

evangelism

Building Missionary Congregations

Yes, but how?

Number 2

Renewing the Church Around Purpose

Practical Ideas for Action

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This is the second of a series of articles about what churches, wanting to make the shift into mission mode, can do to make progress in that journey. The first article dealt with the subject of simplifying the life of the church. This one deals with shaping the church's life around its purpose - and daring to allow what does not fit to take second place.

There is such variety in the types and settings of churches that no list of practical suggestions will apply in all situations, indeed the opposite of some of the ideas listed below might be right in some situations. This means that the principles are more vital and enduring than the illustrations. However, the stories are added to give life to the principles. Some ideas may well be right, when re-worked to fit the local setting, others may not. It is working the principles into the life of the church that is likely to pay the greatest dividends.

1 Take the long-term view.

Too many churches suffer from short-termism - 'If it needs more than a few months to do, it can't be done'. As a result one good (or otherwise) idea follows another in rapid succession. A vast amount of energy is expended, but no real change results. It leaves the church exhausted and discouraged. Remember:

Most people overestimate what they can do in one year and underestimate what they can do in five years.

So think in terms of long-term working on change over the next three years. Like planting seed, do not expect to see 'the green shoots of recovery' for eighteen months or so.

That way you could even be pleasantly surprised in a year's time.

2 Come back to purpose at every point.

Get the PCC, home groups, etc., to complete the sentence 'The purpose of the church is to' This is best done in pairs, giving people permission to add 'not more than ten words' to complete the

sentence. Then get the 'twos' to negotiate with each other to produce a revised statement, then the fours. If you have more people and need eights, then simply get one person from each four to represent the group in a new four, etc.

Get people in small groups to brain-storm about how we could express this in our worship, relationship patterns, mission structures, and training in prayer in the life of the church.

Preach about purpose, about *missio dei* (see David Bosch, Transforming Mission pps 389-393).

Get everyone into the habit of asking the vital questions:

- what is this meeting, group, organisation for?
- what is our goal?
- is this the best way to achieve this goal?
- what might be another/better way?

3 Affirming incarnation.

Identify (in the PCC?) the key leaders of the church on the church/world frontier. Who is, or are, the key person/people engaged in the health service, government agencies, education, local community, local action groups, etc.

Gather them together (at a PCC meeting, or specially convened meeting) and listen to what they say about what help they need, and the relevance (or otherwise) of the church to their 'world'. Get them to say how it could be more relevant.

Express commitment to the mission of the whole church in its daily life through the intercessions at Sunday services. This can be done by:

- using the insights from the 'gather' exercise above as fuel for intercessions.
- asking key people from the 'gather' exercise above not only to lead intercessions, but to be interviewed briefly (3-4 mins). e.g. 'Before Mary Davies, head of PE at the local comprehensive, leads our intercessions today it would be good to hear a little from her about the challenges in the world of education'.

Talk about the issues identified by the above process, at PCC, home group meetings and in the application of sermons. See John Reader's *Local Theology* and *The Earth Beneath*. Use courses such as *Monday Matters* (Board of Education) *Sunday-Monday* (SU/Cassells), and *To live and work* (MU) to help home groups 'turn outwards'.

4 Building faith

'Training in prayer should be the main preoccupation and service given by bishops and clergy to the adult members of the church'.

Gerard Hughes, *God of Surprises*.

That being so, how people are finding help to discover prayer as a reality in their lives is a vital question. How far are there clear spiritual goals in the pastoral work of the church? Without them all pastoral work is liable to subsidence: subsiding into simply making people comfortable.

Ask the PCC to ask (five?) people each about what they find helpful in practising prayer and what help they would like. Then get the PCC members to report back at the next meeting. Find some way of making sure that no one is being asked the same question by all twenty people on the PCC! This sort of exercise is not only very instructive; it is actually shifting the PCC meeting to being one geared around the real purposes of the church.

Ideas about implementing the renewal of prayer in the whole life of a church can be found in the last chapter of my book, *An Affair of the Heart*.

Remember it was Brother Roger of Taizé who said:

'Make your church a house of prayer and many will beat a path to your door.'

It may not be quite as easy as that but there is much truth there. People are looking for spirituality (the experience of truth) rather than doctrine (the exposition of truth) today.

Some churches practice 'prayer walks' around the parish. Others knock on doors and ask people if there is something they would like to have prayed about at the service this Sunday. One church wrote to major businesses in the area and told them they were being prayed for regularly by the church. Out of that has come a major local festival, well supported by the key people in those businesses. Some churches have held Prayer Vigils for special needs and crises in the community. Do not be afraid to do something 'once off'. Everything good does not have to be turned into an institution with minutes and a secretary!

Consider also what the stepping stones into faith are for people coming new to this church:

- are there any/enough/the right ones?
- where can and do people make contact?
- how social are the church's social events; or would a new comer be frozen out of cliques around the place?
- are there enquirers' groups to be involved in and faith nurture groups to progress to?

See the ideas in Steve Croft's *Growing New Christians*, and remember, making no provision for such newcomers to church and the faith is the best way to ensure that there will be none!

5 Building community

Take people's feelings seriously - but don't be manipulated by them.

Stop at PCC and other meetings, if there is tension and recognise that things can be happening at three levels:

- the *emotional*
- the *functional*
- the *spiritual*

People may feel fearful or critical of someone/each other. Get that out into the open, it may well be blocking dealing with the functional

matter - the issue at hand. There may also be a spiritual dimension, such as lack of love, or faith, or obedience. Find out which level is the focus of problems, then move on.

Build affirmation of people (for who they are, not just what they do) into the life of the church at every level - including notices and intercessions at Sunday services.

Avoid avoiding conflict; find ways of working it through. Look for win-win solutions.

Ensure women play a significant role in senior leadership of the church, they are more likely to pick up relational issues than many men.

6 Structures

Mission/parish audits and mission statements can be a great help - as long as what is identified is implemented, otherwise loss of motivation sets in. Keep talking, thinking, reading and praying purpose: then rebuild structures (simplifying where ever possible) around the achieving of that purpose.

A church in maintenance mode sees the structures as an end in themselves (what we are keeping going). A church that is missionary in nature is built around purpose, and sees structures as relative and secondary - always open to change if a better way emerges.

For advice or assistance in the area of Evangelism please contact:

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