

A SABBATICAL DREAM

Matt 28.18-20 & John 20.19-22

“I have a dream” declared Martin Luther King, *“that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood...I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today”*.

I too have a dream, a dream which revolves around our church’s mission statement – ***“To go Christ’s way and make disciples”***.

This mission statement is based on two versions of the commission which the risen Christ gave to his church:

- According to Matthew, our Lord said to his disciples: **“Go to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples, baptizing them...and teaching them”**
- According to John, our Lord said to his disciples: **“As the Father sent me, so I send you”**.

As a church we have combined these two versions of the Great Commission into one: ***“Go Christ’s way and make disciples”***.

- Yes, we want to make disciples, we want to see people come to faith, we want to see people baptized, and then grow in their faith, and go out and win others, who in turn will be baptized and then grow in their faith, and then go out and win others....
- But vital as is the making of disciples, first and foremost we are called to do what Jesus did and show the love of God in Christ to our world, whether or not they actually respond to God’s love. For Jesus did not just call men to be his disciples, he went around doing good.

But for me this mission statement of ‘going Christ’s way and making disciples’ has received a new dimension as a result of spending three months on sabbatical in Australia & NZ.

And just as Paul & Barnabas, after their first missionary trip, reported back to the church at Antioch, so I this morning have been asked to report back to you on my sabbatical trip. For that reason I am dispensing with a normal sermon, and instead will elaborate on my dream, copies of which were handed out as you came into service.

Needless to say, this dream didn’t simply take place one night. It evolved over three months. But as you see, the dream keeps on going back to our mission statement: *“I dream of a church.... Where people go Christ’s way and make disciples”*.

Let me take you through it – illustrating it with some of my experiences.

1. *I have a dream of a worshipping church
Where God is at the centre of our life together
Where Sunday is a day not to be missed
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples*

The first Sunday Caroline and I were in New Zealand we worshipped at Auckland Tabernacle, a Baptist church in down-town Auckland. 10 years ago there were only 70 worshippers – today over 700. The first Sunday morning Caroline and I were in Melbourne, we went to Crossway, and there were not 700, but 3000 worshippers.

Over the three months I had some amazing experiences of church.

But ultimately what counts are not amazing experiences of church, but amazing experiences of God. I dream of “*a church where God is at the centre of our life together*”, and “*where Sunday is a day not to be missed*”, because God is at work.

2. *I have a dream of a multi-congregational church
Where God is praised in a variety of forms
Where everybody belongs to one congregation
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples*

The Sunday after I had been to Crossway I went to the neighbouring New Hope Baptist Church. One thing which both churches have in common is that both are multi-congregational churches.

This is particularly true of New Hope – a Saturday evening service, three Sunday morning services, and two Sunday evening services. Significantly, nobody attended more than one service. Everybody belonged to just one congregation.

I believe that the time has come for us to move to a similar pattern – not in having six services a weekend, but in encouraging people to attend church only once.

When I was young, people were encouraged to be ‘twicers’ i.e. attending church twice a Sunday. But life has changed. People are busier – a busyness increased by the fact that there are relatively few couples of working age where only one person goes out to work.

I believe that we need to be positive and accept that it is a good thing to observe the Sabbath principle of rest, as well as the Sunday principle of congregation. I want to encourage people to be ‘onciers’ – to come to church once every Sunday.

What’s more, I want to encourage the services to develop different patterns of worship – patterns appropriate for those attending the congregation of their choice.

3. *I have a dream of a multi-cultural church*
Where people from many nations come to worship God
Where internationals find special welcome
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples

I shall never forget my visit to Parkside Baptist Church, Sydney. I preached to a congregation made up of 48 nations. In the church auditorium were hung flags from all over the world – and the word ‘welcome’ was spelt out in 48 different languages around the walls. Three or four times a year they hold an international evening, with 600-700 people attending, most of them not Christians at all.

Later that day I made a list of all the nations represented in our church here. We have some 20 nationalities present. As I reflected on this, I felt God saying that we should become much more intentional in welcoming internationals to our church.

Indeed, to make the point, maybe we too should hang out flags from many nations – maybe we too should have the word welcome displayed in 20 or more languages – so that people coming to our building during the week will realise that we mean what we say: this is a place “*where internationals find a special welcome*”.

4. *I have a dream of a non-sexist church*
Where women play their full part
Where men can truly be men
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples

While in Christchurch, NZ, Caroline & I stayed with the Vicar of Sumner.

Fittingly for a rugby-mad nation, this church's men's group is called the ‘All Blokes’ group. Sumner is not alone. In many of the churches I visited there were groups for men. Why? Because for too long church has been dominated by women. Yes, of course, church is a place for women – but also for men.

What's more, Christian men can make all the difference to a family. According to some NZ statistics, if a child comes to Jesus first, then 3.5% of the family follow; if a mother comes to Jesus first 17% of the family will follow; but if a father comes to Jesus first, then 93% of the family will follow. Where neither parent attends church, then only 6% of children remain faithful; where only the mother attends church, 15% of children remain faithful; where only the father attends church, 55% of the children remain faithful.

Yes, I have a dream of a dream of a church where not only women play their full part, but also “*where men can truly be men*”!

5. *I have a dream of a community church
Where family life is strengthened, but also
Where singles are valued and find friendship
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples*

Church is for families, but it is not just for families. It is also for singles too. One of the things which I liked about Australia & NZ, was that many churches talked about being a 'community' church, rather than a 'family' church. I have a dream where there is a place for everyone.

6. *I have a dream of a praying church
Where the needs of our town and of the world are remembered
Where the church and its leaders are prayed for too
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples*

Let me go back to Crossway – a church with an unusually high emphasis on prayer. They have a prayer chapel, which is open day and night. Indeed, their senior pastor is in that prayer chapel most mornings at six o'clock. They have a full-time paid member of staff whose task it is simply to encourage prayer in the life of the church. Every leader in that church is expected to develop a special group of prayer partners to pray for them and their work. "*I have a dream of a praying church*"

7. *I have a dream of a multi-age church
Where there is a place for young and old
Where people of all ages feel at home
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples*

One Sunday I preached in Greymouth on the West Coast of NZ – for that service we were joined by the Baptist church in Hokitika, the only other Baptist church on the West Coast. I shall never forget the congregation singing a hymn about the joy of being West Coasters. But I also remember that this church was a great example of a multi-age church. It wasn't a massive church – after all, only 4000 people live in Greymouth, but all the age groups were present. And that is how it should be – the church should be for old and for young. And what's more there should be worship appropriate for old and young. "*I have a dream of a multi-age church...*"

8. *I have a dream of a church full of children
Where every month there is a children's special
Where children come to know the Saviour
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples*

As I was being introduced to the senior pastor of Crossway, suddenly a child with a massive water gun came up and squirted the pastor concerned. Goodness, I thought, that's going a bit far, until I discovered that it was one of his grandchildren. I also discovered it was water Sunday, and every child had been invited to bring a water gun or pistol to church. By the end of the service all the Sunday School teachers were absolutely soaked.

This year that church has allocated £170,000 for its children's work. For them, the most effective way of doing evangelism is attracting children – for children bring parents, and the more families there are, the more families come.

But they don't want simply to attract children to Christ. They also consciously seek to win children to Christ.

I think this church has something to teach us. For although we set out to attract children, I am not sure that we set out to win children to Christ – we tend to leave that to teenage years. But today that is often too late. By the time many children reach secondary school, decisions for Christ – or not for Christ – have already been made. According to one statistic: “80% of people make a commitment before they are 13”.

9. *I have a dream of a church reaching out to young adults
Where the evening service is contemporary in style
Where the needs of students and the new city-dwellers are met
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples*

In almost all churches I visited the evening service was a service devoted to young adults, and to young people. This was the fun service – this was the noisy service – this was the service drawn up with the needs of young adults.

I believe we need to do the same.

Currently our evening service is something of a compromise – it is for both young and old alike, and as a result it does not always hit the spot for young adults.

We need to develop our evening service to ensure that it is truly contemporary in style – in that way I believe we can become more attractive to students – and to the new city-dwellers who over the next few years will be moving into the centre of Chelmsford.

10. *I have a dream of a church growing with seniors
Where a growing number of seniors find the Saviour
Where seniors grow in grace & in understanding of their Lord
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples*

Enough said

11. *I have a dream of an empowering church*
Where the focus is on the world, and not just the church
Where those in mid-life are resourced for their life in the world of work
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples

Enough said

12. *I have a dream of a stress-free church*
Where diaries are freed up from unnecessary meetings
Where people have time to make friends with their neighbours
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples

I was greatly impressed with a Hornby Presbyterian Church, in Christchurch, NZ.

Hornby is a large, charismatic church, which over the years has grown and grown.

It's a busy church – but a church which has learnt not to be over-busy.

In that church they attach great importance to home groups – indeed, they expect everybody to belong to a home group. But these groups do not meet every week – but every other week.

Why? Because in the intervening weeks they hold their business meetings, their committee meetings, their team meetings.

In this way, they sought to ensure that people did not become exhausted by church life – that people had time for their families & friends, time indeed to make friendships outside the church.

Here is something here we can learn. Too many people in our church are too busy to be human and neighbourly – they are too busy attending church meetings.

Let's cut down on those meetings – and let's begin by cutting down on the frequency of our small groups. I actually think the groups would be strengthened if we did that.

But there are other ways in which we can reduce stress.

- One way would be to slim down our present leadership team. At times there can be as many as 20 of us meeting – and then we wonder why it takes so long to make decisions. The fact is that with a team that size there is only a limited amount of business which can be done – with the result that in addition we have to have a strategy group and a management group. Slim down the number of deacons to six or seven, and then we could do away with extra meetings like the management group & the strategy group, because there would then be time to deal with such matters at the regular leadership team.
- Another way would be to stream-line the number of our church meetings. Currently only 60-70 attend, and most of these are retired, and understandably so – because most people at work haven't got the time to attend eleven church meetings a year. So let's just have three or four a year – most other churches do – and then perhaps more people would actually attend church meetings!

13. *I have a dream of a ministry-led church*
Where the ministry teams get on with their tasks
Where the leaders are free to lead
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples

Needless to say, if we were going to cut down on the number of deacons and on the number of church meetings, then we would have to trust our leaders more – but so what?

Provided there is a system of accountability in place, leaders should be encouraged to lead.

By expecting leaders to attend a non-stop round of meetings, we are in fact hindering them getting on with the work God has called them to do.

I found it instructive that when Baptist churches in NZ did away with many of their committee meetings & adopted the model of 'ministry-led' church, baptisms increased by 24%.

14. *I have a dream of a vibrant town-centre church*
Where the strong and powerful are challenged
Where the needs of the weak and vulnerable are met
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples

It was a brave decision when our church agreed not to sell the buildings and move to the edge of the town – in many ways it would have been so much easier; car parking would not have been a problem. But we believed God was calling us to be a town-centre church, and so we re-developed our limited site and have put up with the difficulties of car parking. God blessed that decision. In a way in which we could not have foreseen, we have not only been able to continue to minister to the weak and vulnerable of society, we have also been able to serve the strong and the powerful through letting out our church to bodies such as ECC and the university. But we have yet to challenge the '*strong & powerful*'.

When I was at the Central Baptist Church in Canberra, I was fascinated to discover that their new senior pastor was in the process of getting a lobbyist's ticket for the Australian Houses of Parliament – he wants to lobby Australian MPs on Christian issues.

We may not have the British Parliament on our doorstep – but we do have CBC & EEC.

What kind of witness do we as a church have to make to them, I wonder.

15. *I have a dream of a welcoming church*
Where the welcome is such that newcomers want to return
Where a smile is accompanied with the offer of a meal
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples

Thank God, we are a welcoming church – but we must work on our welcome, not least in encouraging people to fill in the yellow cards, so we can get to know their names and their addresses, so that we ministers can follow them up.

I was fascinated with Auckland's Green Lane Christian Centre where last year 800 people filled in cards giving details of their names & addresses, and of those 800, 300 became members! In amazement, I asked the senior pastor, Terry Calkin, how he achieved that rate of assimilation. 'That's simple', he said. 'We first ensure that everybody receives a welcome as they come into church – this welcome begins with the visitors being shown the way to a parking place. We announce in every service that every visitor who returns a filled-in card to the welcome desk, will receive a voucher for a free cup of coffee and also a free gift – a porcelain mug bearing the name of the church. [NB picture of cup – with slogan!] Then during the week, he said, everybody who filled in a card is phoned up by a member of the pastoral team to say how pleased we were to see them; at the same time I write to every visitor likewise saying how pleased I was they came to church, and I enclose another voucher for another free gift which they can claim if they come back to church – this time it's the gift of a worship CD'. Wow – is that manipulation? Or is it simply good Christian marketing?

16. *I have a dream of an evangelising church*
Where people want to bring their friends
Where baptisms are a frequent event
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples

The most effective form of evangelism takes place amongst friends.

For me this was exemplified in the last church I preached at, Parkerville, up in the hills above Perth. Parkerville is only ten years old, but already they are outgrowing their first set of premises, and are looking to build a new set of premises.

One of their keys to their growth is what they call 'mateship' evangelism: this mateship evangelism involves five steps

- Building bridges of authentic relationships
- Loving extravagantly like God has loved you
- Waiting patiently until asked to give an account
- Telling your story about how God has changed your life
- Asking gently for a response

There is actually little difference between this and the 'Blowing your cover' course we will be running in the autumn. The key to both approaches is relationships: "*I dream of an evangelising church where people want to bring their friends*".

17. *I have a dream of a growing church*
Where the crowds necessitate yet another congregation
Where growth dictates yet further building
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples

Yes, I want see our church grow. But there is a cost to growth.

Maybe not now, but soon, we may well have to go to two morning services – in addition to the afternoon & evening congregations. For as we discovered when we moved to an afternoon congregation, when you remove 70 people from the morning congregation, that morning congregation grows again, almost without effort.

When we reach 80% capacity, we will need to cream off another 70.

“I have a dream of a growing church, where the crowds necessitate yet another congregation”

I go on: *“Where growth dictates yet further building”*. With two exceptions, every church I visited in Australia & NZ was in a building programme. I think we may well need to expand our premises.

- We have planning permission to build over the car park at the back.
- Alternatively, we might be able to buy up the building next door.
- Or maybe we need to buy some car-parking spaces.

Yes, it will cost money – but if we raised £2m, then we surely could raise more!

18. *I have a dream of a church made up of small groups*
Where everybody feels they belong
Where everybody feels free to share and not to feel ashamed
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples

Most churches had over two-thirds of their people in small groups – compared to the third who go to small groups here. *“I have a dream – not of a church with small groups – but of a church made up of small groups”*.

Small groups in a church our size are absolutely vital. For it is only within a small group that we can feel we really belong. It is only in a small group, where we are known and loved by others, that we can really be honest and share those things which truly concern us. Small groups are not an extra for the enthusiast. They are a key aspect of being church.

19. *I have a dream of a church served by an ever-expanding staff
Where young & old volunteer to be interns
Where part-time as well as full-time staff serve their Lord
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples*

Church growth always involves more members of staff.

I was impressed by the way many churches in Australia & NZ operate a system of internship. E.g. when I was at New Hope Baptist Church in Melbourne, they were setting aside nine interns of the coming year: most of these interns were young people, but not all. These interns were giving two days a week to the church. Significantly, they were not being paid for their services – rather each of them paid £350 for the privilege of service!

20. *I have a dream of a generous church
Where people are eager to give to vision
Where finance is a servant of the church's mission
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples*

I came across a fascinating story of a pastor outlining to his congregation the church's vision of the next five years. It included clear goals & strategies to reach people with the gospel, and to train them in discipleship & leadership, but the anticipated growth would necessitate significant expenditure to provide for the accompanying influx of people.

As he concluded his presentation, the congregation was surprised to hear the pastor say: 'The great news is that we already have all the money required to fulfil this vision. He then added: 'The bad news is that most of it is still in your pockets!'

21. *I have a dream of a visionary church
Where faith dreams
Where faith dares
Where people go Christ's way and make disciples*

Enough said!