

Larger Churches Conference Report

Ministry Today 38: November 2006

By Paul Beasley-Murray

Senior Pastor of Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford and Chairman of Ministry Today

This is an unusual item for Ministry Today. It is the report of a 'staff college' for Baptist senior ministers (and a few Anglicans) at Mulberry House 26-30 June 2006, attended by our Chairman. We publish it because we believe it has relevance to churches of all sizes and raises a number of issues and will give pause for thought about the way our churches operate.

A definition

A larger church = a church with 350+ at Sunday worship.

150 Anglican and 50 Baptist churches fall into that category.

One in eight British Christians worship in a larger church!

Interestingly, the least frequent churchgoers go to growing churches. Is this because these churches are especially welcoming and friendly, or because they will be less noticed? The percentage of those reading their Bible (other than on Sundays) decreases with the size of church.

<>The context of the conference: massive church decline. In 1979 12% of population went to church; last year (2005) 6.3%; and churches are still declining. The only group of churches growing are ethnic churches (10% of churchgoers in UK are now of Afro-Caribbean origin).

Reasons for decline:

- drastic loss of young people in the 1990s
- lack of relevance of church to life
- increase in individualism and consumerism
- attraction of alternative activities
- changing patterns of family and family life
- impact of other forms of spirituality.

Leadership is key

A 2003 survey showed that strong leadership and a clear vision are the key factors for church growth.

Various definitions of leadership:

- “The core of leadership is vision. Vision is seeing the potential purpose hidden in the chaos of the moment, but which could bring to birth new possibilities for a person, a company, or a nation” (William van Dusen Wishard)
- Leadership is more than vision. “It involves the ability to think and plan with long-term insight, in the light of current developments, and to identify consequent deliverable key areas of action” (strategic thinking) (Peter Brierley)
- “Leadership is the art of managing disappointment (i.e. other people’s!)”
- “Leadership is getting people to do what they don’t want to do, to achieve what they want to achieve”
- Leadership involves the taking of risks: “There is no credit to be drawn from the virtue of one’s past. Look for the risk. Make it your watchword. If you seek to save your life, corporate or individual, I promise you - *Jesus promises you* - you will lose it. Don’t play safe” (Stan Mooneyham, President of World Vision 1991)

A key question: “What does our church have to do in 2007 in order to become the church we want to be in 2012?”

Where do we want to be in 2012? My personal desire would be to see the church double in membership, for with people retiring later, this may well be the only way in which we can continue to service our ‘seven-day-a-week church.

Two main lessons

For me, two main lessons emerged, which simply reinforced what I had seen in Australia and New Zealand:

1. ***Larger Baptist churches (and indeed larger Anglican churches) are all staff led.*** The staff report back to the deacons/elders, but essentially it is the staff who make the day-to-day decisions of church life. With regard to the size of the leadership team, a recent survey of Scottish churches revealed that “the smaller the executive the more likely it is to be a growing church”. In larger churches there are fewer church meetings than in smaller churches: although the church meeting is the place where major decisions are made and where leaders are appointed (in this sense they are ‘congregationally-governed’), it is primarily a place for vision-sharing and information-giving. Membership matters in larger churches tend not to be dealt with by the church meeting, but by the deacons/elders. Peter Guinness of Lancaster spoke of the inter-play of three levels of leadership: episcopal (i.e. the pastor), presbyteral, and congregational.
2. ***Delegation involves holding people accountable.*** Prof Gillian Stamp presented her model of ‘tasking’ (the leader shares his intention), ‘trusting’ (delegating), ‘tending’. Informally, there was talk of the practice found in large American churches (and also in Australia and New Zealand) of an ‘executive pastor’ (or ‘executive

administrator') whose task it is to deal with holding people accountable, allowing the senior pastor to focus on preaching, leadership and vision.

Further insights and ideas

1. ***We need to work at team-building.*** one quarter of all Anglican curacies fail in the sense that the curate fails to finish his curacy; at least half of all Baptist teams break down. One pastor talked of taking his staff away to Paris for the day as a team-building exercise.
2. ***Relational small groups are vital in a larger church.*** Churches grow larger by growing smaller (i.e. through small groups). Success is determined by the quality of the leaders. Every group needs to be outward-looking. On several occasions it was suggested that, at every small group meeting, an empty chair is set out as a constant reminder that there is room for others. Small groups are the key to pastoral care: "If you want to get the best pastoral care in the church, then join a small group". One church found numbers attending small groups significantly increased when two people visited all those not attending. During the period of the visiting the senior minister made a presentation indicating the rationale of such groups.
3. ***Studying Rick Warren's '40 Days of Purpose' next Lent could benefit our small groups.*** Most churches had experimented with '40 Days of Purpose' and found that it had had a major effect on church life. The number of small groups in many churches had doubled. Some churches have found the '40 days' format so helpful, that they have devised further material around that time-frame: e.g. '40 days in John'.
4. ***A larger church functions with fewer church meetings - an effort, however, needs to be made to make them more interesting.*** The largest Baptist church in the UK (Charlotte Chapel) has a church meeting once a year. Most of the larger churches have quarterly meetings. Only one church met as often as five times a year in church meeting. In larger churches direction tends to be offered from 'the pulpit'. It was said, 'The most powerful tool for change is the pulpit'. Once a year Andover Baptists take over a Chinese restaurant in town and organise their church meeting around a meal. In another church once a year their church meeting takes the form of a 'ministry fair', in which the various church departments set out stalls and answer questions from interested members. The minister of Leigh-on-Sea Baptist church writes a pastoral letter to every member before the meeting, outlining the issues. In many of these churches the quorum for formal decision-making appears to be 25%, as distinct from 33%.
5. ***Few larger churches have family services.*** Stockton Tabernacle has moved their family service to a termly late afternoon (5-7 pm) 'event' for young families, with food. Andover Baptist has family services only at festival times (Christmas, Easter and Harvest).
6. ***Larger churches focus on young people.*** 'Churches which do not have full-time youth workers struggle'. A larger proportion of younger people go to larger churches, presumably because they find there a wider range of more appropriate

activities. The importance of involving 'Generation X' and indeed 'Generation Y' in leadership opportunities was mentioned, as well as the idea of encouraging church young people to offer a gap year. One church uses its students in the holidays and pays them the MacDonald's rate. One church's evening service for young people takes the form of a 'café church teach-in'.

7. ***Eating together is vital.*** 'Jesus must have been a fat man, because he was for ever eating' (John Bell). In one church the leaders meet every month for a meal at 6pm, and then do business from 7-9pm!
8. ***Church weekends do not have to take place 'away'.*** Several churches organise annual 'weekends at home' (e.g. during the October half-term) with social events such as hog-roasts, as well as teaching. Church weekends at home attract a greater proportion of the church.
9. ***We need to be creative in the way in which we hold prayer-meetings.*** I was fascinated by the way one church has been holding monthly prayer days ('Powerhouse days'). These prayer days (for them a Monday) feature five different opportunities, most 45 minutes in length (60 minutes maximum) - see the article elsewhere in this edition of Ministry Today. In this way they get out 100 people every month!
10. ***Prayer ministry teams need to be accountable.*** In other churches prayer ministry teams always report back to the senior pastor (only if the person has expressly requested privacy is the pastor not informed of the details of the situation). This contrasts with our prayer ministry team, which gives no information of any kind, not even the number of people who have gone forward for prayer.
11. ***Leaders need to make opportunities to listen to God's Word together.*** I was challenged by the way in which some pastors meet with their leaders for prayer and reflection on God's Word. In one church the 'elders' meet every Tuesday morning for an hour followed by breakfast (6.45 - 8pm) in which they not only pray together, but study a chapter of the Bible together ('What is God saying to us?'). Another church does something similar, but there the senior pastor meets with his leaders in three groups (early morning, lunch-time and late evening).
12. ***Evangelism should underlie all our activities.*** It is important to build from one event to another - e.g. at Christmas mention what is happening at Easter. Communication is key. Mention was made of a betting shop exercise, in which the pastor encourages all members to go and place £1 in their local betting shop, and from this experience discover how difficult it must feel for non-Christians to attend church.
13. ***Healing should be part of every church's ministry.*** One church has a mental health club where people pray for one another (even although they may not be all Christians).