliantly illustrates apostolic ministry on page 71, as not being a static serving of churches, but something where churches are caught up on mission together.

I love the passage in Romans 15: 23-24 when Paul says,

"Since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and have you assist me on my journey there."

Already planning his next apostolic journey, Paul boldly suggests to a church he has never visited before that they should help him to get to Spain. We need to release and support those with clear apostolic gifting to help our churches to be pulled into the regions beyond our local reach. Our attitude should not be, "How can we be served?" but rather, "How can we serve?"

Apostolic Ministries

We must continue to start new churches all over the country, with bands of believers reaching out to local communities. The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us; mission has to be lived out on the ground and must be 'owned' by individuals. I was struck recently by what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 1 v 5 *"We lived among you for your sake"*.

We also need our apostolic ministry and our mission to have an international aspect to it. I am sure many of us will have known significant leaders who have left large established churches to go with their families to work in a church plant with a relatively small number of believers, both within the UK and to other countries. This needs to happen again and again.

To build mission-focused communities we must make space for the gift of the evangelist to shape our church life. Lex Loizides has helped me so much on this. On a recent visit he made to King's, we had planned a gospel healing meeting: I suggested 45 minutes worship and then about 30 minutes preach and response. Lex laughed at me and said graciously, "Let's do it this way - 20 minutes worship, testimony, words of knowledge, pray for the sick, preach the gospel, make an appeal, pray for the sick again." With all my desire to see gospel breakthrough, I had planned a meeting for believers!!!

The Frontedge weekend is an excellent example of intentional equipping of churches to be more mission focused and effective. We ran another such event this year, with 30-40 evangelists placed in our local churches, preaching the gospel and praying for the sick.

Training and Resources

To build mission-focused communities, as churches and individually, we need to avoid 'giving fatigue'. We will need to continue to raise millions of pounds together, to fulfil our vision of 1,000 churches in the UK alone, as well as releasing millions of pounds into our global mission. To build mission-focused communities we need to ensure that we identify, recruit and train leaders to have mission focus and skills. *Our training programmes should continue to be flexible in achieving our goal.* Interestingly, Prof Leslie J Francis summarises his article in Quadrant magazine by saying,

"Once ministry in the UK becomes reconceptualised in terms of growing new churches... then the leadership qualities prized by the churches' selection criteria may also need to be revisited."

I could not agree more.

As the family of Newfrontiers continues to grow (we now have churches in 29 nations), we will increasingly begin to operate like a missionary society, in the sense that we will be an apostolic people, a sent community. But rather than sending our people off to a particular para-church organisation, we will look to the over-arching ministry of the apostolic to provide direction to our ever increasing army of young disciples who have the nations of the earth on their heart.

Para-church organisations are aware of such a phenomenon, and Global Connections very graciously asked Dave Devenish to address them, as David records in *What on Earth is the Church for?* - p55.

"I was asked to speak about church-based mission. My brief was to be as controversial as possible and to raise the very real issue concerning whether there is a future for mission agencies, now that the local church is beginning to take on its responsibilities for world mission."

His whole chapter on church-based mission is well worth a read.

Conclusions and the Future

We still have much to learn, but I sense that in coming days we may see a shift in relationship between so called para-church organisations and new church movements like Newfrontiers. While we still have much to learn from their vast experience, the relationship - I believe - will be one of drawing from that experience rather than sending our people out through such organisations. We will not serve the vision of the missionary organisation; they will partner with new church movements.

A vision of the future would be church planters sent out from our churches, overseen by apostolic ministry, while partnering with existing mission organisations for aspects of training in cultural awareness and language. But when it comes to church building, foundations, and leadership appointments, this would rest with the overarching apostolic ministry.

In conclusion, I believe we must continue to look to a biblical model of church which in no way separates local church life and mission. Mission-based para-church organisations have sprung into life in reaction to impotent local mission effectiveness, but the result has been to weaken churches rather than solving the problem, making the church more pastoral as a result. The lasting benefit of such mission is limited because when evangelistic fruit ends up in local churches, and these are weak, then weak disciples will be produced. As David Watson says in *I believe in Evangelism*,

“If we fail to build individuals into the corporate life of the church we have missed the purpose of evangelism; it is one thing to reap, it is another to disciple and add.”

The local church must place the Great Commission central to its agenda, allowing the apostolic ministry to lift our eyes to the harvest field, and must model truly an integrated strategy of reaching the lost, caring for the poor and training and sending leaders, with such generosity that many who have given up on the church will return. God is looking for such communities to emerge in our generation. Let’s build them, to His glory!

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