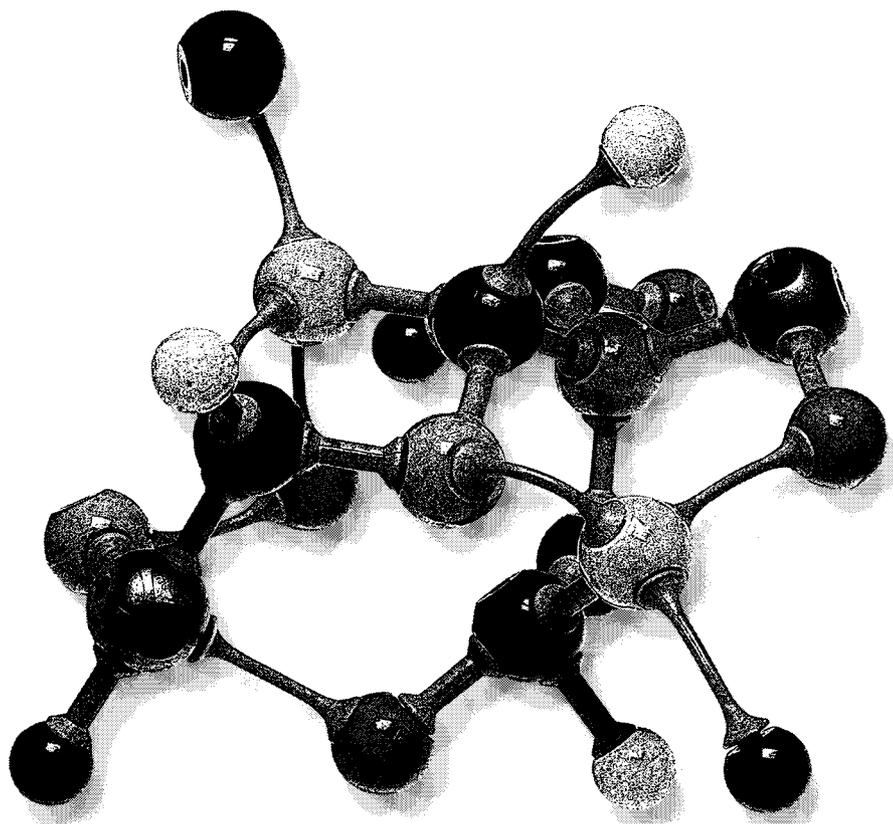


Summer 2003

# TALK

*The Mainstream Magazine*



*Connecting leaders*

**Church Meetings  
and membership:  
have they had it?**

Rob Warner  
Derek Tidball  
John Balchin  
Bryan Doyle  
John Bridger  
and many others  
plus:  
Geraldine Latty on  
worship,  
our regular  
columnists and  
much more

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# Sexing-up church meetings and membership?

You couldn't get a more domestic issue! In the scale of things it's pretty small beer – see the last question I asked Derek Tidball in the *Talk* interview – but perhaps not unimportant because of that. Maybe it's a little part of a central issue – the church willing to go on 'being reformed' even in its politics. If we're not willing to entertain reform over what is a 'petty agenda', it's symptomatic of an intransigence that makes change impossible when it comes to the big agenda. There's sufficient evidence from our contributors of the need to confront the issue.



The other day I talked to two active, committed, young members of our church, who said with feeling, 'We don't come to church meetings, because we don't believe in democracy. You're called to lead, we should trust you to do it.' The gateway for a word game about democracy and church meetings opened up. I could have rejoined, 'I agree, we believe in theocracy.' But this would have been just that – an unproductive word game that begged all kinds of questions – my own response raising the majority! The fact was they felt disconnected from an institution that was irrelevant and, as they saw it, actually harmful to the working of God's people. If we believe congregationalism has a future then we have to articulate and communicate the purpose of church meetings and membership better. And beyond that we have to embody a practice that is not only seen to be viable but actually beneficial to the maturing of the body of Christ.

And that's the tricky bit. If we could point to examples of membership and church meetings that were not only relevant and viable, but actually attractive, generating excitement because of the sense of the shared journey we're on as community, then it would be fine. But there are so few examples. Having been involved in three churches at close quarters in which I have seen much of the uglier side of congregationalism, I have to say, that whilst I am now in a church that has by far the best expression of church meeting life I've experienced, it is still felt by many – the majority? – as something frustrating, alienating to some temperaments, more to be endured than enjoyed, certainly not a place where we expect Christ to be. There's a need to take a long, hard look at them both, have an honest conversation that searches for the essence of what our forebears alighted upon, and finally find tangible ways to discern the mind of Christ together. This is not a question of 'sexing-up' the church meeting – that horrible phrase destined for temporary fashion status – but of re-discovering the potency of what has become largely impotent.

Read on and let the conversation continue.

**Stephen Ibbotson** is the Editor of *Talk*. He is also a member of the pastoral staff of Altrincham Baptist Church, Altrincham, Cheshire.

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**TALK The Mainstream Magazine** Volume 3 Issue 1

**Editor:** Stephen Ibbotson **Production Editor** **Layout and**

**Design:** Robert Parkinson **Editorial Assistant:** Jean Morgan

**News:** Craig Millward **Network News:** Peter Nodding

**Reviews:** Daniel Pritchard **Front Cover:** Wingfinger Graphics,

Leeds **Printed and despatched** by Moorley's, Ilkeston, Derbys.

# New Testament practice – or sacred cow?

by John Balchin



**Dr John Balchin** retired last year after 44 years in full-time ministry, during which time he served in pastorates at Wood Green, Morden, Purley and Above Bar, Southampton. For a number of years he was tutor in Christian Doctrine and NT Studies at the London Bible College. He has written books and travelled widely, exercising an inter-denominational preaching ministry both at home and abroad.

'You do have Church Meetings, then?' 'Yeah, about two a year.' 'What do you do in them?' 'Well, we approve the budget and elect the deacons.' 'When do you hold them?' 'After a morning service.' 'How long do they last?' 'Oh, about twenty minutes!'

So went the conversation with a senior pastor in Texas, a man who would die rather than deny that he was a Baptist, and I couldn't help thinking of the churches back home where the Church Meeting had acquired a sort of iconic status. Stop everything else, but without a traditional, regular church business meeting – with its agenda, motions, votes and general free-for-all – you are no longer entitled to call yourself a pukka Baptist.

This conversation happened when I was criss-crossing the States on a sabbatical trip, asking pastors about the structure of their churches. Having returned from academic life to the pastorate, I was puzzled as to why so many of our larger churches tended to plateau at around 400+ members. My instinct told me it was something to do with the way we organised ourselves, which included Church Meetings.

I was reared on thorough-going Baptist ecclesiology. The church in the New Testament, the *ekklesia*, 'the assembly of God's people', was either

universal or local, and Christ was equally Head of both. When God's people assembled in an attitude of love, prayer and worship, the Lord of the Church would lead them collectively into his will for their fellowship. The machinery of the vote was merely to determine that God-given common mind.

I discovered by hard experience, when I got out into the pastorate, that it didn't seem to work that way in practice! On the one hand, the pattern of Church Meetings seemed to owe more to the Victorian town hall than the Bible, while on the other, when they turned up, those loving, worshipping, praying church members seemed to regard it as their right to say whatever they thought about the church, the deacons – and me! Something seemed to be wrong, but doubtless, I thought, it must be different in the larger churches.

As part of my sabbatical project, to get some raw data, I sent out a questionnaire about Church Meetings to all the Baptist churches with 400 or more members in England, and not only did they all reply – a miracle in itself – but confirmed my suspicions that, even in larger fellowships, there was a huge gap between theory and practice. What is more, apart from one church which had reinvented its Church Meeting, I sensed a good deal of

discontent, not to say disillusionment, with the accepted practice.

For a start, the level of attendance indicated that the Church Meeting was not *the church meeting* together at all, but a much smaller group – sometimes as few as a quarter of the membership – of those who liked, even demanded that kind of opportunity. The proceedings were frequently stilted, and too often the atmosphere reflected Prime Minister's question time! With regard to actually getting anything done, the process was cumbersome, and the gap between Church Meetings meant that decision-making could be painfully protracted.

It took me many years to wake up to the fact that, apart from a couple of references to the church disciplining unruly members, there is no mention of a Church Meeting – certainly as we have come to know it – anywhere in the New Testament. (Acts 15 describes a Council with a pretty select attendance list.) There is, however, a great deal about gifted leadership, and about the members' responsibility to both respect it and follow the lead and example of those God has placed over them. True, they were not perfect, and there were times when those led disputed with their leaders, but the principle is clear. I'm sure that Paul and the others certainly did not anticipate the emotional abuse that many of our pastors

and deacons have suffered over the years in Church Meetings.

Please do not misunderstand me. I have not reacted, as has the oversight of some of our newer churches, by espousing ministerial despotism. The leadership *must* be answerable to the membership. At the same time, for the leadership to do its work effectively, the members must be prepared to deliberately delegate a good deal of the responsibility for actually running the church to those whom God has given them as leaders. That should be implicit in their election and recognition, even though this may require a revision of current expectations on the part of church members. The challenge we face is to maintain that fine balance in our long-overdue reform of the Church Meeting.

So, if we are going to retain our Church Meetings, what should we be looking for? Try this for a wish list. There should be a sense of worship as the church meets in the presence of

particular decisions – most of these can be left to the leadership – so that the membership might own the overall policies which drive the fellowship. It should be a celebration of what God has done, and an affirmation of what he could do. It should be prayerful, not merely at the beginning and the end. It should be disciplined, members being made aware of what is not fitting in that context – how many pastors have found 'AOB' to be a veritable minefield? Apart from the statutory AGM, it should be called when necessary – some churches have far too many Church Meetings.

When I left school, having suffered so much from the game, I promised myself I would never play rigger again. When I retired, I felt the same way about Church Meetings. For the sake of my many brethren still involved in pastoral oversight, may I appeal to all concerned to consider the possibility that there might be a better way!

**There should be a sense of worship, fellowship and mutual acceptance. It should be a time for sharing the vision. It should be prayerful, disciplined, and called when necessary. What a huge gap between theory and practice!**

God – in one church, members complained when the Church Meeting was moved from the hall to the main church building, as it might inhibit them in what they had to say! The accent should be on fellowship and mutual acceptance, creating an atmosphere where it should be hard to break the rules of basic Christian courtesy. Traditional 'business' should be kept to a legally required minimum – many members, particularly the young, find it boring and irrelevant anyway. It should be a time for sharing the vision of the church, not necessarily coming to

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# worship file

## Sing to the Lord a new song

by Geraldine Latty

Photo: Kelvin Reeves Design, Bristol



**Geraldine Latty**, a graduate musician, conducts workshops in leading worship. She also leads worship at national and international conferences such as Spring Harvest, Baptist Assembly and Worship Together. Previous to this she taught as head of music in a secondary school for 12 years. For further details please contact Geraldine on [geraldinelatty@hotmail.com](mailto:geraldinelatty@hotmail.com).

One of the questions I'm often asked is, 'How do we introduce new songs and hymns into the gatherings of which we are a part?' Here are a few observations I've made:

### Why learn new songs?

I talked in an earlier article about how we need to develop a vocabulary of song-choice that reflects the myriad expressions of faith in our amazing God. There is always more to express.

### What do we need to be aware of when introducing new songs?

Take time to teach the song carefully. (What you sow you will reap!)

Even the composers themselves sing their songs differently from the way they've been written down, so decide which version you will use – whether you are learning it from a CD or from manuscript – and stick to it.

In my experience, there are very few songs that people feel they have really engaged with at the first learning session. This applies particularly to songs with complex melodies and rhythms.

Keep your expectations realistic. Not everyone will 'touch heaven' on the first sing-through! It may well take time for some people to be able to 'use' the new hymn or song in their worship, without having to concentrate on the learning process. The teaching time is a

foundation to build on. As you use new material in subsequent weeks, people will move naturally to own the songs – particularly when they express a corporate story.

### What material should we introduce?

Let me encourage you to become a song harvester! You can glean songs from anywhere: CDs, conferences, older hymnbooks, songs from around the world or other Christian faith experiences, e.g. gospel, Iona. Also I'd encourage you to discover, if you haven't already, who the song-writers are in your own fellowship. Their songs will have added significance, reflecting something of the journey you are making together.

### When?

Introduce it before the gathering starts. This provides a good base to use it later on in the gathering itself.

Arrange a 'learning new songs' evening. You won't get the whole congregation, but a core group who are confident with new songs will be a great help when you introduce them to everyone else. You could introduce the new song by having a choir or soloist sing it one week, using it again for all to sing the following week. Try to re-visit it in subsequent weeks if you can – every little helps!

### How do I teach a new song?

There are so many different ways to teach a song. Here are just a few:

- Sing the song (or a verse or chorus) through once so that people have an idea of the context.

- Then sing it line by line and ask the congregation to sing each line back to you.
- When you think they've learnt a particular line, move on. If it takes a long time for a line to be learnt, break it down to half-lines or even individual words. This is the crucial stage of learning and if the goal is to learn the song, don't worry – it is not 'interrupting the flow of the Spirit'!
- It can help to have the person teaching the song, or someone else from the worship band, using hand movements to show whether the melody goes up or down, and whether notes are long or short. The musical members of your congregation will appreciate this and pick up the song more quickly!

For some songs that have three sections – verse, chorus and 'bridge' – you may even want to learn the verse and chorus during the first session, then add the bridge the next time. Alternatively, you could have the group / congregation learn and sing the verse and chorus, then listen to you sing the bridge, moving back to the chorus and learning the bridge section later.

If there are any sections that are particularly easy to pick up (usually the chorus), you might want to teach that first, so that people feel a sense of completion.

### Who can teach the song?

YOU! As long as you know the song well, you can teach it. Keep it within your confidence and skill ability. If you know well the song you are teaching, it will make the whole process easier for learners and teachers alike!

# Membership – surely there's a better way!

by Bryan Doyle

In recent years I have become more and more disillusioned with the exclusivity of church. The unspoken awareness of an 'in-crowd' and an 'out-crowd' within our churches has frustrated me immensely. Endless references to what members can do and what non-members cannot do, exclusive lists and charters, secret meetings and so-called special handshakes... sorry, privileges! The idea that there were several hoops you had to jump through in order to qualify was not my understanding of 'being members of one body' (Rom.12).

Alongside this frustration was the nagging observation that in this post-modern era, it seems to be ever less socially acceptable to sign up to organisations. In my first couple of years at Stopsley, I became aware that despite significant numerical growth in our corporate celebrations, our membership list did not reflect that growth.

As a team, we evaluated this paradox and concluded the following:

I. We didn't place a high value on the status of membership. The team reflected a non-institutional thinking and, along with me, they despised the idea of exclusivity in church life.

II. With so much preaching and communication on the issue of 'grace', the idea of creating privileges for some and not for others seemed to lack integrity. Surely the ultimate privilege is God's rescue plan for our lives.

III. We had spoken a lot about 'belonging before believing before behaving'. We truly wanted every individual to feel a genuine sense of affinity with our church community, whatever their spiritual condition.

IV. However, given our constitution and heritage, we should have a mechanism that indicates personal commitment to the body.

V. Therefore, we needed to recreate the image of 'membership' for a growing church!

Over the past two and half years, we have re-invented the concept without making laborious changes to constitutional framework. We orchestrated a 'face-lift', not a new creation. First, the name had to go! 'Membership', as it does in wider secular circles, points to privilege and not participation. However, the word 'Partnership' evoked a sense of co-operation, relationship and equality. It was the chosen new name.

Partnership also indicates activity and shared responsibility – you could almost call it 'share-holding' – rather than simply getting your name on a roll. It is not a benefit, but rather a commitment to get involved in the heartbeat of the church. 'Partnership' is a far more intentional word. Isolationism is rampant in modern society, and it is the church's role to provide an antidote, to generate true community and help people to find fellowship. We've scrapped membership rhetoric, reformatting lists, rules and regulations and even invited future partners to our secret meetings! We discuss values as opposed to rules, opportunities as opposed to rights; we talk about sonship as opposed to servanthood (no time to get into all of that right now).

I'm absolutely amazed at what a simple name-change and the cleaning-out of old ideas did for our church family. I quote one of our new partners: 'The term partnership helps me



Bryan Doyle has been Senior Pastor at Stopsley Baptist Church, Luton, since 1997. Stopsley is one of the largest Baptist churches in the UK, ministering to over 800 people each week. Bryan leads a team of sixteen from three office locations in the Stopsley area. They are presently involved in three church plants. Bryan is married to South African-born Tracy, and they have three children.

understand my responsibility to the church instead of just enjoying the ride.' Statistically, we have found that partnership significantly increased as a direct result of changing our approach to the whole process when compared with the membership roll. We've gained over 140 partners in the past two and a half years. You may be tempted to think that we watered down the components of commitment in order to gain numbers. On the contrary, we spend more time going through values with prospective partners than any previous membership interviews. We have proactively broken the traditional membership mould and replaced it with something that is far more engaging. This goes so far as to allow non-members to observe any Partnership Meetings and participate in discussions. There is no longer a 'closed door policy' at Stopsley.

One meeting last November saw thirty-four people entering into partnership. These sorts of numbers speak for themselves, pointing towards there being something in the idea of committed 'partnership' that is attractive. We are always looking at what it means to be a Partner of Stopsley and listening to the needs that people flag up. It is vital that we don't become complacent or get lost in some paradigm, but rather continue to seek to provide relevant, 21st-century church that people want to be a part of.

# off the shelf

compiled by Daniel Pritchard



Daniel Pritchard is a member of the pastoral staff at Battle in Sussex. He has an interest in theological studies and compiles reviews in each edition. Reviews and suggestions for reviews can be submitted to: [daniel@thepritchards.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:daniel@thepritchards.freeserve.co.uk)

**N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God – Christian Origins and the Question of God, Volume 3*** (SPCK, £30 pb, ISBN 0 281 05550 5)



**A** book to sell your shirt for! Here is the long-awaited third volume of the series from the bishop-designate of Durham. Previous volumes established the creative reputation of Tom Wright's intellectually rigorous approach, and this one further enhances it.

His now familiar methodology combines historical examination, scriptural exegesis and theological description. The fundamental historical question is summed up best in his own words: 'How do we account for the sudden rise of a lively and many-sided movement, growing from within a pluriform Judaism and making substantial inroads into a highly pluriform world, within which one strand of belief about what happens to people after death is affirmed exclusively, is made pivotal for several aspects of the movement, and yet is significantly but consistently modified in specific directions across a wide range of texts?' In answering this question, the book's strength lies in its general mapping of culture, against which the tradition-shaped and innovative features

of early Christian belief about resurrection are lit up. Regular introductions of the ground to be explored, questions to be adequately answered and conclusions drawn ensure that you never get lost in the treasure-house of detail. Between introductions and conclusions is a veritable mine of contextual evidence and textual exegesis.

His argument carries weight by moving from the general to the specific. So rather than working from biblical text towards a comprehensive theory, he first maps the linguistic and cultural understanding of the concept of 'resurrection' within the wider understanding of life after death in paganism and pluriform Judaism. 'Resurrection' is never simply used as a way of speaking about 'life after death'. It has two specific meanings. First, a metaphorical usage in texts like Ezekiel 37, specific to 'Israel', indicating the socio-political restoration of Israel – 'the end of exile' introduced in previous volumes. Second, it is a reversal and defeat of death, which restores to those who have already gone through death some kind of bodily life. Early Christians continued to use the word in this second sense, applying to it their own unique understanding of resurrection in the light of the history of Jesus.

The bulk of the book is a detailed examination of textual evidence of early Christians' beliefs about 'resurrection'. Paul's usage of 'resurrection' was consistent with concurrent Jewish understanding, but he developed it in two ways. First, the resurrection was in two phases – that of the Messiah, to be followed at the parousia by all his people, in what Wright calls 'transphysical' resurrection. Second, Paul used it metaphorically to describe the experience of Christian living, replacing the metaphorical usage as the socio-political restoration of Israel. Wright then surveys in the same manner other writers

of both the New Testament outside of the resurrection narratives themselves, and of the non-canonical early Christian period including apocryphal material.

The evidence demands an explanation for a bundle of issues. Amongst the most important are, how did 'resurrection' move from the circumference in Judaism to the centre in early Christianity? Second, how did the clear and consistent modification to a two-phase resurrection take place? Third, why the change of metaphor from its socio-political application to that of the new life of holiness? Finally, the biggie to which he devotes a whole chapter: Why did this man become the source of a messianic movement in which he was proclaimed as Israel's Messiah and the world's lord, when everything in the pre-existent tradition and historical parallels pointed to the game being up with his crucifixion? The answer argued is that Jesus was raised from the dead, in accordance with the common and demonstrable meaning of that word, as the only historically tenable answer. He further argues that the resurrection provides the root of the early church's high Christology.

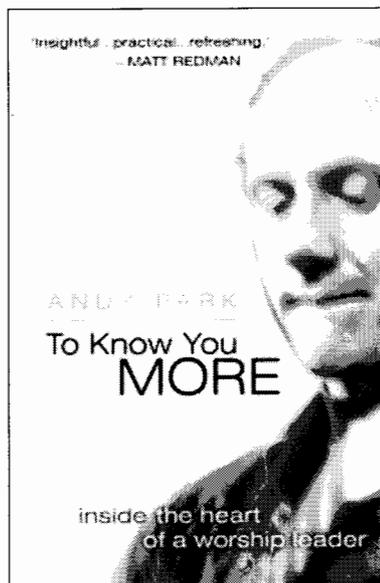
It is only after almost 600 pages of closely argued analysis that he turns to the accounts of resurrection in the Gospels. Four surprises need explanation. Whereas in the rest of the Gospels the evangelists are at pains to show how events fit with biblical tradition, this is virtually non-existent in these narratives. There is no application to personal hope beyond death, rather an emphasis on work to be done. There are surprising features in the portrait of the risen Jesus. Finally, there is their united testimony to the important place of women in the stories. Each Gospel's narrative is then examined in turn. They were not created decades later in a

developmental process but reflect early fixed traditions, each demonstrating both a unity of perspective and a remarkable degree of original treatment by each author. His conclusion is that they were writing about events that actually took place in space, time and matter. This alone adequately handles all the evidence about early Christians' understanding of a transphysical resurrection, their belief that Jesus was Israel's Messiah, the lord of the world, the inaugurator of the new age. The final two chapters are summaries of all conclusions, applied with relentless and painstaking logic as the historical case is presented for a traditional understanding of Jesus' resurrection, and its theological implications are finally drawn along lines already explored in the main body of the book.

This is sophisticated, weighty and positive scholarship. As in previous volumes, he takes both razor and sledgehammer to the fanciful theories of liberal orthodoxies, demonstrating their dependence more on unexamined world-view perspectives than on actual evidence. Polemic is never far away. There is no credible case that permits a re-interpretation of Jesus' resurrection into ideas of exaltation and vindication only, of Jesus 'rising into the power of God', or 'the preaching of the church', or of the disciples awakening to a 'perceived presence', plus any other number of linguistic creations of liberal scholars. Such are merely illustrations of pet theories triumphing over the evidence. No liberal account will be able to ignore it. No serious evangelical account would want to be without it. This will take its place as a classic statement of a traditional Christian understanding, but with the verve and freshness we associate with Tom Wright. It is ironic, given a recent incumbent, that Durham should be his diocese. Buy it!

*Stephen Ibbotson (review courtesy of Baptist Times)*

**Andy Park, *To Know You More – Inside the Heart of a Worship Leader*** (Kingsway Communications, £10.99 pb, ISBN 1 84291 123 6)



When this book dropped through my letterbox recently, my first reaction was to dismiss it as 'yet another book on worship'. It was the sub-title – *Inside the Heart of a Worship Leader* – that made me pause and give it a second look. And I'm glad I did. This is a good book, written not only to those involved in worship (leaders, musicians, writers) but also to pastors and church leaders. Written to encourage and exhort those involved in such ministry, it also addresses some of the tensions that can arise in church life in this whole area, and does so from the author's wealth of experience both as a worship leader and a pastor.

Park is quite clear that he is addressing the subject of musical worship, and the task and gifting of the worship leader. If you are looking for a detailed defence of the relatively recent phenomena of the worship leader and worship ministry, you won't find it here. Neither will you find lengthy discussion of what worship is. What you will find is a thorough treatment of the call, character and gifting required in those who take a public role in leading the church in worship. Park assumes the validity and

place of such ministry and writes from a huge breadth of experience, from small churches to mega-churches, in the USA and throughout the world. For over twenty-five years, most of his ministry experience has been in connection with the Vineyard churches.

The book is divided into three parts. The first is partly autobiographical, addressing Park's own call into worship ministry and the wider issues of the heart and character of the worship leader. The pursuit of God is at the heart of his thinking. Seeking intimacy with the Lord, growing to know him and allowing ourselves to be changed through intimacy with him, is the foundation for the ministry. The worship leader is first a worshipper. We all know that, of course, but it is good to be reminded, especially when technical excellence, performance skills and the like can be so seductive. With examples from scripture and church history, Park underlines the truth that the 'lifestyle produces the language' when it comes to worship leading. It is through the experiences of life and daily walk with the Lord that the worship leader finds the resources for ministry.

The second part of the book focuses on the nature of the ministry, including some important insights into the relationship between worship leaders/bands and pastors. Park deals with some hot potatoes here, including questions such as, 'Who chooses the songs?' and does not duck issues such as artistic temperament and independent spirits! His treatment of such matters is wise and even-handed, giving a lot of food for thought. What is particularly interesting in this section is the emphasis on the many gifts that may be in operation when someone is leading worship; Park explores the priestly nature of such ministry and emphasises gifts of prophecy, healing, teaching and evangelism. This is partly an attempt to legitimise the ministry of the worship leader

continued on page 11



**Glen Marshall** is the senior minister of Wakefield Baptist Church. He is currently chair of Mainstream North, and is a regular speaker at conferences and Bible weeks in the UK and beyond.

In some ways it's a perfect metaphor of Western Christianity. More and more people banging on about new ways of being church but not a lot actually happening. All talk and not nearly enough action. Diagnosis sound, prognosis worrying, treatment largely neglected. If I was given to cynicism, I might wonder if the usual suspects have found a subject out of which to squeeze a book or two, the odd speaking tour and perhaps even an edition of a magazine here and there! If I was given to despair, I might resign myself to the conclusion that church will never respond to the challenge of genuinely incarnational mission in contemporary society. But given as I am (in my fondest imaginings at least) to realism laced with charity, what I actually reckon is that effecting radical change in church life is just very hard work. At least, there have been times when it's felt that way here in Wakefield.

## Effecting radical change in church life is just very hard work

It's taken us over two years to bring about what to be honest is a relatively unadventurous reshaping of our life as a community of God's people. In a nutshell, we have begun a process of attempting to de-centre and de-institutionalise the way we do church.

The de-centring has involved embracing diversity and

responding to deeply ingrained (and in my opinion not altogether negative) consumerism by providing: a range of worship services (different styles at different times); a selection of approaches to discipleship (find the method that works best for you); and what feels like a whole supermarket-aisle's-worth of ministry opportunities (get stuck in according to your gift and your passion). The hard work here felt like good and satisfying hard work. Doing contextual, mission-theology as a community, re-examining received ways of thinking, questioning taken-for-granted assumptions about how church is meant to be.

Attempting to deinstitutionalise church, on the other hand, has been like walking through treacle. It's some years now since I grew tired of simply shouting at people who have a profound and passionate antipathy to some of the bureaucratic manifestations of our way of church. I've also reached the stage of life when I can no longer afford the luxury of tearing my hair out in frustration. At one recent meeting where a

# All Trust Up?

by Glen Marshall

rerun the reframing of constitutions or the restructuring of leadership patterns. Instead, let me reflect awhile on the issue of trust deeds.

Still with me? Well done! We've all got one somewhere, but it's rarely good news when we actually have to dig it out and examine it. Ours is Victorian. As such, in places it's quite charming, occasionally fascinating and everywhere quite clearly from another world. Thankfully over the years, in the hands of wise trustees and astute lawyers, we have found ways of distinguishing between what is central in the concerns of our forebears and what is peripheral. I understand, for instance, that we don't necessarily have to fit into the precise doctrinal categories that found their way into these foundational documents. On the other hand, certain provisions are quite rightly regarded as crucial to the issue at hand, namely the faithfulness of contemporary congregations to the heart of Baptist churchmanship. We enjoy privileged status as charities, and it's only right and proper that, as such, we remain faithful to the purpose for which we exist and true to the spirit of those to whom we owe our existence. But it can be a pig of problem.

It doesn't help when you are trying to re-express what it means to be a community of Baptists in a totally different age, when communities have evolved unforeseen ways of being. Especially so when that attempt involves re-examining the ways in which Baptist principles have been given institutional expression, ways which at times clearly no longer serve us as well

as they might. Take our hot potato of membership for instance.

I know I'm not alone in being more than a little convinced by the arguments of those who regard our usual practice of admitting members via a process of application, visitation, reporting and voting as a little off-putting. Far too much like a golf club. Far too little like a welcom-

Richard Foster... but you are not allowed to join our church.' (Yes, I know most of them are dead anyway, but you get my point.)

We worked long and hard at finding a way to stay faithful to core Baptist values while at the same time tackling this key area of how we do church. Have we pulled it off? At the moment the jury is still out. Meetings with our trustees are in the diary. I'll spare

## Can we do church in a way that it desperately needs to be done for the sake of the lost, and still be Baptist in the way that our trust deeds require?

ing family. I also know I'm not alone in being fundamentally persuaded by the analysis that stresses the importance of journeying towards faith – conversion as process more than crisis. And surely I can't be alone in spotting that our way of being church, drawing lines around who's in and who's out and then encapsulating that in procedures redolent of the stuffiest of impersonal institutions, makes finding more open and welcoming ways of living as an inclusive and hospitable community a bit tricky. The trouble is that our trust deed, and I expect most (all?) others, requires the admission of members to be in the hands of the existing members, the whole thing being further complicated if your trust, like ours, stipulates that only those baptised as believers may be members. 'Sorry... David Watson, Donald English, Basil Hume,

you the details of what we came up with – space and your attention span on such issues would advise that I cut to the chase.

My point, or rather my question, is this: What do we do when our trust deeds seem to forbid us reshaping church to meet the urgent need of being God's community in ways that take their cue from faithfulness to scripture and commitment to incarnational mission? I genuinely believe we should do all that we can to remain true to our heritage. But not at the cost of gospel priorities. Can we do church in a way that it desperately needs to be done for the sake of the lost, and still be Baptist in the way that our trust deeds require? What do you think?

continued from page 9

and you will have to make up your own mind as to whether you think he succeeds or not; either way it is thought-provoking, both for worship leaders/bands and for church leaders.

The final part is essentially about the 'craft' of leading worship and, although I found the phrase 'the worship set' irritating, it is a helpful and insightful section, giving a lot of practical guidance and advice both on preparation and delivery. The material on developing and training others to lead worship illustrates Park's wide experience and wisdom.

I warmly recommend this helpful book to pastors, elders and worship leaders, but recommend you read it at the same time as each other, discuss it together and think and pray through the implications. Otherwise you may just find support for your own views, without hearing the other side of the argument!

*Daniel Pritchard*

# Post-modern Baptists?

by Simon Hall



**Simon Hall** has been involved in youth ministry since his theological studies at Oxford. He is presently the Pastor of *revive*, a congregation linked with Sharing Life, reaching out to the extensive night club and pub culture of Leeds. He has become known as a writer, speaker and thinker about Church, mission and youth culture.

Ched Myers, in the fantastic *Binding the Strong Man*, suggests that the idea of the kingdom of God undermines any human power structure: God plans on being King, and he is going to get pretty cross with anything that gets in his way – autocrat or democrat. Now I know that congregationalists are not meant to be democrats, but let's face it, we are. Our Church Meetings are so often humanistic affairs, embodying the value of each individual, rather than the seeking after God which we claim them to be. I do not see the best of baptistic theory and praxis in an average Church Meeting. You may know this, but my spell-checker has just tried to change baptistic to autistic. I can't think of a better analogy – lacking in communication skills, prone to explode at the wrong moment, occasionally graced with a mystical genius. Perhaps that's the best we can hope for?

I am so glad that my church is congregational in its polity. When we became independent of the church that planted us, we considered a number of options and made a positive choice for joining the BU. Why? Well... in an ideal world, the legal structure of a church would reflect the physical and spiritual realities of that community. What does it say about a church if it is effectively 'owned' by a board of trustees? Or led by a priest who is under a bishop? Only congregationalism allows **revive** to say, 'We are the church, this community belongs to us'.

For the two years that **revive** has been a 'proper' Baptist church, I have been trying

to work out how we really *do* congregationalism. Just as we are having to relearn the rather obvious truth that worship should continue before and after a Sunday service, I think we need to start developing the same attitude to decision-making and discerning God's will. This is not necessarily easy for **revive**. We are a community of the awkward and the angular, people who can't fit in. These very people recently clashed in the most beautiful, spontaneous outbreak of congregationalism I think I've ever seen. Let me tell you the story...

We recently had our annual church weekend away. This was a great time, with the usual mixture of activities. On Saturday night we were joined by about half a dozen folk who had been at a conference led by one of the Kansas City Prophets. They arrived pretty wired and were clearly frustrated by the fact that the Saturday evening programme was filled with 'fun' activities rather than prayer and worship. They wanted a platform to share what God had shown them. By Sunday morning, there was a *frisson* of tension in the group as everyone wondered what would happen next.

It was a beautiful sunny day, and a number of people gathered in the garden outside the house we were staying in. With children running around playing football and hide-and-seek, guitars were brought out from the house and singing began. People shared testimonies, including some of those who had been at the prophecy event. The community

had decided together what they wanted to do. Those who wanted to share were allowed to share – along with others.

An hour later the sun had gone in, so I asked everyone to return to the meeting room. I had decided to ask one of the latecomers to share what was on his heart, and out it came: in my view, a confusing mixture of personal frustration, religious jargon and God. My own reaction was very negative, and as the speaker sat down, I didn't know what to do or say. Almost immediately, a young woman began to cry, and shared her own fears of judgementalism. Her humility and brokenness seemed to open up the church, and when she then said that she didn't want to lose whatever God had for the church, something amazing happened: different people started to share their own hurts and dreams, gently sifting the original message of its dross so that something pure remained after about half an hour. There then followed a remarkable time of ministry, during which no one walked out (a first for us). This one morning has radically altered our idea of, and expectations for, hearing God corporately. The consequences have been quite far-reaching, changing our regular Sunday meetings as well as our 'business' meetings. We've somehow learned to listen to each other and find God in each other without pretending we all agree. It really is something to behold, and may even provide a realistic alternative to autocracy and democracy ... maybe.

# Midsummer Meeting

by Roger Sutton



Every now and then things become clear. The cloud lifts and we are able to see things as they really are. It was hot and... no... mid-July is not a great time to have a church meeting, but to get twenty-six members attending out of a possible 450+, was embarrassing to say the least. Since we needed to take a decision about a staff member, someone had to ring members living nearby to enable us to reach a quorum.

This event helped to focus our minds on the future of church meetings. Why, given our growth in recent years, have church meetings stayed the same size? Why do very few under 40's attend? What issues should be dealt with elsewhere?

Baptist churches are not alone with this kind of issue. Other denominations face similar questions about outdated structures. This in turn is part of a widespread reappraisal of the function of institutions in British society. From the health service to local government, from universities to our legal profession, traditional practices are being questioned and reassessed. The old order of institutional life is giving way to a new paradigm.

We are moving from being **closed and secretive** to being more **open and accountable**. Once dominated by a culture of protective secrecy, institutions are being forced to become more transparent. The British monarchy is an obvious example.

The delivery of services was from the **top down**. Now the movement is towards regionalisation and a **local focus**. Hospitals run their own budgets, schools are given greater autonomy, assemblies have been formed in Wales and Scotland and proposals are being drafted for other UK regions.

There were always **limited financial constraints** and

accountability placed on institutions, but now stringent budgets are linked to development targets, with '**cost effectiveness**' the new mantra.

Hallowed institutions were granted **respect** and often unquestioning allegiance. Now there is  **cynicism and mistrust** towards institutions. Image consultants and spin doctors manage perceptions in order to make institutions (seem?) more effective.

Institutions were **self-preserving**, an end in themselves rather than a means to an end. The structure around the goal sometimes became more important than the goal itself. Now structures are there **to serve us** and if they don't, they must be changed. Thus social security departments have 'clients', teachers are assessed for effectiveness and local authorities are graded.

We are moving from **hierarchies to heterarchies**. Authority, previously vested in a pyramid structure with a god-like person on top, is now replaced by approaches to leadership and team management which emphasise multiple systems, with multiple summits of power and decision-making. No single person knows everything about something. Multiple perspectives are required to understand complexity.

We are moving from a **rigid, one-way, our-way** culture of work to a much more **fluid, responsive, diverse and complex** model. The changes in local authority provision and the awareness of the need for partnerships with the charitable sector have benefited the Church and its mission.

Church members live amongst these changes in their everyday lives and are shaped and challenged by them. Of course, not all changes have been for the good. Many

mistakes have been made, but overall there is much that we as churches can learn from these developments. **What does a more responsive, fluid, diverse and complex institutional church structure look like?** The following questions need asking:

- Who belongs to the church? What about the children of the church and seekers, those who feel part of the community but are not fully integrated into membership?
- How do we make community discernment more inclusive?
- What are the minimum boundary lines by which the local church defines itself?
- How do we reclaim the church meeting as a place to watch over one another and the work of God?
- If the church meeting is not representative of the community, how do we create other forums for decision-making, empowering the whole community?
- Why don't larger churches, in particular, form a council of about fifty people who serve for a three-year period? Elected by the membership, they would represent them and meet on their behalf to discuss and decide on major issues and provide accountability for the leadership team. An annual or biannual church meeting could then be held to legally approve the accounts and appoint the officers and council members.

**Roger Sutton** is Senior Pastor at Altrincham Baptist Church and heads up the mission developments of the church. He is Chairperson of RUN (Reaching the Unchurched Network) which links together 250 churches, putting the principles of seeker oriented mission into practice.

# Belonging to the church – the four dimensions of membership

by Rob Warner



**Rob Warner** is one of our regular columnists.

A pastor and author, he has served in London churches at Herne Hill and Wimbledon where he presently leads Kairos, a church that's been started from scratch.

He has a wider speaking ministry and is involved in Alpha for believer baptising churches.

## 1. Denominational

For older generations, becoming a member of a Baptist church was synonymous with becoming a Baptist. Denominational identity was strong and life-long: *once a Baptist, always a Baptist*. If someone moved house, the first church they visited was naturally Baptist, to which they expected to transfer their membership without shopping around. Those days have gone. Loose identification with a denomination has become increasingly contingent upon present involvement in a local church. If members move from the area, or indeed move from the church, it is by no means automatic that they will start attending a church of the same denomination. Church mobility is determined more by style of worship, preaching, and provision for children than by denominational label.

Within a local Baptist church today, there are likely to be members with a strong Baptist identity, members who identify with other denominations, members who have little interest in any kind of denominational identity and members who actively resist the very notion of denominational labels. There may even be some non-members who have a stronger sense of denominational identity, whether Baptist or other, than some active church members.

The denominational component of membership has therefore changed in two ways. First, it has diminished. Once there were many 'proud-to-be-Baptists'. Now there are increasing numbers reluctant to own any denominational label in a post-denominational era of 'ecumenism from below'. Second, it has changed its emphasis. Once loyalty could be assumed. Now appreciation needs to be won. A denomination that demands loyalty of post-denominationalists is likely to alienate them still further. A denomination that understands the cultural context is more likely to win support, almost certainly provisional but potentially enthusiastic, through the inspiration of its vision and the quality of its resources for the mission of the local church.

## 2. Constitutional

At one time, many Baptist churches gave out a copy of their constitution to new members. Today there is increasing disinterest in the minutiae of church rules. There are, however, unavoidable constitutional obligations under charity law. Baptist churches in membership of the Union and with buildings held in trust are obliged to fulfil the minimum requirements of congregationalism: members vote to appoint and remove leaders, to appoint and remove members, to approve the budget of the

church and to approve the purchase, sale and redevelopment of church buildings.

The constitutional dimension is necessary, but should not be allowed to assume prime importance. Otherwise a church may function more as a club (for the benefit of its members) than as a mission centre (for the benefit of outsiders). Legal obligations need to be fulfilled, but churches are called to function not legalistically but as centres of the overflow of divine grace.

## 3. Relational

If a Church Meeting is devoutly denominational, scrupulously constitutional, but the members fail to express love for one another, it is a mockery of the gospel. In some churches, only members take communion, appear in the church directory, receive pastoral support, and so on. Non-members are systematically excluded. Thence the accusation that free churches appear to have no place for the fellow travellers and enquirers who may attend church but have not yet made any explicit commitment. If we take seriously the model of Jesus' inclusive love, reaching beyond his disciples to the crowds and social outcasts, we have to say that membership cannot be coterminous with the boundaries of inclusive love. Our love extends to all within and beyond the family of God. Expressing love to someone

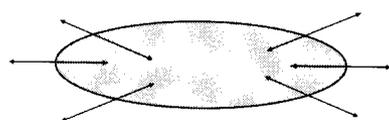
in our church is not determined by the question, 'But is she a member?' The relational inclusiveness of the church is wider than its membership.

#### 4. Covenantal

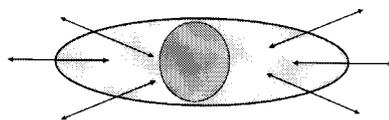
The marriage covenant gives us an experience, at least in principle, of a couple binding themselves to one another, for better or worse. Someone who is a regular attender, who feels loved and included in the family of God, may wonder what they get out of membership. In truth, membership is more about responsibilities than rights, strengthening our dedication to serve Christ together. The covenantal dimension of membership affirms committed belonging in the way of love, in our worship, our mission as a community of love. This covenantal understanding is far broader than the denominational or constitutional dimensions and more focused than the broadly relational dimension.

We can draw the relationship between these four dimensions of belonging to the local church as follows:

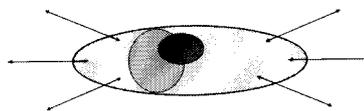
1) The whole congregation, including those around its fringes, needs to be included in **relational** love.



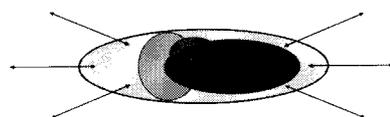
2) Within the congregation, some may have a strong **denominational** identity.



3) Within the congregation, among and beyond those with a strong denominational identity, some may have a strong **constitutional** awareness.



4) Within the congregation, some will have entered into a **covenant** of committed belonging and service. This entails mutual love, without excluding non-members; constitutional responsibilities as a secondary but necessary component of Christian mission; and denominational identity, strong for some, yet marginal for others.



If we accept these four dimensions of belonging in the

local church, we can identify four distinct but complementary tasks.

**Relational:** Promote patterns of local church life that give appropriate and generous expression to inclusive love, both to believers with other denominational backgrounds and to seekers who are increasingly unlikely to have any denominational background at all.

**Denominational:** Explore patterns of credible and attractive denominational identity in an era when denominations are in the process of becoming service-providers. We can no longer assume automatic denominational identity (and therefore loyalty) among local church members.

**Constitutional:** Explain the minimum requirements necessary to function as a congregational church, giving churches freedom to develop their own patterns on a libertarian basis. That would mean the Union providing not only a full-length set of model rules, in the conventional manner, but also providing an alternative, minimalist configuration, identifying the bare necessities requisite to congregationalism.

**Covenantal:** Provide resources that promote wide assent to the understanding and practice of church membership as *committed belonging* - for worship, for service in Christian mission and for mutual encouragement and edification in a community of love.

# An annual affair

Craig Millward



**Craig Millward** is Pastor at Ormsby in Norfolk and is a member of the Mainstream leadership team.

Six years ago I provoked a discussion within our church leadership over the nature of membership. It pained me that the reality of local church life often fell so short of our Baptist desires and convictions, and I wanted to evolve a system which might actually play a part in bringing every-member discernment into reality.

It must be stated that our church was not riven by factions and our Church Meetings were not the acrimonious and destructive gatherings I have occasionally seen elsewhere. In fact, the opposite was the case: it seemed so hard to engage people in discussion on foundational issues that might determine the kind of church we believed God wanted us to be. As leaders, we believed we had heard from God, but I desperately wanted others to test our leadership in a godly manner and add to our insights, so that they would own the direction we were taking.

In so many churches, the leadership see it as their task to pool their combined wisdom and then get the required decisions passed by the Church Meeting. I have complied with many such schemes in my time, but I now feel they are essentially counter-productive and actually play their part in producing either a compliant or a suspicious membership. In the long run, it is far more productive to attempt the time-consuming task of engaging the whole family in the process of hearing God together. Please don't get the impression that the following process was worked out in advance; we stumbled on it over an extended period. And don't believe it has solved all our problems – it has not.

We began by proposing a new system of Covenanted Membership. In practice this means that, although people become members in just the same way as before, every member is expected to re-commit themselves to membership on an annual basis within a month of our Covenant Renewal Service. If anyone fails to do this, they automatically slip onto the 'non-covenanted' member list and lose the right to share in the decision-making process at Church Meetings. The most important part of the process comes in the run-up to the covenant renewal day. Obviously it becomes a focus for those who are new to the faith, as well as for the whole church, providing an annual opportunity to explain what membership means. We have also committed ourselves to reviewing the things God has done and said over the previous year while looking ahead to the next year.

This latter step is not easy. Our intention is to look ahead –

There are times when we have done this during a series of Church Meetings but, more recently, we have used a Sunday service for this purpose. It also becomes a valuable occasion when we affirm those who have served us in various ways over the last year.

An indirect benefit – not so much of the method but of the changed culture that has evolved over time – has been that our Church Meetings have become more lively and visionary. Other things have helped too. One was the deliberate step of inviting *all* those who worship with us to attend Church *Family* Meetings. We have also moved away from bringing every minor detail to the church for approval and now try to have only a few items on each agenda. An important item may be introduced at one meeting (together with notes for everyone) and then discussed at the

**every member is expected to re-commit themselves to membership on an annual basis**

both in faith that God intends us to grow and with faith that each of us has something to contribute to that process. Together we try to discern what areas of our life we believe God desires to develop, and we commit ourselves to a further year of prayer and activity towards that end. The Covenant Renewal Service thus gives us a focus which causes us to pause and reflect.

next. Most important is a deliberate desire to move away from a formal vote as often as possible and take as much time as is needed. Please don't get the impression that everything in our garden is rosy – our leaders may not recognise our church from this picture! What has happened, however, is that over six years we have seen change.

# Must we go on meeting like this?

American sociologist Robert Putnam says we live in a world that bowls alone ([http://muse.jhu.edu/demo/journal\\_of\\_democracy/v006/putnam.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/demo/journal_of_democracy/v006/putnam.html)) for the original article; [www.bowlingalone.com](http://www.bowlingalone.com) and [www.bettertogether.org/](http://www.bettertogether.org/) for debate about the theory and examples from around the USA). His argument is that, over the past generation, we in the Western world have stopped joining groups, preferring to do things alone. As a result, we have suffered a massive loss of social capital – that network of relationships that makes a collection of people into a community. His work is of obvious interest to Christian leaders.

This is the reason membership, and how we do it in today's world is on everyone's agenda. While the BUGB has convened a membership round-table to look at the issue, the Westgate Baptist Community in Australia dedicated a whole edition of its *Monthly Munch* magazine to it ([www.westgatebaptist.org.au/MM\\_aug\\_Sept\\_2002.pdf](http://www.westgatebaptist.org.au/MM_aug_Sept_2002.pdf)). It's well worth checking out. Our own Darrell Jackson has mused on the issue at [www.baptist.org.uk/downloads/mf\\_thailandpaper.pdf](http://www.baptist.org.uk/downloads/mf_thailandpaper.pdf)

Sociologists of religion – especially in America – have done a number of really helpful studies of belonging and membership, attendance and its effect. There is one website in particular that opens the floodgates (literally) to this vast literature: <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/> This is the site of the Hertford Institute for Religion Research. The welcome page has a wealth of information on mega-church research, and the left-hand navigation bar will take you into a library of studies of every aspect of American religion. The studies are

especially strong on church/community relations and social action-type ministries.

Among the individual sociologists worth checking out are Nancy Ammermann (see especially 'Bowling Together: Congregations and the American Civic Order' at [www.asu.edu/cas/religious\\_studies/home/1996lec.html](http://www.asu.edu/cas/religious_studies/home/1996lec.html)) and 'Telling Congregational Stories' at <http://rra.hartsem.edu/1993%20Douglass%20Lecture-Ammerman.pdf>

And, of course, you ought to be familiar with the work of Grace Davie of Exeter University. As well as the books in print, check out two recent articles ([www.findarticles.com/cf\\_0/mOSOR/4\\_62/82477976/print.jhtml](http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/mOSOR/4_62/82477976/print.jhtml)) and an excellent paper she gave on the state of Christianity in a consumer culture at last year's CTBI conference ([www.ctbi.org.uk/assembly/](http://www.ctbi.org.uk/assembly/) Click on her name and download it as a Word file.)

On this issue, there is an interesting new Anglican initiative called Restoring Hope in our Church, featuring Tom Wright and a cast of thousands ([www.restoringhope.org.uk](http://www.restoringhope.org.uk)) The promo video contains the following quote by the Archbishop of York, David Hope: 'The church needs to be less of an institution and more of an exhibition; we need to be more a band of pilgrims on the way than we do a bleak church building with a message "stay out".'

Emerging church websites tend to downplay the institutional aspects of church in favour of the relational. The best ones remain [www.emergentvillage.com/](http://www.emergentvillage.com/) [www.churchnext.net](http://www.churchnext.net) (the tribal generation website) and [www.futurechurch.net](http://www.futurechurch.net)

Some good new sites are emerging from the burgeoning house church movement. Two in

by Simon Jones

particular are worth checking out. [www.hccentral.com](http://www.hccentral.com) is the site of House Church Central, a group seeking to move away from institutional church to church as small gatherings in people's homes – not out of a spirit of criticism of traditional church, but out of a desire to chart an alternative way of doing church in a post-institutional world.

[www.house2house.tv](http://www.house2house.tv) has loads of information about what house churches are and how they work. There's nothing specific here about membership, but implications abound. All of us involved in more structured and institutional churches would do well to listen to these voices and see what insights we can glean for the way we do things.

Two further sites are worth a look. [www.phuture.org](http://www.phuture.org) is dedicated to serving the 'second reformation' – a term often associated with house or cell church – in Australia. It has links to Dreamland and Forge, new-style Australian churches, as well as lots of articles and resources for doing mission in a post-institutional world.

[www.organicchurch.org.uk](http://www.organicchurch.org.uk) is a blog site – a site that collects posts by a whole variety of people involved in church-planting around the UK. One of the bloggers is Daventry Baptist Church, whose own site ([www.daventrybaptist.co.uk](http://www.daventrybaptist.co.uk)) is well worth a look. Blogs concern creating Christian communities that appeal to those currently beyond the reach of traditional church structures. All this clearly has massive implications for any debate on membership in our churches.



**Simon Jones**

is BMS World Mission co-ordinator for London and the South East and author of *Why Bother with Church?* (IVP 2001), *Discovering the New Testament* (Crossway 2001) and *Discovering Luke's Gospel* (Crossway 1999). A former editor of *Christianity* magazine, he was pastor of Peckham Road Baptist Church from 1989 to 1996.



**Derek Tidball** has been Principal of LBC since 1995. Previously he had known the College both as a student and later as Director of Studies. In between LBC he has served as the pastor of two Baptist churches and been Head of the Mission Department at the Baptist Union of Great Britain. He is widely involved in the leadership of a number of Christian agencies and a Vice-President of the

*There have always been those who, temperamentally or because of painful experience, back off from Church Meetings, but is there a more widespread distancing from our congregational way of doing things?*

What we are experiencing today is much more general than the fact that a growing number of individuals have difficulties with Church Meetings. We are undergoing some major sociological changes, and our difficulty with Church Meetings is one expression of a wider trend. In previous generations, people were joiners. Their participation in clubs and societies gave them status and identity. Being a member was seen to be a good thing. Taking responsibility and being elected to some form of office was seen to be even better. Life now is much less fixed, and changes both in leisure and the workplace mean that people no longer get their status primarily through the societies to which they belong. People have now become consumers of a service provided by others.

Parallels to our experience of Church Meetings can be found in many voluntary organisations. Membership of trades unions, political parties and many other voluntary bodies has declined. People tend no longer to belong to local community sports leagues where they have to elect a committee to manage a community sports facility. They

# Church Meetings – Holy grail or

Stephen Ibbotson interviews

have no difficulty, however, in belonging to a health and fitness centre where they can hire a court for an hour to play at a time of their choosing or go into the gym when it suits them. They are not interested, however, in personally repairing the leaky roof!

*What's going on here? Do you think this is part of a general breakdown in commitment to institutions?*

No, I don't think this is part of a

will be new ways of relating to each other.

*So where are you on this scale between optimism and pessimism?*

I suppose I am rather optimistic, but not on the basis of seeing breakthroughs and new initiatives which will take us into a new day, so much as on the basis of a quiet confidence that God can take care of his church and has shown remarkable resilience in both surviving and adapting to

## In previous generations people were joiners. Now they are consumers of a service provided by others

general breakdown in commitment. However, it is a breakdown in commitment to the way institutions have traditionally organised themselves. If we take the parallel from the political world, there seems to be disaffection with voting at elections or being involved in the overall responsibilities of politics. But people get passionately committed to single issues and to particular causes and will devote huge amounts of energy to them. We may either view this as a worrying breakdown of what unites us in society, as if the mortar has gone missing between the bricks and the building is about to break down. Or we can be more optimistic and envisage that in the future there

different cultural contexts. I have to say my faith is in God rather than in our ability to devise new institutional arrangements. As David Jenkins, former Bishop of Durham, says more than once in his recent autobiographical reflection, 'not even the church can keep a good God down'.

*If there is such a shift in general society, does this bear down particularly heavily on our form of church government, which enshrines constitutionally the involvement of every member in decision-making?*

The shift in general society does have a particular impact on Baptist churches because of our commitment to every-member involvement. Ironically, however,

# and Membership wholly fail?

Derek Tidball

all churches are suffering, because in recent years even the most hierarchical of churches have moved in a more democratic direction and involved more 'laity' (as they would term it) in the decision-making process of the church. They may have woken up to the potential of the laity just too late and when the laity have moved on with another agenda. The newer churches, which are less concerned with the 'democratic' involvement of their members, seem much more flexible, responsive and able to make decisions. There are some downsides to that, though, since they also lack the checks and balances. Our pattern of church government is likely to prevent bad decisions from being made. But it is also equally likely to frustrate pioneering people and stifle too many creative or imaginative ideas.

*Can you sketch some possible futures? Are we saying that the Church Meeting has had it, or are there ways of reinventing it?*

Meetings, which are often based on the procedures of the politics and business practices of yesterday. Minutes, proposers, seconds, resolutions, voting often have little appeal today. There are other ways of reaching and measuring consensus than these. We need to revisit the timing of our Church Meetings. Perhaps we need to revert to the earlier Baptist practice of holding Church Meetings after worship on a Sunday. We need to revisit who has a right to attend Church Meetings, since the boundaries between signed-up members and committed attenders are often drawn in the wrong places these days. We need to see whether there is a way for small groups to participate more as a way of decision-making within the local church.

*Is it a particular problem the larger a church gets? My general observation is that the larger the membership, the lower the proportion of church members that attend.*

is usually a problem in this area in that commitment is in inverse relationship to size. We find it easier to own a limited number of relationships. Thus, the most committed relationship many of us have is in marriage. We feel far less commitment to the big firm we belong to, or even larger groups like the nation. But, again, larger groups can be broken down into smaller structures, which integrate people well through participation in small groups or task-focused groups.

*Does the same suspicion apply to 'church membership'? Certainly I've come across increasing numbers of people who can't get their heads round it, or who say, 'It's not my scene'.*

There are an increasing number of people who can't understand the concept of church membership. There may be the need for some legal body called 'members', but our understanding and definition of it is often what puzzles people. Many will say that they demonstrate their membership by belonging to the congregation or by actively participating in the church in some way. They do not understand the extra mysterious element of applying to join the church and receiving a special handshake of welcome. In a mobile and post-denominational age, this is a trend which is going to become more significant.

When people do understand what membership is about, then they are at a loss to know why they should want to join simply so they may have the privilege of attending church business

**Our pattern of church government is likely to frustrate pioneering people and stifle too many creative or imaginative ideas**

I think there are ways of reinventing the Church Meeting, but we need to think long and hard about doing so. We need to look at the format of our Church

I'm not so sure. In my experience, many larger churches get proportionately as many members to a Church Meeting as smaller churches. However, there

meetings and take on additional tasks that many of them wish to avoid. Perhaps we should aim for a more realistic way of assessing those who are really committed to us. Perhaps that has to be on much more of a rolling basis, renewed each year, so that it is composed of those who actively attend and belong rather than those, as often, who once had a relationship with the church in the past.

*I must say I am suspicious of those Baptists who make a great thing of the theological grounding of 'church membership' as if it's the same thing that Paul talked of when he said we are 'members one of another'. Or perhaps you're one of those Baptists!*

the one is alive and changing. The other isn't.  
*How sacrosanct should we make our ways of doing things? Can we learn from other models in Europe or from around the world?*

All our practice of church is provisional. It is the 'kingdom that cannot be shaken' (Hebrews 12:28), not the institution of the church. The reality is that Baptists have constantly changed their practice and have adapted it to the different cultural contexts in which they have found themselves. We have done that historically within the United Kingdom. We do not actually operate within our churches as our 17th- and 18th-century predecessors did. If we tried to, there would

*not leading a church and you can paint on a larger canvas?*

I do not think that is a comment which I have the luxury of saying because I am not currently leading a local church. My wife is the pastor of a local church and I am highly involved in the life of many local churches. I know the reality of local church ministry. But I am also acutely conscious that the church is very good at addressing its own internal issues – whether they be questions of church membership or, as in previous days, eldership or women in ministry or issues surrounding the communion table – when we live in the midst of a world which is dying for its lack of hearing the gospel and of seeing Christians model the gospel in service in a

**There is a world of difference  
between a body and a pile of mincemeat.  
Both are composed of flesh  
but the one is alive and changing.  
The other isn't.**

Paul certainly uses the concept and terminology of 'members one of another', but he meant something much more dynamic and comprehensive by it than we do when we use it to speak of church membership. In speaking of being members one of another, he was writing of the gifts of the Spirit and the way in which each member of the church has a gift of service which is a channel of God's grace to build up the body of Christ and extend the mission of the church. People can meet all that he was advocating and fulfill their role as members of the body without being admitted in some business-like way to a list of members or a Church Meeting. I remember my predecessor, Michael Griffiths, commenting that Paul's image is dynamic and organic and that we need to remember that there is a world of difference between a body and a pile of mincemeat. Both are composed of flesh but

soon be some squeals about the music, the length of prayers or the length of a sermon! We need to be a living church, not an exhibit in a museum. When you visit Baptists in other parts of the world you soon discover that what you thought was a 'Baptist' way of doing something is only one Baptist way of doing things. I am not sure that there are other models with reference to church membership and the Church Meeting that I would want to advocate, but there certainly are things that should make us hold loose to the way we structure church.

*Are these matters important anyway?*

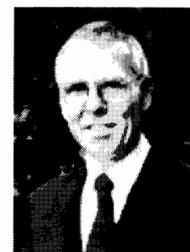
In the scale of things, these are part of a fairly petty agenda.

*Wait a minute, Derek... to be a little provocative, can you make such a comment because you're*

wider community. I do not think that we shall be judged in heaven on the basis of whether we have got our understanding of church membership right or not. We will be judged on the basis of whether we have lived lives of holiness, lived compassionately, lived as servants and witnesses to the grace of God in Christ.

*Thanks Derek, I agree we have to keep things like this in proportion.*

# Tradition down the plughole?



by John Bridger

Has what we understand as a traditional Church Meeting had its day? Yes. Has a coming-together of members to worship and consider different aspects of the church's life had its day? Definitely not. What do the following words have in common? Committee, ballot, vote, election, majority rule and democracy? None of them is found in the Bible, yet many of these things would be very prominent in the life and constitution of a great number of Baptist churches.

Every church has a structure. The structure is unseen and should hold the church together. In reality, some structures keep a church from growing, and some structures invite conflict. The question is, how should a church be structured? The simple answer is, 'The way the New Testament church is structured'. And that is where we encounter problems. The New Testament is descriptive rather than prescriptive – hence the many different styles of churches all with their strengths and weaknesses.

Leadership is crucial, and I believe Baptist churches have lost many good people because leadership has not been effective. Bill Hybels once said, 'Ninety per cent of people in church want to be led. Either the appointed leaders will lead or unappointed leaders will emerge.' Peter Wagner says, 'Those churches who interpret the Bible as centralising leadership authority in the pastor enjoy a superior growth dynamic. There must of course be a balance of authority and accountability. The general tendency is, the older a church gets, the more authority tends to be shifted from the pastor to the people.'

I suggest that the purpose of the Church Meeting is not to provide appropriate leadership, but to provide a forum for membership and leadership to come together with the following four elements:

**1. Worship** Typically we would begin with 15–20 minutes worship, thereby focusing on the Lord Jesus as head of the church, avoiding the tendency for the meeting to degenerate into a secular business meeting.

**2. Fellowship** This would include different aspects of the church's life such as cell groups, children's work, evangelism, finance, membership applications, pastoral news, prayer, special events, youth work, etc.

**3. Faith-building** What has God been doing among us? The focus is on acknowledging and giving thanks to the Lord for His goodness, which is demonstrated to us continually and faithfully in many different ways.

**4. Vision** It is essential to get the vision shared with God's people. Where there is no vision, the people perish, or 'Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint' (Proverbs 29:18). What are we trying to achieve? What is the next step? Where are we going? Properly conducted Church Meetings should be one of the highlights of the life of the church, whereas many people avoid church business meetings.

Has membership had it? Not if the responsibilities and commitment of membership are clearly spelt out and people accept that the commitment requires more than lip service. We have introduced a Membership Class, modelled on 'purpose-driven' Saddleback Church. Every person interested

in membership is required to attend our church membership class before they submit their application to join the church. The class explains what sort of church we are, our purpose, how we operate and the implications of membership.

Our Membership Covenant consists of four commitments:

1. Membership: is there a commitment to Christ and to Reigate Baptist Church? Commitment is demonstrated in attendance, prayers, relationships and giving.

2. Maturity: is there a commitment to the habits necessary for spiritual growth?

3. Ministry: is there a commitment to discovering and using God-given gifts and abilities in serving God and others?

4. Mission: is there a commitment to sharing the good news with others?

Once a person has completed the Membership Class, they should then have a clear idea of what sort of church they are going to join and what is expected of them as a member. They can then decide whether to apply for membership or not. I believe it is essential for a church to define both its membership and the commitment expected of members. If a church asks for little commitment, that is what it is likely to get. Rather than give up on membership, I suggest we should be promoting membership much more enthusiastically and effectively. In our post-modern society, I suspect many people want to belong, and will belong if they can be persuaded that the commitment is worthwhile.

**John Bridger** was trained at Spurgeon's College prior to his ordination. In 1995 Reigate Baptist Church was planted with John as the founding pastor. His passion is for a church based on New Testament principles making an impact in the local community and beyond.



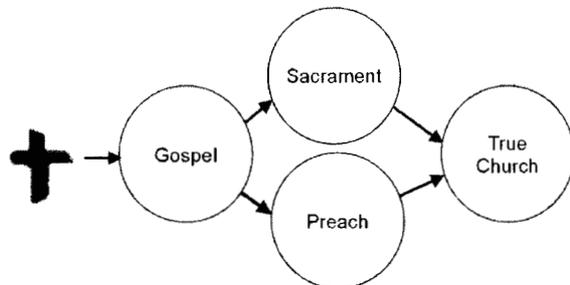
# Beware the

by Stephen Ibbotson

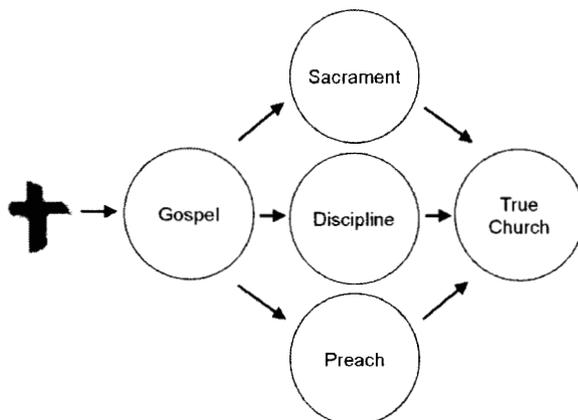
**Stephen Ibbotson** is the Editor of *Talk*. He is also a member of the pastoral staff of Altrincham Baptist Church, Altrincham, Cheshire.

The assumption is often made that becoming a church member is the same as what Paul meant when he said 'we are members one of another' - reassuring for those that think there's a blueprint of a Baptist church in the Bible. However, this owes more to wish-fulfilment than to reality. Fasten your seat-belts for a lightning historical tour of the Church Meeting!

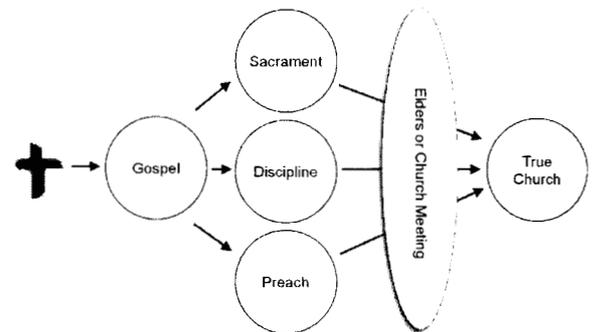
We are grandchildren of the Reformation that asked two fundamental questions: 1) How can we find a gracious God? 2) Where can we find true church? Our particular history as Baptists was one answer to the second question. The early reformers, with various emphases, answered it, 'Where the gospel is truly preached and the sacraments properly administered, there is the Church.' These were the 'marks of the church'. It can be represented diagrammatically.



Their concern was to root the Church in Christ. The next generation found this did not yield the holy church they were looking for. So another mark was added, discipline or 'the ban', excommunication.



The Puritans, Separatists & Anabaptists were defining the circumference of the sanctified. This went so far that one English Puritan found himself on the receiving end of 'the ban' that he introduced into his own church! Once on this route there are ever greater levels of purity to be sought! The generations that followed developed this basic pattern in various ways. The Presbyterian focused authority within the elders, while the Baptists focused authority within the members of the body of Christ – the Church Meeting. Thus we have elders as the lens of authority within Presbyterianism and the Church Meeting within the Baptist tradition.

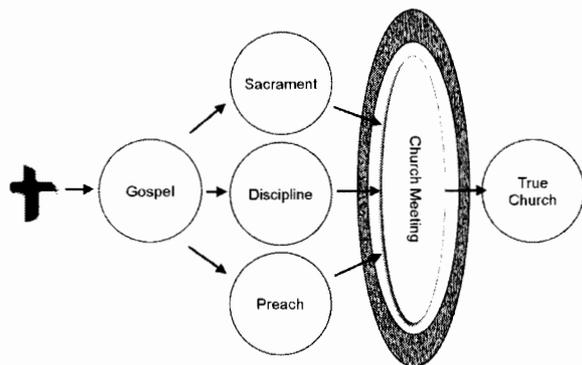


These developments were primarily for discipleship and pastoral purposes – sanctification as they called it. The aim was the well-being of the church and the adequate formation of individual saints within the community of God's holy people. In congregationalism there was a covenanting of members to 'watch over' one another. In Presbyterianism this was delegated to the elders. It was not to do primarily with organisation and decision-making. There were precious few decisions to be made by a small, marginalised group that at best had no social and legal recognition, and at worst was actively persecuted.

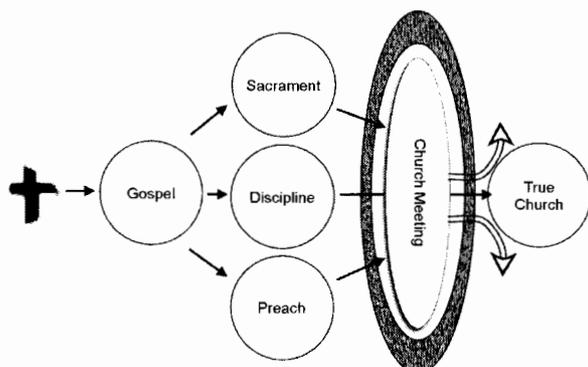
Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the movement towards tolerance and finally social recognition took place. Their standing in society changed and they could enter the general public realm of social and economic transactions. For this to happen, they required a formally constituted legal identity; hence for Baptists the constitution of a legally defined membership roll. Now they could take their place within the general stream of social life as a legally recognised entity. The closest construct to their church dream from the Reformation is what we have presently inherited. And it's a close fit, but it is not an exact equivalent. The constitutional body was set up to

# construct

make legally accountable decisions that held sway in the public realm. For this, decisions needed to be properly administered – they had to be constitutional. Therefore, with this legal construct, came all kinds of legal and procedural requirements. What needs consistent recognition is that the original purpose of Church Meetings has altered. What was once primarily to do with discipleship and forming a holy people, has now become the arena for discussion, debate, decision-making, of proposers, seconders, those for, against and abstainers, of minutes and resolutions. There is overlap but they are not identical, nor can they be. A legal construct hedges the Church Meeting and thus...



Now here's the point. Unless we are always conscious of this distinction between the theological-pastoral dream of our forefathers and the legal construct that has developed, there will be a danger that the legal requirements become the driving force in our corporate and consensual seeking of Christ's way. The legal construct is a good servant but a lousy master, skewing us away from the fundamental purpose of the body of Christ. This can be illustrated in our diagram in this way:



It will only take a moment's reflection on your own church's recent history for you to recognise the effect in practice of this legal construct and its tendency to deflect us. There are precious few decisions we take that need the formal procedures we normally adopt, and that, to be frank, are a lazy way of discerning the way of Christ that easily avoids the harder process of respectful dialogue and consensus.

And I can think of some aspects of our normal church practice that owe more to principles of liberal democracy than to our churchmanship, and open the door wide to elitism and individualism, jettisoning genuine congregationalism at the first post. One example in stark need of reform is the appointment of elders or deacons. In most Baptist churches, they are appointed by a process of proposer, seconder and then it's put to a secret ballot of members. Where on earth does this come from?! Here is probably the most important regular decision we make that virtually rules out procedurally any pastoral oversight and corporate discernment of where the 'two or three gather in my name'. It is elitist because only the confident and the inner circle feel able to nominate. It is individualistic so that one member can shoot off according to his or her personal preference, perhaps totally ignorant of pastoral factors that make the nominee unsuitable. It jettisons congregationalism because it leads to lazy decision-making that demands no genuine discernment by the body. Of course in practice this is softened by behind-the-scenes conversations, but there is no transparency and accountability within this behind-closed-doors practice. There is little oversight by those recognised and appointed to lead the church – or what there is, is guilt-laden, as though somehow the pastor and deacons may be seen as fixing things so that leadership might be thought of as ensuring a self-perpetuating oligarchy. I can think of nothing good about this procedure, except its efficiency in delivering a result.

Does it matter? I think it does, because we constantly need to work at making primary our true purpose of discerning corporately Christ's way for us to be his servant people in the world and seeking to present all mature in Christ. We must keep secondary what is secondary – namely the adequate process of decision-making to fulfil our responsibility as a legal entity. Beware the construct!



**Peter Nodding** brings us news of the Mainstream network and other connections. Peter chairs the Mainstream Leadership team and is the Senior Pastor at Purley Baptist Church, Surrey.  
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## Gear shift for Mainstream

Yes, it is true! Rob White is taking up a roving role with Mainstream as from May 2004, but it's not full time!

He will give around 3 days a week to act as a catalyst in progressing the vision and values of Mainstream through contact with leaders and churches. When asked whether this was an apostolic ministry, Rob responded, "With the historical baggage that comes with the word 'apostle' I am very cautious, but I believe that God is calling me and Mainstream to the things that apostolic ministry entails".

A new face in Mainstream is Mark Owen. Having grown up in Altrincham Baptist, Mark is currently part of Yeovil Community Church, but is hoping to move to Poynton. Mark, a management consultant, is going to work with the Mainstream leadership in contacting churches about Rob's impending role, to ascertain what support can be expected for this new move. Please make him welcome!

## Fish & chips networking

At college, the word sent shivers down my spine. It carried with it, at best, the ring of 'old boys' giving each other a leg-up and at worst, the shallow using of people for personal gain. What I hadn't realised was that I was in a 'network', a good, solid, support network – my classmates. We joked together, shared notes together, prayed and experienced God together.

In my first pastorate, with that ongoing support removed, I quickly felt quite isolated. I had great links with my home church, I had a supportive leadership, but still I felt alone. In essence the art of pastoring is a call to love, and to love in the way that Jesus commands us is often a call to come and die, because to truly love requires sacrifice. God in his mercy then takes that dying process and brings new life both to the church

and me. Nevertheless, dying is hard and lonely.

Then it struck me – we were never supposed to be in this alone. When Jesus sent out the twelve and the seventy-two, he sent them out in pairs; they were to take nothing else with them but their companion. I longed to find like-minded ministers – travelling companions, those who sought Jesus with all their hearts and desired to be all that he was calling them to be.

At the Mainstream conferences I discovered like-minded ministers, and looked for a local Mainstream cluster to be a part of. After a little investigation, it turned out that the nearest one was several hours away. At the last conference I realised that in my area there were others who shared a passion to pursue God, to be effective in mission and to be in real

relationship with others. We took the initiative, set a date to meet and emailed that date to ministers in my local area inviting them to come. In the email I stated the purpose of the group (to support one another and empower our mission together) and our values (to be a Word and Spirit Mainstream cluster).

To date, there are eight of us committed to meeting once a month, from noon to 3pm. The format of these meetings is simple: we catch up over fish and chips, then worship together and pray for one another. We often take individual subjects and examine them, and about once in every three meetings we invite an outside speaker. These times are relational, often prophetic and utterly encouraging.

*Andy Caldwell –  
Welcome Baptist,  
Heathfield, East Sussex*

## Personal Profile: Lynn Green

It is always tricky to know where to start with these profile sort of things, so rather than delving back into the mists of time, I thought it might be better to start from where I am right now.

I currently serve as Lead Minister with Wokingham Baptist Church in Berkshire, having been here for nine years. I work alongside a great team comprising a full-time youth specialist and part-time church administrator; unusually, we are an 'all-girl' team! It is also our intention to appoint an additional minister at some stage soon.

On the domestic front, I am married to Stuart, who is currently Head of Risk Management for Debenhams and commutes to London on most days. We have two children, Adam and Isabel. Those of you who remember seeing me with 'babe in arms' at various meetings and conferences will be surprised to hear that Adam is now six and Isabel four this summer! With a husband out of the house from 7am to 7pm, two children and a church to run, the inevitable question is, 'How do you do it?' A good question and one I often ask myself. The honest answer is only through dependence on God (pious I know, but true), and with the help of a great support network. I was called to the position of Lead Minister on a part-time basis (notionally 70%) and I continue to try and work out the inter-relationships between my different callings as each season of life unfolds.

There have been times when God has used my



Lynn is pictured here with her husband Stuart and their children Adam and Isabel.

unusual situation to connect with people's lives in an amazing way; yet there have also been times when the challenges of ministering differently and other people's perceptions of what is and is not possible, have made the option of staying at home and watching the Tweenies a distinctly attractive proposition.

All that said, I have a real passion for the local church – to see it growing because people are finding faith in Jesus and to see them growing in love and obedience to him. And despite the tough things in ministry, I only need to see one person worshipping who once did not know Jesus and I know that it is all worthwhile. So I have great faith in the church. I am aware of its frailties, and know that I contribute to them! Yet I believe that ministering through the local church is something that's worth giving my life for.

Being part-time, I have the opportunity to get involved in things beyond the local church. As well as the Mainstream commitment, I

have served on appointments groups as a BU representative, led training courses and done some speaking every now and then.

My route to Wokingham was via Regent's Park College, following a job as Corporate Identity Manager for Royal Mail. Delving back further, I read theology at Manchester University and lived at the Northern Baptist College for three years, which was an interesting time... But prior to all that, and much more importantly, someone from the Gideons came to our school assembly and gave me a New Testament which I started reading, and I began searching for God. Then one night the Lord came and spoke to me, and my life was never the same again. He has continued to meet with me in many different ways over the years, and I still think of myself more as a 'disciple in progress' than a minister.

*Lynn Green*



**Craig Millward** brings us information from the Christian world. Pastor at Ormsby in Norfolk, Craig is a member of the Mainstream leadership team.

## BWA: A word and Spirit alliance

**B**aptist world leaders say the Pentecostal dimension of faith has been neglected for too long and want to see more of the power of the Holy Spirit at work in their churches. 'As Baptists we have an excellent doctrine of the Holy Spirit, but we need more faith in the power of the Holy Spirit to mobilise the church,' Baptist World Alliance (BWA) Vice President Amparo de Medina told more than 160 Baptist mission leaders at the Summit on Baptist Mission in the 21st

Century. Medina said that Baptists needed to leave their traditional prejudices and look again at the New Testament and what it says about the Holy Spirit. 'If we compare the advance of the apostolic churches with the bureaucratic slowness in some of our missionary programmes, we need to be conscious of where human technology and human knowledge pretend to replace the Holy Spirit and the power of God.'

Medina's comments were

supported by another leader, Zimbabwe's Noah Pashapa, who said that understanding the power of the Holy Spirit was very important in Africa, where the belief in evil spirits and the clash with Muslims was a big challenge for many leaders. 'I believe in spiritual warfare,' Pashapa said, 'and I believe in a real devil who exists, and he is at war to push Christians up against the wall. We need prayer, intercession and revival.'

Source:

*Charisma News Service*

## globalaction: resourcing the church to change the world

**G**lobalaction is the latest resource from Tear Fund. It highlights key campaigning opportunities, offering you everything you need to make a difference – simple campaign actions, prayer points, background information, up-to-date news, PowerPoint presentations and other really useful resources.

globalaction is a quarterly magazine and CD-Rom, with additional news, updates and emergency action requests for those with email, keeping you in touch and involved with Tearfund's campaigns, and encouraging

you to take action to change the world and get others involved too.

The first edition of globalaction is out now, featuring a PowerPoint presentation on debt, and a five-part Bible study series.

To sign up for globalaction, visit [www.tearfund.org/campaigning/globalaction](http://www.tearfund.org/campaigning/globalaction), email [enquiry@tearfund.org](mailto:enquiry@tearfund.org) or call 0845 355 8355 with your postal details.

## Is your church ready for the DDA?

**P**aul Dicken has been startled by the disturbing finding that 'the majority of churches have done nothing towards implementing the final phase of the Disability Discrimination Act, which comes into force in October 2004'. In the survey conducted amongst *Vital Link* readers, it was revealed that more than a third (35%) of all churches represented have either done nothing or simply do not know what to do. If yours is one of these, there is a place to go to for help. Through The Roof ([www.throughtheroof.org](http://www.throughtheroof.org))

will offer assistance in understanding the legislation and is also an excellent resource on other disability-related issues. The ministry aims to 'make the Christian message of salvation through Jesus Christ available to disabled people and those in their immediate circle' by equipping and training churches and other organisations to be inclusive of disabled people, encouraging and equipping disabled people for leadership and providing support and fellowship for disabled people and their families.

## DAWN Europe

**W**e heard a great deal from DAWN in the run-up to the new millennium and then it all went quiet. Earlier this year, they decided to co-operate more closely with the European Prayer Link, a network of European prayer movements, since each European country has developed a different approach to church planting.

DAWN aims to focus on church-planting strategy, acting both trans-denominationally, nationally and internationally. Their website ([www.dawneurope.net](http://www.dawneurope.net)) contains some provocative material and links.

## Neighbours from heaven?

**I**f you get fed up with the seemingly endless series of specially tagged Sundays or weeks, you're not going to like this. Or maybe you will, as it's a different take on a topical theme. The third annual 'Neighbours from Heaven Week' (15–21 September) highlights people who make a real difference to the lives of others through an award to a nominated charity. The website ([www.neighbour.org.uk](http://www.neighbour.org.uk)) also contains neighbourly tips and a quiz.

# A church to believe in and belong to

by Nigel G Wright

Once spoke at a Baptist church which had four elders. In conversation, it emerged that each of them had been initiated into the church in a different way.

- One had been converted and then baptised by total immersion in the approved Baptist fashion;
- another had gone the standard Anglican route of being baptised by sprinkling as an infant and then confirmed as an active believer;
- a third had been baptised as an infant by total immersion in the Exclusive Brethren and then converted in the growth to adulthood;
- the fourth had been baptised by effusion as a believer in an Anglican church and then immediately confirmed.

Here they now were, working harmoniously and happily as leaders of a Baptist congregation. The experience was instructive. It demonstrated that, looked at from one point of view, the church of Christ is in an untidy mess when it comes to its practices of initiation. It also demonstrated that some Baptist churches have learnt a degree of catholicity when it comes to church membership. But most of all, it demonstrated that tightly defined constitutional structures are less and less likely to work, given the variety of your average Baptist congregation. Something more flexible has to be in place.

Spiritual reality is of course more important than outward form. Of all people, Baptists

should understand this because we are, after all, people who stress heart-religion. What does it profit us to have been through all manner of rituals if none of it reaches the heart? Such an approach ought to make us flexible, but not careless, when it comes to rituals of initiation. We might be clear about what the norm should be ('Repent and be baptised'), and yet not legalistic in our application of the norm. Some things might be irregular but still valid as means of grace.

Puritans among us have long insisted that when people are baptised, they should always be brought into church membership at the same time. The logic is strong enough – to be baptised into Christ is also to be baptised into Christ's Body, the church. On the day of Pentecost, it was clear that those who received the word of God were baptised and then devoted themselves to the common life of the church. I agree with the logic. What I have never quite felt at ease with is the equation of Baptist church membership with belonging to the church. Frankly, the two are not the same. Some people belong devotedly to Baptist churches without being 'members'. Others are 'members' and never turn up! People belong to the church in different ways. Baptist church membership is a domestic discipline, not a theological absolute. In an age when people are increasingly reluctant to join anything, let alone the church, we need to re-evaluate what is central.

Devotion to the community of God's people is surely the

central thing. This is what we invite people into. This is what really matters. It is not a virtue to sit loose to the church. Sadly I sometimes hear colleagues suggesting it might be. Sneaking admiration is given to those who have 'seen through' the church and want to steer clear of the 'power game'. For me it works the other way round. How we manage power and learn to live together is the big challenge of human existence. The church is an experiment, sometimes a painful one, in getting it right in Christ's name. Those who accept the challenge are the ones who should be admired, not those who opt out. And we are unlikely to get it right unless we are devoted to the church as God's great project.

Whether or not this devotion takes form as church membership as traditionally practised by Baptists and others, the church will never be built without devoted people. It worries me that some of the talk about new ways of being church might not be driven by the imperative of mission but by the desire to be in the church without being particularly devoted to it. Perhaps when some people are talking approvingly about a 'churchless faith', the time has come for some of us to insist that we are called both to believe in the church and be devoted to it.

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## What's Mainstream all about?

**M**ainstream is an informal network, mainly comprising Baptist leaders and churches. We are absolutely convinced that the authority of God's Word and the power of the Holy Spirit must always be brought together. It's only then that we can be fully under the Lord's control, direction and empowering and have any hope of doing properly the things he wants us to do.

- Local groups where leaders get together to talk, pray and encourage each other.
- Regional meetings where we encounter God and receive significant input to resource our ministries.
- A national leadership team drawn from those leading the local groups.
- A quality magazine that addresses the issues and concerns that matter to us.
- An annual conference for teaching, ministry, building relationships, and releasing gifts and ministries.

## What do we hope to achieve?

- A network of leaders and churches with authentic relationships, sharing their experience and resources and committed to working together for the advance of God's Kingdom.
- A visible difference in leader's spiritual lives and in God's work through the things we do together.
- Our churches throbbing with spiritual life in their worship, outreach and ministry to the poor in Jesus' name.
- The recognition, mentoring and release of emerging ministries.
- A prophetic voice within the Baptist community.

## Mainstream is committed to:

- Get passionate about knowing God.
- Get real in relationships.
- Get stuck into God's mission.

