

EDITORIAL – Leadership Weekends Away

Paul Beasley-Murray

I am a great believer in leadership weekends away. A weekend is so much better than the occasional Saturday morning or even day conference. A weekend gives time for the leaders of the church (elders, deacons, PCC - call them what you will) to relax together, to bond together, to grow together and hopefully to gain inspiration for the future together.

Here at Chelmsford our ministers and deacons, together with our church centre manager/ administrator, go away together for a weekend every autumn. To be precise, we are together from Friday dinner to Sunday lunch-time, and amazingly, the church survives without us! On occasions I have led all the sessions, but that has been hard graft. I much prefer to invite a guest speaker to provide some input, even if the guest speaker is not able to stay until the Sunday morning.

Our time together is tightly-structured. We normally have seven sessions: one on the Friday evening, two on the Saturday morning, one late Saturday afternoon, another on the Saturday evening, a sixth on the Sunday morning, before our final session in which we gather for 'Worship around the Lord's Table'. This last session is always a high-point, when we commit ourselves afresh both to our Lord and to one another.

There is plenty of time for relaxation too. Over the road from our local diocesan retreat house is 'The White Horse', the venue for much late-night talking and drinking! Rain or shine, early Saturday afternoon we always go for a walk together in the Essex countryside (as I once learnt to my cost, a change of clothes is essential for these weekends-away!).

These weekends are costly in terms of time. It means that those of us who are married have put the team before the family. They are also costly in terms of finance. Each person is expected to stump up £80 to cover bed and board (the church covers the speaker's costs). However, the cost pales into insignificance compared to the benefits - as individuals, as a leadership team, and ultimately as a church, we are the richer for this experience.

The subject of the weekend varies from year to year, although for the most part they are variations on the theme of leadership. This

year Ian Stackhouse, a Ministry Today Board member, devoted three sessions to a series of reflections on John 21. However, the very first session was devoted to ‘the discipline of thanksgiving’. This we found extremely challenging, so much so that I wrote the following article for my church magazine. Hopefully, in spite of its simplicity, some readers might pick up an idea or two.

The Discipline of Thanksgiving

Have you noticed the way in which Paul consistently thanks God for others? With the exception of Galatians, Paul always begins his letters on a note of thanksgiving for the church to which he was writing.

At our recent leadership weekend away our attention was particularly drawn to Paul’s unusually positive expression of gratitude in 1 Cor 1.4,5: “I always give thanks to my God for you because of the grace he has given you through Christ Jesus. For in union with Christ you have become rich in all things, including all speech and all knowledge”. If you and I had been writing to the church at Corinth, we might well have not been so positive, for Corinth was a pastor’s nightmare. Marked by division, immorality, and much pseudo-spirituality, it was a ‘problem’ church of the first order. Yet in spite of all the difficulties, Paul recognised that God was at work in their midst.

Ian Stackhouse, our guest speaker, went on to point out that what was true at Corinth, is true of every church. Of course, not every church is in as bad a state as Corinth. And yet, every church messes up in one way or another. There is no such thing as a perfect church, otherwise there would be no place for you and me! But in the midst of our human failings, God is still at work among us. So be grateful and thank God.

We may not be in a revival situation, but this does not mean that God is not at work among us. To quote Ian Stackhouse, sometimes ‘we don’t see the trees for the wood’. That is to say, we are so caught up with the big picture of what we believe God wants to do in our midst, that we fail to see the little ways in which God is already acting in our church.

If the truth be told, the temptation is to focus on the mess, on the difficulties. We Brits in particular sometimes delight in highlighting the negative. But God wants us to accentuate the positive, and to focus on every sign of his presence amongst us.

This does not mean that we then fail to address difficulties which may arise. But it does mean that we put our difficulties into perspective. As a result, our faith increases, and our souls are encouraged.

But look again. Paul does not just thank God for what he is doing in the church - he thanks God for the church. He thanks God for the way in which his brothers and sisters are agents of the grace of God. What a difference this must have made to those to whom he was writing: they felt affirmed and encouraged, loved and valued.

I believe that what was true in Corinth, needs to be true here in Chelmsford. We need to be grateful to God for one another. This is more than simply playing the old 'Pollyanna' game whereby we focus on whatever the 'silver lining' might be. Similarly, it is more than simply practising the American art of 'stroking' people. It is rather a spiritual discipline, whereby we recognise the grace of God at work in our brothers and sisters.

As a leadership team we were much taken by Ian Stackhouse's emphasis on 'the discipline of thanksgiving'. We have resolved that in our monthly meetings we shall seek to make ourselves more aware of what God is doing, and to be grateful. Hopefully, what will be true of your leaders, will be increasingly true of us all as a church.

NEW EVERY SUNDAY: KEEPING SERMONS FRESH

Stephen Wright

It was reported in March 2002 that the rector of a prominent church in a wealthy town near Detroit had been suspended for ninety days while his diocese investigated accusations that some of his sermons and newsletter articles were copied from the Web. For preachers around the world who recognize that 'plagiarism' of a sort is fundamental to the very business of preaching, this is a sobering story which raises some interesting issues.

There is an unspoken compact between congregation and preacher which allows, indeed encourages, the preacher not to be completely original. Without speculating about the facts of this particular case, it appears that there is a line somewhere between drawing on a