

Let's Not Be Afraid To Learn Lessons From New Zealand!

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I love New Zealand. It is a wonderful country – blessed not just by great scenery, but also by great people. A year ago, I was privileged to pay my fourth visit, and yet again I found myself challenged by the vision and energy of this country of just some four million people. Perhaps because it is a relatively young nation, there is a discernible freshness and vitality which is sadly not always present in the UK. There is a pioneering spirit and a determination to make things work. Outside Auckland University, for instance, I saw a series of colourful banners, each adorned with the slogan: “Make your mark upon the world”.

Not surprisingly, the Baptist churches of New Zealand are marked by similar vision and energy. I believe that we in the UK have much to learn from our sister churches ‘down-under’. In many ways, NZ Baptists are the ‘pace setters’. In particular I want to highlight five areas where NZ churches have things to teach us.

1. Ministers are called to lead

In one sense there is nothing new to this emphasis. Indeed, I have maintained over the years that leadership is the key priority of pastoral ministry. I have little doubt that many of our churches are dying because of lack of leadership, and that others are growing because of good leadership. However, what I found refreshing in NZ was the recognition by the New Zealand Baptist Churches of the importance of leadership. New Zealand Baptists as a denomination have, for instance, formed a leadership network for all their pastors – a network headed up by Murray Robertson, formerly senior pastor of Spreydon, a very large Baptist church in Christchurch. The web-site of the Baptist National Resource Centre has hundreds of ‘leadership resource papers’ which pastors can download on such topics as change and transition, church health and growth, church models, growth barriers, inclusion, multi congregations, staffing, teams, vision and values.... No wonder NZ churches are growing. They are determined to impact their nation for Christ.

I saw a reflection of this determination to ‘make a difference’ in the Auckland Maritime Museum, where there was a display featuring the work of Sir Peter Blake, the man behind NZ’s successful Admirals Cup bid. Following his death, a Blake medal is issued every year for outstanding leadership. I noted with interest the leadership qualities that the Sir Peter Blake Trust looks for:

Determination and the will to succeed
Belief in achieving extraordinary things
Willingness to learn
Desire for constant improvement
Trusting and empowering team-mates
The initiative to pursue an idea
Ability to have fun

This insightful list of leadership qualities surely has relevance to church life too!

2. Ministers are called to be team leaders

All ministers are leaders of at least two teams. In the first instance, the minister leads a team of deacons; in the second instance, the ministers leads a team of members, otherwise known as the church! I like the word 'team': it implies dynamism, purpose, mission.

However, in our larger churches, ministers are increasingly leaders of 'staff' teams. Sadly, some ministers have yet to learn what it means to 'trust and empower team-mates'. In this respect I was struck by some words of wisdom from Murray Robertson in the November 2010 edition of *the NZ Baptist*: *Years ago I came across two words that are extremely helpful in understanding the leader's role in a team. The words are **affirmation** and **vulnerability**. The team leader cannot give enough affirmation to the others in the team, and yet they also need to be vulnerable before the team. There is the risk that other team members might take advantage of the vulnerability that is being expressed, but that is always the risk of being vulnerable. It is much easier to follow a vulnerable leader, though, than the one who seems beyond weakness and struggle.*

Alignment is extremely important to a team. If one team member is not fully aligned to the vision and values shared by the other members of the team, increasingly the time of the team will be taken up with the issues of the person who is out of alignment. That leads to all sorts of frustrations developing.

Murray Robertson has a regular leadership column in the NZ Baptist newspaper. Maybe we could do something similar?

3. Ministers are called to keep on learning

Again, there is nothing new about 'life-long learning'. However, what is new in NZ is the way in which NZ Baptists have put this ideal into practice. The accreditation process for NZ Baptist ministers is much more demanding than our British system in that 'registration' (their term) is an ongoing process. Every three years registered ministers are required to undertake a 'ministry development agreement review'. This ministry development agreement is made between the pastor and the Baptist Union and in consultation with the local church. It involves the setting of learning goals and "aims at discovery ways to affirm and strengthen the pastor in his/her ministry". Currently they are in the process of strengthening the ministry development agreement through a points system involving not just study, but spiritual accountability and involvement in the Baptist community (e.g. attendance at a leadership network event; regular attendance at a cluster group; attendance at their annual assembly as also at a pastors' conference!)

I was particularly impressed by the imaginative ways in which the NZ Baptist Union is pro-active in encouraging its ministers to keep on learning. One way is to encourage ministers' fellowships to turn themselves into 'clusters' committed to "meet regularly, usually monthly, for training and mutual support and accountability", with the purpose of developing pastors "to lead healthy growing churches that have an effective outward focus as part of their ministry". A typical cluster meeting of three hours includes an interactive training session of 60-90 minutes, led by the cluster leader. To make this possible, the Baptist Union emails out study materials every month to every cluster - these study materials are exceedingly practical and to my mind really 'hit the spot'. The NZ Baptist Union well and truly believes in resourcing its ministers!

4. Ministers are called to excel in whatever they do

On one Sunday I had the privilege of preaching at Green Lane Christian Centre in Auckland. Baptist in theology, it is an independent fellowship, led by Terry Calkin, its founding pastor, which thanks to his energy, vision and business-like approach, is now a 'mega' church. Terry believes in all-around excellence. As far as Terry is concerned, the key to growing a church is not 'preaching' - but "*the peripherals*". This is not to say that Terry does not believe in preaching - he does, and sees people every Sunday commit their lives to Christ as a result of his preaching. However, he maintains that a church is built, not by the preaching of the Gospel alone, but by paying attention to such issues as newcomer integration, an imaginative and fun-filled youth ministry, great music, disciplined worship, creative evangelistic programmes, enthusiastic leadership, and a generally professional approach to ministry.

I am impressed by Terry. No detail is too small for him and his staff. For instance, rain or shine (and in Auckland there is a lot of both), there are people outside the church building welcoming newcomers. Those preparing communion are expected to arrive an hour before the start of the service - there is nothing last minute about this ministry. The order of service is 'timed' - and adhered to! There is a red digital clock at the back for everyone to see. The after-church food and coffee is of a standard on a par with any city cafe.

The underlying philosophy is that God deserves our very best. In this respect, I was fascinated by the church's approach to Auckland's city-centre Christmas parade. Some years ago the church took the initiative in volunteering to head up the parade, singing carols. As a result this year they had 500 of their people 'on parade' - this involved a formal dress code, along with black trousers or skirts, all participants had to pay \$12 to wear good quality red T-shirts with the words, '*The reason for the season*' on one side, and '*Jesus*' on the back. A further 80 people, similarly dressed, were asked by the organisers to hold two massive helium balloons in the middle of the parade. What an impact the church must have made - and what a contrast this makes to the bedraggled way we often go about our carol-singing in the UK! Yes, of course, the weather helps, but for me it is the determination to do things well which is significant.

In conclusion

Needless to say, NZ churches have their problems too. However, this is not to detract from their vision and energy. Baptist churches in NZ are increasingly becoming the main Protestant denomination - certainly as far as church attendance is concerned. Perhaps because there is no established church, Baptist churches have been able to attract people of high calibre. The average Baptist church in NZ has around 120 members (and many more attenders) and tends to be larger than the average Baptist church in the UK. They have a number of large churches with several with a membership in excess of 1000. I believe that we should not be afraid to learn lessons from them.