

be quite clear – it **is** an unworthy motive for our service! We need to love people because God loves them, because they are made in his image – even when that image seems to have become quite unrecognisable in them! People will never become disciples of Christ if our love is other than totally wholehearted – and if it ceases because the “message” is rejected. But did Jesus stop loving just because they nailed him to a cross?

But “unconditional” should never mean “non-directional”! Our hope – and our prayer – in all our serving is that people will recognise and respond to the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

The *Regulations* indicate that “**The Church Council shall give priority to building up the Congregation in faith and love, sustaining members in hope, and leading the Congregation to a fuller participation in Christ’s mission in the world**” (3.1.13 (a)). The *Basis of Union* gives all that as the prime task of the Elders with the life of the congregation (*Basis* 15 (b)).

We all find it much easier to relate to Christ’s mission within the Church. What is “Christ’s mission in the world”, and how does our service “out there” relate to the Church’s life “in here”?

- q How do we relate serving and evangelising? In what ways can we appropriately make the gospel clear to people through our service? How can we maintain true “unconditional” love in our service even when people appear to reject the grace of God?

- q What more can we do to “lead the congregation to a fuller participation in Christ’s mission in the world”?

Eldership

and

Mission

Peter J. Blackburn

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mirror, we've got it all wrong. The equal but opposite mistake is to bemoan that we no longer live in "the good old days" when we thought we were more "successful". The constant danger of the Church is to spend our time measuring our own success instead of attending to the call of the Head of the Church.

In Jesus' graphic picture of the last judgment, he makes it clear, "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Mt. 25.35-36).

Those described as "the righteous" seem unaware of having done any of this. They haven't been "ticking up" their good deeds at all. They have simply been responding to human need. Yet "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (v. 40).

When Paul wrote about the grace that saves us through faith, he went on, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2.8-10).

As a whole Body and as individual Christians, we are called to live as Christ's servants in this world. It is this motivation that led to the establishment of Blue Nursing, Life Line, children's homes, aged-care facilities... Such activities were begun with conscious faith and vision. Once institutionalised, it is not always easy to maintain the faith and vision of the founders.

As individual Christians, we can believe we are doing our "serving" through such caring institutions, and can fail to recognise the ways in which Christ is calling us to serve others. After all, we pay our taxes and the government is supposed to be looking after all those people now!

- What are the practical human needs in our community to which the Lord of the Church may be calling us to respond – as a congregation and as individual Christians?
- To what extent does the community recognise our congregation (and its members) for its conspicuous service?

Service and Evangelism

We come back to the commission we have been given – "All authority has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Mt. 28.18-20).

We have "deified" the concept of "unconditional love", almost making it a sin to want people to become believers – certainly an unworthy motive for our service. Let it

relationship with the Lord. But there is something wrong if the “spiritual” doesn’t move us into “practical” care for people beyond the life of the church.

Jesus had taught a great deal about the Kingdom of God. The disciples pictured this in terms of human kingdoms where the king ruled with autocratic might – and where they might have the best places of honour!

But Jesus said to them, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all” (Mk 9.35). And again, not too long afterwards – “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10.42-45).

Jesus graphically illustrated what he meant in the upper room when he took towel and basin and began washing their feet. “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (Jn 13.14-15).

Serving... that’s why we are given gifts. An important part of our serving is within the life of the Body of Christ itself. Paul wrote, “It was he [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, **to prepare God’s people for works of service**, so that the body of Christ may be built up...” (Eph. 4.11-12).

As noted in the previous study, “As people recognise their gifts, it is vital that they understand the life and mission of the whole Body. Spiritual gifts, after all, are not given to boost the individual but to build up the Body. Sometimes this understanding of the life and mission of the whole Body helps people discern the specific part of that mission to which God is calling them.”

q Sometimes “serving” gifts in the life of a congregation are hidden and little appreciated. Some of the hidden organs of our human body are like that too! Let’s pause to recognise and name some of the quiet “servers” in our congregation. Why is their service a valued part of the life of the Body of Christ?

q What “service” does the Body need in order to be built up and to grow in grace and in mission?

Service beyond the Body

But, as we have noticed before, the Body doesn’t exist for itself, but to fulfil the mind and will of the Head, the Lord Jesus. The Body needs to be healthy and growing so that it can do this, but if we have the idea that our main task is to admire ourselves in the

Regulations of the Uniting Church in Australia

ELDERS

3.1.10 (a) The ministry of Elder is one of spiritual oversight, and may also be exercised in pastoral visitation, teaching, encouraging members of the Congregation to share in mission, and assisting the Minister in leadership of worship and administration of the sacraments and other areas in the life of the Congregation. Elders who serve on the Church Council have a particular responsibility to ensure that matters of spiritual oversight, pastoral care and the mission of the Church have priority in the work of the Church Council.

DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE CHURCH COUNCIL

- 3.1.13 (a) The Church Council shall give priority to building up the Congregation in faith and love, sustaining members in hope, and leading the Congregation to a fuller participation in Christ’s mission in the world. This priority shall be reflected in the agenda of its ordinary meetings.
- (b) The duties and responsibilities of the Church Council include the following:
- (i) sharing with the Minister(s) in mission and in the pastoral care and spiritual oversight of the Congregation.;
 - (ii) nurturing the members and adherents in their growth in grace;
 - (iii) making decisions in accordance with the Regulations concerning baptism, confirmation and membership, and the keeping and reviewing of the rolls of the Congregation;
 - (iv) assisting the Minister(s) in the conduct of worship and in the administration of the sacraments;
 - (v) determining the time and place of services of public worship;
 - (vi) carrying out its functions concerning applicants for the ministries of Minister of the Word, Deacon, Community Minister, Lay Pastor, Lay Preacher and Youth Worker, having regard to the Regulations;
 - (vii) managing the financial affairs and the general administration of the Congregation including the reception, preparation and presentation of all necessary budgets, statements and reports;
 - (viii) managing and controlling property in accordance with the Regulations;
 - (ix) preparing and presenting to a meeting of the Congregation an annual report concerning the life and work of the Congregation including its worship, mission and service, and making recommendations with regard to the program for the ensuing year;
 - (x) exercising oversight of the appointment of officers and leaders of Congregational organisations;
 - (xi) referral of matters to Presbytery as prescribed.

8. Serving

Bible references: Mk 10.35-45; Jn 13.1-17; Mt. 25.31-46; Eph. 4.1-16.

In our diagram in the first session, “evangelising” and “serving” are in the same circle. “Evangelising is in the “coming” phase of church life. “Serving” is part of the “going” of the church.

In that first session, the comment was made, “People outside the Church need to hear our loving Lord calling to them, ‘*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest*’ (Matthew 11.28). They experience this in the caring **service** of God’s people. And they hear it when the good news – of Christ, forgiveness, salvation, new life – is shared with them (**evangelising**) and they have the opportunity to respond to Christ by faith.”

Sadly, many congregations have been divided between those who see themselves as “practical” – and therefore involved in working bees and street stalls – while others are “spiritual” – going along regularly to the Bible studies and prayer meetings. Acknowledging valid differences in temperament, such a division is not healthy.

And there are congregations who set up community services with a conscious choice never to put the gospel into words lest that make an ulterior motive for their serving. Other congregations are full of “talk”, but without any validating service. Congregational health keeps the two together. Our love for people will lead to both unconditional serving and intentional evangelising.

- q To what extent do the folk in our congregation divide themselves into the “practical” and the “spiritual”?
- q To what extent does our congregational mission and practice keep together “unconditional serving” and “intentional evangelising”?

Service within the Body

Some of the members of our physical body work for the health and well-being of the body. Our heart keeps on pumping blood and our lungs keep breathing – even when we sleep. We take it all for granted until something goes wrong.

Other parts of our body relate us to the world about us – our eyes, ears, voices, arms, hands, legs... They have much more to do with our conscious choices – with intention and will. Yet the physical body needs both.

So too with the Body of Christ. Some of our “serving” will take place within the Body, working for its health and well-being. Another part of our “serving” is out in the community, motivated by the love of Christ for human beings in need. The “divisions” we have discussed above are very sad. We need the “spiritual”, building up our core

We should not put down “natural abilities.” These may well need to be acknowledged as unrecognised “spiritual gifts” which need to be encouraged, empowered and released into the life of the Body in a new dimension. People need to be set free from stereotypical views to discover and grow in the ministries to which God, through his gifts, is calling them.

As people recognise their gifts, it is vital that they understand the life and mission of the whole Body. Spiritual gifts, after all, are not given to boost the individual but to build up the Body. Sometimes this understanding of the life and mission of the whole Body helps people discern the specific part of that mission to which God is calling them.

q How does my gift help and support another in the exercise of a different gift. How do our gifts work together to build up the Body? How effectively is the Body fulfilling the commission given by the Head (outside as well as inside the Body)?

There is a saying that “teachers are born not made, but they aren’t born made.” A similar principle applies to gifts. Each gifted person needs (and should welcome) opportunities to grow in understanding and exercise of their particular gift. Something is wrong if a passion to grow and learn is absent.

As elders, we are to encourage such growth. In our “up front” leadership role, we will, however, want to ensure that books, tapes, conferences... are guiding people in a way that will promote the unity and growth of the Body, rather than lead to fragmentation and division.

q Where are the members of our congregation in their understanding and exercise of their spiritual gifts?

q What steps can we take to ensure the recognition, nurture and exercise of gifts for the health and mission of the whole Body?

1. Mission and Eldership

Bible References: Matthew 28.16-20; Luke 24.45-59; Acts 14.22-23; Ephesians 4.11-16.

Before we talk about eldership, we need to understand what the church is and what its mission is in this world. Literally, the Church (Gk. *ekklesia*) are the “called-out” ones – the people who have believed the good news of salvation in Christ, are growing in grace and together have become his “body”, the means by which he continues to do his will in this world. So there are always two main aspects to the life of the Church – relationship with Christ and with one another which makes us his Body and the doing of his will.

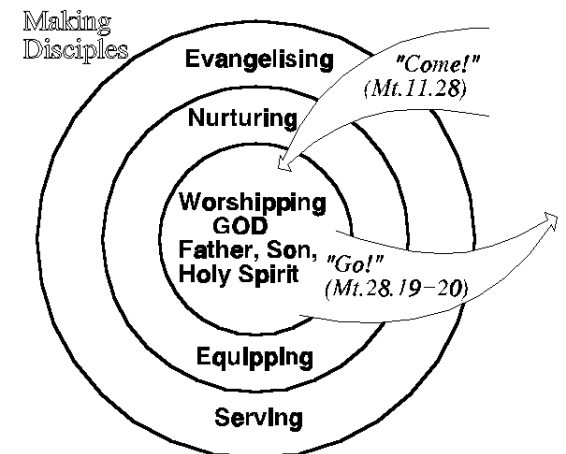
In a previous Parish we reached a point of needing to examine carefully our youth and children’s ministry. It was not just a matter of needing to fill a leadership shortage – though that did exist! The time seemed ripe to ask, “What is the Church here for? What is our mission as a whole Body? and what form should our youth and children’s ministry take within the total mission of the Body?” Big frightening questions! And about fifty people came along to consider them together! That was the context in which the graphic representation of our mission first appeared. The question, then as now, was not for each person or organisation to describe and justify some present activity, but for us all to say, “Lord, what is your task for us? and how should we be doing it today?”

Mission

The **life** of the Body centres on God himself – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So – **worship** is our central activity.

The **task** of the Body is to **make disciples** – the “fishers of men” bit! The Head still wants “to seek and to save what was lost”. But it’s not just a matter of gathering them in. They are to become new characters in Christ, gifted by the Holy Spirit to take their place within the Body, part of the means of fulfilling the mission!

People outside the Church need to hear our loving Lord calling to them, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11.28). They experience this in the caring **service** of God’s people. And they hear it when the



good news – of Christ, forgiveness, salvation, new life – is shared with them (**evangelising**) and they have the opportunity to respond to Christ by faith. They have begun to “come” and now continue to need love and **nurture** so that faith will grow, so that spiritual gifts will be discovered, so that Christian character will be unfolded.

They will be gathered into the worship of God. But nurturing doesn’t end there, for being part of the Body commits us to the mission. Jesus didn’t say, “Come and be comfortable!” In fact, after inviting the people to come to him, he said, “*Take my yoke upon you and learn from me...*” (Matthew 11.29). A yoke is a means of carrying a burden. It suggests that the Lord has work for us to do! The same Lord who said “**Come!**” also says “**Go!**” (Matthew 28.19).

Sometimes we have assumed that the minister (plus a few helpers) are meant to do all the evangelising, nurturing and serving for us! But Paul, writing to the Ephesians, emphasised that the purpose of special ministries within the Body is “*to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up*” (4.12).

So our evangelising needs to include **equipping** – getting ready to do something, discovering and developing gifts that will minister to others in the Body and reach out beyond the Body.

All of us – every one of us – is meant to be involved in some way in building up the Body, in making disciples. All of us, by the grace of God and according to the gifts he has given us, are on active **service**, prayerfully and lovingly ministering to others within the Body and reaching out to others beyond the Body. Our service is evangelism in practice – so vital before the right time comes to express the good news (the evangel) in words.

Eldership

How does the role of an elder (and of a Minister of the Word!) fit into the commission our Lord has given us? Notice that I am linking the two roles closely together, as in fact the *Regulations* of the Uniting Church quite rightly do (compare 1 Peter 5.1). Think for a moment of Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. Many people have been converted along the way. What is to happen to them all? The two missionaries did all they could in “*strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to be true to the faith*” (Acts 14.22). But they went further – they “*appointed elders for them in each church, and with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust*” (v.23).

The elders in fact were the key spiritual leaders in the local area in ensuring the spiritual health and vital witness of the local Body of Christ. Thinking back to our graphic model – our Sunday Schools, youth and children’s groups, Christian education programme in schools, women’s fellowships, craft groups, men’s breakfasts, bowls clubs, home groups, prayer fellowships... may all have their rightful place in the life and mission of the Church (though this should never be taken for granted). But the

all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (vv. 12-13).

Note that the “up front” gifts are for the purpose of helping all God’s people to be ready to use their gifts – not as a substitute for them. In the healthy Body all parts are functioning properly!

Romans 12 contains another section of teaching on gifts. Here Paul is counselling them to be modest in their thinking. Using the image of the Body again, he writes, “in Christ we are many, but we are one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us...” (vv. 5ff). Modesty doesn’t mean not using the gifts, but using them with reference to the Giver – as Paul himself illustrates in v. 3a. As in 1 Corinthians, Paul goes on in v. 9 to speak about “love”.

q Sadly, the modern church has often been divided on the issue of “spiritual gifts.” This is caused, on the one hand, by teaching which denies the so-called “charismatic gifts,” but on the other, by teaching which invalidates the Christian faith and experience of those whose gifts haven’t included, for example, the gift of tongues. Reflect on this as an issue in our congregation. To what extent are both extremes in danger of limiting the work of the Holy Spirit?

[Note the additional resource, *Ministry Together*, which gives a brief account of the modern pentecostal / charismatic movement and seeks to address this issue in the local congregation.]

Equipping

Our “equipping”, then, is on the basis that the Spirit of God endows believers with gifts for ministry. Our role is to help people to recognise their gifts, to enable them to understand the life and mission of the whole Body and to provide opportunities to understand their gifts and to grow in exercising them.

Note carefully that the purpose of the gifts is the wholeness of the Body in fulfilling its Christ-given mission. We all have a different gift or gifts, so that the Body can be complete when we work together in harmony. This has nothing to do with personal power and prestige – or with the effectiveness of one’s Christian life. These are unhelpful side-tracks which have led again and again to division and disharmony in the Body.

Many people need help in recognising their gifts. This has occurred when the church leadership has focussed mainly on “abilities” and “skills”. But it has also happened when people have felt “ruled out” by “charismatic” stereotypes.

The Body is a diversity-in-unity. My body has eyes, ears, nose, mouth, arms, legs.. The life and functioning of my body depends on this diversity. But the diverse parts of my body need to work together in unity in response to “me”.

□ There is a temptation to describe the Christian church as a “unity-in-diversity.” But it is better to call the church a “diversity-in-unity.” Why?

Spiritual Gifts

In the Corinthian church each person was very proud of the particular spiritual gift he/she had.

This led to conflict and chaos because there was no awareness of the Body. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul begins by acknowledging the variety of gifts the Spirit has given to individual members. Then he says, “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ” (v. 12). The parts of the human body need one another, he is saying (vv. 14-26). “Now you [all of you together] are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (v. 27).

As he goes on to list the gifts again, he is emphasising order and leadership in the Body. He removes any idea (clearly present among the Corinthians) that one or other of the gifts made anyone a “superior” member of the Body. “In the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?” (vv. 28-30).

So it should never be a matter of “Look at me! I have a gift of miracles (or helps, or administration, or tongues...)!” The different gifts all have an honourable place within the Body. They complete the Body and enable the Body to function healthily. Without love they count for nothing (13.1-3).

In chapter 14 Paul was particularly concerned about the disruption being caused by those with the gifts of prophecy and tongues. He concludes, “Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (vv. 39-40).

In Ephesians 4, Paul does not enumerate all the gifts. He does emphasise, however, that “to each of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it” (v. 7) – just as every part of a human body has a “gift”, the ability to function in a particular way for the benefit of the whole body. And Christ “gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers” (v. 11b). We tend to see these as special “up front” leadership gifts. In a sense – as in his Corinthian teaching – these gifts have a key role in the healthy functioning of the Body. He goes on to spell this out – “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until it

Elders (and the Ministers of the Word) have been entrusted by our Lord with the oversight of the whole life and mission of the Body.

Elders’ responsibility is “spiritual oversight”. Within the Church Council, Elders are to ensure the priority of “matters of spiritual oversight, pastoral care and the mission of the Church” (*Regulations* 3.1.10). Just reflect for a moment on the first two “duties and responsibilities” of Church Council (3.1.13) –

(a) sharing with the Minister(s) in mission and in the pastoral care and spiritual oversight of the Congregation;

and

(b) nurturing members and adherents in their growth in grace.

Reflect for a moment –

- How do these “duties and responsibilities” relate to the Mission of the whole Body?
- What does this suggest about the role of Elder in the congregation?
- What are the priorities for our Elders? for our local Church Council?

Carefully consider the teaching of Paul in Ephesians 4.11-16. Note that, when Paul is writing about “*apostles, prophets, pastors and teachers*”, he is thinking about some spiritual gifts that have a key role in the functioning of the Body. He is not suggesting that they are superior gifts, or that the Body can function without all the other gifts. He is, however, pointing out that there are some gifts that help to ensure the healthy functioning of the Body.

When we read about the problems in the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 14.16-40, we realise that there had developed a severe problem in the area of the exercise of these important leadership gifts, so that worship was no longer done “*in a fitting and orderly way*”. But in Ephesians 4, Paul is not just concerned with worship but with the whole life and mission of the Body in relation to and in response to Christ the Head.

I believe that this speaks very much of the role of the Elder within the Body and of the role of Elders, in an organisational sense, within the orderly functioning of the Church Council. Paul sees these special gifts as having been given “*to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ*” (vv.12-13).

Discuss:

q The Minister of the Word doesn't have all the gifts. In his work in the congregation he needs the Elders to share with him, using their gifts, too. The Elders don't have all the gifts, either. Ministers and Elders together need to "prepare God's people for works of service". Then, as all the gifts are released, the Body will begin to fulfil the mission given to us.

q How can we best help one another in this?

7. Equipping

Bible references: Eph. 4.1-16; Romans 12.3-8; 1 Corinthians 12.12-31

Referring back to our diagram in the first session, we had "nurturing" and "equipping" in the same circle. "Nurturing" is in the "coming" phase of church life. "Equipping" is part of the "going" of the church.

It is important to recognise the relationship between **nurturing** and **equipping**. If the mission of the church is the function of the whole body of believers, nurturing must lead to equipping, and equipping must be founded on nurturing.

Note this statement from the *Basis of Union* – "Baptism into Christ's body initiates people into Christ's life and mission in the world, so that they are united in one fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy, in one family of the Father of all in heaven and earth, and in the power of the one Spirit" (para. 7).

And here are some further significant statements – "The Uniting Church affirms that every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be his faithful servant. It acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ's Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ" (para. 13).

q "If the mission of the church is the function of the whole body of believers, nurturing must lead to equipping, and equipping must be founded on nurturing." Do you agree? Reflect on this statement.

One Body, Many Gifts

Paul's favourite image of the church is the Body of which Christ is Head and Lord. Without a body we are not equipped for life in this world. So Paul is saying that the church, Christ's Body, is "the completion (or fullness) of the one who completes (or fills) all things everywhere" (Eph. 1.23).

That is not to say that Christ does not work directly in the consciences of people through the Holy Spirit or that he may not use a whole variety of "natural" circumstances to fulfil his will.

Cornelius was "a devout and God-fearing man" (Acts 10.2). He had a vision of an angel. But the angel didn't announce the gospel to him. Rather – "Send men to Joppa (about 55km as the crow flies) to bring back a man whose name is Simon who is called Peter" (v.5). The good news of Jesus was given through a member of the Body.

The same was true of the Ethiopian official – the Holy Spirit didn't do the work independently of Philip (8.26-40). The Lord Jesus himself appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, yet here again he brings Ananias into the act (9.1-19).

relationship with God (note Jn. 4.24). But it also needs to find expression in congregational worship. To be a Christian is to be part of a Body, a family – we need one another, and we regularly need to express our worship together (note Heb. 10.19-25).

▷ **Fellowship.** The Greek word (*koinonia*) begins with what we have in common, joint participation, sharing together, community, communion... Notice the emphasis on fellowship in 1 John 1. Our fellowship is first of all with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ – sharing in his love and redemptive activity. But if we say we are sharing together in him and yet live in darkness, our life is a lie. On the other hand, as we live in his light, we have real fellowship with one another and his redemptive activity is at work within us.

▷ **Witness.** A witness is a person who gives the evidence he knows in a particular case. Christian witness is giving the evidence about Jesus to those who are not believers so that they will come to the right verdict about Jesus and put their trust in him.

The demon-possessed man was healed and directed by Jesus to “go back home and tell what God has done for you” (Lk. 8.39). The evidence of this man was not simply the facts about Jesus (though this was undoubtedly part of what he said), but the evidence in his life of what Jesus had done. The witness was in personality as well as word. In his Great Commission to his followers (Mt. 28.18-20), Jesus emphasised that they were to go everywhere to make people his disciples. It’s not a matter of “doing witnessing”, but of “being a witness”. This surely begins with being a friend.

Q Do we expect to see people “grow in grace”? If so, what more can we do to encourage them in Bible reading, prayer, worship, fellowship and witness?

Q What specific growth opportunities should we be providing for the members of our congregation?

2. Worship

Bible References: Isaiah 1.10-20; John 4.19-24; Philippians 2.5-11; Hebrews 10.19-25.

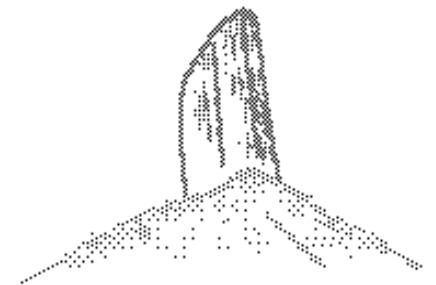
In our first session we noted that “The life of the Body centres on God himself – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So – worship is our central activity.” That is a strong statement, and I can imagine some groups and activities of the church objecting that they exist to fulfil some other purpose. I am not, of course, suggesting that all that we do must be some form of “worship service”, nor denying the different roles of various groups within the Body, nor prescribing the form their activities should take. What I am saying, however, is that any activity in which we do not consciously recognise the presence of God, honour him, seek to know and to do his will... – any such activity is not an activity of the Body, is not a church activity, a Christian activity.

Naturally, in sharing the good news (evangelising), the person with whom we are sharing is not yet a believer, yet the person sharing can only do so out of a conscious and continuing relationship with the Lord. In nurturing and equipping a great deal of teaching, explaining, exploring, discovering and learning-how-to is needed. And in serving we are called to be truly sensitive to the needs of people (as in James 2.15-17). Yet the Lord himself is at the heart of it all – if it is an activity of his Body. That is why worship is central to the life of the Body.

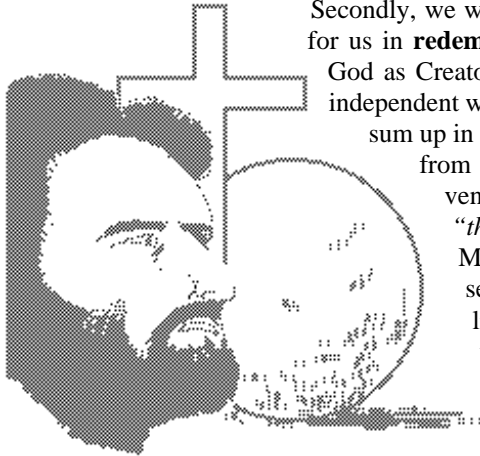
What is Worship?

Our English word “worship” comes from “worth-ship”. It has to do with the highest value we give to something or someone. For many in our society that may well be their goals and ambitions, their talents and skills, their money... For us as Christians, our worship is directed to the God who has revealed himself in history, in Scripture and supremely in his Son. He has in fact revealed himself as one God in three Persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is the God we worship. Perhaps it is helpful for us to consider three of the reasons why we worship God.

Firstly, he is the **Creator** of all things. Consider the words of Psalm 19. “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands...” By its very existence, the creation gives glory to the Creator. But we are different from the rest of creation – made in the image of God, made capable of appreciating its beauty, its glory, of inventing and devising new things from the material the Creator has placed here, made with the capacity for conscious worship. Notice how



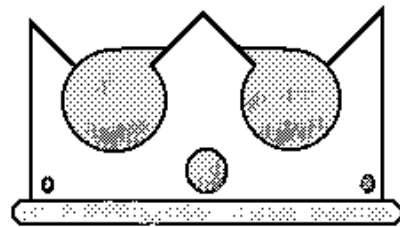
the Psalmist goes on to say, “*The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul...*” Here is a word directed to us. Our worship (and obedience) is not automatic – it is part of our choice, it is a conscious choice to respond to our glorious Creator. Look at what Psalm 8 says about our situation. How should we respond? “Just look at how great and clever we are!”? or “*O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*”?



Secondly, we worship in response to what God has done for us in **redemption**. Our response as a human race to God as Creator and Lord has been to choose our own independent way of life, our own values – the choice we sum up in the little word “sin”. Without some action from God’s side, there is no way we could venture into God’s presence and survive since “*the wages of sin is death*” (Romans 6.23). Many of the world’s religions express a sense of fear and apprehension – we want to live it our way and then “make it up” as well. But we live in the knowledge that God the Son came into the world, that he died on the cross to bear the penalty of human sin and that he rose from death victorious. What has happened to us in

redemption is very much at the heart of our worship – which is why the sacrament of holy communion is a significant part of our worship together.

But when we think about our relationship to God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – it is important to recognise that he is **Lord**. God is not just Creator, but the moral Ruler of the whole creation. That is why we cannot live in a positive relationship with him without redemption. In Jeremiah 7.23-24, we hear the Lord’s complaint about his people, “*I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in the ways I command you, that it may go well with you. But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts.*” Jesus said to his disciples, “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love...” Paul states in Romans 14.9, “For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living”, and in Philippians 2.10-11 paints the glorious picture of the exaltation of Jesus “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Our worship is not just the acknowledgment of God as Creator and the acceptance of Christ the Redeemer through whom we can approach God. It reaches into the realm of the Holy Spirit’s work



words, but does so by encouraging them to turn from trusting their own faithful “good works” to the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Q In what ways is this approach helpful in leading faithful church members to a living faith? What other elements should be included?

Growing in Grace

Jesus said, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (Jn 17.3).

Eternal life / salvation – the whole Christian life, in fact – is a relationship made possible by the redemptive grace of God in Jesus Christ. Growing in grace is growing in this new relationship. Nurturing is providing a faith environment in which this growth can occur. Expect a passion to grow – that is a sign of life. If there is no passion to grow, seek to discern – is there some spiritual “blockage” leading to an unhealthy spiritual life? or has the person never crossed the “great divide” in the first place?

It is helpful to remember five principles that are important for spiritual growth – Bible prayer, fellowship, worship and witness/service. At this point, the inter-relatedness of our original diagram is apparent. We have already noted that worship is central to the life of the Body of Christ. As we look at nurturing, we need to keep in mind equipping people to serve. Remember Eph. 2.8-10 – we are saved for the very purpose of doing good works. Our life with God is going to be reflected in our life within the Body and “out there” in the world.

- **Bible.** Reading the Bible is not simply an intellectual activity. We do not, of course, read with our intellect in suspense. As we read we gather information and understanding that will challenge and shape our whole world-view and way of life. On the other side we do not read as passive recipients – our minds are active to question, probe and enter into dialogue with what we read. Those who desire to grow spiritually need to read the Bible as the Word of God and as testimony to Christ in whom is life.
- **Prayer.** Jesus placed a great deal of importance on **faith** when talking about the practice of prayer (Mt. 21.21-22). Faith is a relationship of dependence and trust. It is not faith in praying, but faith in God. This is highlighted further in Jn. 16.23-24 when Jesus teaches that we are to ask **in his name** – in other words as his people and according to his will.
- **Worship.** We have been made to relate to God, and that proper relationship is worship. The English word “worship” comes from **worth-ship** recognition of God’s worth or worthiness. This “worship” needs principally to be our constant attitude and

appeal, it is usually possible to find out why they are responding and to lead them further through counselling.

In this context an agreed counselling format is appropriate and important, since the evangelist has a specific goal. Also, there are usually a number of Christian denominations involved – possibly with different approaches.

However, in “nurturing members in their growth in grace” in the local congregation, where can we begin? We need to discern where they are in their Christian walk. That can be as diverse and unique as the number of members! And it can vary from week to week!

Discernment is a matter of prayer and listening. Don’t make assumptions! The regular literature from the local church may – or may not! – provide a beginning point. Pray as you listen. Hear what the person is saying. Hear what the Spirit is saying. Sometimes a Bible passage or verse will be helpful. Most times it is appropriate to pray. Be positive about that – not “Would you mind if I pray?”, but “I want to pray for you. Is that OK?”

q Why is discernment needed in nurturing church members?

q How can we develop and exercise the gift of discernment?

Alive by Grace

We have already noted that nurture implies life and looks forward to “growth in grace.” There are some who may have long-term involvement in the life and worship of the congregation, but are not living by grace – they have not, in fact, crossed the “great divide.” Some think God will accept them because of their faithful service. Deal gently with such people! Over the years they have heard all the “bits” of the gospel and often need only a little directed encouragement to cross the “divide.”

Here’s a simple approach. Do they know John 3.16? Say it to them. Ask, “Do you know God loves you? Do you know Jesus came for you? Have you ever believed in him – asked him to be your Saviour and Lord? Have you ever thanked him for his gift of eternal life?” If they would like, lead them in a simple prayer, based on John 3.16. Go over John 3.16 again, this time putting their name in it – “God so loved John/Mary, that he gave his only Son, that as John/Mary believes in him, John/Mary will not perish but will have eternal life.”

This is a simplified approach which I believe is helpful and appropriate for the situation I have described. It doesn’t challenge people to repentance and faith in so many

within us – the submission of our lives to God’s Lordship in all things. If he is Creator, if he is Redeemer, then he rightly must be Lord of all my life. Worship expresses that submission to our Lord.

Thinking about worship –

- q To what extent is our worship restricted to what happens in “services of worship” – for ourselves and for other members?
- q Why is “the habit of meeting together” (Hebrews 10.25) important for our worship?
- q How does our worship together relate to the rest of our lives?

Elders and Worship

In our first study we noted that “The elders (in the early Church) in fact were the key spiritual leaders in the local area in ensuring the spiritual health and vital witness of the local Body of Christ.” So, of course, part of our role is to help ensure that our worship together **meaningfully honours God and leads into lives of obedience to him in the power of his Spirit.**

This brings together a number of very important principles –

- Worship does need to be **meaningful to the worshippers** – not obscure, couched in a language that is not understood. We cannot avoid “heavy” words, though we need to struggle to keep them to a minimum consistent with divine revelation. But worship is not a performance, and the whole congregation needs to be “gathered in” to the worship of God.
- The direction of worship is not ourselves but God! Our worship has to **honour God**. Some people speak of “a wonderful worship experience”. That means it made us “feel good” – but did it make God “feel good”? Reflect on the Lord’s words in Isaiah 1.10-20.
- As those Isaiah words clearly indicate, our acts of worship are worse than pointless if they do not **lead into lives of obedience to God**. It is not a matter of whether we sing hymns or choruses, speak in tongues or in 1611 English, wave our hands above or keep them sedately by our sides... In any or all of these ways we may genuinely worship God – or avoid the call to obey him.

God is present in our times of worship and in the rest of our lives too – not in the glory of “the great white throne”, nor in the humility of the Lamb who died and rose again (and will return in great glory), but in the unseen, all-pervading yet powerful presence

of God the Holy Spirit. Jesus told the Samaritan woman that true worship must be “in spirit and in truth” (John 4.24). We can only obey God **in the power of his Spirit**.

q What does worship mean to you?

Consider these two “duties and responsibilities” set down for the Church Council in the *Regulations* (3.1.13) –

(iv) assisting the Minister(s) in the conduct of worship and in the administration of the sacraments;

(v) determining the time and place of services of public worship.

These two, of course, are to be seen in the light of the first two – our responsibility to *share with the Minister/s “in mission and in the pastoral care and spiritual oversight of the Congregation”* and *“nurturing members and adherents in their growth in grace”*. Our role relates both to the spiritual health of the whole Body (the congregation) and of the individual members. The conduct of worship has to do with leadership, not with “doing it all”. Many members of the Body may well be involved in a variety of aspects of worship, since they have received gifts from the Spirit for building up the entire Body. Too often we have done things “decently and in order” by stifling the gifts God has given!

q How should Elders and Minister/s work together in the conduct of worship?

q In what additional ways should we plan for and encourage the involvement of other members of the Body in worship?

6. Nurturing

Bible references: 1 Cor 3.5-9; Eph. 4.14-16; 1 Pet. 2.1-3; 2 Pet. 3.17-18

Having focussed on “evangelising” and on “conversion and new birth,” we come to the second circle of our original diagram – “nurturing.” The *Regulations* put this second in the responsibilities of the Church Council –

(b) nurturing the members and adherents in their growth in grace.

Nurture implies life and looks forward to “growth in grace.”

If you have a “pet rock”, you may need to wash it – or at least dust it – to return it to its “as new” static condition. You don’t “nurture” it! You would be rather alarmed to see it change!

Reflecting on nurture within the church context, there are perhaps too many times when our prime concern has been to get a person to look like, speak like and act like a Christian – according to the stereotype of our congregation or denomination. That has been our measure of growth. This has been a danger equally in churches that are “traditional”, “liturgical”, “charismatic”, “evangelical”...

q “There are perhaps too many times when our prime concern has been to get a person to look like, speak like and act like a Christian... That has been our measure of growth.” Comment.

Discernment

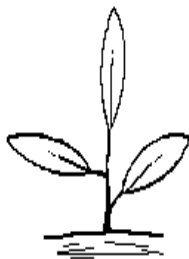
We don’t need to be so discerning in some of our shopping these days. A number of items proclaim themselves as “one size fits all.” It’s not exactly true, yet there are some products suited to this style of manufacture and marketing.

Sometimes we have wished to apply this principle to Christian nurture. We note the convenient way – very practical and workable too – in which evangelistic crusades are organised with a standard approach which is to be followed by all counsellors. Wouldn’t it be good, we think to ourselves, if we had one simple learnable process for nurturing church members?

For a number of reasons, the answer is “no” – though it is good to take the opportunity to train for such counselling when it is offered.

The evangelist is endeavouring to get people over the “great divide” to conversion and new birth. The challenge is specific and the “enquirers” are responding to an appeal for first-time or re- commitment. Because people have made a “response” to a specific

needed to gain eternal life is faith. It is the final key that releases the new birth that God brings about within the individual by the Holy Spirit. In 2 Corinthians 5.17 Paul puts it this way, “*When anyone is joined to Christ, he is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come.*” When people reach up to God, they are reaching up to the one who is already reaching down to them, who has loved them with an everlasting love, who sent his Son to pay the penalty for their sins. No wonder all heaven is let loose!



- q What do we expect to happen when a person comes to faith in Christ?
- q What is the response of our average church member to news of someone who has come to conversion and new birth?

3. The Going and Coming of the Church

Bible References: John 10.1-18; Luke 15; Matthew 16.13-28.

God is at the centre of the church’s life, so worship is the central activity of his people. In our first session we noted – “People outside the Church need to hear our loving Lord calling to them, ‘*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest*’ (Matthew 11.28).” We also noted – “The same Lord who said ‘Come!’ also says ‘Go!’ (Matthew 28.19).”

The Picture of the Shepherd

In John 10, Jesus gives us that striking picture of himself and his people as the Shepherd and the flock. He is saying clearly that he cares for his people in every way, even to the point of laying down his life for them. The shepherd is also “*the gate for the sheep*” – the only means by which we can know salvation and nurture (vv.7-10). But notice v.16 – “*I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.*”

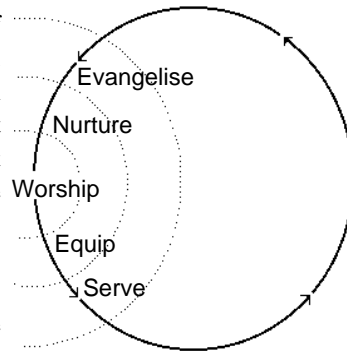
The group of parables in Luke 15 – the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son – all emphasise the same seeking and finding, reaching out and gathering in. These are essential characteristics of the head of the Church and will naturally be characteristics of the life of the Church which is his Body.

The Life of the Church

It is helpful here to look at the diagram we used in our first session. There we were picturing the mission of the Church with **worship** at the centre, surrounded by a **nurture-equip** circle and **evangelise-serve** around the outside. We saw the different elements in these outer circles as related to one another in the **going** and **coming** of the Church. All groups in the congregation (and in any wider link/cluster) need to be encouraged and challenged to consider their purpose and goals in the light of the Great Commission.

But, as we noted in the first session, “the Elders (and the Ministers of the Word) have been entrusted by our Lord with the oversight of the whole life and mission of the Body.” In other words, we need to be thinking, not just about the valid roles that groups and activities may exercise within the mission of the total Body. But – is the mission being fulfilled? Individual groups may well say – “This is what we believe our role is in the mission of the Body.” But we have to ask – is the desire of the good Shepherd to call the “*other sheep who are not of this sheep pen*” being fulfilled? are the people who are responding to the call of Christ being nurtured and incorporated into the life of his Body? are the contributions of the various parts coming together to fulfil the total commission?

I have drawn another graphic to represent the life of the church in response to its mission. Perhaps you have come across the concept of “the church gathered and the church scattered.” An important truth is taught here. The life of the church is not restricted to what we do together. We are still the church, the Body of Christ, when we are not together. The whole life and mission of the church will only be seen when we think of what happens when we are scattered and as well as what happens when we are gathered.



But our present consideration of “the going and coming of the Church” goes far beyond this. It relates to the very essence of the life of the Body, in what the Church is doing when we are either “gathered” or “scattered”. The line representing the cycle of the Church’s life will encompass many different groups and activities. The health of the Church’s life will be evident as it moves from **worship** to the **equipping** of its members and the involvement of the Body in **service**. One of the current ecclesiastical “buzz-words” is “unconditional love”. This is a fine concept when we realise that God has loved us “*while we were still sinners*” (Romans 5.8). The real danger is that we will turn it into “non-directional love”! The heart-desire of the Shepherd is to gather in the “other sheep”. So our **servicing** will naturally lead us into **evangelising** and **nurturing**, so that together we **worship** the Lord.

q Let’s do a “mission-check” on the life of our congregation. List the various activities that make up our life together – including frequency and, where applicable, the particular group to which each activity relates. Then note against each how strongly (on a scale where 1 = very strongly and 5 = not very strongly) it embodies the five key elements of the Church’s mission. Be as realistic as possible. After completing the table, now ask...

q To what extent do the activities of our congregation relate to the commission that our Lord has given to us? Do they indicate “going” as well as “coming”?

q To what extent do the basic concerns of our members reflect the heart-desire of the great Shepherd? Are they eager for opportunities to “go”?

freely offers them forgiveness in the Lord Jesus Christ. The notable example here is Judas Iscariot who “*repented and took back the thirty silver coins... then he went off and hanged himself*” (Matthew 27.3,5).

Clearly, he had not turned to God in faith. In similar vein, the lost son in Jesus’ story (Luke 15.11-32) grieved over his life in the far country and the hurt his sin had caused to his father. But he didn’t leave the matter there – he returned to his father.

Thinking about conversion, then, there are a number of things that take place in the area of mind, emotions and will. Faith in God has sometimes erroneously been called “a leap in the dark”. I am well aware that there is a truth in the statement – it could equally be said that marriage is a leap in the dark, in the sense that nobody ever knows all that is involved in marriage on the wedding-day! But there are things that need to happen in our **mind**, our understanding – about the other person, about marriage, about financial realism, our having and raising children. Yes, there is also a growing **emotion** of love towards the other person – but a real problem exists where that emotion does not go hand-in-hand with our understanding. And there is – and this is where the marriage itself takes place – an act of the **will** in which we are committed for life to the other person as husband or wife.

In the same way, there is an intellectual conviction about God, about the Bible, about who Jesus is, about the meaning of the Cross, about the resurrection... without which conversion is not real. There is also the appeal of the love of God against the backdrop of our past hurts, of the guilt of past failures and the emptiness of much of our life. But conversion, like marriage, come about at the point when our will chooses to respond to God in faith, love and obedience.

q What are the intellectual, emotional and volitional steps through which we can, by the grace of God and in the power of his Spirit, lead others to conversion?

The New Birth

When people come to that act of will, the miracle of the New Birth occurs. It is then possible (and necessary) for us to nurture them “*in their growth in grace*”.

In John 3 we read about Nicodemus, an earnest, good-living Jew, a member of the Jewish ruling council. Already he was along the road of intellectual conviction about Jesus. He believed that the miracles of Jesus showed that he had come from God and that God was with him. He came at night – he was not out to trick, to ridicule or to score points. He sincerely wanted to know more. Coming at night also gave him opportunity to get more of the “feel” of Jesus’ personality. It gave Jesus the means to speak to the deep spiritual needs which this highly moral man could not put well into a question. Already there was an emotional element in the relationship. But Jesus was in fact calling Nicodemus to an act of the will. Notice verse 16 – the one human response that is

As Paul puts it in Ephesians 2.8-9 – “For it is by God’s grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God’s gift, so that no one can boast about it.”

The “turning” of conversion may take place in widely different ways. For Paul there was a definite time and place that he could never forget – on the Damascus road on the way to persecute more Christians (Acts 9.1-19). That was true for Zacchaeus too (Luke 19.1-10). But what about young Timothy who had grown up under the believing example and teaching of his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice (2 Timothy 1.5)?

When we lived in Toowoomba, we were conscious of the Great Divide as a range. It marked suddenly and dramatically the division between the rolling Downs and the coastal plain. Geographically, it is at that point the watershed between streams feeding the Murray-Darling system and those feeding the Brisbane River. My wife spent some of her childhood at the Central Queensland town of Jericho and went to Alpha for piano lessons. There is no range to mark the Divide, yet it is there between those towns – a watershed between inland and coastal streams.

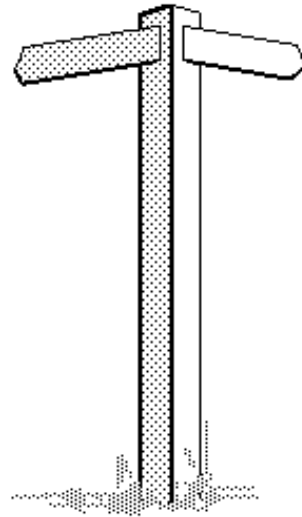
It is not a question whether people can point to the “landmark” or “watershed” in the lives – but whether they are now “flowing God’s way” by faith in Christ. Sadly there are people who respect God, respect the Bible, respect Christian values, who have spent their lives **turning** but have never **turned** – in other words, they are not converted.

q What are the evidences in your own life that you have “crossed the divide”? For you, was it sudden and dramatic, much more gradual or almost unnoticed yet very real?

Steps in Conversion

Again and again in the New Testament, we see **repentance** and **faith** closely associated with conversion. We could say that they represent the “from” and the “to” of conversion. Paul wrote to the Thessalonian Christians, “*You turned away from idols to God...*” (1 Thessalonians 1.9). Repentance is a turning away from sin and from dependence on our own good works for salvation. Faith is a turning to God in dependence on God’s work of salvation in Jesus Christ and in submission to his Lordship over our lives.

Repentance must be linked to the positive turning of faith. Some people are filled with sorrow for their sins (or for themselves) but never turn in faith to the God who



Mission Check

Activity	
How often?	
Special group	
Worship	
Equip	
Serve	
Evangelise	
Nurture	

Building a Healthy Congregation

Sadly, some congregations rarely (if ever) go. Their life is locked into a maintenance mentality. At all costs, they are concerned to maintain what they've got in case they lose it. We need to recall the words of Jesus, *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it"* (Matthew 16.25,26). Those words, of course, present a personal challenge to all his disciples. But they also represent a spiritual principle which is true for congregations too.

The healthy congregation looks, not for its own glory, but Christ's. It rejoices in every advance of the Kingdom wherever it occurs and does not seek to grow parasitically (i.e. by snatching at members from some other Christian fellowship). Its worship and life are controlled by the Spirit of God and the Word of God. Prayer pervades its decision-making and all of its life. Every activity is characterised by faith and love – faith which is trust in God and obedience to God, love which warmly appreciates and encourages one another and which is ever reaching out to others. Its missional understanding responds in practical and relevant ways to the Great Commission itself.

Congregations may be linked or clustered to help and encourage one another in the fulfilment of their mission. It can bring a broader perspective to individual missional understandings and enable a sharing of resources and skills. It can be a means by which congregations rejoice together in what the Lord is doing and encourage one another in their life and mission. Ideally it may release congregations from a sense of competition so that they can understand and pray for one another.

q Is the above statement of characteristics of healthy congregation adequate? If not, what should be added to it?

q Evaluate the health of our congregation. In the light of this situation, to what specific action is our Lord calling us?

5. Conversion and New Birth

Bible References: John 3.1-21; 2 Corinthians 5.11-21.

Our previous session focussed on "evangelising" and noted that this is a clear part of "Christ's mission in the world.. The next circle in our original diagram has to do with "nurturing" and the *Regulations* puts this high on the agenda –

(b) nurturing the members and adherents in their growth in grace.

In this session we are in fact considering the line between these two areas of responsibility. Think again about that definition of evangelism – "Evangelism is so to present Jesus Christ to the world in the power of the Holy Spirit that men and women shall come to put their trust in God through him, accept him as their Saviour and serve him as their Lord in the fellowship of his Church." Evangelism is intentionally sharing the Good News.

The parable of the sower (Matthew 13.3-9) reminds us that people may respond in a variety of ways. But what did the sower expect? Did he mean to scatter food for the crows? Sometimes we blame the sower for his carelessness. But the parable is about human readiness to respond – and we are not really as fixed and unchangeable as the soils! The sower expected a good crop!

Evangelism is intentionally sharing the Good News, and people respond in a variety of ways. But we evangelise with expectations "that men and women shall come to put their trust in God through him, accept him as their Saviour and serve him as their Lord in the fellowship of his Church." Our responsibility to "nurture" assumes that something has happened, that the seed has germinated, that there is life and therefore the possibility of growth.

There are two important aspects to consider here – the human response to the Good News that we call conversion and the divine infusion of life that we call the new birth.

Conversion

The Greek word that is translated "convert" in the New Testament simply means "turn" or "turn back". It is almost always in the active voice. In almost all instances where the King James Version has "be converted", other translations put the "action" with the human person concerned. Consider, for example, Acts 3.19 – *"Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out..."* (KJV); *"Repent, then, and turn to God, so that he will forgive your sins"* (GNB).

In this passage, the people were being called to do two things – repent and turn to God. Having said that "conversion" refers to our turning to God, it is important to emphasise that it is God, through the Holy Spirit, who brings people to the point of conversion, that he seals the conversion with the new birth and that the new-born soul will only continue to grow through his grace.

Focal-point evangelism may range from a monthly or quarterly “Guest Service” at the local church (with an evangelistic message and specific call to commitment) to a full-scale “evangelistic mission” with a visiting evangelist. These “mass” methods are most effective when they are part of the context of the congregation’s on-going evangelising, a support and impetus to that evangelising – but not a substitute for it!

- q In what forms of intentional evangelising are we currently engaged?
- q What strategies for evangelism should we now adopt?
- q What members do we discern as having a specific “gift of evangelism” that may need encouragement and training?

4. Evangelising

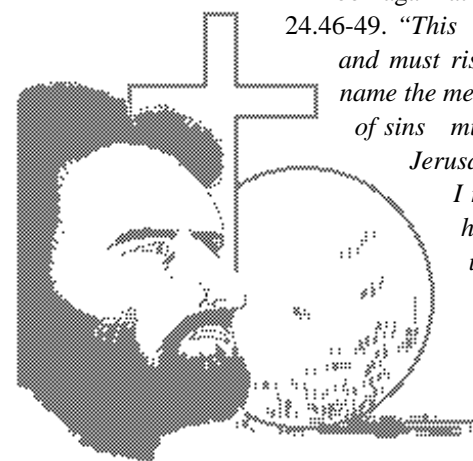
Bible References: Luke 24.46-49; Matthew 5.13-16.

In our first session we noted that “People outside the Church need to hear our loving Lord calling to them, ‘*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest*’ (Matthew 11.28). They experience this in the caring service of God’s people. And they hear it when the good news – of Christ, forgiveness, salvation, new life – is shared with them (**evangelising**) and they have the opportunity to respond to Christ by faith.”

In our third session we looked at the cycle of the Church’s life. There are some churches whose life never gets out into the world – who rarely, if ever, “go”. There are others who “go” but rarely, if ever, share the good news with the intention of gathering people into the life of the Body. Sharing the good news (**evangelising**) is an important part of the life of the Body – not something to be tagged on occasionally because “it’s time we did it again”!

The *Regulations* no longer make specific reference to evangelism. Since it is a central part of “Christ’s mission to the world”, it is a clear responsibility of the Elders to ensure evangelism has a high priority in the life and mission of the congregation.

What is the Good News?



Look again at the Great Commission as recorded in Luke 24.46-49. “*This is what is written: the Messiah must suffer and must rise from death three days later, and in his name the message about repentance and the forgiveness of sins must be preached to all nations beginning in Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And I myself will send upon you what my Father has promised. But you must wait in the city until the power from above comes down upon you.*”

So there is a message that must be “preached to all nations”. The big question is, “What is that message?” So there is “good news” and it focuses on the life and ministry of Jesus. What is that good news? How do we understand it? How can we begin to communicate it “out there” – where people haven’t been brought up on the Bible and don’t understand the “jargon”?

q What is the "good news" for me in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus?

q What is the "good news" for my non-Christian neighbour in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus? What words can I use to express this good news beyond the walls of the church – out there in the world?

"You are witnesses of these things"

We have sometimes talked about "witnessing" as one of those things that Christians should do. But Jesus says, "You are witnesses of these things." In other words, they had seen and experienced the life, work and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ in their own lives.

And every person who is truly a Christian has likewise seen and experienced the Lord Jesus – though not "in the flesh" in the way the first Christians had done. Our lives are part of the evidence that Jesus saves, that Jesus is alive and relevant to the needs of people today. This is why our initial diagram linked evangelism and service. The evidence of our lives – and of our life as a Body – is crucial to our sharing of the good news.

Listen to these words of Jesus – *"You are like salt for all mankind. But if salt loses its saltiness, there is no way to make it salty again. It has become worthless, so it is thrown out and people trample on it. You are like light for the whole world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead he puts it on the lampstand where it gives light for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven"* (Matthew 5.13-16).

q What more can we do to help every member to be salt and light in their relationships with others out in the world?

Intentional Evangelising

Every Christian is to be a witness. Some Christians have a particular gift of evangelism (Ephesians 4.11) The task of sharing the good news is a key one in the life and mission of the Body of Christ, fulfilling the very purpose for which he "came in the flesh". One definition puts the task this way – "Evangelism is so to present Jesus Christ to the world in the power of the Holy Spirit that men and women shall come to put their trust in God through him, accept him as their Saviour and serve him as their Lord in the fellowship of his Church."

Evangelism should not be incidental or accidental, but intentional. Sometimes we hear it said that all that we do is evangelism. But this becomes an excuse for not intentionally sharing the good news outside the life of the congregation!

Consider these two statistics – What percentage of our members have come into the life of the church from a non-church background? What percentage of our members have come from a non-church background in the past five years? I believe that the answer to the second should be **at least** ten percent. But it will not and cannot be unless we are consciously saying, "Lord, what should we be doing to fulfil this part of your commission to us?", and then intentionally sharing the good news out there.

There are many methods of evangelising. At their best they depend on one another. Using a particular method must never become a substitute for addressing the whole evangelistic task.

Scatter-evangelism (dropping leaflets with an evangelistic message in people's letter-boxes) is valid when used as part of a wider plan to contact people face-to-face.

One-to-one evangelism is always basic, even when other methods are used. Lay Institute for Evangelism has provided a tool (*Have You Heard of the Four Spiritual Laws?*) and Evangelism Explosion a method (involving an apprenticeship training) which have helped many people to get their tongues untied and begin sharing the good news. We should expect that about ten percent of our members have a specific spiritual gift of evangelism – a gift which may need to be developed and encouraged.

Group evangelism can helpfully bring these two methods together. *Christianity Explained* (used as follow-up for Pavilion of Promise contacts at Expo '88) was originally designed to be used like this. Invitations to attend were to be delivered to a hundred homes around the proposed host home and followed by personal contact. The group thus gathered went through the course. More recently, the *Alpha* course is a valuable means of group evangelism.