

# GETTING ON BOARD

County Church Northumberland.

In 1985 Liz and I made our first visit to what was then Clarendon Church in Hove led by Terry Virgo. We were having a weekend break in Brighton, and I was a Baptist minister just along the coast at that time. We loved everything about it. Liz whispered to me at the end of the worship "I can imagine us in a church like this." Little did we know that the following January I would be welcomed into the team leading that church, and that we would be there for the next eight years. For us it was like coming home.

So here I am looking at the issue of joining a local church - a church where it feels like home and you're among family. This is based on a short series of messages I brought to County Church in September 2006 under the title "Getting On Board". I hope this will particularly help those thinking of joining County Church.

My starting point is a text of Scripture that is an illustration of "getting on board" rather than an example of someone joining a church, but I think it points us in the right direction. In Acts 16:6-12 Paul arrives in Troas on his travels with his companions Silas and Timothy; but when they leave by sea there are four of them not three. Luke, the writer of 'Acts', joins them at this point. His language changes from "they" to "we". This is Luke's moment of transition from enthusiastic observer to one who is connected, related and involved. He is now committed. It is "we" not "they", it is "us" not "them".

Our vocabulary often betrays our commitment - just listen to football fans. Ardent magpies don't say "*Who are they playing this weekend?*" when referring to Newcastle United. They say "*Who are we playing?*" They are committed; they are involved.

This narrative records Luke's transition from enthusiastic observer to committed participant; but his commitment found expression, not just in his vocabulary but in action. So as the ship sailed for Macedonia he, literally, got on board. "*We got ready at once to leave for Macedonia*". He packed his bag and left home and boarded the ship. No one could ask: "*Is he with us or is he not?*" Luke was on board.

In much the same way we want to encourage you to get on board with us. But because this issue of church commitment can be such a sensitive one I want to say some things by way of introduction. Some Christians think there is no need to talk about commitment or church membership. They say Christians should not be tied down but be free to come and go among the churches; in other words, church membership smacks of institutionalism. For others the subject is delicate because they have come from difficult experiences of church. So let me explain, first:

## **What we believe about church membership.**

In fact I am not very keen on the term “church membership” because of its institutional “feel”, so I will use it sparingly. I prefer terms like “joined” and “committed”. This, then, is our understanding of the biblical basics.

When we come to know Jesus Christ we become members of Christ’s worldwide church. We immediately have brothers and sisters in many nations. We are all one in Christ Jesus whatever our denominational labels or doctrinal emphases. When we go on holiday, or move house or travel abroad on business we find fellow believers everywhere, and we experience the reality of our worldwide church membership. When we meet other believers in this County of Northumberland – we are part of the same worldwide church.

But we also need to be built into a local congregation of Christ’s worldwide church. What Jesus is doing in the earth needs communities of believers working together. “Church” is the priority of Jesus for this. He said “*I will build my church.*” (Matthew 16v18).

Church is “*built*”. We are like stones in God’s hands. (1 Peter 2v5) God takes different individuals and joins them together. There is a building and joining together of our lives even though we come in all shapes and sizes, with different backgrounds, and temperaments. God manages to build people together who normally would have little in common. This is what we mean by church “membership”.

In ‘Acts’ we see people getting added to actual local units of Christ’s worldwide church. (See Acts 2v41-47; 4v5; 5v14) New believers didn’t just listen to preaching or experience the power of God - they knew they were being added to a company of people. The New Testament knows nothing of believing without being added to a community of believers.

## **This is not intended to make anyone feel “got at”!**

Some have only just come among us and need more time.

You may decide this is not the church for you. When this happens it is not usually over a fundamental of the faith. It might be over some distinctive or a value – or even the priority given to certain values. It may be the way things are done. You may not like the style of worship or you may prefer leaders to wear a collar & tie! But if this is not the church for you it is important you find one that is. You need to be added and built in somewhere.

Other people just need plenty of time to be sure. This is especially true if you have come from a difficult experience of church. For some County Church will be a place of recovery. We believe this is part of our prophetic calling.

At a newfrontiers regional leaders & wives weekend back in November 2004 a prophetic word was spoken over us. It pictured a large landscape littered with

boulders from another place, brought by glaciers, but now stranded. These large rocks represented people of strength and ability who had been part of previous works of God. God's word concerning them was "Petrified!" These people were now characterised by fear, anxiety, and hardness. God's word to us was that by warmth these rocks would come back to life; they would become living stones once more. The message was "Don't back off from them but warm them with love. Restore them. You will then be able to build with them."

Such people may need time to recover confidence in leaders. Others simply need to feel welcome and be accepted for who they are or find friendship. Some just need space. For some people it is the security of a Bible based ministry they need; for others it is a context where there is openness to the Holy Spirit.

So this theme of "Getting on Board" – is not to put pressure on anyone

### **But we do need to know who is on board with us.**

Leaders need to know who is on board – to know who they have some responsibility for before God, and also who they can entrust with responsibility.

We also need to know because we are on a mission and we need you! God has given you gifts and experience & resources that we need in our mission in the county.

We believe God has promised to give us experienced people to help us. At a few days away for prayer we were given a prophetic picture of a big wave with several experienced surfers coming in together. God was going to be sending us more key people.

Many have already made it clear that they are on board. A good number of our original core group took massive steps of faith to get on board with us and start church planting. Some even moved house and left jobs and changed their children's schools to join us. In some cases this involved relocating from the south of England to uncharted land north of Watford. Such people were making it abundantly clear that they were on board!

So what causes people to make such sacrifices? What caused the change in Luke from enthusiastic observer to committed participant? Why did he get on board?

# THREE REASONS FOR GETTING ON BOARD

## A Growing Relationship

We do not know how or when Luke became a follower of Jesus but his relationship with Paul, Silas and Timothy probably started with him listening as they shared the gospel. Perhaps he began to write down something of their story. In the process he developed a relationship with them. This would be crucial in his “getting on board”.

Luke would go on to become one of Paul’s closest friends and a trusted member of his team. This was the start of a long partnership. This was not for a few weeks or months; it was a commitment for many years and one which would take Luke all over the known world. As Paul neared the end of his life he wrote *“Luke alone is with me”* (2 Timothy 4v11).

This issue of friendship is so important in getting on board a local church. We need “heart links”. Unless we begin to connect with some people as friends we are unlikely to feel we belong. This is why the welcome you receive is so important – and hospitality and cell groups and social occasions.

All of us need relationships outside of church meetings & prayer meetings. We need meals together, times with our children playing together; going out to a concert or film, visiting the countryside or beach, playing sport. We need to be around each other – laughing, playing music and cooking food. Community means we do things together.

Perhaps Luke, who was a doctor, realised how much Paul and Timothy needed him, and this was another reason for deciding to get on board. Both Paul and Timothy suffered from physical ailments. Paul’s *“thorn in the flesh”* may have been a problem with his eyes. (2 Cor. 12v7-10; Galatians 4v13-15) Timothy suffered from *“frequent illnesses”* and was advised to take wine for his stomach’s sake! (1 Timothy 5v23) So even though Paul saw God’s power released in miracles of healing in his travels Luke the physician was still needed. Paul later described him as *“the beloved physician”* (Col.4v4).

For most of us the need to feel needed is very important. We need to feel valued – to know that we have a contribution to make. Well, if you join a church planting initiative like ours everyone is needed. It’s all hands on deck on board a ship like this one.

## Identification with a Vision

v9. *“During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’* In Acts ch.16 this is the hinge between Luke’s “they” and “us” language.

It was a historic crossroad. This was the moment Paul would cross from east to west; from Asia Minor to Europe. Alexander the Great had famously aimed

*“to marry the east to the west”* and so make one world. But God was giving this privilege to the apostle Paul and Luke himself was caught up with this great vision: v10. *“We got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.”*

We too are on a mission with the gospel, here in Northumberland. Christ's Great Commission rings in our ears. *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”* (Matthew 28v18ff)

We believe Jesus Christ is the answer to the deepest needs of every man and woman, whether young or old, and of every boy and girl. We have good news to share in the county, alongside other believers.

Our vision is to change the landscape by planting churches – communities of God-intoxicated, Jesus-loving, Spirit-filled believers! God has given us faith for church planting in the county – not one church but multiple churches. We believe God will give us growth primarily by new believers, although in the early stages our core group has been made up mainly of experienced believers drawn by our vision. It is a long term vision and so we are taking time to build securely. While we want to grow numerically we will not be seduced or put under pressure by the numbers game.

Our strategy is to look for households in many towns and villages in the county rather than all being based in the same place. This means we can feel stretched and isolated to begin with, but in the long term it gives us many potential bridgeheads for the gospel.

To change the metaphor - God spoke to us a few months ago about being like a strawberry plant, with the mother plant sending out runners across the ground bearing fruit in different places. Some, not all, take root strongly and become mother plants themselves continuing the process of spreading out over yet more ground. Our strategy is to grow horizontally rather than vertically. Rather than one or two large churches we are looking for churches to spring up in many places over time.

Luke was not getting on board a ship that would stay in harbour. The ship was going somewhere. First stop, Macedonia. The adventure was just beginning. This boat was moving with purpose on a mission much bigger than anything he could have imagined. He hadn't just joined a small band; he was part of a historic apostolic movement which had world mission in its sights.

It is the same when you get on board with us in County Church. We are part of a mighty army, the world-wide church of Christ. We are committed to working alongside other churches in the county who share a passion for the gospel. We are also part of the *newfrontiers* network which is “a worldwide family of churches together on a mission”.

## A Call from God

Luke actually uses this kind of language: “*concluding that God had called us.*” In the end, this always underlies why we get on board. We believe it is what God wants us to do. God’s call is usually accompanied by an inward “yes”! Here Luke’s sense of call is connected to Paul’s vision and his mission to Europe. Suddenly Luke felt drawn. The Lord of the Harvest was thrusting him out as a worker in His harvest field. (Matthew 9vv37f)

This is how it is so often for you and me. Out of nowhere, you begin to want to do something or go somewhere or make some commitment – whereas a short time earlier you might have felt indifference. God is at work putting new desires in your heart, giving you an appetite for His purposes.

This is my own story as far as church planting is concerned. I never wanted to do it. I had said as much to colleagues in the past. Yet back in 1992, in the first personal prophetic word I ever received this was the central thrust - I was going to be a church planter. Sure enough, when it was God’s time for Liz and I to go church planting I began to feel a strong desire to do it. I suspect that God rarely calls us into something He does not first stir some desire for - a much better arrangement than grim duty and sullen obedience.

You may have thought the same about small churches or *newfrontiers* or a church meeting in homes and hired halls. You may have said – “Not me; never!” John Wesley hated the thought of losing his “*commodious pulpit*” as an Anglican clergyman, but he became a mighty open air preacher throughout this land. Why? Because God’s call was accompanied by an inward “yes”.

But when God calls, your mind is also engaged in the process. Notice in the text, they “*concluded.*” This word means “to join together in one’s mind.” It is the kind of word we might use today for “joining up the dots” until a clear picture emerges. Some reasoning was involved; they had to think it through.

That’s what we need to do too. Join up the dots. When it comes to God giving you direction, there is usually more than one pointer. But you have to consider them and come to some conclusion for yourself. If you are a couple, or a family then you do it as a unit. Always be wary of people who want to make your decisions for you - that is the pathway to manipulation.

Of course, we don’t know exactly where the call of God will take us. When Luke got on board with Paul he knew the first stop would be Macedonia, but he knew nothing beyond that. The vision Paul had seen was a broad brush vision – there was no great detail. It left a lot of questions unanswered, but it was enough. So too when you get on board in the mission of a local church – you can’t be sure where it will take you. But the important thing is you are going somewhere with God and for God.

William Carey set sail for India leaving behind the rallying cry: “*Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God*”. With this same rallying cry we invite you to get on board with us in our mission in this great county.

# FIVE SIGNS THAT YOU ARE ON BOARD

There are some basic expressions of commitment, signs that you are getting “on board” and that God is joining your heart in a local church. I will be very specific at this point and identify five.

We are looking for these indications of God joining your heart to us rather than joining the church by attendance at a membership course.

## **You want to be with us when we gather**

When God begins to join your heart to a local community of Christians you simply want to be with them when they meet, whether on Sundays or in small groups or prayer meetings or social occasions or weekend camps.

It is more than liking the songs or the preacher or finding people friendly. These things have their place but they will never fully satisfy. No, there is a joining of hearts involved so that you want to be with these people.

When you know Jesus and become part of His worldwide church this desire to join with other believers is an evidence of the Spirit in your life. When those three thousand were gloriously saved at Pentecost they needed no persuasion about meeting together. *“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread together in their homes and ate together.” “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”* (Acts 2v46, 42)

When Charles Spurgeon the great nineteenth century preacher and church planter first became a Christian he pestered the minister of the church in Newmarket about becoming a church member. *“I felt that I could not be happy without fellowship with the people of God. I wanted to be wherever they were, and if anybody ridiculed them, I wished to be ridiculed with them, and if people had an ugly name for them, I wanted to be called by that ugly name.”* (C. H. Spurgeon. ‘The Early Years’. Banner of Truth) He not only wanted to be with other believers, he wanted to be identified with them, even if that involved some social stigma.

## **You belong to one of our cell groups**

Everyone is encouraged to join a cell group as soon as they come among us.

What is this all about? Is this a hoop to jump through before you are accepted? No. It is much more fundamental. Many of you have been in different kinds of small groups in church life like prayer groups, Bible study groups and home groups. In many churches these groups are an optional extra. They are part of a varied church programme.

But in this church cell groups are of the essence of who we are and what we are doing. Every cell group is vital in our multiple church planting mission,

because planting *new cell groups* around the County is central to our strategy for planting churches.

Cell groups are different from most other small groups in one major way - they are geared for mission. Their primary purpose is growth and multiplication. This is how it is with biological cells in your body. You have billions of cells but they have a short life span because healthy cells constantly divide to multiply.

So this is what makes cell groups distinctive. They are mobile mission units. They are geared for growth. Our goal is to pioneer cell groups which grow in two ways: by friends & neighbours and other contacts becoming Christians, and by welcoming existing believers who come to the county (or do not already belong to a church). So the cell group grows until it is ready to multiply. This is our how every cell becomes a vital part of our County wide vision to plant churches.

There are other dimensions to cells of course: pastoral care, one-anothering, accountability and friendship. Cell meetings are a good context for worship and beginning to exercise spiritual gifts and praying for each other, for working through Biblical teaching and encouraging leadership and nurturing new believers. Healthy cell groups are the church in miniature.

Perhaps you can see now why we say that it is not possible to be part of a church like ours without belonging to a cell group. Cells are not a part of our programme for those who like that sort of thing. They are fundamental to who we are.

## **You are giving to help finance the work**

Brits can be very sensitive on this subject. Someone told me the other day that her husband commented about her coming to us: "*They'll be after your money!*" In fact, we don't even pass a plate around on Sundays. There is a basket at the back, but most give by standing order and use Gift Aid to add tax from the government. On special occasions we may have a Gift Day where we do take up a public offering and encourage our people to give over and above their normal giving.

The truth is, how you spend your money *is* a tangible expression of commitment. It is a good test of where your heart is. I trumpet the fact that I'm a Newcastle United supporter. But if you put me through the finance test you'll find I'm an enthusiast but I'm not really committed. If I were I would spend my money on a season ticket or on travelling to away games or on merchandise. A few seasons ago I took my two sons to a Champions League game at St. James' Park and it cost me almost £100. I can still feel the pain! I enjoyed the evening (a 2-1 win thanks to a Shearer penalty) and it was great to treat my lads, but I'm not committed enough to do it very often.

Giving is a very tangible expression of commitment. But it is a heart issue. Giving is to be rooted in grace. Many people tithe their income but there is no pressure to do so. New Testament giving is not commanded to be in tithes.

The apostle gave this guideline: *“On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income.”* (1 Cor.16v1-3) Everyone’s circumstances are different. Some can give very little, others can give a lot. Grace giving is not so much about the actual amount, it is about giving generously, consistently, willingly, joyfully and sacrificially. This kind of giving takes you out of the realm of law. It will also cause you to out-give law!

In the New Testament giving is also channelled to and through the local church. Even gifts that went elsewhere were given through the church. As the temple had been a storehouse, so the local church became a means of channelling believers’ giving for the work of God’s kingdom. Giving in this way provides funds for the work of the local church and financial support for those who are employed to work for the church. It therefore underlines your commitment and your support for the leaders in their ministry.

Because giving is rooted in grace it gives us an indication of the spiritual heartbeat of the church. That’s why we will focus on it from time to time without blushing. Jesus didn’t look away in embarrassment when the people were giving their gifts at the Temple. He *“watched the crowd putting their money in”* and noticed the poor widow giving all she had. (Mark 12v41-44)

## **You are willing to serve alongside us**

This is another clear sign that you are “Getting on Board”. When Luke got on board that ship at Troas he was not there as a passenger. This was not a luxury liner. He had a part to play in Paul’s mission to Europe. Paul refers to him as his *“fellow worker”* (Philemon v24).

Luke was not a great pioneer apostle like Paul, but he was a loyal and faithful partner in the work. He was willing to be left behind in Philippi after they landed. Then he was willing to travel on later to Caesarea and Jerusalem and then to go with Paul on his final journey to Rome. Because Luke was a doctor he would have had plenty of work to do tending the wounds Paul suffered in his beatings and shipwrecks. He was also a historian, and we have the results of his magnificent contribution today in the third Gospel and the “Acts of the Apostles.”

When you are ready to serve rather than be served it shows that you are on board. You want to give. You want to take your share of the weight. You want to play your part. It is also a sign that you are healthy.

The church is the body of Christ. In a human body the sign that an organ or limb is healthy is when it is functioning alongside other organs and limbs. So the sign of a healthy Christian is that you are functioning in a local expression of the body of Christ.

God gives every one of us gifts, and these gifts are needed in the local church; gifts to build up the church and gifts for our mission. You each have a unique contribution to make. We need you.

## You trust and respect the leaders

*“Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord, and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work.”* (1 Thessalonians 5v12) If you don't trust or respect the leaders of a church you should not join it. Luke would not have got on board if he'd had doubts about Paul.

Leadership is an important issue in the life of the local church. When you join the church you are also joining those who lead and you are indicating your willingness to follow, support and trust them. This is a sensitive issue for some who have had a bad experience in the past and who may even have been plunged into a crisis of confidence over leadership.

The Bible regards leadership as a gift. *“If a man's gift is leadership, let him govern diligently”* (Romans 12v8); 'govern' here means to bring order, to bring shape, influence outcomes, co-ordinate initiatives, teach others. All of these things are part of a church leader's responsibility.

Leaders in the church have been given authority. *“Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”* (Hebrews 13v17) There are many who lead in different ways in the church. We should honour these people and, when we are in teams or cells groups, make their work a joy not a burden.

Yet these leaders are also described as servants. This is so counter-cultural. It is also the litmus test of church leaders worth following. Those who lead the church are not to lord their authority over others but use their authority to serve others. Paul himself wrote to the Corinthians of *“the authority the Lord gave me for building you up – not tearing you down.”* (2 Cor. 13v10) The apostle Peter wrote *“To the elders among you, be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers.”* (1 Peter 5v1-4) Jesus Himself was the great example of the Servant leader. (John 13v1-5) and He taught His disciples to be servant leaders (Mark 10v35-45)

In the record of David's life there is a season when he is living at Ziklag, banished from the presence of King Saul. 1 Chronicles 12 lists the mighty warriors who came to join him. Amasai was among them. We read: *“Then the Spirit came upon Amasai, chief of the Thirty, and he said, ‘We are yours, O David! We are with you, O son of Jesse!’”* (v18)

There is something noble and stirring about this kind of commitment, and it was a commitment *the Spirit* stirred them to make. From then on it was “us” and “we”. It is this kind of joining of hearts we are looking for as people get “on board” with us.

## **JOINING COUNTY CHURCH.**

I hope this has been a helpful introduction to joining County Church.

But what about the next step?

Knowing Jesus and acknowledging Him as Lord is a prerequisite for joining the church. Those who come among us who do not yet believe, or are not sure, are most welcome to belong to a cell group and are also invited to an Alpha Course. This is an introduction to the Christian faith over several weeks where those attending are able to meet others from the church, share a meal together, discuss issues raised and ask all their questions.

When people come to faith in Jesus among us, whether through Alpha or some other means, we encourage them to be baptised in water and we then welcome them into the church. Someone from the cell group will be allocated to be a mentor for their first year as a believer.

Those who are already Christians and have recently come among us are invited to one of our "Getting On Board" evenings to meet the leaders, hear more about our vision and values and give newcomers an opportunity to ask their questions. This is not a membership course but it will help those who are new to us to grasp who we are and what we are about. We can also give you our County Church "Foundations" document which outlines our core beliefs, some of our distinctives and our vision.

Those who then want to join the church can speak to a cell leader or to John or Dennis at any time, and we will arrange for you to have an evening with one of the leaders. This offers a context where we can find out how you have settled in among us, when you came to know Jesus Christ and what your previous church experience has been. We can also discuss any issues you want to raise.

Where there is clarity about joining the church you can be welcomed and prayed for publicly on the following Sunday morning.

**John Wilthew. September 2006**