

SERMON

Going For Growth: By Being Relevant In the 21st Century

In the preparation of the sermon God has been putting several things my way. The first were some words which I read this week

“If we stay where we are and just look after the resources we’ve got, we’ve had it. We are not called to that. We are a movement that is called to new places and in new ways to make Jesus known” (Jonathan Edwards BUGB General Secretary)

Words which appear on the back of the latest BUGB magazine, which was given out with the notice sheet last week. Words written by Jonathan Edwards the General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain. Words which I felt God was directing to us, along with many others which says that we must be Going For Growth. If we just look after what we have, they we slip back, we begin to decline.

Then in the post I received my quarterly magazine from Christian Research and they were advertising the book *Pulling Out Of The Nosedive* by Peter Brierley. In their latest press release Christian Research say

Many churches in England are in a healthier state now than seven years ago. Some local churches as well as a few denominations are doing very well, more churches are growing, and overall they are not losing nearly as many people as they were...

The Census showed that in the 1990s 1 million people left church in nine years, but in the seven years from 1998-2005 only ½ million left, a much slower rate of decline, showing that churchgoing in England is beginning to pull out of the ‘nosedive’ decline seen previously.

That is seen as good news, although it still means that the church overall is still declining. We can either run and hide and hope that it will not happen to us, here at Ashurst Drive Baptist Church, or we can take action and we can be a church that is Going For Growth. Does this guarantee growth? Of course not, but if our mindset is Going For Growth then at least we will have a better means of achieving it, rather than as Jonathan Edward said

If we stay where we are and just look after the resources we’ve got, we’ve had it
(Jonathan Edwards)

Because with an attitude of maintenance, of looking after what we have, then we have had it.

But just as Paul planned his missionary journeys, just as Jesus had a plan because at one time he did not go to Jerusalem because it was not his time, but then he had to go to Jerusalem because that was in the plan – the plan of redemption.

So today is the day of Vision Sunday, the day when we can look back, look back at the good things that God has done. And we have had good things happen – things like

- Baptism
- Richard and Sue
- Caribbean Evening
- Club With No Name started up
- New people coming into membership and into the church

- Prayer in happening monthly and also in the Prayer Labyrinth last January and the Prayer Walking in the area during the summer
- Closer links have been forged with St Laurence's, our local Anglican church
- We have run an Alpha course with people coming closer to God and one of the members of that course who began it very far away from God, now having moved, is looking to attend church
- Café Church which has attracted people who would normally never set foot inside church
- Darren and Ruth
- And finally the finances of the church are good.

It is good to look back and give God glory. Paul writing to the Christians in Ephesus wrote

“In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.” (Ephesians 1:11-14 NIV)

Notice in verse 11 that it says that God had a plan

“...according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will,” (Ephesians 1:11 NIV)

But then our role

Those who ... hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory (Ephesians 1:12)

Or to put it another way

A person's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever
(Westminster Confessional)

We are here to glorify God and so it is good to have a review, to thank God for his goodness to us, for his blessings upon us. But we must also move forward, we must move

to new places and in new ways to make Jesus known (Jonathan Edwards)

Because we are compelled by the command of Jesus when he says

“...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 28:18-20 NIV)

It is not an option, making disciples, but a necessity. We make it an option at our peril. Although as we heard before the church is pulling out of the nosedive but we also need to realise that

The overall result of the Fourth English Church Census was that on 8th May 2005 there were 3,166,200 adults and children in church in England, 6.3% of the population.

At one time in the not too distant past the percentage of churchgoers was 10%, now it is 6.3%.

So what can we do? We need to be a church that is Going For Growth By Being Relevant in the 21st Century. So often it is not that people are rejecting the message, it is that we have stopped being relevant to their lives. So how do we do this?

The process began just under a year ago now with the questionnaires which we filled in. This gave us a picture of our strengths and weaknesses and other perceptions that we held as a church. This was then linked with some government statistics of the area when we met on a Sunday afternoon, having spent lunch with each other. And on that day one of the most profound things we began to realise was that the church had a great potential for taking the message of the gospel to others, but did not realise that potential, although most thought that it was.

We then had the document called the *Findings* in July along with the sermon that day which was entitled Going For Growth or Meander in Maintenance. Then over the summer people have been contemplating, meditating and praying on all of these things so that we can move towards an Action Plan. This may sound all very formal and structured, but it has been done in an attitude of prayer, it has been done to give God glory and none for ourselves, it has been done to follow the command of Jesus to make disciples and it has also been done because

- We know that God has a plan – that plan was to send Jesus and die on the cross and God had to plan so that crucifixion was the punishment of the day. God has a plan for us today, as he says

“For I know the plans I have for you,...plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (Jeremiah 29:11 NIV)

- Also as the housegroups learnt in the early part of the summer, Paul planned what he was doing on his missionary journeys, he knew where he was going, although he was always open to God diverting him from the plan he had gained from God in the first place.

We too can then plan for the future, we too know it is under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we too realise that God can also change things and modify things, but Paul would never have been sent to Macedonian by God if he had not been in the right place at the right time, i.e. God’s place at God’s time and there are occasions when God finds it easier to divert us as a moving object, rather than move a stationary object. There is good Science in that.

There are times when I can home and Sue will say to me, “I’m not sure if I like the bedroom the way we have it. Maybe if we move the furniture around a bit, it will help.” I know that will mean a lot of sweat on my part moving wardrobes and beds, etc. But the hardest things to do is to get that wardrobe moving, the danger is that as soon as it moves the wardrobe seems to gain a life of its own – I could go into the differences between the coefficients of static and dynamic friction – but suffice it to say that a moving wardrobe tends to move a lot easier than a static one, and can run away with you, and once I managed to trap Sue between the wardrobe and the wall, but I had to let her out as it was lunch time!

So what is the plan which has kept in mind those two overarching principles of

Those who hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:12 NIV)

and

...go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19)

The plan arose from a wish-list, a divinely inspired wish-list

- The vision is to bring people to Christ – i.e. Kingdom Growth – secondary is growth in ADBC
- Central Data Base to enable targeted mailshots to/contact with people about events and groups happening at ADBC
- Taking good publicity opportunities – relevant publicity for the 21st Century
- Regular (e.g. Café Church) Events for Whole Church
- To challenge our events/ministry/everything we do regularly and ask if they are still 21st Century relevant
- To enable each ‘group leader’ and group to strive for ‘Going For Growth’. Many groups already here have different target people – let us build on those contacts or possible contacts. There is a need to recognise that some groups are post conversion on the Engel Scale and so not outreach – but there is nothing to stop them putting on something
- ‘Enable’ a thirst for God so people move towards the ‘core’ of the church. An encouragement to have deeper relationships with God and each other
- Big outreach events – a few each year
- Have ‘Step’ groups e.g. Starting Point → Alpha (or similar) → Housegroups → Service

And then the ideas begin to flow. Some are already being thought about and can begin now, some were ideas for the future

- Central Data Base to enable targeted mailshots to/contact with people about events and groups happening at ADBC
- Taking good publicity opportunities
- Look at things we do things now
 - Services
 - Special Occasions
 - Etc, etc.

We are already looking our constitution, so this goes through all the things in the church to see if they are relevant for the 21st Century.

These were things we could begin now to set ourselves. But then ideas kept coming.

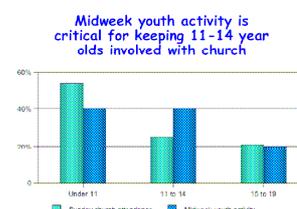
- Self discovery – Café Essence course
- Parenting Course
- Topical Discussions
 - Green Issues
 - Contemporary – Da Vinci Code
 - Etc
- Having different groups for different people
 - Marriage Group
 - Single Group
 - Divorce Group
- Special Services
 - Bereavement Services c.f. Hawes the undertaker
 - Healing Services
- Café Church every 6-8 weeks

Keeping things contemporary, but always with the eye to Growth, to challenging people with the gospel within the groups, within services, within events, but still Being Relevant In The 21st Century.

And the ideas kept rolling on

- Interchurch Outreach (e.g. Christmas Singing at Newbury Park flats on Old King George’s site and joining in with St Laurence’s)

- Stronger links in Housegroups making the housegroups stronger
- Visibility outside Church
 - March of Witness
 - Picnic in Park/Car Park
 - Carol Singing
 - BBQ
- Youth
 - Increase Frequency of Youth Club, Club With No Name – one of the things in the Christian Research report was that a midweek youth activity is critical for keeping 11-14 year olds involved with church
 - Young people to meet the in holiday period
 - Have an outside organisation run something for a week, e.g. SU, Etc
 - Soul in the City
- After School Club
- Pre-School – making the outreach element stronger



But the ideas kept rolling in.

- Holiday at Home for older people – 2 days at ADBC with an outing on day 3
- Flowers going outside of church people
- Groups in the church to have their own outreach ‘events’

The realisation was that we could not do it all, so a timetable, an Action Plan for 2007 was drawn up of things that we did now and were possible and so the Action Plan was born. This can be thought of in sections.

Firstly there is church on Sunday where we fitted in the festivals of Easter and Christmas and also put in the times we have united services with

- NIFOC & High Rd, Ilford
- Then there was Café Church which would happen at times in the morning and in the evenings. And on perhaps a quieter note there would be Healing Services at times throughout the year.

Then there is the important area of prayer.

- This would continue to take place on the second Thursday of each month
- There would be the Prayer weeks in January, Holy Week and October and also in late July early August some prayer walking in the area.

We also need some church events. Something we can invite friends, relatives and neighbours to and something we can talk about on Monday at work or over the garden fence. We need some big events so we can talk about them

So we move into the area of youth. This was to run in the summer and Youth Holiday Club and a Children's Holiday. Club but realise that we may have to get in an outside organisation to head up or run on of those activities. There is also Soul in the City for the youth which I something that runs all year round but has special events in the summer.

That is youth, but not forgetting the older people that live in the area, it was suggested that there run a holiday at home where we put something on for older people for say two days and then on the third day there is an outing arranged.

And then other events and ideas were put on with the last being that each group could put on some sort of outreach event. This is to turn the potential into reality. This is an ambitious Action Plan, but as William Carey said

Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God (William Carey)

If we expect nothing, we will attempt nothing. We are called upon to be people of action, to go

...to new places and in new ways to make Jesus known (Jonathan Edwards)

To end with a story. When I was visiting one of the people who is here this morning, I won't embarrass them by saying who they are, they told me that they felt that God was doing a new thing at Ashurst Drive Baptist Church. We were on the verge of a new wave sweeping through the church. Just a few days before someone else had shared at a meeting I was in that they felt that ADBC was on a wave, a wave provided by God. God provided the wave, but our responsibility is to get on the wave and to begin to be those who are Going for Growth By Being Relevant in the 21 Century in which we are living.

We are in this together. God is wanting us to move forward into his future, on his wave, the wave of the Spirit, the wave which sees us Going For Growth By Being Relevant in the 21st Century. There is something here for everyone to get their teeth into, something for everyone to help with, to invite people to and if your thing isn't there, then do say so, do tell Sue, Darren or myself or Mensah as head of our evangelism committee.