

LARGER CHURCHES CONFERENCE REPORT

Paul Beasley-Murray

This is the report of a 'staff college' for Baptist senior ministers (and a few Anglicans) at Mulberry House 26-30 June 2006.

A definition A larger church = a church with 350+ at Sunday worship. 150 Anglican and 50 Baptist churches fall into that category.

One in eight British Christians worship in a larger church!

The least frequent churchgoers go to growing churches. Is this because these churches are especially welcoming and friendly, or because they will be less noticed? The percentage of those reading their Bible (other than on Sundays) decreases with the size of church.

The context of the conference: **massive church decline**. In 1979 12% of population went to church; last year (2005) 6.3%; and churches are still declining. The only group of churches growing are ethnic churches (10% of churchgoers in UK are now of Afro-Caribbean origin). **Reasons for decline:**

- drastic loss of young people in the 1990s
- lack of relevance of church to life
- increase in individualism and consumerism
- attraction of alternative activities
- changing patterns of family and family life
- impact of other forms of spirituality.

Leadership is key: A 2003 survey showed that strong leadership and a clear vision are the key factors for church growth.

Various definitions of leadership:

- The core of leadership is vision. Vision is seeing the potential purpose hidden in the chaos of the moment, but which could bring to birth new possibilities for a person, a company, or a nation" (William van Dusen Wishard)
- Leadership is more than vision. "It involves the ability to think and plan with long-term insight, in the light of current developments, and to identify consequent deliverable key areas of action" (strategic thinking) (Peter Brierley)
- Leadership is the art of managing disappointment (i.e. other people's!)

- Leadership is getting people to do what they don't want to do, to achieve what they want to achieve"
- Leadership takes risks: "There is no credit to be drawn from the virtue of one's past. Look for the risk. Make it your watchword. If you seek to save your life, corporate or individual, I promise you - *Jesus promises you*- you will lose it. Don't play safe" (Stan Mooneyham, President of World Vision)

A key question: "What does our church have to do in 2007 to become the church we want to be in 2012?" Where do we want to be in 2012? My personal desire would be to see the church double in membership, for with people retiring later, this may well be the only way in which we can continue to service our 'seven-day-a-week church.

For me, **two main lessons** emerged, which reinforced what I had seen in Australia and New Zealand:

1. Larger churches are all staff led. The staff report back to the deacons/elders, but essentially it is the staff who make the day-to-day decisions of church life. With regard to the size of the leadership team, a recent survey of Scottish churches revealed that "the smaller the executive the more likely it is to be a growing church". In larger churches there are fewer church meetings than in smaller churches: although for Baptists the church meeting is the place where major decisions are made and where leaders are appointed (in this sense they are 'congregationally-governed'), it is primarily a place for vision-sharing and information-giving. Membership matters in larger churches tend not to be dealt with by the church meeting, but by the deacons/elders. Peter Guinness of Lancaster spoke of the inter-play of three levels of leadership: episcopal (i.e. the pastor), presbyteral, and congregational.

2. Delegation involves holding people accountable. Prof Gillian Stamp presented her model of 'tasking' (the leader shares his intention), 'trusting' (delegating), 'tending'. Informally, there was talk of the practice found in large American churches (and also in Australia and New Zealand) of an 'executive pastor' (or 'executive administrator') whose task it is to deal with holding people accountable, allowing the senior pastor to focus on preaching, leadership and vision.

Further insights and ideas

1. *We need to work at team-building*: one quarter of all Anglican curates fail to finish their curacy; at least half of all Baptist teams break down. One pastor talked of taking his staff away to Paris for the day as a team-building exercise.

2. *Relational small groups are vital in a larger church*. Churches grow larger by growing smaller (i.e. through small groups). Success is determined by the quality of the leaders. Every group needs to be outward-looking. It was suggested that, at every small group meeting, an empty chair is set out as a constant reminder that there is room for others. Small groups are the key to pastoral care: "If you want to get the best pastoral care in the church, then join a small group". One church found numbers attending small groups significantly increased when two people visited all those not attending. During the period of the visiting the senior minister made a presentation indicating the rationale of such groups.

3. *Studying Rick Warren's '40 Days of Purpose' next Lent could benefit small groups*. Most churches had experimented with '40 Days of Purpose' and found it had had a major effect on church life. In many churches the number of small groups doubled. Some found the '40 days' format so helpful, that they devised further material around that time-frame: e.g. '40 days in John'.

4. *A larger church functions with fewer church meetings - effort needs to be made to make them more interesting*. The largest Baptist church in the UK (Charlotte Chapel) has a church meeting once a year. Most larger churches have quarterly meetings. Only one church met as often as five times a year in church meeting. In larger churches direction tends to be offered from 'the pulpit': 'The most powerful tool for change is the pulpit'. Once a year Andover Baptists take over a Chinese restaurant in town and organise their church meeting around a meal. In another church once a year their church meeting takes the form of a 'ministry fair', in which various church departments set out stalls and answer questions from interested members. The minister of Leigh-on-Sea Baptist church writes a pastoral letter to every member before the meeting, outlining the issues. In many larger churches the quorum for formal decision-making is 25%, as distinct from 33%.

5. *Few larger churches have family services*. Stockton Tabernacle moved their family service to a termly late afternoon

(5-7 pm) 'event' for young families, with food. Andover Baptist has family services only at Christmas, Easter and Harvest.

6. Larger churches focus on young people. 'Churches which do not have full-time youth workers struggle'. A larger proportion of younger people go to larger churches, presumably because they find there a wider range of more appropriate activities. The importance of involving 'Generation X' and 'Generation Y' in leadership opportunities was mentioned, as well as encouraging church young people to offer a gap year. One church uses its students in the holidays and pays them the MacDonald's rate. One church's evening service for young people takes the form of a 'café church teach-in'.

7. Eating together is vital. 'Jesus must have been a fat man, because he was for ever eating' (John Bell). In one church leaders meet every month for a meal at 6pm, and do business from 7-9pm!

8. Church weekends do not have to take place 'away'. Several churches organise annual 'weekends at home' (e.g. during October half-term) with social events such as hog-roasts, as well as teaching. Church weekends at home attract a greater proportion of the church.

9. Be creative in the way we hold prayer-meetings. One church holds monthly prayer days ('Powerhouse days'). Held on a Monday, they feature five different opportunities, most 45 minutes in length (60 minutes maximum) - see the article elsewhere in this edition of *Ministry Today*. They get out 100 people every month!

10. Prayer ministry teams need to be accountable. Prayer ministry teams normally report back to the senior pastor (only if privacy is expressly requested is the pastor not informed of the details of the situation. This contrasts with our prayer ministry team, which gives no information.

11. Leaders need to make opportunities to listen to God's Word together. Some pastors meet with their leaders for prayer and reflection on God's Word. In one church the 'elders' meet every Tuesday morning for an hour followed by breakfast (6.45 - 8pm) when they pray together and study a Bible chapter together ('What is God saying to us?'). Another church does something similar, but there the senior pastor meets with his leaders in three groups (early morning, lunch-time and late evening).

12. *Evangelism should underlie all our activities.* It is important to build from one event to another - e.g. at Christmas mention what is happening at Easter. Communication is key. Mention was made of a betting shop exercise, in which the pastor encourages all members to go and place £1 in their local betting shop, and from this discover how difficult it must feel for non-Christians to attend church.

13. *Healing should be part of every church's ministry.* One church has a mental health club where people pray for one another (even although they may not be Christians).

KEEP ON BELIEVING IN GOD

Paul Beasley-Murray

Elinor's death was and is a tragedy. She was only in her early 60s. By rights she should have had many more years to live. But she didn't. She died on the afternoon of Friday 1st September. Let's not pfaaf around with this sentimental nonsense that Elinor has slipped into another room. Death has taken her forcibly from us.

On the night of her death I said to Paul that the Bible is realistic in its view about death. It describes death as "the last enemy", as "the king of terrors". Death is a nasty business. In the words of Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung: "Death is indeed a piece of brutality. There is no sense in pretending otherwise. It is brutal not only as a physical event but far more so psychically: a human being is torn away from us, and what remains is the icy stillness of death".

We grieve the loss of a loved one. We grieve the loss of good friend. We grieve the loss of one who was special to so many people.

We have heard a good deal about Elinor in Marion's tribute. But there are other things we could mention. After leaving school she joined the Foreign Office and, having signed the Official Secrets Act, she went to work at Cheltenham. To this day the family don't know what she did, because she refused to say. They used to tell her that they thought she probably emptied the waste paper bins!

We could mention too the key role Elinor has been in the life of her family. Elinor was not just a loving wife and mother. She was the