

‘Minorities and honey pots’: A response to a ‘case study’ by Roy Dorey in the Baptist Ministers’ Journal Jan/Feb 2009 pp8-10.

In his article ‘Minorities and Honey Pots’, Roy Dorey’s major contention is that “*until we recognise that we are a small minority in our society, and we stop engaging with a false sense of success, then we will not take mission seriously*”. Few people would take issue with this statement. Baptist churches – as indeed churches of every Christian tradition – are a small minority in British society. There has been a major decline in Christian allegiance in general, and in church-going in particular.

As far as my own town of Chelmsford is concerned, according to the *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends 6 (2006/2007)* in the period 1989-2005 Sunday church attendance in the borough declined from 9.2% to 6.3% (interestingly Chelmsford is below the national average: in England as a whole Sunday church attendance in that period fell from 9.9% to 6.3%). According to the 2005 English Church Census there were 10,100 people in church in the Borough of Chelmsford on the day of the census.

However, we must not underestimate the size and influence of the churches. An increasing number of churchgoers are ‘twicers’: i.e. they attend church twice a month; indeed, in my experience, more and more people are attending church every three weeks, if not less. If we are therefore speaking of ‘churchgoers’, rather than attenders on a particular Sunday, then clearly the percentage of churchgoers increases. According to Peter Brierley in 2005 7.3% of the population attend church at least once a month; while 9.9% attend at least twice a year.

Indeed, the figures may look better than that. According to research released by Tearfund in January 2009 in September 2008 26% of adults in the UK attended church at least once during the preceding year – figures which somewhat surprisingly revealed that churchgoing may be on the increase, for in the previous year there were only 21% of adults attending church. Significantly the questionnaire was designed to exclude attendance for weddings, baptisms and funerals.

Still, whatever way we look at the statistics, Christians are very much a minority. We have an enormous task before us if we are to win our country for Christ. No church can afford not to make mission a priority.

So far, so good. Unfortunately, however, Roy Dorey goes on to imply that larger churches, which he equates with churches with a membership in excess of 200, do not “take mission seriously” – as if their size breeds complacency. Indeed, Roy Dorey states that “It feels good to be part of a crowd on a Sunday, as it reinforces our view that we are not such a minority”. He argues that “churches which receive the larger congregations tend to be cut off from their own community”, and have “no real links with the people who live around”. Furthermore, larger churches “encourage attendance on the ‘consumer pattern’.... Those who attend such churches are in danger of being ‘takers’ and not ‘givers’”. Larger churches are, he says, ‘honey pot’ churches, which draw people as a result of “good teaching, specialised teaching, particular forms of worship, feeling comfortable, culturally at home, a crowd attracting a crowd”.

As the pastor of a 'larger' Baptist church, which Roy Dorey would no doubt characterise as a 'honey pot' church, I thought a response was called for.

At the outset let me make it clear that in my response I am not seeking to say that larger churches are necessary 'better' than smaller churches, they are simply different. I believe that there is a place for both small and larger churches. Yes, some members of larger churches can be complacent and inward-looking – but on the other hand, some members of smaller churches can lack vision and can define success simply in terms of keeping the doors of the church open for another year. As one colleague said to me: "If we take the words of Jesus seriously when he said that he would build his church, we would never be satisfied with 'small' church". But nor for that matter can larger churches ever be satisfied with their size – for by comparison with the thousands who not darken the door of any church, every church is 'small'. All of us remain, as Roy Dorey rightly reminds us, a small minority.

Why do larger churches attract people? At a recent meeting of ministers of larger Baptist churches we identified the following factors distinguishing our churches from others:

1. Larger churches give a warm welcome. Time and again people visiting larger churches comment on the warmth of the welcome they receive. At first sight this might seem strange. One might think that visitors in a larger church would get lost in the crowd and would perhaps not receive much of a welcome, whereas in a smaller church visitors would be immediately noticeable and would therefore be much more welcome. However, the reality is that most larger churches go to great efforts to ensure that visitors are made welcome. Larger churches tend to have welcome teams, who are keen to learn the names of newcomers, and ready to show people to their seats and in so doing perhaps introduce them to others in the church. Some larger churches even give gifts to newcomers. There is a professionalism behind the welcome not always found in a smaller church. Please note: I am not saying that small churches do not welcome others – but simply that larger churches tend to ensure there is always a welcome.
2. Larger churches can provide anonymity for people seeking a haven. The experience of larger churches is that they often attract Christians who have been hurt or bruised as a result of church 'fights'. Larger churches also tend to attract people who have been 'burnt out' and are exhausted as a result of having to take on too much responsibility in a smaller church. Larger churches provide space for people to recover from bad experiences in smaller churches. Being a 'passenger' can be part of a healing process. Please note: I am not saying that it is just smaller churches which wound people. Sadly church fights can also take place in larger churches.
3. Larger churches are more seeker-friendly, in the sense that non-Christians do not feel as conspicuous. It is much more difficult for a non-Christian to try out a small church. Please note: I am not saying that large crowds are a necessity for effective evangelism. Many a larger church runs Alpha courses less people in the average sized 'small' church: however, what helps in that smaller context is that the majority of people are not church people.

4. Larger churches tend to be positive places. People in larger churches often feel good about their church, their pastor, and their activities. As a result of their good experience of church, they are happy to tell their friends about their church. People look forward to coming to church – church is a great place to be. Not surprisingly people are attracted to such churches. Please note: I am not saying that small churches by contrast are negative places. However, the fact is that sometimes smaller churches can be marked by a sense of tiredness, routine, and sometimes failure. It can be tough being a member of a smaller church.
5. The worship and preaching of larger churches is attractive, not only because of the quality of the ‘performance’, but also by the vibrancy of spirit. In an age when people are media-savvy, this is important. It is so much easier for worship in the larger church to become a ‘celebration’. Please note: I am not saying that there are no vibrant small churches. Nor am I saying that the Spirit is only present when crowds of people flock to worship. Isaiah’s encounter with God in his Temple was probably a very personal and individual experience.
6. Larger churches offer something for everybody. Small churches, for instance, are often unable to run a full programme for children and young people; they are also unlikely to have activities for young singles. Large churches are also able to offer a range of worship styles. All this is attractive to many.

Not everybody, of course, is attracted to a larger church. There are many people who prefer the intimacy of a smaller church – they like to be the sense of ‘family’ which comes from everybody knowing one another. Difficulties, however, arise for the smaller church when it seeks to be a ‘large church write small’. Instead of smaller churches seeking to be ‘all things to all men’, they probably need to do just one or two things well. To put it in ‘shopping’ terms, there is a place for the small ‘boutique’ as well as for the larger ‘supermarket’.

Roy Dorey seems to assume that it is wrong for Christians to pass other churches in order to worship at a larger church. But why is it wrong? The simple fact is that some people prefer life in a small church, and others prefer life in a larger church.

In terms of Christian mission, there is a lot to be said for the larger church. As Peter Brierley has shown, larger churches tend to be growing churches – the larger the church, the more likely it is to attract worshippers. Roy Dorey is wrong to suggest that it is more difficult to invite neighbours to church if a church is not local. The fact is that people are happy to travel to shop and to commute – so why should they not be happy to travel go to church? During the week, for instance, people come from miles around to the centre of Chelmsford to catch the train, to work in the University or in the County Council offices, to shop, watch the cricket etc – so why not drive to church on a Sunday, or get the bus on a weekday? If you have something good to offer, people will make the effort to come. Indeed, we have to turn away people from our Toddlers group and from our seniors lunches. It’s not distance, but parking, which puts people off.

Roy Dorey is also wrong to suggest that people who travel to larger churches do not have a community to serve. The community is different. The ‘parish’ may no longer be a neighbourhood – instead the ‘parish’ may be the town as a whole. Indeed, one can

argue that the larger church can be more effective as salt and light in the world than the smaller church. The leaders of the Borough Council or indeed the County Council are more likely to take notice of the concerns of a larger church, than a smaller church.

Life in a smaller church can be demanding, but so too can life be demanding in a larger church. Roy Dorey speaks of the difficulties some smaller churches find in getting a competent treasurer – but it can be just as difficult finding somebody to act as treasurer in a larger church, and all the more so because the finances of a larger church are so much more complex and time-consuming. Yes, in a larger church there are many more volunteers – but many more volunteers are needed. The fact that people may choose to pass other churches to attend another church does not mean that they all simply become ‘pew fodder’. True, in a larger church there is perhaps a greater proportion of ‘passengers’ – but sometimes this is not a bad thing. Sometimes people need to be ‘passengers’. Furthermore, we need to remember that there is a wider world in which people can serve God, not least the world of work – some of the apparent ‘passengers’ are in fact busily serving God in their places of work.

So in conclusion, there is a place for the larger church. The fact that people often come to a larger church as a result of surfing the web is not to be condemned as a feature of modern consumerism – very often they search the web because of a need. As larger churches we are glad to meet those needs. Our sadness is that smaller churches all too often fail to recognise the validity and worthwhile nature of our ministry.

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