



**WHEN HEAVEN  
AND CHURCH  
COLLIDE**

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## Try Going to Specsavers

Just about everyone is familiar with the national spectacles provider that goes by this name. Their T.V. adverts are very clever and amusing. To make my point I will describe just a couple of them here. A hill farmer has gathered his flock of sheep for shearing with the help of his faithful Collie dog. One by one he shears his sheep and they trip out of the shed and into the field. Unexpectedly, the Collie, neatly sheared, follows the last sheep out while looking quite bemused and forlorn. The farmer is shown squinting at his dog with a puzzled frown. The caption appears on the screen saying, "He should have gone to Specsavers." The second example shows a railway train arriving at the platform. The passengers alight. An attractive lady waves happily to a man she mistakenly thinks is her husband, runs towards him, throws her arms round him and gives him a long passionate kiss. Her husband stands by with an unbelieving look on his face. Once more the caption says, "She should have gone to Specsavers."

Here are well meaning innocent people getting things badly wrong because of defective eyesight. Here is a personal story. At eight years old I attended a primary school in the suburb where I lived. Fortunately, my desk was on the front row of the classroom where I studied and I did very well. I came top of the class. Soon after this our family moved to another part of the city and I went to a different school. Here I was seated on the back row. My previous record had given me access to the 'A' form. Very soon I was demoted to the 'B' form and the end of year tests rated me as 33<sup>rd</sup> out of 38. There wasn't a form to descend to. I just couldn't read the black board because I was extremely short sighted. Salvation was at hand. It was a new year and along came a nurse to give us all an eye test. My eyesight was terrible but I didn't know it, my parents didn't know it, the school didn't know it, nobody knew it. When my National Health glasses were supplied, I just couldn't believe how wonderful it was to be able to see clearly. A whole new world opened up. I could read the blackboard. I could see bus numbers before I was nearly run over. I would spend ages in the countryside just enjoying looking at the scenery and the wildlife. Thankfully my schooling improved in record time enabling me to qualify for Grammar school.

I think that we should begin by admitting that overall, as believers and as churches we are not seeing much success in impacting our nation. It continues its moral, social, political and institutional decay. I don't think it is because we do not care, we do. I suggest that we have become very short sighted but don't know it. In an innocent and well-meaning way, we go on doing what we are doing and end up puzzled that people show little interest in finding God or wanting to join our churches. I think we can learn lessons from the advert "Should have gone to Specsavers."

My aim in this book is to use the corrective spiritual lenses of scripture to take a fresh and comprehensive look, first at what Jesus taught about the Kingdom of Heaven, then to use the lenses of the Kingdom, through which to view the Church. One day when I was praying and meditating, a picture of Jesus came to mind. He had a group of believers seated around him as he taught. They were fixated. Jesus paused, stood up,

and with his hand shading his eyes, looked over their heads into the distance. He kept that stance for a while until he had the attention of the believers. Then he spoke. "If you begin to look where I look, and see what I see, you will do what I do." As I thought about this it became plain that we can be so absorbed with Jesus, that we can lose sight of his mission and purpose. I believe he is calling us to look at the kingdom, the church and the world through his eyes. This picture brought to mind the story of Zacchaeus. The crowds were focused on Jesus. But Jesus raised his eyes to focus on Zacchaeus who was sitting high up in a tree. Zacchaeus turned to God that day.

## Seek Heaven's Kingdom First

Doing things in the right order is always a great help. Jesus set that order from the beginning. **Seek the Kingdom of Heaven first and everything else will fall into place.** One way of interpreting this could be, 'Focus on eternal matters, and temporary matters, the things of this world that you are so concerned about, will under God's hand take their rightful order.' I want us to look into the kingdom, see it the way that Jesus sees it, so we can look from the kingdom at the church, and at the communities where we live. I think that so often, we look at God's Kingdom through the lenses of the world and even the lenses of the church and religion, when we would see so much more clearly by swapping our viewing position. Let us put on eternity glasses to view what is temporary. Jesus told us that his kingdom was not of this world. We read in the bible that we came into the world with nothing and go out with nothing. The incredibly good news is that we are invited into, and can belong to this eternal kingdom whilst dwelling upon the earth. We are invited to become children of God, citizens of heaven, and depart this world with our souls intact to be given new spiritual bodies far superior to our earthly bodies, and to enjoy an eternity of bliss. The prayer that Jesus taught, proclaims, 'Let your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'

I haven't said anything yet that we haven't heard before, have I? When I received my National Health glasses, I was looking at things that had been there all the time. But suddenly, wonder of wonders, I could now see them with pristine clarity. This is my fervent prayer and I hope it will be yours too. 'Oh, Father God of heaven, heal our eyes so we can see as you see.' I have invented a new word, Kingdomed. We talk about becoming Churched. Well, my observations show me that it is perfectly easy to become churched without becoming kingdomed and I believe that here is the root of most, if not all of our difficulties. I know this from my own experience. I remember the period in my life when I was only churched and found it a very uncomfortable fit. The day came, through the grace of God, when I was well and truly kingdomed. Don't misunderstand. I was already saved from the moment I gave my life to Christ. I am talking about being kingdomed. I am talking about a revelation of the absolute reality of God's heavenly kingdom, and being freed to totally surrender to the King.

My transition from being Churched to being Kingdomed happened like this. One Sunday morning as Brenda and I set off home after a church service, she said, "If heaven is going to be like this Michael, I don't want to go there!" I could not disagree with her. You see we were looking at our heavenly destiny through the lenses of the church and not being excited by the prospect. How sad. How tragic. How mistaken. I made a decision to attempt a fresh approach. I decided to ignore for a time, everything I had ever learned in church and in the world and concentrate wholly on the words of Jesus. It was helpful that I had a Red Letter Bible. That is a bible that prints all the words of Jesus in red. Over a few days I read and re-read only what was printed in red. What did I find? Jesus was focused entirely on the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God. On and on he went, "The kingdom of heaven is like this, like this, like this, parable after

parable. This kingdom is a kingdom righteousness, of light and truth, and above all a kingdom of love, compassion, selflessness, giving, protecting, healing, restoring. Everything that is noble and just and fair. Everything that is good. This kingdom is unshakeable, it is life, it is everlasting." Jesus worked so hard to teach about and demonstrate the magnificence of this kingdom. He was consumed by it. Though what he said so often fell on deaf ears he persisted to the very end of his life, his courage never failed. Put as simply as I can, Jesus became my Hero. If the kingdom consumed my hero, it must consume me. I came to a new understanding which was sealed when I laid my hands on my red letter bible and prayed, "From this moment on Father God, whatever it costs, I choose to live by every word in this book." Instantly heaven opened, light filled me and surrounded me. Believe me when I say that I saw the kingdom in all its glory. I was in the kingdom. I was invaded, soaked by the very essence of God's kingdom. Ever since that day, the kingdom has gripped me, its reality has remained part of me. My wife Brenda will testify that when she saw me, soon after this experience, I was surrounded by light. It gave her a real shock. To avoid any misunderstanding, I must make it clear that this was not my experience of being baptised in the Holy Spirit. That came later. On reflection, the nearest I can come to interpreting what happened, was that I received an exceptional revelation straight from heaven. Heaven had collided with Church.

Reading this back I notice that I have used the term kingdom far more times than would fit with good literary practice, but that's OK if the message has been delivered. If one follows all those red letters of Jesus through the four gospels by consulting Strong's Concordance, we find that Jesus uses it about 130 times. How many times does he use 'church' do you think? He uses it only 3 times only in Matthew's gospel, and not at all in Mark, Luke and John. Jesus began with the kingdom.

## Choose Life

I do wonder if God spent any time deliberating as to whether or not to create us humans with a will of our own. We know that he did, and I suppose we ought to presume that he knew what the consequences would be. The awesome fact is that we are free to choose. Our lives and destiny are being shaped by our decisions every day. I don't see Jesus hounding people to make the decisions he would like them to make. I don't see him attempting to manipulate or control people. But he did appeal to them to make good choices. He gave reasons and explained the advantages and disadvantages. In other words, he presented options. Always he fully respected the free will that God had given to each individual. Both John the Baptist and Jesus introduced the Kingdom in the same way. "It is time to rethink the way that you live. Have a change of mind and a change of direction. Turn away from your sinful ways and turn to God. The kingdom of heaven has come near enough to you that you can take hold of it. It is not out of your reach. You can choose the Kingdom if you wish."

The people were being offered a marvellous opportunity to exchange the world for the kingdom. What a bargain! I can only think that some of those that did not accept the offer were indeed suffering from desperate short sightedness. They could not see what a bargain it was. Many repented and were baptised into the kingdom. They freely made good choice. Some I am sure would have been torn between the world and the kingdom. I say this because throughout the history of Israel the Jews, most of the time, tried to worship both Jehovah and idols and foreign gods too. There is a word that scholars use for it, that word is syncretism. This is highly relevant to our own time. Many Christians I believe are not enjoying the full benefits of the Kingdom of Heaven, because whether or not they are aware of it, they are attempting to synchronise the world and the kingdom. They struggle to be fully effective servants of God because, as Jesus put it, they are trying to serve two masters. It can appear compatible. We can think we are doing quite well. I know. I've been there. One can look quite committed, very committed maybe, offering help but in reality, maintaining the status of being self-employed. But there is no place for self-employment in God's Kingdom.

Imagine a person who has their grasp firmly on the world and when the kingdom comes near says, "Ah, I like the look of that." So, he takes one hand off the world and reaches out to take hold of the kingdom with the other. Someone in the kingdom calls out. "You need both hands! Let go of the world." The kingdom demands a choice and God gives us that choice.

We are free to choose.

Jesus told the parable of a man who discovered a great treasure in a field. Note this. **The man could see clearly how valuable this treasure was. It was his seeing that enabled him to sell everything he had to buy the field and gain the treasure.**

In the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 30, God speaks to the people of Israel through his prophet Moses, just as they are about to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land.

“The command I am giving you today is not too difficult. It is not beyond your reach. Today I have **given you the choice** between life and death, between blessings and curses. Now I call upon heaven and earth to witness the choice that you make. Oh, that you would choose life!”

We mustn't understate what is at stake. God's Kingdom offers life and eternity while the World offers only death. News bulletins are overwhelmingly obsessed with death. Many people have lost the will to live and the suicide rate is at an all-time high. More and more people seem to be glorying in an atheistic mindset, even proud of their unbelief. Their good news is that this life is. It will end in death, and death will be the end of everything. How can a doctrine of death have such an appeal, but more and more people are choosing it. Friends, we have chosen life and blessing. Let us be wildly enthusiastic and uncompromising about our choices. God's message to Israel continues with an explanation of how to make the right choice, how choose life and blessing. “You can make this choice by wholeheartedly loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and committing yourself firmly to him. He is the key to your life.

But oh, how that little big word 'obey' can trip us up, can be an obstacle to abandonment to God and his Kingdom. There is a powerful, powerful force at work in us all which is to retain control. We must see this and admit it. We feel safe when we are in control. We love to be in control of things. It gives us a feeling of security. One day Jesus encountered a centurion (a Roman army officer in charge of 100 soldiers) who asked him to heal his servant. Jesus readily agreed and offered to go to the officer's home. With extreme humility, the officer declared that he was unworthy to have Jesus under his roof saying this, “Jesus, you do not need to come to my home to heal my servant. All you need to do is to say 'be healed' and he will be healed.” Jesus was amazed, and declared, “I have never come across faith like this in the whole of Israel.” The centurion explained his faith and provided us with a marvellous lesson. **This lesson transformed my understanding of the kingdom.** This is what he said. “It is like this Jesus. I am under the authority of Caesar the Emperor, the king of the whole Roman Empire. **Because I am under his authority,** (obedient to him) **he gives me authority** and I can say to a man 'go' and he has to go, or I say to a man 'come' and he has to come. **I see Jesus that you are a man under authority, under the authority of God in heaven.** So, when you say to a man be healed, he will be healed because you are acting with God's authority.” No wonder Jesus was amazed. This Roman officer had understood what many Christians do not understand, that **when we place ourselves under the authority of our loving Father God, and choose to live a life of obedience to him, we gain access to all the resources of heaven.** We are greatly

deceived when we think that retaining mastery over our own fate is beneficial to us. Why do we even hesitate to hand over responsibility for our lives to a Father who desperately loves us, knows all things, has all wisdom and power, holds the power of life and death in his hands, has our best interests at heart, who wants to pour out one blessing after another upon us. Self-rule, obedience to self, who wants it?

The way that our Father God exercises his authority is nothing like the abusive self-seeking even harsh authority we frequently encounter in the world. He is gentle and kind and patient. He is full of understanding and compassion. He understands all our struggles. I had a woodwork teacher who was very strict and kept the workshop a safe and secure place. He was the best teacher I ever had. He was fearsome to naughty pupils, but to those that wanted to learn, he would show great kindness, patience and care. He was brilliant at passing on his skills. He encouraged us all the time and inspired us with self-confidence. We produced work we could be proud of. God is a teacher who will, in all wisdom, produce the best in us and inspire us in our partnership with him to advance his Kingdom. Here is another secret that I have discovered. **God loves to share his plans with us** in such a way that we catch his vision, agree with him, and work together with him to fulfil his plans and purposes. I suspect that many struggle in their response to God and experience difficulty in their relationship with him because they see him as one that simply gives orders that are to be obeyed. Of course, he has the right and the power to command, but experience tells me that he is reluctant to do things in that way. When Jesus gave us his great mission statement about reaching the world with his good news, he followed it with a wonderful and amazing promise. "I will be with you." This is teamwork and we have the indescribable privilege and honour to be invited to join God's team.

## Answer the Call of Eternity

I will start by selectively quoting from 1 Corinthians 15 and hope you will read the whole of that Chapter.

The first man, Adam, became a living person, but the last Adam, that is Christ, is a life-giving Spirit. What comes first is the natural body. Then the spiritual body comes later. Adam, the first man, was made from the dust of the earth, while Christ, the second man, came from heaven. Earthly people are like the earthly man, and heavenly people are like the heavenly man. What I am saying dear brothers and sisters is that our physical bodies cannot inherit the Kingdom of God. Our earthly bodies will be planted like a seed in the ground when we die. They will be buried as natural mortal human bodies, but raised as immortal spiritual bodies. So, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever wasted.

My hope is that as God's people we will develop a deeper and deeper revelation of our earthly mortality, and a deeper, clearer revelation of the immortality of the soul. This will help to free us to devote ourselves to the eternal things of heaven and hold very lightly the temporary things of the earth. My previous book, written to equip believers for person-to-person mission I entitled 'Populating Heaven'. I made it very clear that God's plan in populating the earth was with the explicit purpose of populating heaven. Jesus was devoted to saving people's souls. His first words to his disciples were, "Follow me and I will teach you how fish for souls." He told them not to fear the death of the body, but the loss of the soul. He explained that gaining the whole world wasn't worth the loss of a person's soul.

There was an occasion shortly before Jesus was crucified where he used physical metaphors to explain spiritual truths regarding his coming sacrifice. When he talked about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, it was too much for many of his followers and they decided to leave him. He asked his closest disciples, "Are you going to leave me too?" They couldn't understand what he was saying either and were no doubt greatly concerned and upset. However, they replied with a marvellous Kingdom truth. **"Where would we go? Only you have the words of eternal life."** They got a lot wrong at times. They often did not understand Jesus, but my, they did get this one right. If I was one for tattoos, I think would have those words tattooed on my right arm so they would be before me every day. "Where can I go Jesus? Only you have the words of eternal life." Maybe on the other arm I would have, **"The world and everything in it is passing away."**

Quite rightly we are upset for people and empathise with their tragedy, when they receive a terminal diagnosis. Suddenly mortality stares us in the face. I am not being morbid when I say that we should be comfortable with the certainty that we all have a terminal diagnosis. We are born to die. We have a disease called ageing. If I die in accordance with the average age of death for men in England, my terminal diagnosis is four and a half years. If I went for a medical check-up and came home with the news, "The doctor has told me I only have four and a half years to live." there would be a bit of a stir. It is interesting that when Jesus sent out his 72 disciples on mission, and they came back full of it after a resounding success, rejoicing in all the miracles and wonders they had performed, Jesus sounded a bit of a killjoy in his response. "These are not the things to rejoice in. Rejoice that your names are written in heaven's book of life." **He shifted their gaze from the mortal to the eternal.** He wanted them to understand, that whatever happens here on the earth, whatever brings joy or tears, we can always rejoice in our eternal destiny.

Brenda gave birth to our first child in 1968, two and a half years after we married. Angela was a model child, healthy and happy always. She had a lovely temperament, charmed everyone and brought us incredible joy. One day, when she reached the age of three and a half, I came back from school bringing with me a mouse cage I had promised to make for her. She played with it for over an hour, imagining the mice we were planning to buy on the following day. We put her to bed, told her a story and settled her down to sleep. Half an hour later I went upstairs to check she was fine. She wasn't. She was having trouble breathing. We called the doctor who called an ambulance, and in the hospital, at one in the morning she died in my arms. As I held her I felt her slipping away, as it were, through a gossamer veil into the arms of God. How little separates us from the next life. Just a moment in time. How I rejoice in the sure and certain hope of being together with my beautiful daughter for eternity. Her photo is by my bed, and sometimes when I look at it, I think, "Not long now." and am filled to the point of tears with joyful anticipation. I do hope that this intimate story of exceptional grief and exceptional joy will help you to a new way of seeing, and a new way of living.

As the fullness of heaven is the final destination of God's children, we must allow ourselves to become suitably excited and motivated by the prospect of spending eternity there. The bible does not give us detailed pictures of what exactly it is like and I suppose that is because we do not have the capacity in our mortal state to be able to comprehend it. Enough is said however to convince us that it is worth releasing our grip on this mortal life.

*Revelation 21:3.*

"I heard a loud shout from the throne saying, "Look, God's home is with his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these

things are gone forever.” And the one sitting on the throne said, “Look I am making all things new!” And then he said, “Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true.”

*John 14.1.*

Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God and trust also in me. There is more than enough room in my Father's home. If this were not so, would I have told you that **I am going to prepare a place for you? When everything is ready, I will come to fetch you, so that you will always be with me where I am.**”

Both of these declarations emphasise the need for faith. Without faith we cannot please God. What peace we can have when we seek and find an absolute trust in God and his word.

*Hebrews 11:8.*

**It was by faith** that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land that he would receive as his inheritance. 11:10. **Abraham was confidently looking forward to a city with eternal foundations, a city designed and built by God.**

We too can confidently look forward to heaven. In the 1970's, there was a truly evil African dictator called Idi Amin. He would send his soldiers to Christian evangelistic gatherings with orders to shoot dead anyone who responded to a call to accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. This did not prevent many from raising their hands knowing that immediate death would be the consequence. This is what faith looks like. They knew with a total knowing that Jesus would be there to take them to the place prepared for them. Even from the moment of conversion, heaven was real! With good reason the best known and most quoted scripture in the Bible is John 3:16. For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in **him will not perish but have eternal life.**”

These are the words of Jesus, and after all, the main purpose of this book is to help us to see things through his eyes. We mustn't let their familiarity rob us of their world-shattering impact.

## Let Go and Trust God

Over the years I have listened to many inspirational talks and sermons, in church, at conferences, at Bible Weeks. I have read many great Christian writings. I have gained much insight and been helped to understand deep spiritual truths. However, probably because of my technical training I very often feel let down when so little attention is given to the practical application of these exhortations, these marvellous insights and truths. I frequently think, "A very fine talk good friend, but please tell us how, in practical terms we can work this out in our everyday lives. Can you give us some examples? How do I practice in real life what you are saying?"

In the technical side of my education, we used a number of books with titles that started with, 'The Theory and Practice of ----- .' They were great. I loved them. We need the theory of course, but we really do need practical instruction too. Academic study is all very well, but if it becomes isolated from application what is the point. When I decided to study Advanced Level Maths, I was given the option to choose between 'Pure Maths' and 'Applied Maths'. No prize for guessing which I chose.

If you have got to the point where I so often get to of, "Fine, but how do I put this into practice?" this is where we switch from theory to practice and I am not overstating it when I say that what comes next can be life changing. I was at a leader's meeting one day where we were looking into a number of issues regarding overseas mission. As conversation proceeded, ideas and possibilities were discussed. At a certain point the missionary who had oversight of this meeting, a most gracious person, commented, "You know friends, it is important to remember that talking about things isn't doing them." I have never forgotten that simple truth. Jesus said that hearing and not doing was like building on sand instead of rock. Jesus was teaching on the law one day, explaining that the whole law could be summed up by completely loving God and loving one's neighbour as much as loving one's self. Helpfully, he was asked a question. "But who is my neighbour?" He responded with a remarkable story, a practical application, of how to love someone in need. Is there anyone who does not remember the story of the Good Samaritan? I was introduced to this story at school as a child and it so impacted me that it became almost a curse on my life. The fatal words of Jesus, "Go and do likewise." cut like the proverbial two-edged sword. In any and every situation where someone was in need, I could not for the life of me 'pass by on the other side', if there was any practical way that I could respond. Jesus pierced my soul with this story before I ever came to know him. When I started motoring and I ever saw someone broken down at the side of the road, common in those days, I found it impossible to drive past without offering help. I became a one-man voluntary roadside assistance mechanic. The inconvenience that this lesson of Jesus inflicted on me was huge.

I often wonder what answer Jesus would have given, if he had been asked, "How do I love the Lord my God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength?" Maybe no one dared to ask after the previous reply. Anyway, there came a time with Brenda and I, where we

wanted to give a very practical response to this question. Lord, how can we love you like this? After some consideration we recognised that in our hearts we had wholeheartedly submitted ourselves to God and his purposes. I am not sure how we arrived at this but we decided to undertake a private ceremony of consecration. It may have been inspired by the old hymn that begins, "Take my life and let it be, consecrated Lord to thee." We collected an array of items that symbolised every aspect of our lives, and set them out on a table, as if we were placing them on an altar. We then dedicated, set apart for God, each of these items in prayer.

We began with our birth certificates, laid our hands on them and prayed,  
"This is who we are Lord. We give our lives to you for your purposes".

The deeds of our house and the door key came next.

"Our house is no longer ours; it belongs to you dear Father. Use it as you will."

Next came the car registration certificate and ignition keys.

"This car is now your car Father. Use it as you wish."

And so, we went on:

Marriage certificate, Cheque book and bank cards, Employment contracts, educational qualifications, holiday brochures, diaries and watches. Our days and our plans were all dedicated to God.

Jesus said, "Only by losing his life does a man gain it." I can only think that this was what heaven was waiting for. It was as though God had a blueprint already prepared. God took every single one of our offerings and set about his purpose. We would need to write our autobiographies to explain the dramas that followed. One could interpret our service of dedication as an act of sacrifice. We did ourselves at the time. This was our intention. And yes, there were very real costs, many hard times and much pain attached to honouring God in our call. But we see it now in a different context. We gave our lives to Him, but he gave his life to us. Kingdom life. Life with eternal purpose. We call it now 'A Divine Exchange'.

It is worth giving space here to copy out the words of the hymn that inspired the chapter:

**Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to Thee; take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise. Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of Thy love; take my feet, and let them be, swift and beautiful for Thee. Take my voice and let me sing always only for my King. Take my lips and let them be, filled with messages from Thee. Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold. Take my intellect and use every power as Thou would choose. Take my will and make it Thine, it shall be no longer mine. Take my heart, it is**

**Thine own, it shall be Thy royal throne. Take my love my Lord, I pour at Thy feet its treasure store. Take myself and I will be, ever, only, all for Thee.**

I am greatly challenged by the early hymn writers. They bring an uncompromising message from the Christian culture of their time. I have to often reflect on Jesus' words to the Revelation church of Laodicea. "How I wish you were either hot or cold, lukewarm brings me no blessing!" In today's culture it would be easy for me to begin to think that my spiritual temperature is quite high, but fear that I would have to review that if I were to be returned to an age when the church was on fire. This hymn was written around 1880. I had an interesting conversation with a friend of mine who is involved with a very good church with a very good reputation. Recently they have had a sudden and quite large influx of African immigrants who are full of fire with regard to their faith. They never miss a single meeting. Their commitment and sense of community is remarkable. After his church had suffered the initial shock and a difficult adjustment period, the believers responded with great positivity recognising how they needed to restore their passion and commitment. Bless them for their humility and readiness to respond to the example being set.

Has what I have shared so far confirmed and encouraged you in your own understanding, or has it challenged you to go deeper with God? When I write these things, I have to continue seriously challenging myself, and asking myself how well I am living up to what I write. In everything I have said so far, and everything that follows, I ask you to follow the example of the Bereans who were a fellowship of Jewish believers in

Greece. The Apostle Paul preached to them after leaving Thessalonica.

The Bereans are spoken of as a very open-minded people, a noble people. They listened eagerly to Paul's message. But this is what I love about them. **They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth.** Please friends, search the scriptures as we travel and test everything I say, asking the Holy Spirit to lead you and guide into all truth as only he can.

## Let Your Roots Grow Deep into God's Love

*Colossians 2:7.*

Let your roots grow down into him.

The Apostle John wrote, **"God is Love"**. Where we fail to grasp how completely he loves us, as individuals, we will fail to respond completely to his complete and perfect love. Our walk with God, our journey of faith, just has to be a grand love affair. I once served God out of a sense of duty and perhaps it was a good way to start, but now I serve him because I recognise his love for me and simply want to return his love. I am a child of God. That is what I am. He is my Father. So what I want to make plain is this, that **only love is sufficient to motivate us towards letting the purposes of God consume our lives**. That is, his love for us, and our love for him. I know it is a cliché, but we know perfectly well that Christ would have died as he did, for any single one of us if we were the only one that needed saving. This truth must sink deep into our souls, not as any kind of demand for repayment, oh no not at all, but as a true measure of how much we are loved. And this truth must sink in also. God loves us all the same. We must not consider for a moment that he has a greater love for some well deserving person more than ourselves, or any less deserving person less than ourselves. That is not to say that he is equally pleased with everyone. We do have the capacity please God, and God has the capacity to be pleased with some people more than others. I have a passionate desire to please God, but not as a means of earning his love. That would spoil everything. The great beauty of Kingdom love is that it is unconditional and freely given. We can in response, freely love and please God with pure motives. We want to bless him and make him happy just because we do. We are not seeking rewards even though he does freely reward. Divine love, kingdom love, is of an entirely different substance, a different order, and little by little we are able to learn to love more and more with that kind of love. It can't be taught; it can only be caught. The apostle John wrote,

"It is not that we first loved God but that he first loved us."

All I can say is this. **We have to open ourselves to God and let him love us, and love us, and love us, and keep on loving us until we overflow towards others with that same love**. The apostle Paul recognised when he wrote to the Ephesians that he did not have the capacity to describe to them adequately the measure of God's love for them. He said clearly that they could only comprehend it through revelation, by God showing it to them directly.

"I fall to my knees before God the Father and plead with him that he will empower you to understand how wide, how long, how high and how deep his love is. May you **experience** the love of Christ even though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God."

In Chapter 2, I emphasised that there is a correct order to follow in most things. For us to be made complete, we first have to experience the love of Christ, the love of God, the love of the Holy Spirit, the love of people, even the love of ourselves. We are called to love others in the same way as we love ourselves so if we have not learned to love ourselves, we have little to offer in loving others. There is a general misconception amongst many that they must somehow become 'good enough' before they can be accepted and loved by God and have an intimate relationship with him. This is putting the cart before the horse. It is the wrong order of things. Let the scriptures be our lenses. A simple reading of the parable of the prodigal son, of the dying words of Jesus to the criminal nailed to the cross next to him, is quite enough to show us that the totally undeserving have access to the full love and mercy of God. This is what comes first and transformation follows. Paul writes to the church in Rome, "Don't copy the ways of the world, but let God transform you into a new person." God's order of doing things is best. **He starts by first giving his love to the old person, and then makes the old person into a new person.** This is not a difficult thing to understand, but for many, a difficult thing to accept. There is a lovely song which says, "One touch from the Lord changes everything." How true this is.

I suggest strongly to those of you who still struggle to accept and experience the love of God in a powerful way, to be very practical and **ask him very simply to give you a revelation experience.** If you feel that you are not making progress with this, find someone who you know who is very close to God and who knows his love. Ask them to lay hands on you according to scripture and to pray for God's love to come on you. It may be that your answer is to experience the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

## Do Things His Way

I suggest once again that we do not let familiarity with particular words of Jesus rob them of their potency. He had been asked by his disciples to teach them how to pray. He took them most seriously and gave them a carefully considered model to guide them. He put things in the correct order of course, being one with all wisdom to hand. Start with God he advises, understand that he is your heavenly Father and you are his children. First to come is your relationship with him! Next you are to hold him in the highest honour. Having established right relationship, now recognise the Father's vision, plan and purpose. His priority is for his kingdom to come to earth and his will to be done on the earth. These two concepts are linked together not presented separately. They are interdependent. **Doing God's will be accepting his rule and where he rules that is where his kingdom has been established.** He rules heaven and is seeking for people to accept his rule on the earth in preparation for heaven. This I am sure we already understand, but the question for us is this, how do we put it into practice? I am happy to assume that we all want to do the will of God otherwise why am I writing this and why are you reading it. So this chapter is not written as a persuasion to do God's will but to discover how best to respond to the desire we already have within us, the desire to honour our heavenly Father in this way. Here is a self-evident statement, but I will state it anyway.

**In order to do God's will faithfully and effectively, we need to know what God's will is.**

I am not talking about a vague and generalised awareness that he wants us to be good and live good lives. This just raises a whole string of other questions as to what ways does he want us to be good. What does it mean in specific terms for me to live a righteous life? I will break this down into two main blocks. There is the general will of God that applies to everyone, and the specific will of God that applies to us as individuals. The Ten Commandments were not designed to apply to some individuals and not others. These requirements of God, clearly numbered, clearly ordered and very clearly stated, represent the will of God for all mankind. They are brilliantly conceived and provide us with a framework of good moral behaviour that is difficult to argue with. The trouble is, for anyone who is not familiar with them, how can they know God's will, and therefore do God's will except by natural instinct. And we know how dreadfully unreliable that is. I had no church background, but, being born in 1940, I am of a generation that did benefit from being taught in school about the bible and what was right and wrong. So, I was clear about the 'Ten Commandments'. I had the opportunity to choose to adopt them and try to live by them, which I did. This was an issue of morality at the time not an issue of knowing God. So, in a general sense, we can discover God's will for us in the scriptures and from those who interpret and teach the scriptures well. God inspired all scripture through the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is the one who will interpret them for us. Do we want to know the will of God so that we are able to do it? It is all too simple. If we know the scriptures, we will know the will of God. Friends if we are serious about this there is no short cut. We really must be

disciplined and form the habit of regular bible reading. Now reading the bible theoretically or simply to gain bible knowledge, or theological insight, can become quite tedious. Reading the scriptures in order to discover God's will so we can then apply and practice what we have discovered is different altogether. The truth we have to admit is this. If we are lazy about our bibles, we are lazy about seeking God's will. We can't avoid this truth. Every page of the bible will present us with an opportunity. As a demonstration I have just opened my bible entirely at random.

*1 Peter 2:*

"So get rid of all evil behaviour. Be done with all deceit, hypocrisy, jealousy, and all unkind speech". He could easily have added, "For this is the will of God."

Now let me encourage you to say at the end of any scriptures that you read, '**For this is Gods will for me.**' This will help to personalise what has been read and provide us with an opportunity to consider if a practical response is needed. God is so, so ready to help us. I find that he is able to change my heart much easier than I can change it. I am happy for him to work with me in this respect. He is the potter and I am the clay.

When it comes to **finding God's particular, specific will for our lives** we have to be willing for him to show it to us and willing to trust him sufficiently to act on it.

**Discerning his will requires that we hear him person to person, not only through the bible.** It goes without saying that the Father will at times speak to us by getting out his highlight pen as we are reading the scriptures. The words jump off the page at us with such conviction, that we know that he has spoken to us personally and directly. But he can and does speak to us in other many and varied ways. I have a teaching unit entitled, 'Twenty-six ways of hearing God'. Whatever way he speaks, he will never contradict scripture. The bottom line is that we must learn to hear Father, Son and Holy Spirit personally if we are going to be able to discern our specific call and purpose.

**Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice."**

In the book of Revelation, we find Christ, through the apostle John, sending messages to each of seven churches in Asia. At the end of each message, the closing statement is, "Anyone with ears to hear must listen

to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches."

For you and I, we must tune our ears to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to us as individuals, and local churches must also learn to hear on a corporate level what the Spirit of Jesus says to them. It is impossible for me to over emphasise how important this is. How can we be led by the Holy Spirit if we are deaf to what he is saying? An examination of scripture demonstrates time and time again how God speaks to people in many and varied ways. All through the bible he keeps on speaking to people. He hasn't stopped. **He still speaks today.** I am quite torn at this point in the dialogue. I

would like to teach comprehensively on this major issue but there are many other matters I want to give attention to as well. What I have decided is this. "When I have completed writing this book to prepare a supplement on the topic of hearing God and make it available for those who want further help. In the meantime, you can find in my book, 'Populating Heaven.' a good selection of testimonies that demonstrate how God has spoken to Brenda and I in specific terms and how his speaking led many people to faith through or person to person missions.

This is an appropriate moment to visit Jesus as he anguished before his Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. I am grateful indeed that this exchange is reported in the gospels. It shows the humanity of Jesus in such a graphic manner. This is no invented Hollywood style hero facing death without flinching, a steely faced man displaying not a trace of fear or emotion. Jesus cries out, "Oh Father, save me from this trial, surely there is some other way." Three times he offered this cry. But, even in this extreme desperation, he surrendered his will to the will of the Father in those timeless words, "Not my will Father, but yours be done." It is most unlikely that you or I will ever have to face a trial that anywhere approaches the suffering of Jesus but many Christians have. But for us the truth is that surrendering our will to the will of God is very likely to involve doing much that we would rather not do. God's will is just that, his will not ours. There will be times, maybe many times, where our own spirit within us is saying loudly, "I really don't want to do this." I am being honest and real because often the message that is sent out is, "Give your life to Jesus and all your troubles will be over." I am remaining true to scripture, true to the words of Jesus when he said. "In this life you will have many troubles." I would have preferred that he had said a few troubles. The joy is of course that he walks with us through them all. We are never alone in our troubles. When we surrender our will, we should accept that we will be tested and we will be called to make sacrifices. My way of coping is that on discovering what God's will is, I make up my mind to agree with him. Being in agreement with God over everything is a beautiful thing and a pathway of peace, even when it is very costly.

About five years into our marriage Brenda and I moved into a 1930's semi-detached house in what one terms the leafy suburbs. It needed a huge amount of renovation but had an excellent position and potential for becoming a very nice house. Having completed some of the basics I began to dig out foundations for a kitchen extension. One evening as I was studying the scriptures, I was reading the first chapter of the prophet Haggai. This is what I came across in verses 3-4. Then the Lord sent this message through the prophet Haggai. (This was to the Jews living in Jerusalem after their return from their Babylonian exile.)

"Why are you living in luxurious houses while my house lies in ruins?"

Oh, how my heart was pierced. The church we were attending at the time could readily be described as a ruin. I mentioned earlier about God's highlight pen. This pen was particularly bright and I was convicted to the point of deep shame when I was called to compare my house with God's house. How awful this was. The following day I filled the

foundations of the intended extension back in, and spent the next few years renovating the church building. Was it a trial? Yes, it was. A very great trial at times. The work was laborious and used up most of my spare time. But what a joy it is to serve the Lord in this way. I got to work on his house. What an honour. What satisfaction to see his house restored. I use this story as a concrete illustration of what I have been trying to communicate in this chapter. To do God's will, we need to know what his will is, and then we can put it into practice.

A final word. It is great wisdom to guard against making important decisions before discussing them with God to discover what he thinks. Firstly, do they fit in with his plans, and secondly, he has such good advice to offer. So often in conversations I have with believers, I hear them say quite glibly, "I have decided to buy this house, or go to this church, or to buy this car, or to apply for this job or promotion." Sometimes I may say, "So have you been seeking God over this?" or words to that effect. It bothers me a lot that I frequently provoke a puzzled response. This is very prevalent when believers change churches. Brenda and I can honestly say that we have never felt free to choose which church we go to. We are servants of God, and he knows best where he wants us to serve. I used this illustration recently with someone considering leaving a church. Large building companies have multiple building sites across the nation. They have clearly defined management structures. It is not in order for an individual worker to suddenly decide to go and work on a different site without consulting management. When Jesus said he would build his church, I guess he would expect his work force to be available to build where he wanted them to build.

[Acts 17:26.](#)

When Paul spoke to group of philosophers and debaters in Athens, he said this,

"From one man God made every nation of men, so that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live."

We do believe that God has in his blueprint the ideal location of our residences, where we are to live in accordance with his plans. We have a number of times over the years had particular personal leanings to move house, having particular hopes to live in the countryside. Each time we felt the hand of God restraining us and are thankful that he did. Many of our neighbours have come to Christ as a result, and geographically we have been ideally placed to fulfil the assignments that God has given us.

## Be Content with Little or Much

**Paul to the Philippians writes,** "I have learned to be content in all circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. **I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation,** whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want."

**I want to talk about money and material provision and how to manage these well, and about giving.** Paul said on a couple of occasions, first came the natural and then the spiritual. When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, one of the things he said was, "If you don't believe me when I tell you about earthly things, how can you possibly believe if I tell you about heavenly things." I do encourage people to see that God is God of the natural, the spiritual and the miraculous and each dimension plays its full part in all of God's plans and purposes. I have met many Christians who have attempted to live in a single dimension with very little success. So please understand that what I offer you first is rooted firmly in the natural because the natural comes first. Then we will look at the spiritual and then the miraculous. I begin with a story. A young man from one of the congregations that we served, came to us with a problem. He was about to be evicted from his council flat because he was well behind with his rent. I contacted the council and had a conversation with the rents manager asking if he could hold back the eviction on the understanding that I would attempt to work with his tenant and establish regular payments. The young man, a sincere Christian, met with us for a review of his finances. He was on benefits and jobless. The long and the short of it was that we discovered it would be possible for him to manage on his income if he worked to a budget. Talking about a budget was like speaking a foreign language. We took a short cut by explaining a very simple and basic truth. Now listen Matt, this is the principle you need to live by or I will have to get back to the council and let them evict you. **Whenever you are thinking of making a purchase you only have to answer one simple question. "Can I afford it?"** Well, even with the threat of eviction hanging over him he was struggling to face reality. "So Matt, in the light of our conversation what are your plans? In a way it was quite comical to listen to his tortuous attempts to justify the purchases he wanted to make. "Yes Matt, I hear what you are saying but you haven't answered my question have you? Can you afford it?" Off he went again on a different track trying to convince me about his need to purchase what he wanted. "Yes Matt, I hear what you are saying but you are not answering my question are you? Can you afford it?" Six times we went through this routine and finally he gave up the battle and admitted he could not afford it. "There you are Matt, I have given you one simple rule to follow and if you follow it you will have no more money problems." He did follow it, and he was able to pay his rent on time and he paid back his arrears to the council and he got a good job and he was able to buy a motorbike that he could afford. **The moment that he became responsible in the natural, the blessings of heaven opened to him. He was blessed in the both in the**

**natural and the spiritual, and indeed the miraculous.** This is why I have chosen to give most of the space in this chapter to talking about money in a down to earth fashion. Matt developed a healing ministry, became a gifted evangelist, and joined an evangelising Christian Motorcycle club. With regard to finances and provisions, if we don't first act with responsibility and wise management in our normal everyday affairs we can't expect to be effective spiritually. If ever money or wants become our managers we will find them to cruel masters.

**Here are some helps.** I can provide all kinds of practical money management advice but learning to live contentedly with little or much can only be achieved through changed thinking. We live in a 'must have' culture that has taken a grip on many. Learning to 'do without' was a happy gift from the culture that formed the principles I work on. One principle instilled in me by my Dad was never to borrow money. I thank him for it. It has served me well. You see, borrowing permits us to cross that line I set for Matt. "Can you afford it?" Clearly there are exceptions where it makes good sense to spread the cost of some high cost item over a period of time, but the same principle still applies even here. "Can I comfortably afford the repayments and the associated interest on the loan?" Stress is a major issue in our culture and financial stress is maybe the biggest. It is responsible for the majority of marriage failures, many suicides, mental health problems, and much general worry and unhappiness, none of which represent Kingdom living, and in most cases are self inflicted. Debt, the burden of debt, is a huge, huge issue today. Even our nation is trillions of pounds in debt and much poorer as a consequence. But the population cries, "Austerity has no place, so let us continue to spend, spend, spend and get deeper and deeper into debt." This happens to very many individuals too. One day the piper has to be paid, the devil will demand his due. I don't apologise for being forthright because so many people have lost their way in this matter. The bible tells us clearly that the love of money is the source of all kinds of evil. It is appropriate here to introduce the appeal that scripture makes to us, to follow the precepts of wisdom.

**Proverbs 2:** "My child, listen to what I say and treasure my instruction. Turn your ears to wisdom and concentrate on understanding. Cry out for insight, and ask for understanding. Search for them as you would for silver. Seek them like hidden treasures. For the Lord grants wisdom! From his mouth come knowledge and understanding! He grants a treasure **of common sense** to the honest." **James writes,** "If you need wisdom ask our generous God and he will give it to you." I do wonder how far our many failures are the consequence of simply failing to seek God's wisdom. Please make it a habit in all things.

Brenda and I married in 1966 and bought our first house. It was a modest new build townhouse. We paid our deposit and took out a sensible mortgage on the basis that we could meet the repayments out of my salary alone. This was just common sense. We restricted ourselves to what we could afford without borrowing. We bought a little

table and two stools for the kitchen, along with a free standing cooker and a kitchen cabinet. We were in clover. No washing machine, no drier, no dishwasher, no fridge, no fitted units, no heater, no floor covering, no anything else. And so on for the rest of our rooms. No central heating, no double glazing, no television, no telephone. Happy days! No loans! No financial worries! And so it stayed. We couldn't have been happier. Happiness was our relationship.

I wonder if start up families today could find such contentment and joy in the same circumstances, or would they feel impoverished? By today's standards I was, materially speaking, brought up in poverty. But we were not poor at all. We were content having to make our toys and invent games and use our imaginations to create our entertainment. It was a good life. I share these things to convey my sadness at seeing so many people in need of so much in order to find a form of contentment that doesn't bring contentment. As a teenager, I spent a number of years living in the Australian outback with my Dad and brother and lived in a corrugated iron shack to begin with. Then we upgraded to a ten foot by six foot hardboard caravan and cooked on a little paraffin primus stove. No running water, no fridge, no power supplies, no bathroom. We were content. I repeat what Paul said. "I have learned to be content in all

circumstances." Those circumstances may be affluence and that's great. There is no need for guilt. We must also be content to enjoy the fruits of our labours and the generousities of God. There are times to have little and times to have much but contentment can be unchanging. The list of things that Brenda and I did not have when we married, we do have now and are pleased to have them and enjoy them.

**The main thing is that we have always been able to remain generous with our giving by not being over generous with ourselves.** I meet many Christians. Most of them have very generous hearts. But some are often stifled in their charity by having so little to give because they are overreached with their finances.

**Strict budgeting is a powerful tool.** When Brenda and I married and opened a joint bank account, the bank manager invited us into his office and talked with us about budgeting. He was truly a gift from God! Taking a fatherly approach, he explained that he could provide us with a budget account at no cost to ourselves. It was brilliantly conceived. He explained how it worked. What we had to do was list all our bills for the year, mortgage, utilities, rates, insurances, road tax, etc. etc. Then we had to add them all together and divide by twelve. The budget account was a second account and at the beginning of each month, the bank would transfer the amount of the monthly calculation from our main account into our budget account. Our kindly manager said, "Now just pay your bills from the budget account as soon as they come due. Don't worry about going into the red. There will be no interest charge. Some of the time you will be well in credit and it will all balance out at the end of the year."

Imagine, never having to worry about paying bills. On all other spending we had only to glance at our main account to answer the question, "Can we afford it?" Now we were free to give according to the guidance of

scripture. Here are some brief excerpts from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, chapters 8 and 9. "You must each decide in your heart how much to give. Don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure, for the Lord loves a person who gives generously and cheerfully. Whatever you give is acceptable to him if you give it eagerly. Give according to what you have, not what you don't have. Then God will generously provide all that you need. **You will have everything that you need and plenty to share with others.** God is the one who provides seed for the farmer and then bread to eat. In the same way he will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of generosity in you. Yes, you will be enriched in every way so you can always be generous."

We have looked comprehensively at the natural, then very briefly at the spiritual, so just a few words now about the miraculous. **I believe that when we are faithful in natural and spiritual matters, we can rely on God for miracles when they are needed.** Space does not permit me to prove this through our many testimonies, but trust me when I say it is the Father's joy to bless us in ways we could not expect or anticipate. Don't think for a moment that I am one to align with what is referred to as the prosperity gospel. If my children made me a gift with a view to extracting a reward from me, I would not particularly value it. It has become a selfish act on their part. We should give with the expectation of it being a sacrifice because that must be our heart.

Besides learning to manage our money well we need to learn to manage our time well also. Time and money are intertwined. We spend time in the same way that we spend money. We give time in the same way as we give money. Spending too much on ourselves leaves us little to give to others or to God. If we are so frantically busy earning money that we become overstressed, that we neglect our families, yes, that we neglect God's work, that we neglect those lost souls that Jesus is wanting to save into his kingdom, then a diagnosis and a review is needed. I think it is wise to think of budgeting time in the same way as we do money. A frenzied lifestyle will always want to drag us away from time spent with God and our family so make that a first area to re-order and work from there. Let first things be first. Let God's light and wisdom help us to see through the fog so that priorities can be rearranged. We can seek out someone full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit and talk things over with them. If the way we spend your time keeps us away from God's house this is not a good thing. Consult seriously in prayer with the Lord about this and seek his guidance.

The scriptures give good guidance: Remember to observe the Sabbath Day, by keeping it Holy. You have six days each week for your ordinary work, but the seventh day is dedicated to the Lord your God. (Exodus 20:8.)

Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works and let us not neglect our meeting together as some people do.

(Hebrews 10:24-25)

There is a phrase used for both Jesus and Paul regarding attendance at the synagogue.----- 'As was their custom'.

I think we can sometimes get clear guidance when we consider asking God an appropriate question such as, 'Father are you happy with me missing attendance at your house as often as I do?' Would he give us a peace about this? Another way of looking at it is this. If I neglect God's House, I believe I would be neglecting God's family. I was given a serious correction by God on that score. There was a time some years ago when I began to feel an unsettlement in my spirit. I sensed that something was out of order and that I was failing to hear God on this. I shared this with Brenda, saying to her, "You know Brenda, I feel as though God is trying to get through to me on something and I am not getting it." At the time I was in the thick of pastoral responsibility in a growing church and at the same time managing some very demanding missions and projects. She replied immediately, "I know what God is trying to tell you Michael. He is trying to tell you that you are neglecting me!" It took me a few moments to catch on that she was deadly serious. It was quickly on my mind to point out just how busy I was 'doing God's work' in the hope that she would be more understanding. Then God spoke to me very clearly and said, "Michael, I can find someone else to lead your church, and I can find someone else to manage the projects, but I can't find someone else to be a husband to your wife or a father to your children. Only you can do that." No room for argument against heavenly wisdom like that. I was cut to the heart and repented, asking Brenda to forgive me. I changed my ways and blessings followed. Here is some helpful advice. Don't ever be afraid of God's correction. In fact, go to the trouble of seeking it. I am so grateful to him for the times he has corrected me on my journey. Always it has produced remarkable fruit. In everything, seek him and keep on seeking him until you reach that wonderful place of peace that passes all understanding.

## Fix What Needs Fixing in Your Church

I am acutely conscious that with this book, I am addressing a wide audience. It maybe that you belong to a lively, successful church and are able to conclude that little restoration is required. If this is truly the case, bless you indeed. Thank you for your enterprise and faithfulness. Perhaps you might consider identifying with my vision to give help to those churches that need it, and would be glad of it. When we first planted church, we linked with a network of 40 Yorkshire churches overseen by a remarkable man called Peter Fenwick. He was indeed a Godfather to us. We learned so much from him and the churches in his network. He was a great example to us, equipped and encouraged us in all sorts of ways. He inspired us to be always available to give a helping hand to those churches that were ready to be helped. Brenda and I have worked into many situations and it is remarkable how easy it is for a 'fresh eye' to see ways of developing churches that have become so familiar with their own ways that they have failed to see the way forward, or simply to improve what they were already doing.

As part of our history, we connected with a network of churches that had established a team of very capable leaders. Some of these leaders were released to help and guide needful churches in their network. The program that had been developed was presented as 'Assess and Bless'. By invitation, this team would be made available to spend time with receiving churches to do thoroughly what is now done in schools under the banner of OFSTED. Having departed for a while to consider things they would then return and help the churches to make changes and put into practice progressive ideas particularly suited to their individual situation. It was impressive. What a great idea. I would love to see successful churches develop such a spirit of service.

When we talk about success though, we should be very wise in how we assess it. I suspect that as with the adage, 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder', success can be in the eye of the beholder. Once more I think we must try very hard to see through the eyes of Jesus and keep seeking and asking what he would consider to be a successful church. I had a conversation a while ago with a church minister who had moved to the North of England to pastor a Traditional Church. He was from a New Church, charismatic background, so I was surprised that he had chosen to minister in a traditional setting. We had a conversation about this. It became clear what had influenced him. The church he belonged to was Spirit filled, joyful, freely expressing the gifts of the Holy Spirit, touching heaven one might say. The problem was that they were not seeing people saved. On the same road was a traditional church, not Holy Spirit centred but gospel centred. They were seeing lots of people saved. In effect, one had the Spirit and one had the Word when in practice there was no reason at all why both could have, and should have, had the

Spirit and the Word in abundance. They were successful churches in their own eyes but each in practice was only partly successful. One was enjoying heaven so much they had

forgotten their Lord and Saviours mission to seek and save the lost. The other was so focussed on the task on earth, that it was missing out on enjoying heaven.

Categorically, Jesus is not asking us to choose between such models of church but looks for churches to be consumed by him, consumed by his mission, and to be filled, guided, equipped and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

I have entitled chapter 20, The Magnetic Church. Don't jump ahead please but read the intervening chapters first to interpret that chapter in a clearer way. I just want to make one relevant observation here in the form of a question. Is your church a magnet for existing believers, or for people needing to be saved, or for both, or for neither? When the question comes up, is your church lively and growing, and you are able to answer confidently yes, do consider carefully just what kind of growth you are experiencing? How much of it is transfer growth, that is, Christians moving into your district, or joining you through dissatisfaction with their existing churches? How much is because existing members are having children? How much of your growth is a response to new believers having accepted Christ and being baptised? Are we populating heaven, or simply redistributing heaven's children who have their names already written in the book of life? We should I believe examine our churches honestly and ask ourselves the question. Is our church in need of restoration and in what ways? Here is another of my parables.

Not long ago I was approached by my daughter who asked, "Dad, I want you to look at a damaged chair. It belongs to a friend of mine. She is so upset. Someone smashed it in a fit of rage and it is very precious to her. It is one of a set of four antique dining chairs given to her by her parents along with a table. She is terrified of them finding out and wants to know if it can be repaired?" Warning bells started ringing. The phrase,

"Can you just take a look at this?" has far too often involved me in a lot more than looking. With great caution I replied, "I will look at it and give an opinion but that is all." Promptly, the chair appeared in my workshop. Smashed was not an overstatement. "I don't really think it can be repaired." was my response. That was that. However, the wreck lingered in my workshop awaiting its return. It kept nagging me. Each time I looked at it, I began to wrestle in my mind with possible ways it could be reconstructed. It became a challenge. Next time I saw my daughter, I found myself saying, "Look, tell your friend I am prepared to have a go at repairing her chair providing she accepts that there is little hope of success and my attempts may eventually consign it to the scrap box." The reply came back from her friend, "Please do try." Well, I have to say, that I greatly surprised myself with the final result. The chair showed no signs of its previous damage and perfectly matched its companions. I was very pleased with it and remembered the words in Genesis, "Then God looked over all that he had made and saw that it was very good." So I had a moment with the Lord sharing his sentiment.

Joy in restoration seems to be programmed into the soul. Have you noticed how many TV programmes take advantage of this. I do think it is time to admit that our nation has turned away from God and turned away from the church, with all the attendant consequences. Brokenness and decay are all around. I believe it is imperative that we

discover how to restore and invigorate our local churches wherever that is needed, with a view to restoring our nation. May we be nagged by this brokenness till we see ways of attempting what may seem impossible, throw caution to the winds and risk failure if that is necessary. Acting with faith and courage brings with it the opportunity for success.

As one embarks on the journey of restoration and growth, inevitably it will involve change, and change is rarely popular. It is vital to establish in any congregation pursuing such a vision an adventurous spirit and extreme positivity. Responses such as 'Ah but', 'What if', or 'We can't do that', can easily arise with the over cautious. In my early involvements with church planting, I remember preaching a sermon with the ridiculous title of, 'The destructive power of the choking 'Ah but Weed'. You can guess at the content! For the season coming, I do not think we have the option to be timid. I believe it is a time for bold, almost reckless faith.

My second testimony is this. When I reached the age of sixty I felt that it was time to bring a generational change to the leadership of the church I was responsible for at that time. So, with the agreement of our team, began a period of transition and appointed a young man to be apprenticed. I stayed to oversee this transition until one Sunday morning about two years later as Brenda and I drove home from church I felt a deep peace and conviction that our work was finished. I shared this with her and we began to wonder what our next assignment would be. Within three days we had a visit to our home from the Pastor of a church. He asked us if we would join his leadership team. The remarkable timing of this convinced us that we should give his request serious consideration. We attended his church the following Sunday and met the congregation. There was an immediate witness for them and for us that we should agree to join them for a while and work with the leadership to move the church forward.

Initially, we simply spent time meeting with people and listening to what they had to say regarding their hopes for the church. Only gradually did they feel they could open up to us without being dishonourable to any of the leaders. This is what emerged. Their church had only a few years earlier been four hundred strong. However, decline had set in and was now only one hundred and fifty strong. Not only that, many of the remaining members eventually admitted to us that they also were thinking of leaving the church. We asked them individually what their dissatisfactions were and a picture soon emerged. Their concerns and disappointments were entirely justified. What had we got into? Could this be fixed? It looked very doubtful. Well, we felt that there was nothing to be lost. We might as well throw caution to the winds and deal with the many issues head on. As you might have guessed, management by the Pastor was at the hub of every issue. We asked all those who were planning to leave the church to grace us with six months to try and resolve things. Amazingly every single one of them agreed to this. Next, I asked for an elder meeting to be arranged where I could present the concerns of the members. It soon became evident that the Pastor had not called an elder meeting for eighteen months even though his team had consistently asked for one. He particularly didn't want a meeting that was intended to confront issues. Was

this the time to walk away? I would have been wholly justified. I requested a one-to-one meeting with him. Eventually I got a meeting arranged and was ready for a confrontation. Before we met, the Lord graciously gave me a remarkably clear picture in my mind of a galvanised metal bucket that represented the church. A number of holes had been punched through the sides of the bucket and water was leaking out at some pace through these many holes. It was easy for me to identify what these holes represented and I will come back to this. God used my knowledge of metalwork to explain how these holes could be repaired and become the strongest parts of the bucket. Very simply, flatten the area where the punch hole is, cut two small metal plates to rivet and solder on each side, job done. So, I was able to go to the Pastor with an encouraging plan for restoration and promised him my full help and expertise in repairing the holes in his church. A short time later, I was leafing through a commercial magazine which showed a full-page coloured picture of the identical galvanised bucket, holes and leaks that I had seen in my mind earlier. The grace of God! The bold caption said, 'Stop your Company leaking'. I was thankful for this confirmation because the Pastor did not respond. Within a few months he left the church and we all set to work with enthusiasm.

I will use the leaky bucket illustration only to identify where the leaks had developed in this church and permit following chapters to speak comprehensively into the issues that had emerged. Then we can expand our insight and understanding, and explore practical solutions.

1. Lack of a clear, common, communicated vision amongst the leaders.
2. Few individuals had a personal vision or understanding of their God appointed assignment.
3. The people lacked a voice. Opportunities for corporate or individual dialogue between the Pastor and church members were difficult to identify.
4. The small group fellowship structure had diminished to two couples meeting together.
5. Corporate prayer was a rare occurrence.
6. After three months of being involved with this church we had not on any occasion broken bread together. This was our first restoration work.
7. There were no teaching courses or training and equipping structures available.
8. Baptism in water seemed to have fallen off the agenda. We soon discovered a number of people who had for some time been ready to be instructed and baptised.

9. Sunday Services had become predictable, inflexible, and lacking in variety and content.
10. The children's workers were very able and dedicated, but felt undervalued and taken for granted. They were.
11. Vision for outreach and community involvement was difficult to find.

You can probably now see how appropriate my parable of the broken chair is. As with the chair, I set to work systematically to address all these issues. The elders and all the people were highly cooperative and Brenda and I were greatly encouraged by the love shown to us by the precious people of God in that place. Their willing response was a joy. And yes, the holes were mended.

## Be a Great Example

When writing to the Greek church of Thessalonica, the apostle Paul wrote this: 'And so you became a model, a great example, to all the believers in Greece, both the northern regions and the southern regions. God's message rang out from you to every church in Greece and beyond. Your faith in him has become known everywhere. As we travel about we don't need to tell anyone about you, they have already heard and are eager to tell us.'

What an accolade! How we would like to belong to a church like that? Wow! Isn't this a vision to aim for in our own churches. We might not become as renowned as the Thessalonians but we could surely become renowned in the immediate districts where we church, and possibly beyond. We could make it our goal to become an inspiration to the communities and churches where God has placed us.

I once read a book entitled, 'The Power of Setting Goals.' and was convinced by the reasoning. It can be all too easy to settle for what we already have in our churches and just keep on doing the same old things in the same old way, unchanging, without adventures of faith. Goals inspire us towards creativity and invention and give us energy and motivation. Suppose that a church set a goal to find some way of blessing their local community, winning its appreciation, and establishing good relationships. A brainstorming session would soon throw up ideas and those ideas could be considered according to the available resources of the church. Goals should always be achievable. Prayer and the leading of the Holy Spirit are indispensable if the work is to be a work done in partnership with God.

A few years ago, a church I belonged to decided to bless the local secondary school. I helped at a workshop based Saturday club for disadvantaged pupils. Later we built a peace garden at the same school where staff and pupils could retreat for contemplation and prayer. We served this same school with the secondment of gifted Christian youth workers, who helped with assemblies, religious education, mentoring, clubs, sports etc. This was a great example. A church we were in touch with in the early stages of its development, limited in its resources, chose to litter pick the rather deprived area where the church met. It was a great example of service to the community and much appreciated. In the early days of church planting, we established a church shop on the main road that ran through our town. It combined a Christian book and craft shop with a cafe and a retreat for missionaries on holiday.

Possibilities are endless in their variety.

After reading Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, I thought how helpful it would be to be transported back in time and have the opportunity to study this church at first hand. To be soaked for a while in its life and discover just what was at work to make it so

renowned across a whole nation. There are only a few clues given by Paul but it is surely worthwhile for us to take a close note of them. In the first letter we hear of, 'faithful work, loving deeds and enduring hope in Christ.' In the second, 'flourishing faith, growing love for one another, endurance and

faithfulness under severe persecution, hardships and suffering. Oh how I wish we could have the opportunity to observe the ways in which these amazing people gave practical expression to these remarkable qualities. All one can assume is that their practices were so clearly visible for all to see that they were talked about across a whole nation. Simply giving assent to a set of beliefs is never going to impress our nation. Singing our holy songs of love towards God, or hanging onto every word of sermons however profound they are, will not by themselves be a great example until they are translated into visible acts of faith, practical demonstrations of what Christ-like love actually looks like. The apostle James writes,

'What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions. You see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless. Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works.'

This is forthright speaking from James and one can detect a measure of exasperation leaking through. He was expressing a fundamental truth that it seems his hearers were slow to grasp. Our faith will only be a great example to believers and unbelievers alike in as much as it can be seen in action.

When I consider this marvellous church in Thessalonica, unlike many churches that Paul wrote to, he is high on praise and low on criticism. Out of his extravagant love for all the churches Paul was free to pour out generous encouragement and praise for all that they were doing well. At the same time he was ready to call them to account and speak disciplinary words to them. After a careful reading of Jesus words through John, to the seven churches in the book of Revelation, we see that Jesus also would praise and criticise each one according to their deeds. The church at Laodicea came off very badly. It is all criticism. Not a single word of praise does Jesus use. One of the things he tells them to do is to buy an ointment for their eyes so that they can see. (A metaphor) He severely criticises them for being lukewarm. But, he presents them with the solution. "Look! I stand at the door (of your church, is the best interpretation.) and knock. If you open the door (of your church) I will

come in". The obvious implication is that this church was in its terrible state of failure because they had left Jesus outside. This church and the church at Thessalonica were at the opposite ends of the spectrum. My assured interpretation is that Jesus was at the very centre of one and on the outside of the other. If we want to be great example churches, we must bring Jesus to the very centre of all that we do. We must learn, as I know I keep repeating, to see as he sees, look where he looks and give him full reign.

Jesus, we call you Lord. We pray, "Come into the very centre of our churches and take your place. Build your Church Lord".

To end on a very happy note, I notice that Paul encouraged the Thessalonians by making a special point of reminding them of all the rewards they can expect when Christ returns. We are blessed indeed when in the trials and demands of our Christian faith we take time to meditate with joy on the rewards of heaven. And I do not think it is presumptuous, when one has worked faithfully for the Lord, to imagine him watching over us with his great love, and saying, "Well done good and faithful servant." We can always encourage ourselves in the Lord in a world where encouragement is scarce.

## Call in the Master Builder

**Matthew 16:** When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" "Well," they replied, "some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say one of the other Prophets." Then he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Christ, Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being. Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means 'rock'), and upon this rock **I will build my church.**"

One of the ways that I find to interpret this, is that because Peter had now become a man capable of receiving the revelations of heaven, Jesus was now able to start building his church. I believe that true works of

Christ can only be built with people capable of receiving revelation.

Works of man alone are incapable of building the Church of Jesus Christ.

"Not by human might or power," says the Lord, "but by my Spirit." "Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit of God and understand what he is saying to the churches." It is imperative in our day that churches learn to listen with the greatest care to what God and Jesus have to say through the Spirit. It is a time for all of God's people to become a prophetic people. God has made a gift to the churches of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip the people. Where are these gifted people? There is a chapter on the way about this but for the moment let us simply be aware that God's plan includes the provision of prophets to the churches to help us all to know how to listen to and understand and act on what the Holy Spirit is saying.

It is surprising in a way that Jesus didn't come to spend his time on earth as a fisherman, especially when his call to his disciples was, "Follow me and I will show you how to fish for souls." It seems he was pretty good at knowing where to throw nets in the water. But God chose for him to be a carpenter. Forget all those artistic representations of Jesus where he is shown in a little workshop making a simple domestic item. Traditionally woodworking trades are divided into cabinet makers, joiners, and carpenters. The carpenter is the one who works on the heavy timber work associated with buildings. Roofing timbers, beams and joists. The Greek that 'carpenter' is translated from, refers to this kind of work, but also includes the work of the stonemason. So, if he were working like this today, we would refer to him as a builder.

Another helpful change of image would be to remember that as a Jew, Jesus would never have worn his hair long. I want us to adopt a true image of Jesus the man, a very practical man. He was a robust builder by trade so he knew what he was talking about when he talked about building. He used a house building metaphor when he challenged people not simply to be hearers of the word but doers of the word. It is like building on sand he said. Along comes a storm and it is washed away. Build on rock he advises and we find him telling us that he is going to build his church on rock. Today we achieve the same using concrete. I can imagine Jesus saying, "Dig your foundations deep and fill them to the top with concrete." Though Peter was a fisherman, listen to what he writes in his first letter: "You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house." Paul writes to the Corinthian church, "You are God's field. You are God's building." He explains to us that all kinds of seeds can be sown in us, they can be watered, they can grow, and we can be fruitful. He switches metaphor and continues, "I have laid the foundation like an expert builder, now others are building on it. But whoever is building on this foundation must be very careful, for no one can lay any other than the one we already have - Jesus Christ.

I would happily introduce lots of other scriptures but want to be concise. **What I hope to convey is that we are being planted, we are being built, but also we are called by God to be planters and builders.**

Paul continues with his messages by saying this: "We are being carefully joined together in Christ Jesus the cornerstone, becoming a holy temple of God." Then he goes on to say sternly and with warning, "Anyone who builds on that foundation may use a variety of materials, for example gold, silver, jewels, wood hay or straw. But on the judgement day, fire will reveal what kind of work each builder has done. The fire will show if a person's work has any value. If the work survives, that builder will receive a reward. But if the work is burned up, then the builder will suffer great loss. The builder will be saved, but like someone barely escaping through a wall of flames.

As I write this chapter, the TV news media keep showing the devastation of the Australian bush fires. All over the south east, thousands of people are seeing everything they own burned to the ground, and are literally escaping through a wall of flames. They are suffering a great loss. Now if you are like me, you could easily slip into a mindset of avoidance when the scriptures confront us with talk about judgement. It's very scary. But every so often I have to take myself to task and remind myself that the time will come when I have to give an account to God for the way I have lived, how I have served him, how I have treated people, and not become complacent. I want my

work for God to have value, to survive, and will be very happy to receive and enjoy whatever reward I am worthy to be given.

What I hope for in each chapter is that I can create amongst us fresh way of looking at things. In this chapter I have introduced Jesus in his identity as builder and if we are to be effective as his body in action on the earth, I think that it is vital that we share his identity. I hope we will begin to see ourselves as builders, co-workers with Christ. I want us to see ourselves on his building site with our sleeves rolled up, being apprenticed, learning new skills and building church according to his design.

At its simplest, when we talk about building church, we are talking about building people. We really must work hard to rid ourselves of the associated clutter of associations that have attached themselves to the word church such as buildings, institutions, denominations, clerical garb, religious language, ceremonies, festivals, calendars, names, notice boards, and religiosity in general. I think we should keep telling ourselves, until it finally sinks in, that the church is simply the family of God. We are being built up, and being built together by the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, so our building work is to co-work with them and to serve and build up each other up in every possible way. It is only people that are destined for heaven. I have studied design in some depth and I can happily assume that Jesus must be a brilliant designer, a brilliant architect. I believe that he has a blueprint for each of our local church families, and that the more closely we follow the instructions of scripture, the more closely we listen to his voice regarding how we are to build in our particular locality and beyond, the closer we will build according to his blueprint.

The essential principles of design start first of all with 'Function'. What is the essential purpose of that which is being designed? All other aspects of the design must relate to and serve its purpose. There is something of a mystery that designers recognise. The closer the design conforms to the function, the finer the form and appearance becomes. It works the opposite way round when a designer attempts to begin with how nice can he make it look? The function will usually suffer badly. The point I am making here is that the more we concentrate on what Jesus sees as the purpose of his church, the more easily will we be able to read his blueprints and the more beautiful it will appear. Clearly the church at Thessalonica that I introduced you to in chapter ten was such a beautiful looking church, because it was working out its function in such a remarkable manner.

Further chapters will introduce lots of practicalities on how to build in partnership with God, with particular emphasis on equipping. I will close this chapter with a motivational parable through another testimony. It epitomises the work of restoration. Keep in mind the metaphor of living stones that Peter used. During my years as a landscape gardener I was called to look at a prospective restoration project. The owner of the property took me to see his huge back garden. I was aghast and daunted at what he showed me and what he wanted done. The only way I can get near to describing it is to ask you to imagine a bomb site, and then imagine a paradise garden that he wanted me to produce from it. The house had been built in the nineteen thirties. Everywhere

there were heaps of random shaped stones, tons of them that were the residue of previous owner's projects. The stones were of different types, colours, thicknesses, sizes, no two the same. The proprietor shared his dream with me. Broad patio's, sweeping curved pathways, changes of level with wide steps and pillars connecting, rockeries, lawns, even a fountain and pond with underground water supply. His dream was looking like my nightmare. His closing declaration was, "and I want it all built out of the existing stone." I was not ready to commit myself to this venture yet. I asked him to leave me to wander round and have a good think, so he retreated indoors. Mainly, I wanted to investigate the supply of stone, and spent an hour pulling at the various heaps to see what was there, and what it would be possible to build. I can well imagine Jesus doing this when he is planning to restore or build a church. Stone is a wonderful material. It can be trimmed, split, reshaped, refaced, all the different pieces arranged in various beautiful patterns and mortared together and pointed in different styles. Each individual stone in random stone walling carries equal importance. Each separate stone depends on all the others for the display of its beauty. The large stones and the small set each off other by the way they fit alongside each other. The large stones look nothing, the small stones look nothing, the medium stones look nothing, until they share the stage. Paul when writing to the Corinthian church (1:12:12) uses the metaphor of the body and its many parts all being indispensable to one another and all being of equal value. None of us ever need to seek position or importance in the church. Christ will position us, and whatever that position is, it carries the same importance as every other position. For Christ to build his church through us effectively we need to really understand this at a fundamental, root level. Dear friends, as a son or daughter of God we can't find a greater value or importance.

The offspring of kings are princes and princesses.

Another truth is this. As living stones our place and position will constantly fluctuate. God wants to mend us, heal us, purify us, reshape us, tenderise us, grow us, increase us, beautify us and equip us, and position us, not to make us more important, but to make us more effective in his purposes, advancing his Kingdom, building his church and reaching the lost.

I did take on the project. Of all the projects that I worked on this was my favourite, and the one I am most proud of. The final result was remarkable. Happily, the owner of the house made a comprehensive photographic record of the proceedings from start to finish and presented me with a copy. I would love you to see it as an illustration of the parable.

## Make His Plan Your Plan

Our grandson is just approaching his fourth birthday. After discussions about where we are going to take him and what we are going to do, and when this has been decided, he will stretch out his arm, point his finger, and cry, "That's the plan." It's very comical. It is now his plan, as though he has invented it and is commanding it. You could imagine he was about to lead his troops into battle.

Jesus had ministered for three years, said it all, done it all, died and risen, and finally just before his return to heaven we read in the last verses of Matthew's gospel, his plan and purpose for the Church, clearly stated. **"Go and make disciples of all people everywhere. Baptise them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples all that I have taught you and all my commands."**

**THAT'S THE PLAN!** And Jesus explains that he will be present with us as this particular command is obeyed. He was not giving an invitation, not expressing a desire or a hope. He was giving a command from the position of having been given all authority in heaven and on earth by his Father. Now to my mind, being given a command by one who has absolute authority requires full attention and full obedience. And yet, when I consider in general, the response of God's people individually and corporately to this central command of our sovereign Lord, I find it on the whole being treated as an option. Rarely do I see individuals or local churches giving Jesus' abiding passion to seek and save the lost, top priority. He died that people may find eternal life and he has commissioned us to the task of being witnesses, reaching people with the good news, and leading them into God's kingdom. I write this with passion and grief in my heart. During my military training, I never questioned the fact that my commanding officer was to be respected, and obeyed without question. Military metaphors are used widely in the scriptures. We are referred to as 'Soldiers of Christ'. We are instructed to put on the whole armour of God. We are told to fight the good fight with all our might. We are told to carry the weapons of righteousness in our right hands and left. We are reminded that a soldier does not devote himself to civilian life. We fight not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers in the spiritual realm. And so on and so on. You can see that I am being forceful with this in an effort once again to help us through to a different mindset, to see things through the lenses of scripture and through the eyes of Jesus.

I have used my little grandson as a metaphor. He adopted our plans and made them his own. I want us to take the plans of Jesus and make them our own. I want us to stretch out an arm, point a finger and declare, "That's the plan, forward men!" When he says he will be with us, he is not offering to come as an observer or simply to be a companion watching from the side lines. He comes as our senior officer to train and equip us, to plan the operation, and to lead the way. He gives us the Holy Spirit to empower us, to come alongside and guide us, to give us wisdom and the right words

to speak. We are most unlikely to lead people to Christ in our own strength and wisdom. I make every effort not to use the term evangelism. I cringe at the sound of it not because it is a bad word but because of the clutter of false understanding and unhelpful practice that has become attached to it. Many times over the years I have heard from the pulpit this expression. "Get out of your comfort zone and get out there and tell people about Jesus." Ouch! That sounds painful! No, no! If it worked I would be all for it, and if it is working for you carry on with the pain, it is worth it. It would have helped me though, if those proponents of uncomfortable evangelism could have given testimony as to the nature of this discomfort and how such discomfort was an aid to someone being saved. It was never explained. Our experience tells us that the more comfortable and relaxed we are, the more comfortable and relaxed the people we are leading to Christ are, and the more easily they find faith. Metaphorically, it is quite painless driving in nails in with a hammer unless your thumb gets in the way. So if you are looking for painful evangelism, just do it unskillfully.

I was listening on God channel one evening recently to a well known mature and gracious man of God, who initially disappointed me by saying, "Over the past few decades, the church has been very productive and fruitful with its evangelism." Well, I couldn't have disagreed with him more strongly. My view was and still is that largely the church has, however well meaning, been failing badly in its evangelistic efforts. This fine gentleman paused for effect and followed with a shocking statement. "What I mean is that the church has been very effective in evangelising people away from the church." Had I not had such a high regard for him and the outstanding wisdom he had accumulated over many years, I would have been very upset at this and considered him to be very harsh. As I thought about this, I found myself unwillingly coming to the conclusion that he was stating a horrible truth. Of course one can find exceptions. Here and there some dedicated works are being beautifully undertaken that give full honour to our Lord, and people are being brought into the kingdom in good numbers. We need to learn from these people.

I want to spend a little time encouraging you. Brenda and I have lost count of the number of people that we have led to Christ over the years through person to person mission. I say categorically that it is not difficult to inspire people with a desire to know God, and to help them to turn to him. It defeats our understanding that a large majority of

Christians can fail in a whole lifetime to lead even a single person to Christ. This really needn't be. If you have the desire to see people saved, and have seen little or no success, it is not unreasonable for me to conclude that no one has ever motivated and equipped you for the task. This is not a popular activity in churches. In fact I hardly ever see it. I ask plainly, do you have a strong desire to see people saved into God's kingdom? We can help. It is the central focus of our ministry. The apostle Paul used an expression, "That which the Lord has passed onto me I pass on to you." This has always been our passion. I began to get agitated a couple of years ago by the fact that our success in reaching people was shared by so few, and yet I was entirely convinced that this was not because we had any unusual or special gifting, but that we simply knew

how to do it. Knowledge can be easily passed on. I spent twenty years as a school teacher passing on knowledge to students and motivating them. They were generally very successful and obtained high grades in their exams. It is only because they were motivated and well taught. Dear friend, if you desire to see people saved, you probably need to be taught how to do it. I have written two books for your instruction.

**'Populating Heaven'** is written for Christians who want to be shown how to lead people to faith. It is a comprehensive and very practical work that demonstrates how easy, relaxed, enjoyable and successful this task can be when the right principles are understood and put into practice. No need to come out of your comfort zone, quite the opposite. It is illustrated throughout with many examples of how particular individuals have become Christians through our ministry. You can do the same.

**'Choosing Heaven'** is written to be handed to those who have not yet become believers, but are showing an interest and are seeking help to understand what is involved. It is a very helpful tool for Christians who lack confidence in communicating the message themselves. The book communicates the Gospel in the easiest form of today's none academic, none religious language, providing people with a great opportunity to choose Christ. These books have not yet been published so if you want to obtain pre-printed, none profit copies, order from me direct by texting 07931 621 898, or email to [towlemike1@googlemail.com](mailto:towlemike1@googlemail.com)

Earlier I explained that when structures are designed while keeping their purpose as a priority, they turn out to be elegant. The proportions, beauty and aesthetic appeal are in the main dictated by fully satisfying functionality. My urgency is this. If we concentrate on returning our local churches to the essential purposes that Christ has designed them for, they will look beautiful, and become places of delight. I will close this chapter by quoting directly from an article written in UCB's latest copy of 'Word for Today' - (2019). It is presented by Leon Evans, the senior pastor of Lifecentral Church in Halesowen.

## **WHO WANTS THEIR CHURCH TO GROW?**

I have often asked Churches this question: **'Who wants their church to grow by reaching unchurched people?'** All the hands go up, then comes the killer question: **'Who would be willing to change some things you do in order for this to happen?'**

At this point not so many hands go up. Why? One reason is we've been suckered into believing things that aren't true; like we'd need to change what we believe or dumb it down absolutely not! So what does it mean?

Every church has a model or strategy of how they do church, and your model is perfectly suited for getting the results you are currently getting! So if you are happy with the results, do nothing..... but I think many of us are not happy; we long to see our churches grow by reaching unchurched people. It's possible but it's not easy.

Over the last few years at Lifecentral Church, Halesowen, we have been on that journey. It has meant digging deep into the Bible to see how Jesus communicated. It has meant looking at our language and approach, our environments, and the way we welcome people from the car park to the coffee at the end. One of the key game changers for us was the phrase, 'assume they are in the room'. What would be the implications in our churches if every week we assumed guests were there, even your none Christian friend or family member?

In Acts 15 the early church was debating what they should change or not change as new people were coming to faith. With remarkable clarity James listens to all the arguments, then says these powerful words: 'And so my judgement is that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God'. (Acts 15:19 NLT).

Two thousand years later, let's search our hearts and ask if we are, maybe unintentionally, making it difficult for people to turn to God, or are we willing to do whatever it takes to reach people that Jesus left heaven to reach and calls us to do the same. It's not easy..... but it's possible.

## Become Equipped and Mobilised?

**Ephesians 4:11-16.** Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.

Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ who is the head of the body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts to grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.

Wow! What a vision for church! To achieve this, Jesus as the architect builder, project manager, saw in his wisdom that this would need a strong team of variously gifted members, working together and training and equipping all of God's people to play their part. "Oh well, we can understand that, but let the lonely pastor do it all by himself why not. We have sort of got along with the one-man ministry model up to now, why change anything?" If I visited any church, and asked the question, "Who is the Pastor?" I would get a ready answer. If I asked, "Who is the apostle, the prophet, the evangelist, the teacher?" what response would I be likely to invoke. Think about this please. I will change the question. "Who in this church has an apostolic gift, a prophetic gift, an evangelistic gift, a pastoral gift, a teaching gift?" Or, "Who are those equipping the people with the many and varied skills they need?" When questions like this are asked, it does help us to consider how far we have drifted from the model of church the Bible shows us.

Actually, I am very wary of allocating titles where there is the risk of developing hierarchies. When people step into 'office' there are dangers of officialdom developing. Interestingly, the choice of 'minister' to describe church leaders was initially a good one because essentially it means 'servant'. Jesus came as a servant. The Prime Minister is meant to take on the identity of Prime Servant. That is the true meaning of his title. His considerable authority is an authority given to enable him to serve well. His many 'ministers' also are appointed as servants. Jesus warns us not to adopt titles for ourselves. "Let no man call himself Father, or Rabbi." I know a minister of a church who, though not a Roman Catholic, introduces himself, "I am Father so and

so". He clearly likes the title. Biblically speaking, Elders and Deacons were appointed in the early church and there are still many churches that correctly adopt this model. However, these titles like many other religious words, have been worn out or spoiled or are seen to belong to a bygone era. All this is my attempt to explain that I am not suggesting that we make appointments of, and give titles to, apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers and pastors. How we identify and free them to serve the church I leave as a question at this point. All I can do here is to ask that we look carefully at, and work out together, how to restore their ministries.

I have concerns that calling the main leaders Pastors, casts them in the roll of main 'carers of the flock'. Of course Jesus took on the identity of a good shepherd but it was hardly his exclusive role. He also exercised and exemplified the ministries of apostle, prophet, evangelist and teacher. If we call a leader, 'The Pastor', (singular), this can send out a strong message to the congregation that his or her main task is to care for them. He or she will live under this expectation and in faithfully responding, their main energies will be absorbed as they fulfil these expectations. Most frequently this provides a strong pastoral ethos in the church at the expense of weak apostolic, evangelistic, teaching and prophetic dimensions. My view is, that whatever terminology is chosen, the main leaders should take on, and be seen to take on, the role of 'overseers and facilitators', their task being to ensure that a plurality of ministries are identified, equipped and released so that the people are served and equipped in all aspects of their faith and mission. In doing this the quality of pastoral care will be magnified because those with pastoral gifts can team together, add to their pastoral skills through training and discussion, and establish within the body of believers a strong ethos of care. The people can be shown how to care for one another ensuring that everyone who needs care in its many dimensions receives it.

Many churches do, very productively, establish leadership teams, and teams need a team leader of course. As I have hinted at already the giving of titles and the creation of offices has the potential to generate hierarchies. The formation of 'committees' and the use of that term to describe them, in some strange way that I do not fully understand, frequently creates an environment where tensions arise. The church I described in a previous chapter, where we were involved in a major restoration over a number of years, had appointed elders and an administrator. The initial approach to me was, "Will you come and join the leadership team Mike?" I was happy with this until having settled in, I was asked if I would become an Elder. I felt uncomfortable. Brenda and I were making great progress with the restoration work, without having a title or holding office. I instinctively felt that we would be seen differently by the congregation, who were presently able to identify with us more easily because we had no title or office. I declined. We became great go betweens. We were identified by our gifts not by position.

I am always worried about being misunderstood when I push the boundaries somewhat by saying things like this. I am not suggesting for a moment that a church should not make appointments, only that the spirit of hierarchy is not given an opportunity to grow. Once a spirit of 'them' the leaders, and 'us' the membership

becomes established, the 'clergy' and the 'laity' for example, the designation of special seats or special types of dress, the personalising of titles, anything which divides, makes me uncomfortable. Often when I minister elsewhere but my local church I will be introduced as 'Pastor Michael Towle'. I am aware that this is a way of honouring me, and I appreciate that, but to be honest I get the cringes. I have no wish to be elevated by title because every one of God's people are worthy of equal honour. I know it is quite out of time and fashion now, but there was something rather precious being expressed when believers referred to each other as 'Brother John', or 'Sister Jane', and pretty well sums up what I am trying to communicate. If the focus is to become family rather than organisation, perhaps we will be less likely to fall victim to religious structures. Development of 'team' generally works well, and without creating hierarchy, people's individual gifts and abilities can be recognised and given place. No one is likely to feel less, or below, if it is said, "So and so would be really good at, or really helpful, doing such and such. Shall we invite them to be involved?" We all think, 'great', that will get the job done!

My dream is that all members of local churches begin to see themselves as a working family, a working team, getting on famously with the work that God has given them to do, learning on the job, being trained and equipped, learning new skills, passing those skills on to others, constantly honouring, appreciating, and encouraging each other, all motivated and mobilised by vision and purpose, able to develop strategy.

In the world of work it is fully accepted that to do their jobs effectively, staff need to acquire knowledge and skills. In the different trades it is obvious that apprenticeships have to be established where one already skilled generation passes knowledge and skills on to the next. British industry right now is desperately hampered because of what is termed the 'skills gap'. They are unable to recruit skilled workers because the education establishment has been too occupied with theoretical, academic pursuits, leaving the general workforce bereft of practical abilities. Most of my time in teaching I chose to give to teaching practical subjects. The headmaster of a large comprehensive school I was working in invited me into his office one day for a talk about my future career. I was a head of department at the time and entirely content to remain in that role. "Mr. Towle, your abilities are wasted in the workshops. I want to send you back to university on full pay so you can train for a future headmastership". He didn't doubt but that I would leap at the opportunity. I explained that I felt that I was serving the students well doing what I was doing. I explained that as I understood things, there was a desperate need for students to experience the fulfilment that comes from applying themselves to practical matters, and learning skills that would benefit them for life.

You see, the opposite of practical is impractical and we must learn to be practical in the way we do the tasks that God has set before us. If we ask the question, "Who has apprenticed you, and who are you apprenticing?" perhaps this will indicate how far we have fallen behind in the churches and how wide is the 'skills gap'. If I were to invite you to come and listen to me give a lecture on healing, you may be interested enough to come, but if I say, "I am going to run a series of healing workshops and apprentice you on how to develop a healing ministry." you may see this as having a much greater

appeal and find it much more useful, much more practical. When I did military training, we didn't sit in classrooms learning the theory of war. We were given uniforms, supplied with working weapons and live ammunition. We were shown how to use them, and given lots of practice in using them. At the end of our training we could shoot straight, use bayonets as they were meant to be used throw hand grenades correctly, and were competent to engage an enemy when the need arose. We were equipped and trained for war. In a previous chapter I made the point that the church is engaged in a war of righteousness against evil. I remember someone saying to me that it was easy for a church to become a passenger liner rather than a battleship.

In what ways do we need to be equipped, and how can this equipping be practically worked out in the local church? I will be as brief and concise as possible with these far reaching questions.

The best way to explain I think is to list a selection of equipping and training programs I myself have prepared and used in various churches and settings. These can be considered as a template and added to as the need arises.

**1. Equipped by the Holy Spirit:** This has to come top of the list. I am thorough and progressive with this, teaching first on the person, vision, purpose and work of the Holy Spirit, so we can adopt his vision, understand his agenda, align ourselves with it, and so engage in a powerful partnership to accomplish his plans.

This is followed by developing an understanding of how to live by the Spirit and then how to be led and guided by the Holy Spirit. We then look at the fruit that he can be produce in our lives. Next we look at the ministry gifts given by the Holy Spirit to empower us to fulfil the mission of Christ.

It is always the intention that those attending this workshop will discover how to be baptised with the Holy Spirit, continue to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and how to receive and exercise his gifts. The laying on of hands for impartation is practised in the workshops for those who ask. There are lots of opportunities to begin to practice using these gifts in a safe environment.

**2. Clothed with Power:** This is a follow on program for those who wish to understand at a deeper level how to minister in the authority and power of the Holy Spirit. There is a strong emphasis on ministering healing in its various forms. These are emotional healing, physical healing, and the healing of a person's spirit.

**3. Healing Workshops:** These provide an opportunity to be introduced to different types of healing prayer at a basic level, and to practice healing.

**4. How to Understand the Bible:** This gives a basic 'Birds Eye, Overview' of both the Old Testament and the New Testament. It sets out the chronology and content in such a manner as to make future Bible reading and exploration much, much easier to understand.

5. **Making sense of the Old Testament:** A follow on program from above that is more detailed and comprehensive. The OT will make even more sense!
6. **Twenty five ways of Hearing God:** Another title might be, **When Heaven Speaks:** The purpose of this teaching is to establish and cultivate the sensitivity to recognise when Father, Son and Holy Spirit are meeting with us so they can speak into our lives and to know very surely which voices are from heaven, which voices are from your own spirit and which are deceptive voices. Doing this program greatly helps people to develop fresh sensitivity to the voice of heaven and give increased access to insights and guidance from above.
7. **Joining a church and growing in faith:** This provides an introduction to the beliefs of Christianity, living righteously, prayer and the bible, worship, communion, becoming family, serving, and response to leadership.
8. **Where am I in my Journey?** This sets out a typical journey of deepening faith that helps us to discover our next steps. It begins with where we all usually start 'Just Looking' and then goes on to identify the process towards decision. Getting interested, questioning and seeking, understanding the gospel message, believing that it is true, desiring to act, making a decision. The track continues on the other side of decision by looking at baptism in water and baptism in the Holy Spirit, how to relate to God and his purposes, (partnership with Father Son and Holy Spirit), relating to the family of God, (Church), the personal life of devotion, servant and steward, no fear of death, resurrection, eternal life.
9. **Preparation for Baptism in Water:** Understanding the Kingdom of Heaven, rethinking our lives and turning to God, forgiveness, belief and faith, salvation to eternal life. The big plunge and what it symbolises.
10. **Discovering God's call for our personal ministry:** Vision, passion, purpose and strategy.
11. **Populating Heaven:** Understanding how to lead people to salvation and faith in Jesus Christ. Person to person engagement that is **opposite** to the exhortation, 'get out of your comfort zone'. This training is based on the two books I have previously written and mentioned in chapter twelve.

How such teaching and equipping programs are introduced and integrated into church life will depend upon the particularities of local churches. Firstly, does the leadership recognise the need and have a strong vision and intent to rearrange priorities? Who is willing, able and available to do the teaching? Where can these programs be taught, knowing that they are best taught in small groups? They all lend themselves to free discussion and questioning. Experience tells me that the home setting is ideal. My own approach would be to start by selecting a few alternative teaching units that I felt were most needed, and would be most helpful to individuals and the fellowship at large. I

would then offer this selection to the whole congregation for individual personal choice as to which unit they would like to be involved with. How this is put into practice can then be worked out. I find that presenting the teachings fortnightly works well, but there may be preferences for weekly or monthly sessions. Just go with the flow.

**Now here is a big issue.** How do we staff such a program where multiple units need to be taught at the same time? Let me explain. In secondary schools it is normal for teachers to spend most of their time teaching their specialist subjects, but can be called upon to teach any subject on the curriculum when the need arises. Providing that a good textbook is available, it is reasonably easy to stay one step ahead of the students even in a subject one knows little about. But one does need a good text book! We have been apprenticing a couple for some time now and have recently given them the opportunity to practice leading meetings when we come together. They are really enjoying it and feel invigorated by the experience. We have been greatly blessed by them. Unexpectedly they have been asked to get involved in leading meetings at their own church house group and have come to us for advice. Having emphasised the need to be clear about what they wanted to achieve, it emerged that their group were very keen to learn how to reach people with the gospel and lead them to Christ. "Why not teach that?" I suggested. They were somewhat daunted. "Come round for a practice session one evening?" I offered, "I will show you how to do it." What they expected I am not sure. When they came and we sat down together, I opened my book, 'Populating Heaven', and simply read to them the first chapter word for word, put the book down and said, "Shall we discuss this now?" I think they were quite taken aback at the simplicity of the approach. They went off rejoicing with the book in their hands.

What I am getting at is this, if church leaders prepare the teaching material expertly, in such a manner that it can be simply read out word for word 'if needed', this opens up the possibility that practically anyone in the congregation can competently lead a meeting. Read and discuss is a beautifully simple, winning formulae because it draws from the group the collective wisdom thereby contained. Another spin off is this. Very often, the less the group leader puts in, the more the people in the group give out. This provides an opportunity for gifts and ministries to be birthed, recognised and encouraged. I will close with a testimony to illustrate. My main contribution to church life was for many years practical serving. The minister, who naturally led the bible study group very competently, left to serve in another church. Pressure was put on me to take on his roll of group leader. I refused for a time, not seeing myself as qualified for the task of spiritual leadership. No one else wanted the responsibility, and the "But you're a schoolteacher Michael." card kept being played until I reluctantly gave in. Matthew's gospel focuses very strongly on the kingdom of heaven and I was beginning to get a vision for this so I proposed that if it was acceptable, I would lead them through this gospel chapter by chapter and we could discuss Jesus' teaching. This is how I handled it. You've guessed! Read and discuss. Anyone can do it. Blessings flowed despite or maybe because of this dramatically simple approach. No preparation needed. Matthew had done all the work. He had written his book and all I needed to do was read from it. Perhaps this is a suitable place to close this chapter. I hope it has been helpful.

## Don't Journey Without His Presence

**2 Chronicles 7:** When the Temple built by Solomon was completed, he stood on a bronze platform, looked up to heaven, and dedicated the temple to God in passionate prayer. He closed his prayer by saying, **"And**

**now arise O Lord and come into your resting place.** "When Solomon had finished praying, fire flashed down from heaven and burned up the offerings and sacrifices, **and the glorious presence of the Lord filled the temple. His presence was so strong, the priests could not enter.**

The people of Israel, who were gathered outside, fell down and worshipped God saying, "He is good! His faithful love endures forever".

**Exodus 40: 33-34.** So at last, Moses finished the work of building the Tabernacle. **Then the glory of God filled the tabernacle.**

**The presence of God was so strong, Moses could not enter.**

Bear with me. I will bring in the New Testament perspective shortly, but I want us to learn some valuable lessons from Moses first. Moses had an intimate relationship with God. Indeed, like Abraham, he was known as a friend of God. He was able to have bold conversations and felt free to pour out his heart almost to the point of confrontation, not fearing to offend God it seems. One day he had it out with God over his call to take the Israelites up to the 'Promised Land'. A full reading of this starting Exodus 33 at verse 12 can be consulted. My rather loose paraphrase goes like this. "This is your people God, they are your responsibility. So then, who are you going to send with me to help". God replied, "You don't have to worry about that Moses, I will go with you myself, my favour is on you, everything will be fine."

One would think that this would have been sufficient, but oh no, he wants to get everything absolutely clear. He wants double assurance, regarding this awesome responsibility. So, he continues the exchange. "If you don't go with us, unless it is altogether obvious that your presence is with us, setting us apart from other people, how will anyone know that your favour is on me? I want your favour to be demonstrated by your presence, I want it to be seen that you are with us. If not, do not ask us to leave this place. We

might as well stay here in the wilderness." I can half imagine Moses wanting to say, "If not, I'm not going".

I can wholly sympathise with Moses. If we are hoping to restore our churches to relevancy and make an impact on our communities, what we do will have little effect unless the presence and power of God is with us. Of all that needs to be restored in our churches, it is my firm view that the number one priority is to see the glorious presence of the Lord returned to our gatherings. All the clever schemes of men can never substitute for Gods obvious seen presence and favour amongst his people. Only this will mark us out from the secular world, and applies to us as individuals and collectively. The alternative is to construct empty shells of religion.

At the age of eleven, Brenda used to go every Sunday on her own to a very traditional, formal church. One morning she decided to take her three year old sister with her. When settled in the silence that was customary at the time, her sister, in a loud voice for everyone to hear, asked, "Where's God?" In her simple understanding, she expected to find God in the church. Oh that we could return to such simplicity and ask, "Where is God in all this?", as we go about doing what we do.

Let's consider some clues as to what we are seeking. When two of our neighbours came to faith, we provided the opportunity for them to experience different kinds of churches, and to attend different kinds of Christian events. One of these was a rural church fellowship in North Yorkshire. It had a reputation for experiencing powerful works of the Holy Spirit. When we left the car park and found our way to the barn where the Friday evening event was soon to start, we were in good time. The meeting had not yet started. The moment the four of us passed through the entrance way, we encountered an intense presence of God so strong, and tangible, that our two friends who had never experienced anything like this before, simultaneously began to weep deeply. Tears were free flowing for some time. How does one interpret this? It was as though God was melting their souls and doing a deep, deep work in their lives, a work beyond words that could only be achieved by a deep soaking in his presence. They were never the same again. It was as though they had received something direct from heaven, certainly a deep knowledge of God's love, possibly a profound awareness of the wonder of their salvation. Maybe they were being 'Kingdomed' to use my invented new word. These are deep mysteries. All I can say is, that when people encounter the powerful presence of God it can achieve in a few minutes far more than that which can be achieved by a person listening to a hundred sermons, or reading many books on faith. Lord I pray, "Invade your churches with your glorious presence. Let Heaven collide with Church."

Brenda and I returned to this church one Sunday morning just to enjoy ourselves in the presence of God, expecting the same. Hmmm. No extraordinary presence. We felt somewhat disappointed. We had a coffee and chatted to people. We all eventually got seated ready for the service to start. The small worship team positioned themselves. The welcome was given. The worship leader strummed the first note of the first song and in an instant the tangible presence of the Holy Spirit flooded the hall. We enjoyed

an amazing time of worship. Heaven was open. 'Tis mystery all' as the old hymn says. This church was founded in the 1970's in response to the renewal movement. During a recent conversation, this church was mentioned. Someone commented, "The only trouble is, it is still stuck in the seventies. It hasn't moved on. It's pretty old fashioned now." My immediate thought was, for heaven's sake, stay where you are. I don't deny that it can be good for churches to be contemporary in the way they worship. But big bands, loud music, loud speakers, smoke machines, big screens, the latest songs, theatre, digital technology, spot lights, strobe lights etc, cannot of themselves create the holy presence of God. The test of any particular form of worship is this. Has it ushered in the glorious presence of God? Are the worshippers encountering God and seeing their lives changed. Are they drawing closer to God, being healed, and growing stronger in faith. I guess that the Holy Spirit isn't choosy about worship styles. My feeling is that he looks for a place to occupy where he will be welcome, where hearts are towards God. While on holiday in Spain a few years ago, Brenda and I looked for a church to attend on Sunday as was our custom.

The only one we could find was a cathedral style Roman Catholic Church which was very traditional. Every word was in Latin or Spanish and we didn't understand a single thing. But you know what? The Holy presence of God was there in strong, strong measure. That was more than enough.

We came away with our souls satisfied!

You will find when you read what I say in chapter 19, 'Be Creative, Flexible and Adaptable' that I am committed to establishing forms and ways of doing church that are varied, effective, appealing, inviting, and essentially satisfy the longings and needs of believers at the same time as paving the way for unbelievers to find God. We must work hard to produce these. But the purpose of a wineskin is to hold and dispense wine. People are thirsty and hungry for God, even though they may not understand the source of their hunger and thirst. When they can come to our churches and experience his profound presence, we will have won the day.

We started this chapter looking for teaching in the Old Testament, and noted that the temple was filled with the glorious presence of God when it was dedicated to him. We can now take a look at the New Testament. I have chosen four scripture passages where the apostles Peter and Paul make it clear that we believers are now God's temple. So, the glorious presence of the Lord can fill us as we dedicate ourselves to him.

**1 Corinthians 3:16.** Don't you realise that all of you together are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God lives in you.

**1 Corinthians 6:19.** Don't you realise that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

**Ephesians 2:20.** We are members of God's family. Together we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. The cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself. We are carefully joined together in him, **becoming a holy temple for God to live in by his Spirit.**

**1 Peter 2:5.** You are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple.

**In Acts 2** we have the birth of the Church described to us. The believers are gathered together. Metaphorically the temple is ready for the 'glorious presence of the Lord' to fill it. When Solomon's temple was ready, fire flashed down from heaven. When the church was ready, fire flashed down from heaven. Heaven and Church Collide.

'On the day of Pentecost all the believers were meeting together in one place. Suddenly there was a sound from heaven, like the roaring of a mighty wind storm, and it (the Holy Spirit presence of God) **filled the house** where they were sitting. Then, what looked like flaming tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. **Everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit**'.

The glorious presence of the Lord was with them and in them. Peter preached a sermon to the crowds in the power of the Holy Spirit. Three thousand people responded. They were baptised and added to the church. Here is a question to consider. How many people would have responded do you think if Peter had preached his sermon without the Holy Spirit? A few I suppose. There is no way we can know. Here is another question. Are we having so little effect in reaching people for Christ because we are lacking in the power of the Holy Spirit? My personal view is that when we begin to minister in the power of the Holy Spirit, we will see many people saved into God's Kingdom. It isn't a boast, it cannot be a boast, that Brenda and I have seen many people saved. In every case it was down to the work of the Holy Spirit. If you read my book 'Populating Heaven' you will see this clearly through the many testimonies used as examples. Do you wish to see people saved through your personal ministry? I am sure your answer is yes. There is a profound simplicity as to how this can become a reality. Dedicate your life to God. Dedicate your life to the lost. Ask God for the filling, leading, fruits, gifts, and power of the Holy Spirit. And keep on asking. You see, it was when the Temple was dedicated that the awesome presence of God invaded it. Our dedication is what God is looking for.

When the early church began to meet with opposition from the authorities, what did they do? They got together to pray. And this is how they prayed. "Give us your servants, great boldness in preaching your word. Stretch out **your hand** with healing power. May miraculous signs and wonders be done **through the holy name of Jesus**". The place where they were

meeting shook, and they were **filled with the Holy Spirit** and with **the boldness that they had asked for**. More and more people believed and were brought to the Lord. Crowds came bringing their sick and they were all healed.

I trust that we are all now beginning to admit and agree that restoration is needed in the church, the restoration of God's presence and power. Do you remember what happened when Peter went to the house of Cornelius to preach to the Gentiles? Peter began to preach what looked like being a long sermon. The Holy Spirit couldn't wait for him to finish. He poured himself out while Peter was still sermonising. The Gentiles were filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to praise God with enthusiasm. So, having been baptised in the Holy Spirit, they were all baptised in water in the name of Jesus.

Let me tell you about Christine. As our church was first beginning to gather in our home, I felt very vulnerable, uncertain in my leadership. Christine joined us. She was single, very small, quiet and shy. She spoke very little but had a beautiful spirit. When she walked into the room the atmosphere changed. She brought with her the tangible presence of God. She carried the glory of God in her life, and the sweet fragrance of the Holy Spirit. The strangest thing for me was that from the moment she arrived, I was filled with assurance, and given confidence to minister God's grace. Was the Holy Spirit ministering to me through Christine, to give me the Holy Spirit boldness that I needed? She was such a precious gift to our infant church. I would not be surprised when I get to heaven to find that she was indeed an angel in disguise. Heavenly Father I pray that we too may discover the grace that Christine carried and take your presence with us wherever we go.

**This is a good time to say just a little about the fire that John the Baptist prophesied when he said,** "I baptise you with water but someone is coming soon who is greater than I am (Jesus) who will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and **with fire**. I have heard much teaching and preaching on the Holy Spirit over the years, and I have taught and preached much myself on the same. What I have recently come to see is that none of us has given much attention to **the fire**. We seem to just pass over that. A trip back to the Old Testament is appropriate.

**Isaiah 6:** While present in the temple one day, Isaiah had a vision of heaven. The building filled with the smoke of God's presence and was shaken to its foundations. While in the Holy presence of God, Isaiah cried out, "It is all over I am doomed for I am a sinful man. I have filthy lips and live amongst a people of filthy lips". Then an angelic being flew to me with a burning coal from the altar, holding it with a pair of tongs. He touched my lips with it and said, "Now your guilt is removed and your sins are forgiven". Then I heard the Lord asking, "Whom

should I send as a messenger to this people, who will go"? I said, "Here I am, send me."

**Jeremiah 5:** The Lord said, "I will make my words in your mouth a fire"

**Jeremiah 20:** If I say, "I will not mention the Lord or speak anymore in his name; his word is like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones, I am weary of holding it in; indeed I cannot".

I will be very succinct here and make only one observation to close this chapter. **The fire drives the message.** There is a common phrase that we use, "I am all fired up". We need to be all fired up for God of course but what seems to emerge in the scriptures, Old and New Testaments alike, is that when the fire comes, the message follows with passion.

## Find Your Vision and Your Purpose

I do believe that for some of you reading this chapter, you could find yourself released into all that God has planned for you in this season. I start with four different translations from Proverbs in order to convey as fully as possible what the original Hebrew text was saying.

### **Proverbs 29: 18.**

Where there is no vision, the people perish. (KJ)

Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint. (NIV)

When people do not accept divine guidance, they run wild. (NLT)

Where there is no clear prophetic vision, people quickly wander astray.

(TPT)

It is clear that vision and revelation are used interchangeably. This is to say that we are talking about a vision birthed in heaven, not in the human soul. We could say that this vision is first established in the heavenly realm, and secondly revealed to people on the earth. One way of expressing it could be, 'Unless we receive heaven's vision from heaven, we will finish up going nowhere and doing nothing useful. It seems that when a local church has a clear vision and purpose and strategy given by God, individuals find it easier to discover their personal vision and call. At a time when I was seeking to hear from God in response to a growing awareness deep in my spirit that he was about to lead Brenda and I into a new season of ministry, I was concerned regarding what this would involve, in particular, whether this would require us to locate in a different local church. We were visiting a church in a different town to our own one Sunday morning and there was a call to the front for anyone who needed prayer. I was inspired to go forward, as many others were. The prayer team began to lay hands on people and pray for their particular needs. A team member approached me and was about to start praying, when he was interrupted by the Holy Spirit. In a very definite manner he said, "You do not need prayer, you need someone to talk to". He paused for a few moments, and then asked, "Would it help you to talk to me." I agreed enthusiastically and we found a quiet corner. I explained my situation, and the need I had to hear clearly from God regarding our future. He paused again, obviously being attentive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. After a few minutes meditation he said, "I would like to ask you two questions, is that OK." "Of course", I replied, "please do." The first question was, "What is the vision of your Pastor and do you share it?" I couldn't in all honesty declare the vision of the Pastor but explained that he was doing good church. "My second question is this he said. "What is your vision, and does your Pastor share your vision?" I was able to give a clear answer to this. I had explained to our Pastor that because Brenda and I

have always been successful in leading people to Christ, and had trained people successfully in this ministry, we could offer training for our home church. It was a surprise and disappointment that the Pastor didn't respond. I was asked a third question. "So, you don't share your Pastor's vision because you are not clear what it is. He doesn't share your vision, even though he is clear what it is. Why are you in his church?" I could have replied, "Well, we like the Pastor, we like the people, it is a good church doing a good work." This obviously wasn't the point so I had to accept that it was an issue of vision. I carry a huge gratitude to Steve, the guy who so boldly confronted me with the reality and necessity of working out our service to the Father with a greater clarity regarding his heavenly plans. We did need to move and we now work with great fulfilment in a newly planted church. There is shared vision between us and the Pastor and his wife to train and equip God's people.

## **Habakkuk 2:2.**

**God answered me and said, "Habakkuk, write down the vision I have given you. Write it simply and clearly so that anyone can read it and pass it on."**

Permit me to ask you a question. **What is your personal vision? Can you write it down** clearly enough for others to read it and understand it? Do you have a strategy for achieving it? Are you in the right place to fulfil your vision?

I have to be cautious here and not become too simplistic. **It may be that God will speak to you through someone else's vision and you find yourself so inspired by it that you make it your own.** This is not uncommon, particularly in the early stages of one's ministry development. I believe that this is absolutely in God's order. I will come back to this very soon with examples. Before doing so, come with me to look at a church in Denver, Colorado. It is called 'Bear Valley Baptist Church.' What a great name. I connected with this church after reading a book entitled, '**The Church Unleashed**'. What a great title. It was written by the pastor, Frank Tillapaugh. I was inspired by it and still am. So, while preparing to visit a healing centre in Florida for training, I wrote to Frank and asked if I could spend a few days at his church to see at first hand, the wonders described in his book. I spent five days there receiving the kindest hospitality and was able to experience all aspects of the church and visit many of their projects. Frank spent considerable time explaining his vision, and the strategy he was using to fulfil it. It is impossible to convey, in just a few sentences the measure of what was being achieved, but I can give you the main principles, and we can learn much from them.

**The overall vision and purpose was to reach the community in as many ways as possible so that as many people as possible would find Christ. Church growth was predominantly through unbelievers finding faith in Jesus and being added to the church. Then they in turn reached others.**

**The strategy was amazingly successful.** First, the pastor would not permit more than fifty percent of the people to be occupied in servicing the church. The other fifty percent were released for community mission. **This was based on individuals discovering their own personal mission vision, and strategy, for reaching the community, and was not leadership inspired or managed.**

**There were twenty-six community projects in action at the time of my visit.** Each one was the result of an individual church member getting a vision and a passion for a particular form of outreach. If I remember correctly, it was first exemplified by a lady who was gifted in making pottery. She had a vision to set up a pottery workshop on her own premises and offer to teach pottery to anyone in the community who was interested. She did just that, and with wisdom and sensitivity began to share her faith in the relaxed and conducive environment of pottery classes. People started getting saved and added to the church. The idea caught on. Others began to develop vision for other projects, and wonderfully, others would catch the same vision and a team would be formed.

For example, one of the projects I visited grew out of the passion someone had, to care for overseas students arriving at the university for the first time. He talked to others about his vision. Others thought it was a great idea. It became their vision too. A team was formed and a marvellous work was birthed. Church members in general gave support in various ways. The root of the project was to provide family links for overseas students coming to study at Denver University. It was fortunate that my week with Bear Valley Church was Fresher's week and I was able to attend a welcome dinner provided and hosted by the church. It was held at the university. The new students were treated as though they were corporate executives. A classy three course meal suitable for a wedding reception was provided. Waiters were in uniform. The walls were arrayed with the national flags of each nation represented. Welcome talks were given and students invited to come to the platform and introduce themselves if they wished. My estimate is that one hundred and fifty students attended this dinner without cost to themselves. After proceedings ended, contact slips were made available to any students who wanted to be linked for friendship with families in the church. Not surprisingly many of these students joined the church. It seemed that serving these students with such honour was a key to them finding faith.

I was able to visit three other projects. Two medical doctors, husband and wife who were in private practice, decided to live on one salary instead of two. They each volunteered half their working time to provide free medical care for the destitute and set up a centre at their own expense to facilitate this. Not surprisingly some of these destitute people found faith and joined the church as new believers. Another group of members got together to purchase and renovate three connected town houses in a run-down area of the town. This was to provide a refuge for the destitute. Another of my visits was to an outdoor session put on in the town by a group of young hip musicians who could really make things swing. They mixed secular and spiritual songs and gave testimonies about how they had found Jesus.

Back on home ground I will mention two particular projects where I was able to draw alongside someone else's vision, make it my own, and team with them to develop very successful mission works. This is to emphasise that if you are looking to discover your vision and purpose, don't assume that you have to be the first initiator. It is quite probable that God will lead you to connect with someone who has had a first revelation, and God already has you in mind to receive the same revelation a little later. This is how it happened for me in two main works of my life. In 1992 the churches of Leeds decided to mount a joint churches initiative entitled 'Leeds Festival of Churches 1992'. I don't know who birthed this overall vision. I was invited to join the 'Committee' to act as a representative for the newly emerging churches. The whole idea, and it was a good one, was for individual churches to come up with a vision of their own for some kind of community project for that year. There was a great response, and many churches took up the challenge. One lasting legacy was birthed because one of the churches chose to send a young Christian youth worker into a school to help with assemblies and RE lessons. The school appreciated this so much that a vision grew to extend this work to other schools. Having previously been a strong Christian influence in the schools where I had taught, it didn't take but a moment to make this vision my own. We established a charity, formed a team of trustees, of which I eventually became chairman. My first contributions were to fund raise among Leeds churches and oversee the work of our first fulltime paid worker. Leeds Faith in Schools has continued to go from strength to strength and has eight paid workers plus many volunteers and has touched fifty schools. Many young people have found faith.

In the early 1980's an overseas Missionary family joined our newly planted church. They had a strong vision and call to Thailand but needed a sending organisation. At the time I had little interest in overseas mission. However, we had someone in our congregation who was passionate about it and I was persuaded to throw the weight of our church behind the venture. Our resources were limited and we decided to see if another newly planted church that we had formed a bond with, would be interested in partnering with us. We met with the leaders to discuss the possibility. They were really enthusiastic, more so than I, and to cut a long story short we established a charity called 'The Partnership Trust'. I got involved just to help facilitate it. Our friends were able to go to Thailand and as time went on other missionary minded people from the New Churches came to us for help. At the present time the Partnership Trust is serving 26 missionary works across many nations. I caught the vision from others. The point I want to make with this example is that sometimes vision can be slow growing. Acting as a servant to someone else's vision may be the very means by which you catch it. Now if God is birthing a vision in you, write it down and then look for those who can catch it with you, or maybe are just happy to serve your purposes even though they are not brimming over with passion, --- yet. The moment we become visionaries is the moment when strong purpose begins to grow.

## Move from Fed up to Fired up:

The horrible truth is that many Christians are fed up with church. Maybe just church weary. I meet them frequently. There can be many reasons. The root of most relate to failed expectations. They can feel disappointed, let down, uncared for, ignored, neglected, gifts not recognised or appreciated. Sometimes mistreated and hurt. For some it can be simply a matter of sheer boredom, same old, same old, same old. Where is the excitement, the adventure? Can we have just a bit of variety please? Where is the challenge, where is the action? What is the point of just sitting in the pews week by week singing the same old songs, hearing the same old sermons, why is everything so predictable? If you are one of these people you may be entirely justified. I agree that 'the church' as we keep referring to it is often in a place of failure and this book is my faltering attempt to help churches to raise their game. Many churches do need to raise their game and the corporate body does need to be challenged. However, I want us to stop making 'the church' the object of our dissatisfactions. It does us no good and a lot of harm. When we blame 'the church' we blame ourselves so that is a good place to start. We must find a new way of thinking and a new way of seeing. We need a new mindset altogether. We are the church. We must kick the habit of holding 'the church' responsible for our dilemmas, somehow expecting 'the church' to serve us as though we are customers, consumers who have a right to good service and if we don't get it we will try another store. Friends we are the store and if we move to another department we will continue to be the store. Of course Church leaders are responsible for serving creatively and for building church in a dynamic, lively way so it can be effective in its purpose. But remember this, that they are accountable to God for their service and answerable to him. And we must remember that we are accountable to God in the same way. My advice to us all is to get focussed on what God's expectations are of us as individuals and aim to please him. Let us stop fussing about other people's failures and consider our own. Jesus said it clearly enough when talking about planks and splinters in the eye.

Repentance carries with it the concept of doing a U turn. The U turn we must undertake is to no longer look to our church to bless us, but to concentrate on how we can bless our church, bless one another. It will not help to arrive for Sunday Service with a mindset that says "Well, I hope I am going to get blessed this week better than I did last." We are setting ourselves up for a disappointment. What will not disappoint is, "Lord I am here to bless you this morning and to bless and encourage my church family. Lead me to anyone here that you want to bless through me." How sad it is when people leave after Service, down hearted because no one spoke to them. I never cease to be incredulous when I hear people say, "No one spoke to me this morning." The important thing is, who did we speak to this morning? If we sit at home feeling sad because no one has visited us for a while this is silly. We can become the ones who visit. Brenda and I have at various times given help to couples who are struggling in their marriage relationship. It seems that in every case, the root of the problems is selfishness, failed expectations. Each of the partners is usually looking for the other to be their blessing, to meet their expectations. All any couples need to do to have a

happy marriage is to selflessly devote themselves to the other persons happiness. When this is mutual, there is so much happiness floating around that it spills over into the lives of others. So it is with the family of believers. When we devote ourselves to each other as the scriptures teach, and as we devote ourselves to God, seeking always to bless, there will be so much blessing that we will be unable to contain it. It will spill out of the church and unbelievers will be drenched. They will want to know the source.

We have two great kids, just over forty now. They are both living exciting lives. I don't know that they ever get bored. Maybe it is due in some measure to the way we brought them up. When the phrase 'I'm bored' began to creep in, we banned it! "We don't do bored and boring in this house! If you are bored, that's you being boring. Go and find something exciting to do." Ooooooh, how cruel you may say? Not that this removed our responsibility for providing them with a lifestyle of interest excitement and adventure, they got spades of it. But there was a huge spin off from placing responsibility upon our children to solve their own boredom problems. They became very creative. "Hey Dad, look at what we're doing." They would often draw me in to their exciting projects and I would help with resources, and where appropriate, help and join in.

OK, so you are fed up and bored with church. Ask yourself, "What can I do about it? How can I introduce some new zest into this place?" Get some ideas of how you would like to see changes made in your church and arrange a good long chat with the Pastor or leaders and make proposals. It is far better for us to do this than expend energies complaining and grumbling, being negative. Seek God diligently and get his take on things, let him give you helpful ideas. You now have the previous chapter on vision and purpose to draw on. Maybe you could follow the example of the people at the Bear Valley Church. I didn't detect a trace of boredom or 'fed up' there. Lack of purpose will create boredom generally. Don't depend on your church to define your purpose. Let God do that.

Famously, when John Kennedy became president of the USA he said, "Do not ask, 'What can my country do for me? Ask, 'What can I do for my country.'" Start asking God, "What can I do for my church?" If eventually you cannot identify ways to serve and bless your church, maybe even bring change, or if what you have to offer is not welcome, it is quite right I believe to consider prayerfully whether it is time to relocate. Let the Holy Spirit lead you to where your vision can be fulfilled.

There is a place for humility in all these things. If we find ourselves developing a critical spirit we must beware. Sometimes it can be fuelled by arrogance. In the early days of leading church I used to get quite exasperated at times at how free people felt to criticise. Our new church was doing fine under my leadership. It was growing, people were being saved, baptisms were frequent and people were being healed. We had established a Christian bookshop and cafe on the main street but I was still learning. Although it can be difficult to accept at times, being criticised can be very helpful and constructive even when it is delivered in bad spirit. If it is justified we can rethink things and make changes. One of our older saints had worked all her life in the mills and developed a loud voice to accommodate the noisy environment. After I had delivered

the morning sermon one Sunday she said to the lady sitting next to her, "Why does he keep using all these long words?" It was quite easy for me to hear and I needed to hear it. I had never for a moment considered that my quite broad vocabulary, established in the world of education, was out of reach of some of my congregation. Lesson learned. I took the time to cultivate 'everybody language'. I have disciplined myself over the years to appreciate critics because they confront us often with things it is helpful to hear. They say things that others would want to say but are too polite. If on reflection we come to the conclusion that a particular criticism is unjustified then at least the person giving it feels that we have genuinely listened to what they have to say. We can go back with a considered reply after thinking it through, and can say something like, "Jim, I have given careful thought to what you had to say and appreciate you raising it. I don't feel inclined to act on it at the moment but I will keep it in mind." This is a good way to honour them and relationship can build. The bible tells us to honour one another. What bothers me most is that when the arrogant criticise, it does them harm. On one occasion my grace failed with a particularly vocal and arrogant critic and I turned on him and replied, "What have you built John? How many people have you led to Christ? When you can answer those questions come back to me with all your great wisdom." Actually, I didn't regret my retaliation. He needed to hear it.

We all need to convert our criticisms into helpful suggestions delivered with the greatest humility. I do wish those who are so ready to criticise the Pastor would ask themselves, "If I was in his shoes, would the church be better served? If your answer is yes, then in all seriousness, maybe it is time for you to seek God about going into the ministry. Someone I know has recently done that, and is doing well at the church he now oversees. If the answer is no, then appreciate your minister for attempting such a difficult task. Bless and encourage him in every way you can think of. Ask him if there is any way you can support him. It is pretty well certain that he is giving the very best he can, and sacrificially too. If we think we have some good ideas for developing the church we can approach it like this. "Pastor, I would love to have a chat with you if you can find time, to talk about some ideas I have. I would like to run them past you and find out what you think about them, see if they would be helpful or not. This avoids it becoming an expectation. Ministers suffer most of the time from the burden of too many differing expectations from their people. My hope is that we will learn how look for ways we can to help them to carry the burdens they have.

Here is a great truth expressed in earlier times. A prayer-less people make a powerless preacher. Here is a question worth asking if you are fed up with your church. "How much time do I spend praying for my church and particularly for the leaders? Do I pray sufficiently for the service before setting off from home on a Sunday morning?" If that is too trying, Saturday will do just as well. Imagine if you will, all the people of your church reaching out to God for his blessing. Our Father God is not deaf. I can sometimes imagine him looking on from heaven, somewhat sadly and saying, "If only you people would pray more, with expectant hearts, you would find out what I can do!"

There is so much more that I could say, but that is the same with every chapter. **I have said enough here to provide a backdrop for a rule of thumb practical guide on**

**how to move from being fed up to being fired up. Do try it.** Many of you will already be fired up, and I hope this chapter will help you to help others who are not so favoured.

Firstly, **stop blaming your church** for being fed up. **Fire comes from heaven** and it is to there that we must look. Actually there can be dangers in belonging to a fired up church. I am talking about the danger of second hand fire. It is possible to live out of the radiated heat of others. The fire around us keeps us hot, but we are not the ones producing it. Do we take fire with us into all the pathways of life, or do we cool until once again we warm up again from the heat generated by others? While we are in a place of not much fire, we have a great opportunity to get your own personal fire lit. We can ask ourselves, **“Am I bringing fire to this place or am I expecting others to be my fire?”** Do we want fire in our church? We should accept that it is our responsibility to be a source of fire and set others alight.

**Get into the right gear.** What do I mean by that? I will use a metaphor. Imagine that you are sitting in a car which has as usual a reverse gear and forward gears.

Marked alongside the reverse gear is, **‘Seek to be blessed.’** Marked alongside the forward gears is, **‘Seek to be a blessing’.** If we engage reverse gear, we will go backwards. If we engage forward gears we will go forwards. God said to Abraham, “Abraham, I will bless you, so you go and be a blessing.” Abraham received his blessings from heaven as a gift from God and God expected him to use them to bless others with. I have come to see that the more people try to bless themselves, or seek blessing from other people, the less blessing they experience. They are exercising the reverse of God’s order. It is a particular form of selfishness, and if you observe carefully you will discover that the more selfish people are the less happy they are. It is a sickness of the soul where contentment does not thrive. The bible is clear that we will reap what we have sown. If we choose to sow blessings freely, blessings will return to us in abundance, pressed down and running over. The gearbox illustration is very appropriate here. If it is not one’s habit or mindset to devote one’s life to being a blessing and a change of gear is desired, slip into first gear first. Gain some momentum with small acts of mercy and at the right time slip into second gear, and so on. In my book, ‘Populating Heaven’ I devote a whole chapter to the effectiveness of focussing on blessing people who are outside the kingdom as a means of sparking their interest in finding faith. With our churches, suppose the sermon was not particularly inspired, at least we can thank the speaker for bringing his message. It is not being hypocritical to say, “Thank you so much for your message Pastor.” Being enthusiastic in our thanks can be genuine in that we are thankful for his efforts and for him as a person regardless of his performance. We should value him for who he is, not for his ability to perform. When a speaker who is not good at speaking is bringing a message, we can exercise empathy and imagine ourselves in his shoes. We may be facing a congregation showing little enthusiasm, possibly judging our performance, expecting more than we have to give. It doesn’t feel good. They want a Billy Graham, but he can’t do a Billy Graham. We must have a heart and bless him in our spirit and our prayers. He is a good man doing his best for God and for us. Alternatively we can grump and say, “I didn’t

think much of the sermon this morning. I didn't like what he said about ---- whatever." We know very well that God is not happy when we grumble. We will always be aware I hope, of where things can be improved. This is necessary and helpful and it provides an opportunity to become involved in bringing the improvements needed. If we can't engage in constructive actions we can simply rest it with God and shift to matters where we can be positive.

**Draw closer and closer to God in all things and listen for his voice.**

The church belongs to him and is his responsibility. Talk about your concerns with him. Be instructed and guided by the Holy Spirit day by day. Follow his lead. When all our work on earth is done, all we will have left to take with us is our relationship with the Father. When Jesus finished his work he said, "Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands." These were his last words before he died. We must learn to guard our spirit and make sure it is fragrant and in good health at hand over time.

**Be strong in purpose.** The previous chapter covers this well enough. In the natural dimension, lack of purpose is a distress for people. To be without purpose is an unhappy place. It is the same in the spiritual dimension. If we are not full of purpose in our church, maybe God will use this to lead you to discover and work out our spiritual purpose in the community. That is his plan anyway. Let Bear Valley Baptist Church be an encouragement to us. I meet many disillusioned believers whose disillusionment has its source in having only a passive role in their church. They don't feel needed or purposeful. Here lies freedom to serve the community. There are charities and volunteer organisations galore crying out for help. There are neighbours in need and lonely people to visit and care for. There is a whole wide world out there that needs us. There are mission fields everywhere. Where we work is a mission field. Become a missionary there. We really do need to start seeing and thinking outside the church box. We are the church. I have heard preachers say, "Get out of your comfort zone, get out there and tell people about Jesus." I really struggle with such exhortations. I want to shout, "We are 'out there' the minute we leave the church premises and we will be 'out there' for the next 168 hours till we come back next Sunday." We have 170 hours a week to pursue Kingdom of Heaven purpose, usually only 2hrs of which are spent in a church building. It was chapter one, 'Should have gone to Specsavers', that started our journey. We can remind ourselves here that we need to see through new lenses. We are familiar with the use of the expression, 'The Westminster Bubble' when talking about politicians. They so often become so enclosed by political life they can only see and act within that enclosure. The true purpose of government as a means of serving the nation can be lost to their sight.

**Be located in the right local church as the Holy Spirit Leads.** I mentioned earlier in the book that Brenda and I have never felt free to choose which local church we should belong to in any given season. We have always searched God about where we should be so that the assignments he has prepared for us can be worked out according to heaven's plan. I am distressed when fed up people react by saying, "I am thinking of leaving this church." I think, and occasionally say, "But what is God saying about that I

wonder?" Don't misunderstand me. God can sometimes use discontent as a means of moving us on to our next assignment, but if that is the case, it is most likely that he will show you the kind of open door that genuinely allows you to say, "I truly believe that God is calling me to a new work and that involves me locating in a different place." It is not a leaving as much as a going, which is much more positive. I am deeply saddened when people leave their local church by simply not attending anymore. Apart from being bad manners it can be very hurtful to the people they have been relating to for some time. If you are planning to leave your church, do so with great kindness and sensitivity. Talk to the leaders about it and explain why, so they can send you out to your new work with prayers, love and blessing.

## Building Faith through the Power of Testimony

The dictionary definition of the word testimony is **'evidence'**. When witnesses are called to the witness box (evidence box), in a court of law to testify for or against the defendant they are called to give evidence. They are sworn in to tell 'the truth, whole truth, and nothing but the truth'. When John the Baptist was isolated in Herod's jail, prior to his execution, he began to have doubts about whether Jesus really was the Messiah. "Are you really the one sent?" he asked, through his messengers. Jesus could have dealt with the question by a scripture teaching, quoting what the many prophets had predicted, and developed an appropriate theology. Jesus recognised that what John needed was hard facts. "Tell John this. The lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear, the sick are healed, the dead are raised. This is the evidence by which you can judge whether or not I am the Messiah." Remember what Thomas replied when the disciples said they had seen the resurrected Jesus? "Unless I can put my finger in the nail holes in his hand, and my hand in the spear wound in his side, I will not believe." When Jesus appeared again to the disciples, Thomas was with them. He said to Thomas, "Look at my hands. Put your finger in the holes. Look at my side. Put your hand in the wound. Don't be faithless any longer Thomas. Just believe."

Jesus has commissioned us to be his witnesses, people who will provide the unbelieving world with hard factual evidence, evidence that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Religion that only provides theological and doctrinal teaching has little persuasive power. People need to see the Good News demonstrated. They are expecting hard facts as evidence. It is our holy task to give evidence that Jesus is alive and that God is real and accessible. When they experience a sacrificial, tender and kind love through us and the healing power of God, they begin to sit up and take notice. If they find us to be just all talk, where is the evidence in that? This is the reason that I use testimonies so freely in my writings and my speaking. I feel compelled to provide evidence of the practical outworking of those things that I teach. Otherwise it is all talk. I feel bound to be a good witness and give truthful evidence. 'Populating Heaven' is littered with evidence's of what works in leading people to Christ, and I would love to see testimonies within church gatherings given much more space, a much higher profile. My observation is that on the rare occasions where testimony is invited, or perhaps permitted, it is prefaced with, "In just a couple of minutes can you tell us about-----". If it goes over the two minutes the meeting leader becomes agitated indicating that it is time to get on with important matters, like more singing or more preaching. My view is that evidence's of God at work in people's lives is undervalued and largely church gatherings are starved of testimony. Direct factual evidence of God working is incredibly faith building.

While on holiday, we looked for a church to attend on the Sunday. We found a small traditional church. The hymn board was up, the organist on form and the service progressed according to expectation, until sermon time arrived. The minister stood up and said, "I am not going to preach a sermon this evening, I have a testimony to bring. You all know that I have a serious heart condition. I was really poorly last week and

explained to my eight year old son what was wrong with me. 'Well Dad', he said, 'in the bible, Jesus and his disciples went about healing people. Why don't you just ask Jesus to heal you?' He quickly detected my lack of faith and said, 'Why don't I ask Jesus to heal you Dad?' That is what he did. My heart, there and then was completely healed, I could feel it happening. I have been to see the doctor for a complete check up and he tells me that there is now nothing wrong with my heart. It is in perfect condition." How do you rate a sermon against a testimony like this? Such a testimony about the simple and exceptional faith of an eight year old boy releasing the wonder working power of God can outweigh a whole sermon series. This is practical here and now acts of faith that lead to acts of God, not just a bible history lesson and doctrinal theory.

Time and again in conversations that I have with church people, they tell me about the wonderful works that God has done in their lives. My immediate response is, "It would be so encouraging and faith building for the church to hear this, have a word with the Pastor." Generally, the response I get is reluctance, and I perfectly understand that because I am reluctant myself to propose a testimony for fear it will not fit in with already made plans.

I think it a great loss to go for weeks on end on a diet of occasional and reluctant odd five minutes here and there evidences of the wonderful things God is doing amongst us. Preaching from the bible is great. I have done it for years. But I am convinced that we should balance this with preaching from the here and now.

Not so long ago, as part of a preaching series taken from the Book of Kings, I was asked to teach on the healing of the Syrian army commander Naaman. Remember, he went to Elisha the prophet to be healed. Elisha told him to bathe seven times in the River Jordon if he wanted his awful skin disease to be cured. After a bit of a tantrum he humbled himself and did as Elisha instructed. He was made well as you know. I preached convincingly about the healing power of God.

The following Sunday, after someone else had preached on the next chapter of Kings, a young man asked if he could give a testimony. He was squeezed in. This was his story. "My dad has been suffering for some time from a very painful and embarrassing visible condition of the lower regions and experiencing agony when he has to use the toilet. The doctors are unable to help him. After Mike preached about Naaman's healing last week I felt a surge of faith for my Dad. I went home and told him that I believed God would heal him if he did what Naaman did. So, we filled the bath and he got in and got out seven times. On the seventh dipping, he was totally healed. All traces of his affliction left, his pain went and his life went back to normal." Which was the more convincing for the congregation, my sermon or his testimony? Anyone can preach a sermon, but to exercise faith as this young man did, and see the power of God working miracles, that is something else. Our churches need to hear these things. Paul said it. **"Faith comes by hearing, and**

**how can they hear unless someone tells them."** This is the central purpose of this chapter, building faith for believers and unbelievers alike.

Hear is another example. At a time when we were experiencing a breakthrough in establishing healing ministry in our church, a particular testimony provided a strong boost. There was an occasion when the parents of a disabled child asked us to pray for their little girl. They were obeying the scripture James 5:14. 'Are any of you sick? You should call the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord.' We did what the bible said. This little girl had one leg shorter than the other and wore a special boot to compensate. As we prayed, her short leg grew visibly to the same length as the other. On the following Sunday her mother came and gave testimony, presented the evidence? She held up the old boots and threw them in a bin. She held up new boots and said, "These are what she wears now." The more testimonies we had, the more healings there were. The more healings that took place, the more testimonies there were and the more faith flourished. This led to more healings and so on.

I have focused on physical healing testimonies because they are easily validated, but there are a whole variety of works that God does that are deep works in the soul. When believers give testimony about the encounters with God that have changed their lives, miraculous answers to prayer, miraculous provisions of all kinds, freedom from addictions, healed relationships, the power to forgive, testimonies about people turning to God, and so on and so on, faith is built in others for similar blessings.

How sad I am over the multitudes of untold stories that could be building faith in God's people. For example, a lady I know well was in great distress after her husband had an affair and left her. She was in her garden crying out to God and asking for peace in her soul. As she did so, a dove (of peace) flew gently down and settled on her head. What a wondrous, beautiful, loving act of God. I think that such a testimony given in church would have spoken profoundly and built faith. Here is another example. I was at an evangelistic event one evening when a young man was called up to the platform to give his testimony of recently overcoming his unbelief of some aspects of the bible. There was an audience of perhaps two hundred people. This is what he shared. "I was preparing for teaching a Sunday school class. The lesson was about Moses parting the Red Sea. When I came to the place in the story where it said that the water stood up like two walls, I couldn't in truth of heart say that I believed it. How could I teach to the children what I didn't believe myself? That night I experienced a miracle. God gave me a vision from heaven. I was transported to the very shores of the Red Sea and I watched it parting. I was aghast. The water stood up as vertical walls. The following morning when I woke up my belief was absolute. I had received a revelation from heaven." What do you think? Are you a little sceptical? I confess that if that was the end of things I may have gone away with a few wonderings and doubts and rationalisations. But wait, I am not finished. As he completed his testimony, the intense presence of God filled the room, and the spirit of revelation swept through us like a wind. The Holy Spirit confirmed his testimony in power and we all believed. This is all I remember about that evening event. Everything else has faded from my memory.

For myself, I have to admit that I have forgotten most of the sermons I have listened to or preached for that matter. That doesn't invalidate them. They are excellent food for the soul and are digested like food and sustain us for the journey. They shape our understanding, understanding which can last. With testimonies however, practically always they lodge in ones memory. I never cease to be surprised when I am writing or preaching how quickly and easily I recall them, and many others that are appropriate but I don't have the space to deliver.

My hope for this chapter is that you will have become convinced of the exceptional power that testimony has to build faith, change lives and build up the community of believers, and to open doors for unbelievers to find God. Let us create every opportunity for them to be heard. I will close with a quotation from Bob Gass, the author of United Christian

Broadcasting's 'Word for Today devotional.'

**"The most powerful testimony of all is a life that cannot be explained without God! People may dispute your theology, but your testimony is something else!"**

I would add, you can't argue with facts.

## Sit Often at His Table and Remember Him

When the time for the Passover Supper came, Jesus met with the twelve apostles in a large upstairs room. It was evening time. When they were all sitting at the table, Jesus announced, "This is the last time we will have supper together while I remain upon the earth. But the time will come when we will eat together like this again, not on the earth but in God's heavenly kingdom. What I do now I want you to remember always."

He took a loaf of bread, gave a prayer of thanks, broke the loaf in pieces and passed them round. "This bread represents my body which is about to be broken for you and for many in the future. All of you eat it." After they had eaten the bread, he filled a cup with wine, gave thanks to God, and continued, "This wine represents my blood which will be poured out so that sins may be forgiven. All of you drink it. In future, every time you break bread and drink wine, remember me. Listen to me, my death is very near. I give you a new commandment. Love each other the way I have loved you."

Jewish custom regarding the Passover Celebration involved the drinking of four cups of wine. The first was a toast 'to life', the second 'to freedom', the third 'to peace', and the fourth 'to Jerusalem'. It was the third cup, 'to peace', known as the cup of blessing that Jesus dramatically reinterpreted and personalised. In effect he was saying that under the New Covenant, he was now our cup of blessing and we were to drink from him. A cup of blessing that now brought forgiveness, salvation and peace

with God "This is the New Covenant in my blood which is poured out for you."

We must not forget it. Jesus was asking his disciples to keep reminding themselves daily, as it was their custom and culture at the time, to break bread and drink wine daily at their meals. He was calling upon them to daily feed and drink from him for the good of their souls. The question we must ask is this. How can we translate into our own culture, this precious act, and satisfy Jesus' deep desire that we constantly remember him in this way? How far can church practices and our personal lifestyles enable us to properly honour the Lord in his request?

**Acts 2:** Those who accepted Peter's message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of

bread, and to prayer. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. **They broke bread in their homes** and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God -----

We do not hear is that they went to the temple and broke bread. What is the reason I wonder, that the celebration of communion has moved almost exclusively from the home to (metaphorically) the temple. Why is it that in some sections of the church, only those who have gained holy orders or those who have theological qualifications are permitted to officiate? I ask these questions because of my conviction that we must look carefully at these matters through the lenses of scripture, rather than the lenses of tradition. Wider issues emerge. If believers have lost the habit of meeting together in homes, how can they break bread together in what would be the appropriate and natural environment? Later I will be addressing how we do life together as believers beyond the limits of Sunday services, but let us look at our Sunday Celebrations first. The Roman Catholic Church has always built very strongly around the celebration of 'Mass', (Holy Communion). I highly respect them for this. They have kept faith with Jesus and been obedient to his word, 'Do this in remembrance of me.' So, as different denominations and new churches, how should we keep faith with our Lord? It would be unwise for me to propose any particular formula. Each local church has its own practices. My concern is this, are we losing some of the true significance and value of this holy celebration of our Lord's sacrificial death? I get the feeling at times that communion is only celebrated in some churches from a sense of duty. I strongly desire to see a return of the practice of breaking bread to its rightful prominence. In my experience, the presence of God can be evident in a particularly strong and precious way when bread and wine are shared to honour our Lord. We can expect healing and restoration to take place.

Most churches have adopted the provision of a tea and coffee bar with cakes and biscuits and this provides an excellent opportunity for fellowship. I have often wondered if this could be matched with the provision of a communion table where the church family can serve each other with bread and wine on an informal basis as they feel inclined.

**Allowing for this, I can see no reason why the main focus for communion should not be returned to our homes.** I will explore this in the final chapter and give guidance. For now all I need to say is that Brenda and I break bread frequently in our home in many contexts. With neighbours, when friends call, when praying for healing, when we meet for prayer. We break bread together as a couple as we desire. On occasions we will individually break bread. It can be very moving and spiritually uplifting when done like this. I hope I have opened the way for you to discover and adopt a pattern of breaking bread far more frequently, according to your personal circumstances. In our hearts let us desire to honour the Lord. **"Do this in remembrance of me."** Our intimacy and friendship with Jesus will grow as we draw close to him in this way.

## Be Creative, Flexible, and Adaptable

Luke 5:37. Jesus gave them this illustration. "No one puts new wine into old wineskins, for the new wine would burst the wineskins spilling the wine and ruining the wineskins. New wine must be stored in new wineskins."

Wineskins were animal skins and when new were flexible and able to stretch. The new wine would continue to ferment for a while and the skins could accommodate this. After a time, as the skins aged they hardened and became inflexible. So, they ripped open if they were filled with new wine. Jesus was referring to the ancient Jewish traditions, based on an increasing complexity of rigid religious laws. He was the new wine. The religious institutions and establishment, the traditions, could not accommodate the new that he was ushering in.

In the late nineteen seventies and early eighties, Brenda and I were dramatically caught up in what came to be spoken of as the 'Charismatic Renewal'. This was a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit across our nation. Where traditional churches remained rigid and inflexible they split, and new Spirit filled congregations emerged in houses, community centres, redundant churches, schools, hotels, wherever they could. Other references to these phenomena were, 'The House Church Movement' and the 'Renewal Movement'. Where traditional churches embraced this outpouring of the Holy Spirit, it was beautiful to see. They adapted their ways of doing things, introducing new songs, forming bands to replace the traditional organ, baptised people in the Holy Spirit, encouraged the expression of the gifts, introduced healing ministries, formed small group networks for fellowship and teaching, got rid of pews and replaced them with chairs, and so on and so on. Many people left traditional churches to join renewal churches. These were turbulent times and some of you reading this will have experienced them in full.

In our situation, we found that our house group grew very quickly. The power of the Holy Spirit was with us for salvations and healings. We encouraged these new believers and those coming from other churches to join the traditional church we belonged to, and many did. They were full of the Holy Spirit and this was causing unusual tensions. So with reluctance and deep sorrow, we made the decision to meet in a community hall. Our style of meetings reflected what we had learned in the house group. They were truly 'open meetings' orchestrated by the Holy Spirit. As we had taken our brief from the scriptures everyone was free to contribute. Fulfilling our responsibility as leaders we would come with a sketch plan to undergird things and prepare sermons well but frequently abandoned them to follow the flow of the Holy Spirit as he inspired believers.

So what does this look like in practice? I will attempt to draw some pictures and these will provide clues, but what it is impossible for me to convey is what it felt like. I am talking about the presence of the Holy Spirit and we have already explored this. This

can only be understood through experience. Maybe the measure of presence and leading of the Holy Spirit was manifested because we offered him all the freedom he needed to exercise his ministry. People came to each gathering knowing that their full participation was invited, welcomed and valued. Perhaps the reason they so often received empowerment and inspiration was that the Holy Spirit knew that he would have a voice through them. I will pick up on this again after sharing a recent testimony.

An excellent church we visited not so long ago experienced an unexpected visit of the Holy Spirit. The service plan was predictable and tightly managed. After perhaps forty five minutes of unbroken worship, the notices were given. The preacher stood up to give his sermon and started by saying, "I prepared the first part of this sermon without difficulty. (He was an excellent preacher.), but when I attempted to complete it, I found it impossible. As hard as I tried I could not write anything else down. I accepted that I would have to come this morning and confess this and I have. However, just before leaving for church I received a phone call from Mary and she asked if she could share a vision she had received during the night. She explained it to me and I immediately recognised that this was a continuation of what I wanted to say in my sermon. So I will preach my half sermon and Mary will pick up from there." So it was.

Mary was not used to standing up in front of the church and was timid by nature. She was acting under the leading of the Holy Spirit. She shared a vision she had received during the previous night. It was of a cross with four messages imprinted on it for four individuals in the congregation. As she completed her messages, the presence of the Holy Spirit overwhelmed the gathering. There was a call to the front for prayer ministry and about fifty of the congregation went forward. What power! Many were in tears, many received spiritual and emotional healing and many sank to the floor under the power of the Holy Spirit. How does one interpret this? I can only conclude that The Holy Spirit had important works to do and the tight planning of the services didn't give him room.

He decided to take charge.

It reminds me of when Peter was invited to the home of Cornelius. While Peter was still preaching, the Holy Spirit came in power. Everyone was filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke in foreign languages, praised God, and afterwards received water baptism. There is a lesson for us here. Whatever we do and however we do it we will be wise to make room for the Holy Spirit to take his rightful place. Abundant blessings will follow.

Here are some relevant scriptures.

1 Corinthians 14: 26. / 12: 7. "Well my brothers and sisters, let's summarise. When you meet together, one will sing a song, another will teach, another will tell some special revelation that has been given by God, one will speak in tongues, and another will interpret what has been said. But everything that is done must be done to strengthen you all

and build up the church. So, dear brothers and sisters, in answer to your questions about gifts and special abilities given by the Holy Spirit, first remember that these are given for the purpose of helping each other. To one person the Spirit gives a word of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge, to another a special faith, to someone else the gift of healing. He gives power to one person to perform miracles and another to prophesy. He gives another person the ability to discern whether a message is from the Spirit of God or from some other spirit. Still another person is given the ability to speak in unknown languages while another is given the ability to interpret what is being said.”

Other scriptures could be added, but these are sufficient to make it clear that the biblical model was inclusive. Unless we choose to abandon these scriptures, it is important that we consider seriously where and how these precious gifts are to be exercised. Churches caught up in the charismatic renewal, accepted them as the essential model for meeting together and initially adopted them in the main services as well as other gatherings. Our own church was typical, so I will use it as an example.

Our constant aim in the main Sunday Service, as in other gatherings, was that the Holy Spirit would lead, inspire, empower and orchestrate, using who he wished, as he wished and how he wished to accomplish his purposes. We would invite Father, Son and Holy Spirit to Minister to us. I will talk about dynamics and adjustments to be made as numbers grow later. Imagine for now a congregation of up to say one hundred and twenty or so. Those leading had responsibility to lead sensitively under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Sermons were expected to be well prepared and inspirational, spanning the ministries of preaching and teaching in a balanced way. However, they could be lengthened, shortened, changed from what had been prepared, or abandoned if the Holy Spirit moved in particular ways. Sometimes the Service would start with a sermon or finish with a sermon. It may be preached midway. Sometimes it would be preached in two short sessions or sometimes shared by more than one speaker. Worship would be what we termed

‘open’. The meeting leader would exercise a very light handed oversight.

The music group were ready and prepared with songs to undergird the praise time and on occasions that is how things went. But normally it would be a partnership with the congregation. The musicians were encouraged to pause frequently, allowing silence and awaiting response from the congregation. All sorts could happen. The meeting may shift to praying, or praising without accompaniment. An individual may start up a song and everyone join in. The words would quickly follow on the screen and the musicians would begin to play. Solos might emerge or collective singing in tongues. Various expressions of the gifts of the Holy Spirit were prevalent. On occasions sobbing would break out as people were being healed emotionally in the strong presence of

God. Always a time of open prayer was included. Breaking bread would be done in different formats. Testimonies were frequent. Ministry times of healing were common. Praying with one another was interwoven through all that was done. Conference feedback was another favoured expression. Variety and congregational participation underpinned all that was done. This helps to explain why Sermons were so often abandoned or shortened. Sometimes open air services would be an option.

This has been a history lesson so don't draw the conclusion that I am advocating a return to the eighties. But history can be a good teacher. There seems to be a growing expectancy that a new move of God is imminent so it would be wise not to find ourselves with inflexible patterns and structures that will resist it. In chapter sixteen I addressed the reality that there are a frightening number of people expressing that they are Church weary. In that chapter I confronted these unhappy people sympathetically I hope, with their personal responsibility for recovering enthusiasm and passion by not being dependent upon their church to do it for them, but to engage again with God's Kingdom and find fire there. The moment that a believer's church weariness leads to weariness with God's Kingdom, they can soon experience a crisis of faith. The fact that individuals have a personal responsibility to guard their own faith, does not absolve local churches from their collective responsibility to inspire and help believers to maintain their enthusiasm. What can we do? I suggest we start by listening to our congregations, giving them a sympathetic ear, and if and where we discover failings, give those failings the attention they need. We may hear things that we would rather not, but I think that this is a price we must pay.

I frequently encounter, "I'm bored, same old, same old, same old?" There is a saying, 'Variety is the spice of life.' Here is a mildly amusing parable. A considerate wife knew that her husband's favourite teatime snack was egg and chips with bread and butter, so she decided to treat him to this one Monday "Did you enjoy your tea darling?" "Delicious." So, she served up the same on Tuesday, then Wednesday, then Thursday. By Friday, he pushed them to one side and said, "I don't like egg and chips." She asked, "What's wrong with them my love. You enjoyed them on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, why all of a sudden don't you like them on Friday?"

A have had the privilege of attending many different church services in recent years, predominantly New Churches or Renewed Churches. Reluctantly I have to admit that that I am beginning to encounter an unusual and consistent sameness practically everywhere I go. They have, more often than not, become very programmed and predictable have become closely managed all through. Usually forty five minutes worship, then the notices and offering, followed by a sermon of thirty minutes or so. Anything else seems to come as an optional extra. I am an enthusiastic worshipper and love hearing inspired preaching, so I am able to return home satisfied in my own way because I have the opportunity and joy of living a varied Kingdom life all through the week. Why am I concerned?

My concern is that the way most of us do church, particularly on Sundays, **cultivates passivity**. We adopt a model which is essentially that which is used by theatre or sports

events. There are the actors and the audience, the players and the spectators. A few play while the overwhelming number sit and watch. The spectators can go on week after week, month after month, year after year having so little participation that this practice of none involvement becomes so ingrained, so habitual, so normal that everyone assumes that this is how it is supposed to be. Then we wonder why people lose their inspiration, get bored, come to church services out of duty to God, or worst of all find more interesting things to do out of church. They begin to feel free to miss services not thinking they are letting the side down, because after all their noncontribution is not going to be missed.

I have often thought to myself, "These people who keep missing church services would never think of missing work on Monday morning. How can they rate attendance at work more highly than attendance at God's house?" I still think that is a legitimate question to ask, but we have to face the fact that they have vital things to do at work, and as they see it, little vital to do at church.

When we come to consider our young people, we find that they are not often attracted by the 'show' we put on. Being spectators will rarely satisfy them. They are looking for action. If a lot of adults struggle, how do our young people feel? You will have gathered from my little history lesson that the church we founded in the eighties was pretty lively and inclusive by some standards. Even so, when the parents of a teenage daughter started bringing her to church, after a while it was evident that coming to church Sunday by Sunday left her with a diminishing interest. I had an inspiration. "What do you think El about coming down to the City Centre on Sunday evenings with me to help with feeding homeless people? This immediately caught her imagination. "Yes I will come down with you and help Mike." The journey was about twelve miles so we had plenty of time to chat. Little by little she became free to discuss her faith, or lack of faith to begin with. I was able to gradually unfold the kingdom to her. Seeing faith in action, and being part of it gave her what I might call, a purpose perspective. Young people are looking for a cause, for purpose, and if they don't find it in the church they will look elsewhere. Happily, through her getting involved with the homeless work, El discovered a deep faith in Christ. She was baptised and became regular in attending services. Later she went with my daughter on mission to Bosnia at the time of the conflict, serving in a home for war orphans. Not long after returning, she went to a needy area of London to work as an evangelist. I am convinced that El would soon have drifted away from church had she continued in passivity. While ever we present church services like spectator sports I believe we will find it difficult to establish passion in our people.

I sincerely believe that there is a time coming when God will flood many of our churches with new believers. How will we handle that? There will be great pressure on us to radically rethink, re plan, and re do things very differently, and who can say beforehand what that will look like. In the meantime perhaps we should practice being more creative, more flexible, more varied, more adaptive more nimble on our feet, better readied to respond to the kind of revival and renewal that God has planned whatever shape it takes.

I will share a few of my thoughts, not to provide a prescription on how to achieve this but to attempt to show that there are lots of different ways of doing things and they are there for each individual church to discover what is appropriate in their situation. Church is so much wider than the Sunday Service but it makes a starting point. I will broaden things out in the final chapter, 'Being a magnetic church'.

### **What kind of welcome are we giving our visitors?**

#### **First impressions are well known for having a disproportionate influence upon us.**

Anyone visiting a Church for the first time will in the first ten minutes form a strong impression. If it is a bad impression, quite an amount of good favour will be needed to shift it. Conversely, if someone is particularly blessed on arrival they will adopt a tolerant attitude towards less favourable aspects of their experience. A colleague and I visited a four thousand strong church in Texas. It was a quarter of a mile walk around the inside of a circular auditorium. Banks of seats filled with thousands of people rose like a great amphitheatre. It was awesome. We found seats and waited with anticipation for the service to begin. Quiet descended. The Pastor positioned himself in front of the microphone and the first thing he said in his Texas drawl was, "We have two friends from England with us this morning people. Let's give them a great Texas welcome. Enthusiastic clapping of four thousand people resounded through the building. When that finally subsided, he continued, "Come down and introduce yourselves good friends." Somewhat dumbfounded, we trekked to the stage, introduced ourselves and explained why we were visiting. "We are here for five days to learn all we can from your experience, and particularly to understand how you have gained such a reputation as a church of mighty prayer." More cheering followed and the Pastor prayed a blessing on us. That is a welcome we can learn from. My encouragement is this, when anyone visits our churches, we should honour them in ways that leave them feeling honoured. Certainly I recommend that we introduce them by name providing they are happy with this. If a single person visits, they would be blessed by someone of the same gender choosing to introduce themselves and saying something like, "Great to have you with us. Is it ok if I sit with you?" The aim of whatever we do is that they immediately feel to belong.

**What does our 'Shop Window' look like?** Commercial enterprises take the greatest care to presenting themselves well. Why don't we walk past our premises and ask ourselves very critically, "What message are we sending out to the community? How will they interpret what they read on our notice board?" Are we using images or words that reinforce the view that we are a private religious club designed and run for the members?

We used 'community church' when we first started meeting in the local community hall. It was an inclusive name that those outside the church could easily identify with.

**Entrances and Car Parks.** It is so, so important that we place at reception points, happy outgoing people who can smile. All this is pure commonsense. We have all too often experienced arriving at churches where there is no reception at all, or

encountered some misery who struggles to give a civil word of welcome. How is this ever allowed to happen?

**When considering the content and style of services**, the following illustration, will help us I think. As children, my brother and I received very few toys. Looking back I am glad. We had to make our own and that was beneficial. We became very inventive. We actually self manufactured our monopoly set and I could give a long, long list of the other things that we made. However, one glorious day, an uncle who we had never met, called in at our house, and gave us a present. Why I will never know because we never saw him again. It was a No. 10. Maccano Set. The numbers began at 1, so I hope you can expand your imagination to comprehend what a No. 10. set was like. They were fabulously expensive and contained an incredible array of metal strips, plates, boxes, angle irons, axels, wheels, pulleys, gears, hooks, strings, belts, brackets, nuts and bolts, bushes, tyres, screwdrivers spanners, etc, etc. etc. The kit came with a beautifully illustrated manual with detailed instructions of how to build bridges, cranes, engines, tractors, trains and so on. We were in heaven and spent many happy hours replicating these.

**Here is the main point of the parable. It struck us forcibly one day after we had built all the models shown in the manual and on the box that we had the experience to begin to design and build our own models which we did with great success.** This was even more fun. Why not consider the possibility of creatively designing and constructing individual services. I think that as churches we have been copying one another for so long we have lost sight of the fact that we have a wide range of individual options.. Do we tend towards driving our services like trams that run on preset steel rails, or like buses that can manoeuvre in all directions, access places a tram is incapable of, change gear, change speed, reverse easily, stop and start quite nimbly? It would be interesting to set up a think tank with a varied selection of people and see what they came up with. I have been in churches where leaders have been bold enough to hand over some morning services to the young people. How refreshing. Some of these have been remarkably creative.

**So what are some of the options in our box?** I have given a number of examples already in my short history of the Charismatic Renewal.

Testimonies can be spontaneous or planned ahead. This applies to most of the suggestions.

If we are ready to be flexible, we can break up long blocks of content and serve them up in smaller portions. This can help maintain attention and concentration.

When beginning to train up speakers we can start by giving them short time spans. Sermons can be shared and the speaker's potential assessed.

Experiment with a variety of music styles, hymns and songs. When we first started leading church, we sang only the contemporary new songs inspired by the charismatic renewal. This was a reaction to the general dirge of hymn singing accompanied by a

solitary organ. But we soon discovered that some of the 'old hymns' carried exceptional blessing when sung in the Spirit and to the accompaniment of a variety of musical instruments. Old hymns suddenly became new songs, and were integrated into our repertoire. We now have available new songs, renewal movement songs that are still potent, and our faithful old hymns which when first written were resounding vehicles for worshiping God, delivering a message and carrying worshippers into the realm of the Spirit.

It can be helpful I think to at times tone down the volume of the wall of sound produced through powerful speaker systems. They can easily drown the human voice. It may be artificial to make a distinction between praise songs and worship songs, but there are many gentle and sensitive songs that benefit by emphasising voice and using instruments in a supporting rather than a dominant role.

Time given for questions to be asked following a sermon can give the speaker an opportunity to clarify his message and be a help to individuals who are struggling particularly to know how to translate the message into practical actions.

An 'Any Questions' session instead of a sermon, answered by a well chosen panel is another option. I was part of a team that went into a secondary school and faced their sixth form asking questions about the Christian Faith. That was not boring!

Perhaps some freedom could be given for trusted believers with spiritual gifts to exercise them in a sensitive way. There have been a number of occasions when I have been prompted by God to give a revelation word whilst preaching. The Lord interrupted me one morning while I was preaching and I was inspired to say, "God has just revealed to me that there is someone here who has a name that is not their name." I asked, "Does this mean anything to anyone?" No response was forthcoming until the end of the service. A lady came up to me surreptitiously and said, "That is me Michael but please do not let anyone know." She was not British, and explained the circumstances of how she came to be living under a false identity. She was ashamed by it and lived with a heavy weight of guilt. God had responded to her need and showed her how she could be entirely forgiven and live at peace from now on. We prayed together and she was completely released from her burden. I could relate other stories of how revelation words, even while I have been preaching, have reached out to people's deepest hidden needs and freed them from heavy burdens. My encouragement is, make room for God to do these works through his Holy Spirit.

Healing the sick was an absolute priority with Jesus and the apostles, so it is perfectly in order for this ministry to be common place. Why is it that people come to church services with all kinds of sicknesses, mental, emotional, spiritual, physical and relational, but do not bother to ask for prayer for healing. A church we were part of for some years established a healing team. We were given authorisation badges and a dedicated area to occupy at the end of each service. An invitation was given every week for anyone needing prayer for healing or anything else for that matter, to meet with the team before leaving for home. Hardly anyone ever came forward for prayer, believe it or not.

Most people came to church with their sicknesses, didn't ask for prayer and went home with their sicknesses. I still don't really understand it.

One aged man of faith, came to me who was in the process of going blind. His condition was advanced to the point where he could not read the words of the songs on the screen though sitting at the front of the church. He wanted his eyes to be healed so he could join in the worship. Mustering as much faith as I could I prayed for his sight and asked if it had made any difference. I wasn't unduly surprised when it hadn't. However, he came for healing each week and little by little our faith grew. After about six weeks he came for his next dose of prayer and casually informed me that he could now see the screen quite well enough to read the words and share in the worship. He was also able to read the words in a hymnbook. It would have made a good testimony don't you think, but it was never given because that didn't fit the tradition. Maybe more people would have been ready to seek healing if it had. After all these years, the ways of church remain a mystery to me.

I have seen poetry and drama used to great effect in communicating the gospel.

I will make a quick mention of the use of liturgy. The endless repetition and deadness of most of the liturgical services I first experienced as a new believer put me off, and I have no desire to return to that. However, one thing I hold as a precious legacy of those endless repetitions is a clear understanding of what Christians believe. This was delivered through the Nicene Creed. It begins with, 'I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and all things visible and invisible'. It then continues to present a plumb line of doctrinal truth that expresses with exactitude what marks out our Christian faith. I suspect that we have many in our present generation of believers who would find it difficult to give a clear statement of their belief. Somewhere in the scheme of things it would help to find space in what we do to ensure that believers today actually know what they believe. Perhaps an occasional use of liturgy could be considered.

I will finally mention the use of guest invitation services. These can be very effective in introducing as yet un-churched people the strange world of church. These invitation services can be pitched at whatever frequency is appropriate. I have heard it proposed that we should adapt, design and conduct all our services as though people not yet churched are in the congregation. It sounds good but my thoughts are that it could be artificial and rob mature believers of mature experiences.

When we hold baptism services we know beforehand that un-churched visitors will be among us. Because of this we automatically prepare services with this in mind. Already we have a good model that works very well. Occasional guest services give regulars an opportunity well ahead of time and armed with a well designed invitation card, to introduce friends and family to a service designed for them.

### **Let us now take a look now at the management of increasing numbers:**

The fourth book in the Old Testament is called 'Numbers'. It opens with



increased measure of light handed management is needed in order to maintain inclusivity and participation. Prearranging contributions helps the timid and balances their contributions with those of the more forthcoming. We need both. Periods of 'open house' can continue to be included and adjusted depending on response. As numbers continue to grow, leaders need to be increasingly creative and thoughtful as they give stronger management to gatherings.

**Managing inclusivity and combating passivity in large congregations requires increasing skill.** Happily this can be learned gradually in harmony with the gradual growth of congregations. Sharing the task of leading with those who are sufficiently gifted, releases the pastor from carrying too much of the strain and helps others to practice and grow in gifting and skills. When growing congregations begin to transition at numbers around 150 to 200, choices about how to manage future growth become very important. Is it time to consider starting new congregations? If this is not the choice I believe much thought and creativity needs to be given as to how to facilitate close relationships within the church family. The next chapter takes a careful look at this.

I will finish with a few words regarding the dimension of celebration. 'Bible Weeks' are an example of this. A big top that can accommodate thousands of people, is erected at the centre of the camp site. Each morning and evening worship services are arranged and the tent fills with thousands of believers. The presence of God can on occasions be quite awesome. Fundamentally changed lives are a frequent consequence. One's soul and spirit is impacted, one's faith is expanded when we praise and honour God amongst a multitude. Many churches and networks arrange celebration events and conferences across the nation where hundreds and thousands of believers gather. I do encourage you to seek them out and ensure that your soul is blessed in this way.

## Be a Magnetic Church

Acts 2: 46 and 4:32. They worshipped together at the temple every day, met in homes for the Lords Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity while enjoying the good will of the people. **And every day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.**

All the believers were united in heart and mind and they felt that what they owned was not their own so they shared everything that they had.

**This was magnetic church without doubt.** What can we learn from the way this church conducted their lives so we can become magnetic too? Where do we start? The above scriptures are explicit in identifying those who were being attracted or 'magnetised'. It is 'those who were

being saved', not we notice, 'those who had been, saved'. So what had taken place in the lives of these people that transported them from 'not saved' to 'being saved'? It is safe to say that they must have first heard the good news because faith only comes by hearing. I am sure that they must have heard it from magnetic people. They had the opportunity to view the believing community from the outside, seeing the way the people loved and cared for each other and thought to themselves, "I want some of that. I would like to be included in this amazing community even though I am not a believer." And it seems that they were enthusiastically embraced prior to experiencing full salvation.

So where does this leave us today, as individuals, and where does it leave us corporately? In my book, 'Populating Heaven', I deal very thoroughly with our individual response. In this chapter I want to focus on our corporate response to the challenge of becoming the kind of community that causes those outside the church to be in awe of the way we do life and faith together. Many new churches have sprung up recently and they demonstrate how magnetic they can be to those who are already believers. What these new communities are doing is providing what a lot of believers want but who are not receiving where they are. **What does this tell us? It tells us that if our churches provide what unbelievers are looking and longing for, they will find it easy to attach themselves to our communities.** Logic tells us that if our churches want to become magnetic to unbelievers, we need to think again and think deeply about what it is that people without knowledge of God, are longing for. When we understand this we can begin to develop communities that are magnetic to unbelievers and provide them with the opportunity to turn to God.

**Satisfy natural longings first and then satisfy spiritual longings.** People long to belong, to be accepted, to be recognised, to be loved, to be honoured, to be



Be tolerant with each other. Don't get angry with each other.

Do not take offence at each other. Freely forgive each another.

Show kindness to each other. Show compassion to each other.

Be humble towards each other. Look out for each other's interests.

Don't lie to each other. Encourage each other. Help each other.

Protect each other. Do good to each other.

Be patient with each other.

Share your hopes with each other. Honour each other.

**This is quite a list isn't it?** What shouts is that we can only practice this beautiful gospel of love fully within a network of close relationships, so it is here that we can start. Let us pick up where I left off in the last chapter. I talked about three dimensions. That is, Small group, Congregation, and Celebration. I identified small groups as ideally being between eight and fifteen, give or take.

This permits informality. It allows close relationships to grow. It provides an environment where mutual pastoral care can be exchanged. It is a place where all those 'each others' I have listed can be fulfilled. It gives everyone a voice. Everyone can be heard and understood. It is a place where people's gifts both natural and spiritual can be recognised and given space to flourish. It is a place to discover purpose. It is a place to receive interactive teaching and to be equipped. It is a place to worship and pray. It is a place to break bread. It is a place to socialise.

Above all it is an opportunity to become true family.

What has struck home to me over the years is that the blessings of God particularly abound where groups meet together for kingdom purposes. This is less so when groups gather for fellowship alone. Common purpose seems to generate a common bond and achieving purposes together provides deep satisfaction. This harks back to what I shared in chapter fifteen regarding the discovery of vision and purpose. Groups that meet in the knowledge that they are advancing God's Kingdom and building his church seem to become a magnet for heavenly presence and empowerment. Those gathered begin to understand that their faith has become active and this makes more sense of their faith. There isn't space to explore here the many, varied, and changeable purposes that such groups may develop. The important thing is for these gatherings to be fully aware at any particular time of their purpose for doing so, and to be able to see the purpose being achieved.

**There is no way that I can overemphasise how important it is for churches to develop small group structures, and to constantly encourage members of their church to join in.**

Once this is well established, it is most helpful to new people who are being added to the church. The oversight team can identify the most appropriate groups to invite them to join. Then they can immediately make acquaintances and begin to form friendships.

Beyond this basic network of small groups that have been formally established in the church, we can all accept responsibility for establishing a circle of compatible friendships which have the potential to grow very deep and strong. We can also keep a watch for those who find themselves isolated or lonely and give our friendship to them too. On our list of 'each others' we find, **'show hospitality to each other'**.

We can do just that. It is an obligation and an opportunity. We can always invite people round to our homes that we have only a fleeting connection with at church services so we can get to know them and them us. I never cease to be surprised at how even one morning, afternoon or evening with someone can establish a disproportionately positive basis for friendship which carries over into church life generally. As new people are added to the church, either believers or those who are being saved, they will soon absorb the prevailing bond of relationships and grow into the church family.

When we look back to the early church we see that its vibrant life was centred on and stimulated in homes. I see no reason why this should not become the norm today. In the early days of the Charismatic Renewal, the new churches that emerged were referred to as 'House Churches,' for the obvious reason that the people met in houses instead of church buildings. We were typical of this. When we arrived at the point of cramming twenty six people into the lounge of our semi-detached house, we started meeting in a larger home further up the estate. Nationally, churches such as ours began to be referred to as 'The House Church Movement', then, as houses were abandoned for larger buildings, instead of being called house churches were called 'New Churches'. I explain this because we knew church at its very best when we churched in houses. Why is that? Because we churched in the buildings where we lived, just like the early church, and it was much easier to see people saved. When we first moved into the Local Community Hall and called ourselves Community Church, we greatly appreciated the opportunities that meeting as a congregation offered. For quite a time we had the best of both worlds. We continued to church in our dwelling places. What I would dearly like to see is a full recovery of 'church in houses', while still developing our congregations in an even stronger way because of it. Also we churched on the high street by buying premises and turning them into a combination of cafe, Christian book shop, craft shop, retreat for missionaries, and a youth meeting place.

**So what can church in houses look like?** All I can do is point the way because it will look somewhat different in every home. Going back to the first chapter I laid great stress on our learning to see through different lenses. As a starting point, I would like us to think about our homes in an entirely new way, the way the Acts believers did. Their

houses were church buildings and the focus for church life. The road we live on is called Fairway and it would be no contradiction if we were to put up a church notice board outside with 'Fairway Community Church' on it. We wouldn't for the sake of our neighbours, but effectively this is how we function. We have ongoing church expressing itself in many ways. Much of this is a product and continuation of our history so the measure of what happens, is perhaps unusual. However, if every one of us were to think this way, to imagine that we have a church notice board outside our residences, with the name of our street or road on it and a church name of our own liking to follow, imagine how many churches we would have planted. We no longer go to church and then go home we simply occupy different church buildings at different times for different purposes.

We talk about trying to get people into church, meaning persuade them to come to a church service. We can learn to think differently. If anyone comes into our houses, they have come to church because our houses are now churches. We have strategically placed and manned churches all through our communities. If we want to invite someone to church, we can invite them to our homes. Our houses can initially be the best church to invite them to. Wherever we are, when people come into our presence, they are in church. Some of them will be, as described by Luke, the author of Acts, 'those who are being saved'. They were being saved in the presence of God's people and in people's houses. "Please Father, will you dramatically expand our view and understanding of church so we may see it through the eyes of Jesus. May your kingdom come into our homes so that your will may be done in them as it is in heaven." Am I speaking just theory, a hope and a dream? By no means! Brenda and I have proved this consistently in our own home and many others have done so too. Our home has been the means of seeing many people turn to God. Fairway Community Church is thriving. The book of Proverbs says, "As a person thinks, so they will be". When we choose to think of our homes as churches, that is what they will become.

If this leaves you puzzled and wondering what to do, think about the time that Jesus visited the temple only to find it full of traders. He was so angry that he used a whip on them. Remember what he shouted.

**"It is written, My house will be a house of prayer".**

This is the best place to start I believe. Jesus came looking for a house of prayer. We said earlier that we would look where Jesus was looking so we could see what he sees. Well it doesn't require much reasoning ability to come to the conclusion that when he looks at our houses he expects to see them as houses of prayer. We can all dedicate our houses to God and say, "Father, let my house become your house. Help me to make it a house of prayer. Fill this house with your Holy presence. Make me and your house magnetic in your love, drawing believers and those yet to believe into your presence to be touched and transformed by you. A prayer like this can pave the way for God to bless our homes with his purposes. Can I suggest that you look for opportunities to invite believers into your home for prayer, bible reading and breaking bread and then just wait to see what God chooses to do. Already you will have begun

to build a spiritual community in a very simple and easy way. Jesus said simply and clearly, **“This is how the world will know that you are my disciples, by how much you love one another.”**

Lord Jesus, pour out upon us your magnetic love.

Let Heaven and Church Collide.

May the Lord bless you and keep you, make his face shine on you, and give you peace, and give you hope.

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