

takes a community of faith to help you to die well. And we sing, we sing our lives back to God in praise and delight and joy.

The UK churches are, in general terms, in dreadful shape, living on borrowed time. In these conditions, standing still with courage and faith is heroic. But we cannot live without hope and a clear sense of what competent ministry strives for. Dystra quotes Edward Farley about the nasty doubts that surround the efficacy of the texts and practices of faith. “Are Christian theologians like stockbrokers who distribute stock certificates on a non-existent corporation? In this situation, the reality of the corporation, its size, type, power and promise, turns out to be simply the broker itself”. The question, he says, is whether in our heart of hearts, we are thinking of the church as a tomb or a path.

We need hope. We need intellectual and spiritual clarity. Peter Drucker said “Nothing is more useless than to do efficiently that which should not be done at all”. I am of the opinion that when the multitudinous activities of the clergy are weighed out, the gold dust will be the time spent building community, teaching the practices that form and shape the faith community and the people who live it. A writer described the Blessed Margery Kempe as one who combined the twin occupations of being a saint and a public nuisance. Maybe she should become the new patron saint of the clergy who want to build faithful communities who rock the boat, disturb the peace and live the presence of Jesus in these narcotic times.

THE LOST ART OF CONGREGATIONAL DISCERNMENT

Author unknown

One of the defining characteristics of Baptist life is that we gather together as a church to find the mind of Christ. Our forebears were persecuted for demanding the right to independent assembly, unencumbered by set prayers, or the intervention of bishops and other authorities. They felt that God had a specific word for the gathered group of believers in a specific context: “Whoever has ears; let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev 3.15). They risked imprisonment, torture and death for the right to

have a church meeting. Nowadays one almost has to torture people to go to a church meeting! What has changed?

A changed situation

As churches grow larger and more complex, it becomes impossible to bring everything to the church meeting, so most decisions are made at leadership level - whether staff or deacons or elders or church council. Only major decisions concerning property, senior staffing and significant policy or programme changes tend to be brought to the church meeting. Church members feel removed from the process and stop coming. Leaders start organising church meetings less frequently “because no-one comes” and gradually one of the main characteristics of Baptist life is lost. Does this matter? Is the demise of the church meeting a pragmatic response to changed times? If members are content to devolve responsibility for church life to a small group of leaders, then isn't everyone happy? I want to argue that our ecclesiology is dependent upon the people of God discerning the will of God together, and, when we allow this to be done vicariously, we lose a key plank in the spiritual formation of a Christian community.

What are the factors that have contributed to this demise?

Usually the leaders have had time to work the issue through and the only job left for the congregation is to rubber stamp the proposals. This makes the process meaningless and boring. I have often heard leaders say that church members are not mature enough to discern God's will, and hence they as spiritual leaders need to do this for them. I wonder how this view sits with Paul's description of the church as the body of Christ (see 1 Cor 12)?

Another mistake made by leadership teams is that they present their carefully crafted proposals and give the church 5-10 minutes to process the information and make a decision. There is a wise maxim that states “surprised people tend to behave badly”. When presented with a *fait accompli*, members understandably feel disenfranchised and forced into making decisions that they have been ill-equipped to make. The bad feeling that this creates can further alienate church members from attending church meetings.

Added to this, the process of organising church meetings tends to depend on a model based on Robert's rules. US Major Henry Martyn Robert drew on his experience in the army and on parliamentary procedure to produce in 1876 guidelines for running

church meetings. These have contributed to the demise of any significant spiritual impact in church meetings. The military or the parliament are not good models for discerning the mind of Christ. What Robert's Rules have done is to reduce the gathering of believers to a business meeting that runs on confrontational lines and gives precedence to the articulate, the bully and the drone. Edward de Bono commented that it fascinates him how many US senate members are lawyers. He remarked that the legal system of debate - of proposal and counter proposal - is uncreative, because it does not allow for any third option. It does not encourage collaboration to find a more lateral or creative way through. You do not suggest anything which might give your opponent an advantage. He concluded that the process of government thus becomes singularly stuck and unproductive.¹⁵⁴ This happens in church meetings run along the lines of Robert's Rules. They become pedestrian, predictable in who will speak, and encourage people to promote their own preferences rather than listen to God's voice.

Is there an alternative approach?

We have been experimenting with ways of reclaiming the church meeting as the place for communal discernment. We recognise that a large church cannot bring all the details of its life to the whole church, but we believe that the whole church needs to be involved in casting the vision - the big picture - for the community at least once a year and refining it at other points in the year.

Some churches hold a lunchtime forum, gathering all the ideas and insights people have to share, but with no decisions to be made. This is good, but the emphasis in these open forums is often on individual preferences and hobby horses. We have tried to counter this with a fourteen day set of daily reflections on different aspects of church life. Each member is invited to covenant to do these on their own and the booklet is designed to include note-taking pages to record what each person might have heard or felt as they go through the studies. An important aspect of this process is we shed some of our own filters and prejudices so that we can hear God

¹⁵⁴ National Press Club Address. Australian Broadcasting Company, 5 May 2005.

speak.¹⁵⁵ We then hold a Listening Day, when around tables we listen to the key ideas that have emerged. Are there any common themes? Can we sense God speaking to us in one or more areas? The time is punctuated with silences for weighing what has been heard and discerning that special quality of divine touch.

We originally devised this booklet for churches seeking to discern with their pastor whether it was time to move on, but we then developed the process for a more general 'Renewing the Vision' process. A visioning group is charged with collecting all the ideas from the Listening Day and tabulating them. The results are circulated and the congregation is encouraged to sit with the ideas for a couple of weeks and listen for God's voice. At the next gathering, key themes are distilled and tasks are allocated for more work and discovery in these areas. The leadership then oversees the enfleshing and activating of the ideas.

This has developed a strong sense of ownership of the direction and vision of the church. However, it does not necessarily generate new possibilities in vision. People in churches find it difficult to imagine anything other than more of the same. We have therefore devised a preliminary six week course designed to get people out of their comfort zones and engaged with new ideas and experiences. In small groups we offer a menu of experiences, from watching a DVD, to worshipping in a different context, to meeting at the art gallery and reflecting on a few pre-chosen exhibits, to doing a Bible study in a local café, to attending a poetry reading or greyhound race to experience a different sub-culture. Each activity has questions for reflection, and we find that, at the end of this process, people are more able to hear God inviting them to consider new ideas in worship, community or service.

¹⁵⁵ See Danny E Morris & Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together - a spiritual Practice for the Church* (Upper Room Books, Nashville 1997)