

## GETTING BIGGER, MOVING ON

### Introduction

The other week, some of the people in our group were talking about Christian songs where we didn't actually understand what the words meant. The prize went to Kevin, who reported having sung a song with the line "Here we raise our Ebenezer." We all had a good laugh. But what does it mean? What is an Ebenezer? A character from Dickens? Some new draft lager? We are fortunate to have Mary in our group, who, after the laughter subsided, and faster than Andy could type the key word into his palm pilot Bible, quietly directed us to 1 Samuel 7:12 (NIV): *Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far has the LORD helped us"*.

The context of this phrase is that the people of God were able to feel confident about the future because of what had happened in the past. They took courage from God's past faithfulness. He has kept his word so far, and therefore there is every reason to believe he will do so in the future. And so it is for us.

Have you noticed, God is with us? Week by week our numbers have been growing. Sometimes we don't notice growth until we detach ourselves and make comparisons. So here's an example: on Easter Day 2006 we had 28 people meeting here. On Easter Day 2007 we had 75 people. But it's not just numbers. People who have come to us hurt and damaged are being set free. It may not be happening all in a big bang, but it is happening bit by bit. And because God has been with us so far we believe his faithfulness will continue.

But growth brings challenges. Many years ago I was part of the leadership team of a church of about thirty people. God spoke to us very clearly and said he was going to lead us into a time of significant growth. And sure enough, over the next few years, he did. But I recall that, when we shared with the Church about the growth we were expecting one young woman was brave enough to admit she didn't want the church to grow. She liked it around thirty. She knew everyone, and everyone knew her. She didn't want to be part of a church of one hundred or two hundred. In fact, she said the very reason she had joined us was that we clearly weren't growing! There was an embarrassed silence as this girl shared so honestly. But I got the impression that several felt the same way, but were unwilling to say so.

All of us have different comfort zones. Some of us are comfortable in a church of thirty but would not like three hundred. Others like the large church setting. Maybe they feel their gifts are more appropriate in a large church, or perhaps they prefer to "lose themselves" in a larger crowd. Much of this is about personality and is neither right nor wrong. But here at County Church, we want people to be joined to us out of a sense of calling and of being on a mission together, not because our current size fits your particularly safety zone because our current size will change. We want you to join us because God has called you here and because you are willing to experience some discomfort on non-priority issues for the sake of the King and his Kingdom.

In this talk I want to go through two lists. The first is a list of things that are bound to change as we get bigger. And the second are some things we can say emphatically we are determined will **not** change as we get bigger. This way, you'll know where you and we are. It's an opportunity to make sure it's the values which **won't** change your agreeing with and why you're joining yourself to us. This will enable you to tie yourself to the rock and not to the sand. It will also give us all time to prepare to let go of those things which are not critical to our values to ensure we won't be hurt or put off as these changes hit us.

### List 1: What Might Change?

**Sunday Mornings will change.** PA will be or has already been introduced. Can you see all these wires and leads now trailing around at the front? It is becoming more difficult to be heard if you are sitting near the back. We will need to change the PA at some stage so that people who want to make contributions can use the PA as well. This is daunting for some. But others find it daunting to try to project their voice without PA. **But** we still want to have room for congregational contributions even though not everyone will be able to contribute every week. We don't want everything to come from the leaders. We don't want our meetings to become professional, slick presentations.

**Where we meet might need to change.** We might have to leave if this building is sold. Or we might start to find it is too small anyway. We're not staying at the size we are now! We've always said the building is not important. We all know that the Church is the people, the community, you and me – not where we meet. But if we are honest many of us, without realising it, start to give our church an identity based around our meeting venue.

**Mid week groups will change.** Some are getting big and will need to multiply. This is always a happy and sad occasion. Happy because it reminds us that God is increasing our numbers. Sad because we can't stay in the same group as everyone. **But** we always want to have a setting where we can look at the personal application for us of what's been preached, and ask others to pray for us and hold us to the challenges we set ourselves. **And** we always want to have groups that don't feel too large, where everyone feels they have a part to play and everyone is keen to draw new people in.

**The ability to know everyone will be eroded.** That is why our mid week groups are so important. This is where we can know each other and be known. **But** we still always want to be welcoming to visitors. Please never say: "he/she is not in my group, I don't need to speak to them". We are going to need to work very hard to remain friendly, genuine and welcoming. Already it could well be there are people here who have been coming for several weeks who you've not introduced yourself to. We never want to be cliquey and have an in crowd, where some are in and others are out. Can I encourage you to go up to someone after the meeting and say "hello"?

**It won't be possible for everyone to have a close personal relationship with the main leaders.** Not because the leaders don't want to. We're not going to disappear into ivory towers. It's just you can't spend an evening with 50 or 100 different people every month. It's a time thing. Not a change of intention. But its real and it happens. And we need to tell ourselves now that we're not going to be hurt by it. **But** we still want everyone to have someone with whom they feel they can be open and accountable. **And** our commitment to lead without favouritism remains unaltered

## **List 2: What Will Stay The Same?**

**Our emphasis and honouring of the Bible.** We want the Bible to be central to everything we do. We're not going to take away from it and we're not going to add to it. Some people have been puzzled when they've heard me talk about being Biblical but not religious. When people start to take things away from the Bible and say it doesn't really matter about this or that it becomes "liberal". But an equal danger is when we seek to impose on people rules and regulations that the Bible doesn't support. That's religious. So, we will be straight down the line. Biblical. No more, no less. And always searching ourselves and seeking God as we try to improve our understanding of what the Bible really means.

**Our commitment to being led by the Holy Spirit.** Our kind of church is often referred to as a "charismatic" church. But what does the word "charismatic" mean? Recently I have been thinking back to when I was first baptised in the Holy Spirit. I recall seeking God earnestly, asking him to release me so I could know him more clearly and worship him more deeply. I have been quite distressed of late to realise the word "charismatic" is now used to describe a certain style of worship - the kind of songs we sing and instruments we play; the fact that we don't all stand up and sit down at exactly the same time. This is not what charismatic means to me. It is about an intimacy in my personal walk with God and an inner confidence and prompting and power in areas of life.

**Our commitment to seeing new people find salvation.** This is what we are about. This is what we do. We may all do it in different ways or have different styles. We're not all confrontational. Some share the gospel through personal stories or serving. Others by answering difficult questions. But this is what we do. Whether our church is small or big, this must always be a key focus for us. I love the scene from the World War 2 series "Band of Brothers". As the American troops advance across Europe and into Germany, the young panicky soldier says to his senior officer: "Sir, we're surrounded". And the officer, sensing his panic calmly replies: "Son, we're supposed to be surrounded. We're paratroopers. We drop behind enemy lines. That's what we do."

**Our commitment to multiple church planting.** Sooner or later we are going to say goodbye to some people and send them off to launch a new work in another part of Northumberland or even beyond.

And those who felt comfortable in a larger number will suddenly find it gets small again for a bit. And guess what? Just as our numbers grow again, we will send another group off! So don't get too attached to the idea of having large numbers, or else in your spirit you won't be able to make that wrench that sees a whole group of people go. We need to be mobile in our thinking.

The next three things are rather personal for me. One day I was walking through a bookshop. Not a Christian bookshop, a shop like Waterstones or Smiths. The title of a book caught my eye. "With Passion and Conviction". I thought these were fantastic words and I said to myself. "That should be a Christian book with a title like that," Actually it was!

**Passion:** For many years the slogan of the Ford Motor Company was, "Everything we do is driven by you". (I've deserted Ford for Vauxhall now so I don't know if they still use that line.) They wanted to communicate that there was only one ultimate purpose in anything anyone in the company did and they wanted everyone to know they were passionate about it. I too want to be passionate - but for the Gospel. I want it to be the ultimate and overall purpose of everything I do and I want to do it well. I used to pray a great deal that people would say I was passionate. One day someone did and I was very flattered, but the context was a job interview and the person was the interviewer so it wasn't quite the scenario I had in mind. Another time, on an Alpha course someone said: "I would like to become a Christian, but I don't want to be as fanatical about it as you and Kay". Instinctively I replied "Well you are not yet ready to make this decision. Please think about it some more, because, if you haven't really seen it - if it's just something that sounds a nice idea, then that isn't a good basis for becoming a Christian." Are we serving people by making it that easy? Will that kind of decision see them through the hard times, the difficult times we all face? Just to let you know, the next week that person did in fact say she wanted to give her life to Christ.

**Conviction.** We want people to do things because they want to do them, not because they feel they must. There is a place for commitment, for stirring yourself, and for standing with others. There will always be times when that is necessary and helpful. But ultimately, if we are convicted about something, if we are unshakable in our belief, if it's part of us, then we are sustained through difficult times. Incidentally, I find there are two groups of people who are always very quick to spot if we are doing something just out of a sense of duty. Firstly children. And secondly non-believers. These two groups always seem to be the first to see through any form of false motivation (though maybe we just had particularly perceptive kids).

**Compassion.** Some time after reading that excellent book "With Passion and Conviction", I felt the Lord say he was going to give me a third word to be part of the driving force for my life. This is "Compassion". My buzz phrase changed to "With Passion, Compassion and Conviction". This means that we do things because we care about people. More specifically we care about the person right in front of us. We are committed to the task, yes. There are goals and objectives and things we need to do. But we never want to be so focussed that we lose the ability to see the Holy Spirit redirecting us to an individual need. Don't you just love the example that Jesus set when he was on his way to heal Jairus' daughter? A woman with a flow of blood managed to push through the crowd and touch Jesus' coat and she was healed. But no way would Jesus push on regardless. She was a person, she had a name. She had been a social leper for several years so Jesus wanted to give her honour and dignity. And more important than that, he wanted to look her in the face and say those words: "Go in peace". It's difficult to describe the impact of hearing words like that from Jesus unless you have heard him say them to you. And with all this there was the risk that if Jesus stayed too long, if he didn't get to the girl quickly, then he might be too late. The girl might be dead by the time he arrived. In fact that did happen. But was it a problem for Jesus? Not all all.

**Committed to working with other Christian Groups.** Now I've observed over the years that regardless of theological position, small churches may, out of necessity, seem much more committed to working with other Christians than larger churches. Perhaps the large churches feel they have sufficient resources themselves and are less aware of their need for others. This is not a hard and fast rule. There are exceptions. Which is just as well. Because we desperately need County Church to be one of those exceptions, and committed to working with others who love the Lord regardless of how big or small we are. We never want to be saying or implying "we don't need you" or "we don't honour you". We always want to be looking for where we can achieve more by working together than on our own. That's not to deny there are not sometimes problems and issues that need to be worked through. We are not

going to be naïve. But in spirit we always want to be looking for ways to work with other churches and we don't want that to change.

***Committed to seeing the bigger picture.*** If it is true that small churches are often better at working with other groups than their larger neighbours, then it must be said that the reverse is often true when it comes to awareness and active involvement in what is happening with the church worldwide. Big churches are often connected to the nations somehow. They may have former members living abroad or be providing specific prayer or financial support for those in a missionary situation, whereas little churches can think they are too small to be connected globally. Maybe they think they can not afford to divert any of their finances away from the home front. Perhaps even, deep down, they are concerned that if people get to committed to global mission they might go themselves and leave a dent in the church numbers. After all, losing two people when you are twenty is, in human terms, more difficult than losing two if you are two hundred. It can hurt, yes. But you can never out-give God.

I want to assure you County Church will never have that mentality. We want an awareness of and commitment to global mission to be part of the DNA of our very smallest church plant. So, both for us here at County Church Wansbeck and when we do send out small groups elsewhere, we expect an awareness of God's worldwide purpose to be right at the heart of who we are.

Remember that church of thirty where the young woman didn't want us to grow? Well it had its problems. But there were also some things it had right. Out of that thirty people, around twenty had been abroad on some form of Christian service or mission. Countries included Surinam, Romania, and India etc. So it is possible even for a small church.

It was a pleasure to send John and Liz off for a week of ministry in India earlier in the year. But we don't want and there is no need for our international links to be confined to leaders. Earlier in this meeting we prayed for Adrian & Hazel from City Church as they consider moving to Central Asia. We are fortunate in County Church to have people amongst us with international mission experience such as the Lees with their links to Malawi, and Mary A who served the Lord in Ghana.

***And committed to the King and his Kingdom.*** It is possible, of course, that I've got my lists wrong. We all make mistakes. At the very least they are likely to be incomplete. There are other things that might need to change - things that I've not thought of. And definitely more values we need to keep, I could only pick out a few. But I do sense the Lord prompting me to say - be prepared for a time of growth. Not as spectators. This is not like settling down in our seat to watch the Cup Final being played out on the turf in front of us. We are the players! This is a time to be limbering up. To be doing those final stretches before the starting whistle goes; or to be like the substitute running up and down the line, getting ready to be called on to the field. This is the thrust of what I want to say - even if the detail is wrong. Just keep close to God and keep focussed on him. Hear what he has to say - even if the detail is wrong. Just keep close to God and keep focussed on him. Hear what he has to say. Let's set aside our prejudices and our own pet ways of doing things for the sake of God's kingdom and his church. Thus far, the Lord has been with us. Just don't be surprised as his blessing continues. And don't be surprised if there's a price to pay.

**End**