

Sabbatical Insights

Lessons from a Different Western Culture

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I've just returned from a three-month sabbatical in Australia and New Zealand, where I gained many insights, including the following:

1. It's good to remain dissatisfied

All the growing churches I visited were actively planning for further growth, and all of them were building further facilities. In the words of Thom Rainer, whose book *Break Out Churches* was distributed by the Baptist Union of Western Australia to all its member churches: "It is a sin to be good if God has called you to be great".^[1] In other words, the fact that a church may have grown is not a reason for it to sit on its laurels: rather, there are always fresh heights which God would have them reach. Even the largest of churches were not content to remain as they were. They longed to see yet more people won to Christ and his church.

2. Leaders need to lead

In New Zealand and Western Australia, and also in the larger Melbourne churches, a new model of church life has been adopted by Baptists which not only encourages, but also expects leaders at every level within a church to fulfil their calling. This new model, adapted from an American model of church governance, demands that leaders be given the freedom to lead.

"God expects those who are given gifts, talents, skills and a call, to lead with excellence. This means that leaders must be given broad authority to take strong leadership roles over areas for which they are responsible. Those same leaders should also expect to provide specific, measurable, behavioural, and tangible goals relating to outcomes and then be held accountable for these goals. However, in the pursuit of these goals leaders should be given wide latitude, flexibility, and protection by those to whom the leader is accountable. Leaders also need the freedom to fail so they be willing to risk. Obviously, too much failure indicates a lack of wisdom and leadership. On the other hand, without risk and failure the organization is doomed to eventual decline and death".^[2]

Without exception, those churches which have adopted this model are enthusiastic about the difference it has made to their mission and ministry. The New Zealand Baptist Union attributes a major increase in baptisms to the adoption of this model - in one year baptisms rose by 24%. Darrell Holmes, an English Baptist minister, on a

recent sabbatical in New Zealand studied 12 congregations, which in the five year period since the adoption of this model grew on average by 67%.

3. Church staff do not all have to be full-time

In Australia and New Zealand it is common for churches to appoint part-time staff in addition to their full-time staff. One large church I visited had, for instance, three full-time pastors and ten part-time associate ministers! Interestingly in one church part-time staff were expected to give most of Sunday free and one evening a week free, on the ground that many church members freely gave most of their Sunday and one evening a week to the church!

Perhaps the reason why in so many churches not all the members of staff are full-time is that in both Australia and New Zealand bi-vocational ministers are not uncommon. For instance, in Western Australia a third of all Baptist ministers are bi-vocational. There is a lot to be said for a more flexible approach to the church labour market!

4. Church members benefit from value statements

I was impressed by the way one Melbourne church spelt out the values they expected their members to espouse:

- **Passion.** *We are a dynamic spiritual community. We are vibrant in our prayer life and worship. We expect God to be present and we speak openly of his actions among us. We are excited about God, passionate about life in the Spirit and aflame with love for Jesus.*
- **Care.** *We care for one another deeply and support one another consistently. We speak up for justice and foster active partnerships with those addressing real community needs. We serve joyfully together in the cause of Jesus. We complement one another using our gifts.*
- **Invitation.** *We are enthusiastic about inviting people to share life with us and actively introducing others to Jesus. We are growing numerically and celebrating diversity as many different people come to faith in Jesus.*
- **Sacrifice.** *We are selfless and recklessly abandoned to the mission cause of Jesus locally and worldwide. We are attentive to the places of the world's greatest needs. We give generously and cheerfully. We resource the mission of Jesus fully. Our buildings are a gift to the community, purpose built for the current opportunities of local mission*
- **Faith.** *We are innovating effective new avenues of ministry and outreach. We are people of bold faith, risk takers, God-trusters, who go forward together daring to believe that God is changing the world through us. We plant churches and partner with other followers of Jesus who share our commitment to his mission.*
- **Transformation.** *We are a movement, not an institution, which is transforming lives and changing culture in Melbourne. We have transformed fear to trust,*

despair to hope, nominalism to faith and legalistic religion to vibrant intimacy with God. We are transforming the wider secular community to a community that functions on godly principles and values.

5. Worship is more than singing

This conviction arose, alas, out of a negative experience of church life 'down under'. In many churches worship essentially consists of the singing of songs, the vast majority of which are triumphalistic in tone - no doubt reflecting the fact that most of these songs emanate from Hillsong, the Sydney mega-church which preaches 'health, wealth, and prosperity'. In almost all the churches I visited there were no prayers of intercession and certainly no prayers of confession; the Bible was scarcely read; and the Lord's Supper tended to be the most barren of experiences. Perhaps one reason for the poverty of such worship is that it is mostly in the hands of musicians, who are not necessarily versed in the 'theology' of worship.

I was impressed by the polished professionalism of the leading of the singing in some of the larger churches. However, at times such worship bordered on the 'presentational' - with the result that a good number of the congregation did not feel the need to join in the singing. Furthermore, many of the more recent songs are difficult to sing, with the result that it was noticeable that congregations found it difficult to get behind the songs: by contrast, on the few occasions there were hymns or where the song was older in style, the congregations were able to sing their hearts out.

6. Once a Sunday is enough

In most New Zealand and Australian churches people are expected to worship only once a Sunday. After fighting a losing battle for many years, in which I sought to encourage people to attend church morning and evening, I now concede defeat. For whereas in my childhood 'twicers' attended church twice a Sunday, today 'twicers' attend twice a month. Today's battle is to encourage those who attend only twice a month to attend once a Sunday!

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 we need to be positive and accept that is a good thing to observe the Sabbath principle of rest, as well as the Sunday principle of celebration.

7. Services need to be diverse

Where there is both a morning and evening service, the services need to be different from one another. So in almost all churches in New Zealand and Australia the evening service is a service devoted to young adults and young people. It is a service led by young adults and young people and is drawn up with the needs of young adults and people in mind. It is therefore noisier, and more 'contemporary'.

The question arises, however, where there are two morning services, as to whether or not they should be different from one another. In Britain, often because of lack of resources, as distinct from principle, the first service is often traditional in format and with the needs of older people in mind, while the second service is 'family worship', with songs dominating, and with the provision of Sunday School for children. By contrast in many larger Australian and New Zealand churches, the morning services have exactly the same format - with the same worship team and technical team operating at both - and with the provision of Sunday School at both.

8. Visitors need to be assimilated

Like many churches, we have 'welcomers' on the door at every service, who are expected to be able to know (and greet) most people by name, so that they will be aware of newcomers. In addition we have visitors' cards, which we encourage visitors to fill in and return. However, I now wonder whether we should make even more effort not just to welcome visitors, but to assimilate visitors into the church.

The most effective assimilation I saw taking place was where visitors were not only welcomed, but also offered a small 'gift' if they filled in the visitors' cards. Indeed, in the church with the most effective rate of assimilation (three out of every eight visitors becoming church members), not only were visitors given a porcelain mug on the first Sunday they gave their details, but during the week they were sent a letter by the pastor enclosing a voucher for a free worship CD were they to return to church the following Sunday! Was this bribery, or was it simply effective marketing?

9. Evangelism needs to be effective

Effective evangelism is not about better programmes but about more meaningful relationships. With this in mind, one Australian church has adopted a five-stage approach to 'mateship' evangelism, which encourages members to 'live as God's witnesses' by:

- 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

One obstacle to effective evangelism is an image problem. As Brian Harris, the New Zealand principal of the Baptist College of Western Australia, has pointed out, the image portrayed by the media is that Christians believe that "sex and fun are distasteful. Its leaders are invariably hypocrites and paedophiles. It condemns homosexuals to hell while its clergy can't keep their hands off young boys. And though not exactly the flat-earth society, it insists that the world is around six thousand years old"[\[3\]](#). Not

surprisingly, although 99.4% of young New Zealanders apparently believe in God, the majority rate Christianity as irrelevant to a genuine spiritual quest.

So what is to be the church's approach? By contrast with the late medieval and Reformation period, people are no longer wracked by a sense of guilt and sin. Is the issue one of meaning and purpose in life? Or is it about relationships and community? If we are to be effective in presenting the Gospel, we have to discover what is truly 'good news' for today's generation. Needless to say, in doing so, we do not dispense with the concept of sin, for sin is at the root of every human malaise.

10. Children are important

Several Australian pastors told me that they believed that their children's ministries were the most effective way of doing evangelism, for children bring parents, and the more families there are, the more families come. As a result these churches spend many thousands of dollars on their children's work.

We need to take the spiritual needs of children seriously. Even the under-fives can have their own sense of spirituality, let alone the fives-plus. Yet, unlike many churches in Australia and New Zealand, in Britain we tend to emphasise nurturing young children in the faith, but not actively seek to win them to Christ. But in fact we cannot afford to wait until children reach secondary school before we talk about Christian commitment, because by then decisions have often been made. According to one statistic: "80% of people make a commitment before they are 13".

11. We need to focus on men

Whereas in most British churches men's meetings have disappeared, or if they remain, they tend to focus on the retired, a surprising number of churches 'down under' are engaged in men's groups. Men's breakfasts (cooked by men) are very popular. So are all kinds of practical activities for men. It is said that men tend to talk to one another when they are doing something; women, by contrast, do not need to have an excuse to talk!

Both in Australia and New Zealand there is a recognition that winning men for Jesus can be a key to reaching the family. It is said that, 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.

12. Internationals are a fertile field for the Gospel

Multi-culturalism is a feature of both Australian and New Zealand cities. Some churches have a range of ethnic congregations, with services in Korean, Mandarin and

Cantonese, Vietnamese, and Indonesian. Both in New Zealand and Australia 'Asians' are proving a very fertile ground for the Gospel, not least because people new to the country feel vulnerable and are looking for friendship.

I was impressed with one Sydney church, which has developed quite intentionally a multi-cultural congregation representing some 48 nations. The Indian pastor goes out of his way to welcome new arrivals to Australia. In the church auditorium flags from all over world are hung - and the word 'Welcome' is 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.

13. Nurture is more than small groups

Most churches I visited were heavily into small groups. Indeed, it was not unusual for 70% of church attenders to be involved in such groups. But the fact is that small groups are often little more than a recycling of prejudice and ignorance. Most churches make little provision for true development of Christian faith. Although Sunday School lessons are graded according to the age and maturity of the children, churches do not normally put on courses graded according to the spirituality of their members. Few church members have either the inclination or indeed the time to read any Christian books of substance. What proportion of Christians, I wonder, fulfil Paul's maxim of "in thinking be adults"?[\[4\]](#)

There was only church I came across wrestling with such issues, and that was in response to the high fall-out of young adults from evangelical-Pentecostal-charismatic churches. Here is an issue demanding further consideration. What a difference it would make if were to adopt the 'strap line' of the Baptist College of Western Australia: "Think what you've never thought; do what you've never done; become who you've never been"! Or to use the title of a remarkable film I saw while in Australia: 'Live and Become'[\[5\]](#)

14. Prayer is vital

We pay lip-service to the fact that prayer is the key to effective ministry, but in reality our prayers are often limited. In one Australian church I visited, however, there was a prayer chapel separate from the main auditorium, and there was also a full-time paid member of staff whose task it is to encourage prayer in the church. Furthermore, in that church, as in several other churches I came across, each of the pastors was expected to develop a special group of prayer partners to pray regularly for their work.

In most churches prayer is a 'grey' area, which needs to be worked upon. In my own church, for instance, we have a prayer ministry team, but we could be more pro-active in encouraging the prayer life of our church. In particular, I think there is much to be said for prayer triplets, with each member of the triplet praying specifically for three of their friends to come to Christ.

15. People give to vision

I was struck by the often-quoted saying 'people give to vision - not to programmes'. So one Australian church produces every year a A5 booklet, in which most of the content is devoted to the goals of the various departments of the church for the current year; only three pages are devoted to the budget (on one page an introduction; on another page the briefest of budget breakdowns; and on the third page a pie-chart of the expenses breakdown). Yes, if we want people to give more, then we must emphasise vision more. Indeed, in some churches 'down under' Vision Sunday is always followed by a Sunday devoted to the pastor preaching on giving.

While in Australia I came across a fascinating story of a pastor outlining to his congregation the church's vision for the next five years. It included clear goals and strategies to reach people with the gospel, and to train them in discipleship and 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!'

16. Ministers need to give their people time to live

Ministers need to be better stewards of their church's time and ensure that people have time to live, and not least that they have time to live a life outside the church. Otherwise we may reach the stage when most of them, and in particular most of the leaders, become exhausted.

In this respect there is a lot to be said for small groups meeting only every other week, with committees and other business meetings restricted to only those weeks when small groups are not taking place. This is the pattern of church life which I discovered in a large Presbyterian church in New Zealand. If this pattern were adopted, then small groups could well be strengthened as a result of removing other meetings that week; it would also give people time to attend business meetings of one kind or another, and would give everybody more time to be human and more neighbourly - time in fact to be salt and light in the world!

[1] Zondervan (Grand Rapids 2005) 15.

[2] Paul Borden, *Hit the Bull's Eye. How denominations can aim the congregation at the mission field* (Abingdon Press, Nashville) 127.

[3] Brian Harris, 'From "Behave, Believe, Belong" to "Belong, Believe, Behave" 210 in *Text & Task: Scripture & Mission*, ed. Michael Parsons, Paternoster, Milton Keynes 2005.

[\[4\]](#) 1 Cor 14.20

[\[5\]](#) 'Live and become' by Radu Mihaileanu