

East Midland Baptist Association

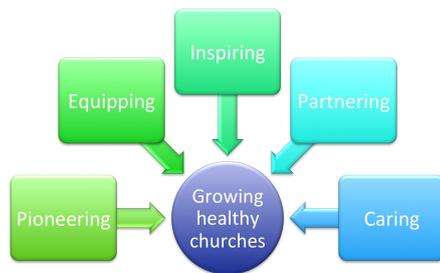
Serving East Midland Baptists in Mission

VISION AND VALUES

The EMBA exists as a network of churches seeking to serve God's kingdom, led by the Holy Spirit, enabling all to do everything possible to fulfil God's apostolic mission and ministry within our communities.

As a **network** of churches we believe that the local church is the primary way in which God's apostolic mission is fulfilled. So **healthy churches** are crucial to seeing God at work amongst us.

network: agencies, groups of persons, constituting a widely spread organisation and having a common purpose



The EMBA staff team are committed to growing healthy churches through pioneering, equipping, inspiring, partnering and caring. These are our **priorities**.

Pioneering: Baptists have, throughout their 400 year history, gone to new places or to groups of people who are unaware of the Good News of Jesus and pioneered new communities centred on the presence of God. In recent years, with various pressures and demands this priority has become less urgent and so we are seeking to recover the emphasis on being sent and going. This is core to the character of God and his purposes. He has always called people, sending them to go and share his truth and his presence with those still unaware of his love, *Genesis 17:3-8*.

Equipping: We are seeking to enable all believers in our churches to use their gifts and serve God's kingdom. There is an emphasis on equipping leaders, ministers, pastors, deacons and elders to be effective, supported and encouraged in their calling. Equipping also happens in review days and vision days when whole churches learn to listen to God and hold on to the biblical principles which will enable them to be healthy and to grow. We also seek to equip churches to face differences of understanding and to have good communication in meetings and church life.

Inspiring: It is all too easy to forget the main thing, that the living God loves us and sent his Son who was crucified and rose again. We seek to do all we can to inspire each other to remember and live out the truths of the Gospel and to be encouraged each day by his presence. We do this by preaching in our churches, working with groups and conferences

and keeping the awesome presence of God at the forefront of our relationships and shared lives.

Partnering: Baptists have always been a people who have worked with others for the benefit of the kingdom of God. The Association seeks to provide a network of ministers and churches, specialist groups and gifted people, so that together we can be more effective in ministry and mission.

Caring: Again and again we are reminded that God is caring and compassionate and we seek to be a caring and compassionate people. In addition to pastoral care within congregations, caring for those who lead us matters, particularly those new to Baptist ministry, as we share God's love. Encouraging local churches to care for retired ministers and chaplains within their community is also important.

The Purpose of this Booklet

- To remind all Baptists in the East Midlands of the vision and values of our network of churches.
- To offer resources which will support those who preach and teach on the issue of healthy churches and God's mission.
- To offer Bible Study material for personal and group use on the theme of healthy church.

If you are using the material for group study it's best to make your own personal preparation beforehand.

Remember: shared knowledge is always better than shared ignorance.

GROWING HEALTHY CHURCHES: CHRIST-CENTRED

Introduction

*Jesus
Be the centre
Be my source
Be my light
Jesus*

This well-known song rightly emphasises the centrality of Christ. Baptists stand with all orthodox Christians in affirming our belief in the Trinity: God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit living in eternal interdependence. Yet we also believe that healthy Christian belief and healthy church life is Christ-centred because Jesus Christ is the focal point of God's revelation and saving work (Colossians 1:15ff; Hebrews 1:3, etc.).

To be Christ-centred is to acknowledge Jesus Christ as the only Saviour.

- It is by faith in his atoning death and resurrection that people enter into a living relationship with God. See Ephesians 2:8.
- It is through Jesus Christ that God is reconciling the world to himself in anticipation of the new heaven and earth. See Colossians 1:19–23.

Consequently, the gospel of Jesus Christ, Saviour and Lord, is the centre of our preaching, proclamation and action.

To be Christ-centred is to acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

This was probably the first Christian Creed. See Romans 10:9, Acts 10:36, etc. The implications of this are cosmic in scope, and have a profound impact on personal discipleship and church life. Our Baptist declaration of principle puts it like this: 'that our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures ...'

Imagine church meetings where all participants submit to Christ's Lordship!

Imagine church budgets and church profiles shaped by Christ's priorities!

To be Christ-centred is to look to Him as our example and model for belief and living.

He is 'the way, the truth and the life'. See Philippians 2:5.

To be Christ-centred is to worship him and offer him the devotion of joyfully obedient lives.

See Matthew 28:17; John 15:9–12.

CHRIST-CENTRED: PREACHING NOTES

Hebrews 1:1-3 The exact representation of God's being

- God has spoken in many and varied ways, including creation and his covenant relationship with Israel, through chroniclers, psalmists and prophets, but God has revealed himself most accurately through Jesus.
- God continues to speak in many ways, but if we want to know what God is like and what pleases him, we must focus on Jesus. How do we know what Jesus is like?
- Explore what it means for Jesus to be 'the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being'. Allow your exploration to lead into wonder and worship.

Philippians 2:1-11 Jesus is Lord!

- From the early days of the church the conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord was central. This conviction pointed to the divinity of Christ (for only Yahweh could claim this title) and challenged other 'would be' Lords (such as Caesar). Explore some implications of the Lordship of Christ, for example for preaching and proclamation, church government and personal discipleship.
- In our multi-everything, pick and mix, individualistic culture, many people see themselves as Lord and Master of their own destinies but this is self-deception. Jesus Christ is Lord, and a day is coming when all will realise this.
- Consider the spirit in which the Lord exerts his influence and the implications of this for church life in general and church leadership in particular.

John 13:12-17 Follow my example

- Draw out the connection between acknowledging Jesus as teacher and Lord and following his example.
- In our everyday lives we often shy away from behaving as the earthly Jesus did. Why is this, and how might this distort our life of discipleship?
- Explore whether Jesus' example of washing the feet of the disciples was intended to be followed literally. If not, how might it apply for 21st century life?

CHRIST-CENTRED: GROUP OR PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY

*Reflection: 'I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians.
Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.' – Mahatma Gandhi*

Transformation 2 Corinthians 3:7–18

- We are on safe ground when we affirm that Christian people are to be transformed into the likeness of Christ. What does this passage say about how this transformation takes place? Compare 2 Cor 4:6.
- In both our personal and church life, it is all too easy to organise things to suit our own tastes, priorities and preferences. What disciplines can we practise that will ensure that Christ and his kingdom values and priorities are at the centre? If our chief witness to Jesus the living word (John 1) is the written word (the scriptures) what place do we give to these in our life together?
- What are the distinctive markers of a church that is centred on Christ? Are there areas in the life of your church where Christ is becoming peripheral?

The special one John 14:1–7

- This passage speaks of Christ as the unique and perfect revelation of God, and the unique way to knowing God. There is much that Christianity shares in common with other religions, but Christ is absolutely unique and distinctive. How do you feel about this claim to the uniqueness of Christ? How can we believe and proclaim this without appearing arrogant?
- In our tolerant culture, Christians feel under pressure to soft-pedal our beliefs. How might Paul's words in 2 Timothy 1:8–14, Romans 1:16–17 and 1 Peter 3:13–15 help us?
- Finish with an act of Christ-centred worship. The following prayer of St. Patrick could be used.

*Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ where I lie, Christ where I sit, Christ where I arise,
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of every one who speaks to me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.
Salvation is of the Lord.
Salvation is of the Christ.
May your salvation, Lord, be ever with us.*

GROWING HEALTHY CHURCHES: EFFECTIVELY LED

Introduction

Anyone who has worked in the world of business or commerce will know of that occasion where chaos reigns because of conflicted directions from above when some wag will raise their face heavenward and utter *'Too many Chiefs and not enough Indians'*. It seems that many of our churches struggle with the exact opposite problem – *Not enough Chiefs!*

The progress of the Gospel appears to be hindered for the **want** of leaders – leaders for the youth work, leaders for cell groups, leaders for worship, leaders for the outreach programme and leaders who envision the role of Charity Trustee/Deacon/Elder as something more than sitting on a committee.

*We need
leaders!*

Leadership is a natural component of our lives. Even from our childhood we have looked to parents and teachers for direction or guidance. So our churches need effective leadership if we are to fulfil our calling to make disciples who make disciples.

Our churches need **an overall leader** to cast clear motivational vision and our churches need **fellow leaders** who will run with that vision.

And the LORD answered me: 'Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it.' Habakkuk 2:2 (ESV)

When a church is led effectively we see

- a vision that encourages and enables others
- a community with a clear sense of purpose
- disciples whose lives are unashamedly gospel shaped

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. Romans 1:16

EFFECTIVELY LED: PREACHING NOTES

John 15:16 Leaders are called

- Not self-selecting - chosen by Christ
- Commissioned and purposed in Christ
- Empowered and enabled by the Holy Spirit
- Faithfulness and lasting fruitfulness going hand in hand

Romans 12:1-2 Leaders must keep high standards

- Operating under the umbrella of God's grace and mercy
- Dedicated to Christ to the exclusion of others
- Meeting the demands of holiness
- Living exemplary lives of worship.

'Everything about great leadership radiates from character.'
Dave Ulrich
(University of Michigan)

Acts 20:28-31 Leaders must shepherd

- Recognising God's delegated duty of care, seeing the flock as God's sheep
- Feeding the sheep
- Protecting and guiding the sheep
- Seeking and restoring the lost sheep

2 Timothy 4:1-2 Leaders must deliver the message

- The clear and urgent charge and call of God
- The one message to deliver
- A message for any time even when it is inconvenient
- Five imperatives tempered with grace: preach, be prepared, correct, rebuke, and encourage

Joshua 1:9 Leaders have courage

- Courage to have and retain vision
- Courage to face current reality
- Courage to build a healthy culture
- Courage to establish and enforce core values. See Micah 6:8 and BUGB Five Core Values: a Prophetic, Inclusive, Sacrificial, Missional, Worshipping Community
- Courage to stay the course to the finish

An interesting consequence of vision is that people are more likely to feel they are truly part of the church, according to George Barna.

EFFECTIVELY LED: GROUP OR PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY

For Reflection:

What is it that keeps a high profile sports team unified when under such intense pressure of expectation?

Could these things transfer into church life?

What kind of responsibility do you have to help build the body of Christ?

The Leader and The Church (emphasis on the leader)

Can you name any men or women in the world of politics or business whom you consider to be good examples as leaders?

- What qualities do you find attractive in them? What quality do they have that creates followers?
- In a world that often appears to lack a clear moral and spiritual compass what kind of leaders do we really need in our churches?

Read 1 Peter 5:1–11. How can church leaders fight the wrong battles?

- What does this passage tell us about the leader and their priorities? What do we see about the leader and their motivational approach?
- What is Peter's view on authority?
- How would you describe the attitude of heart that Peter longs to see in church leaders? What does that look like in practice?

The Church and The Leader (emphasis on the congregation)

When things go wrong in church, and they sometimes do, our human tendency is to look for blame. In our looking for the *who*, before looking for the *how* or the *why*, we may well find ourselves blaming others. Dr Brene Brown (University of Houston) maintains that blame is toxic and kills progress. God's plan for handling difference requires a different approach.

Read Ephesians 4:1–16. What are the virtues which foster unity among Christians?

- How should those virtues change our conduct toward one another?
- Unity may be expressed in oneness within the church. Can you list the seven elements of Christian unity found in this passage?
- How do these help us to live at peace through times of change?

Read Romans 12:9–13. How can we help our leaders lead?

- If we are going to follow a leader, what should our heart attitude be? What is our right motivation?
- How does this passage speak to our response when the leaders call yet again for volunteers to help out next week?

Some Suggested Further Reading

Paul Beasley-Murray, *Radical Leaders: A Guide for Elders and Deacons in Baptist Churches* (Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2005)

Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership* (Zondervan, 2002)

Derek Tidball, *Ministry by the Book: New Testament Patterns for Pastoral Leadership* (IVP, 2008)

Philip Greenslade, *Leadership: Reflections on Biblical Leadership Today* (CWR, 2002)

George Barna, *The Power of Vision* (Regal, 2009)

Henry Cloud, *Boundaries for Leaders: Results, Relationships, and Being Ridiculously in Charge* (HarperBusiness, 2013)

Gordon McDonald, *Building Below the Waterline: Strengthening the Life of a Leader* (Hendrickson, 2013)

GROWING HEALTHY CHURCHES: DISCIPLESHIP FOCUSED

Introduction

'The disciple of Jesus is not the deluxe or heavy duty model of the Christian – especially padded, textured, streamlined, and empowered for the fast lane of the straight and narrow way. He stands on the pages of the New Testament as the first level of transportation in the kingdom of God.'

Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*.

The invitation to follow Jesus has always been at the heart of the Christian vision of a personal relationship with God, and is justification enough for an emphasis on discipleship.

Discipleship is not an optional extra, the preserve of those Christians who are especially zealous. It is an **essential component** of every Christian's identity and a **primary call** on their life.

The making of disciples is also the primary call of the church. See Matthew 28:16–20.

We are convinced that a renewal of discipleship is the single most strategic factor in the renewal of the church.

- It is only the renewal of discipleship which will provide the motivation and capacity for the making of new disciples.
- It is only the renewal of discipleship which will provide the motivation and capacity to sacrificially serve the purposes of God in the church and the world.

In previous generations, there has perhaps been too much emphasis on maintaining the church institution, with responsibility for discipling delegated to the professional clergy.

Today, however, in an age where our culture is sceptical about institutions, we have the opportunity to model a more biblical approach: local churches who see themselves as communities of disciples

- where discipleship places vital contact with the living God at its centre (John 15:4–5)
- where discipleship is worked out in every area of life
- where discipleship has character transformation as its goal
- where discipleship is both personal and communal, shared within the community but never taken away from individuals

DISCIPLESHIP FOCUSED: PREACHING NOTES

Matthew 4:18–22 The call to follow

- This is the essence of discipleship. In first century Palestine it was common for devout young men to seek out a Rabbi to follow, who might either accept or reject them. Here, it is Jesus who issues the call to follow him.
- The call was personal and received an immediate response. In accepting, these men dedicated themselves to become like their master and share in his ministry as they lived each day with Jesus, watching, listening, and joining in with all that he did.
- Explore how disciples were formed then and now, contrasting the whole-life, personal nature of Jesus' style with the programmatic, cerebral approach found in many churches.

Philippians 3:20–4:1 The Lordship of Christ

- The Lordship of Christ is the primary theological context for whole-life discipleship. The argument is this: that if Jesus is Lord of all, then there is no area of life that stands outside of his interest. There is no sacred-secular divide that erroneously places spiritual/religious/church issues on a higher plane than material/non-religious/secular issues.
- Philippi was a Roman colony whose citizens were expected to worship and submit to Caesar as Lord and Saviour. In contrast, the Philippian Christians were to worship and submit to another king who reigned from heaven and who would one day come from heaven to transform the whole world.
- Explore what it might mean for individuals and churches to be ruled from heaven by Jesus, as Lord and Saviour, and how dividing reality into sacred and secular creates blind spots in our discipleship.

Matthew 5:13–16 Salt and light

- The disciples were to be a counter-cultural community whose life and character contrasted markedly with the prevailing culture. The whole of the Sermon on the Mount paints a picture of such a counter-culture. See Matthew 5–7.
- Disciples are to preserve and enhance life (like salt) and dispel darkness and point the way to God (like light).
- Explore the challenge to the church of being engaged with the culture/community, yet distinctive and distinct from it.

DISCIPLESHIP FOCUSED: GROUP OR PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY

Reflection: Which people, events and practices have been most influential in forming you as a disciple? What was it that made these things so potent?

Vitally connected John 15:1–17

- In this extended metaphor of the vine there is a recurrent injunction: ‘Remain in me’. As the branches of a vine are dependent on the vine for their life and fruitfulness so the followers of Jesus are dependent on him for life and fruitfulness. How do we play our part in remaining in Christ?
- How is intimacy expressed in these verses? What part does obedience play on the part of the disciples and what is its focus?
- Explore the flow of love between the Father and the Son, the Son and his disciples and between the disciples, as described in these verses.

The lonely place Luke 5:12–16

- Throughout his ministry and illustrated in this story, Jesus often withdrew from the pressures of ministry in order to pray. Why was this necessary? What do you think might have gone on between Father and Son in those moments? See also Matthew 14:13, Luke 9:10 and John 5:19.
- The disciplines of solitude and prayer are just two of the classical spiritual disciplines that the followers of Jesus have practised down the centuries. Can you name any others? What part do these practices play in your life and the life of your fellowship?

The Lord and his commission Matthew 28:16–20

- At the centre of this text is the Lord, the one to whom all authority has been given, and his commissioning of his disciples to continue the work that he has begun. In a nutshell, they are to make disciples who will make disciples.
- According to these verses, what are the baptised to be taught?
- How might your church go about fulfilling the Lord’s instruction?
- To what extent do you think that the pattern of discipling that Jesus used with his disciples provides a helpful model for those engaged in disciple-making today?

What part does serious bible engagement play in your discipleship?

GROWING HEALTHY CHURCHES: MISSIONAL

Introduction

The Church is the only society on earth that exists for the benefit of non-members.
William Temple

The Church exists to honour and worship God and to participate in his mission; while it does benefit those who belong to the church, who receive inspiration, fellowship, pastoral care and spiritual nourishment, its main aim is to serve God and to serve others.

A dictionary definition of the word mission is 'the vocation or calling of a religious organisation, especially a Christian one, to go out into the world and spread its faith'. Mission involves being sent.

- God is the God who sends.
- He sent Abraham to a new land to become the father of a great nation.
- He sent Moses to bring the Law as a guide.
- He sent the prophets to teach and warn the people.
- And ultimately he sent his Son to save humanity from its sin, defeat death and give eternal life.

MISSIONAL CHURCH: PREACHING NOTES

Introduction – the Mission of God

The philosopher Rousseau in *The Social Contract* 1762 states: 'Man was born free and everywhere he is in chains' while the Gospel says the opposite: people are born in sin and slavery but Jesus Christ came to set them free. The mission of God is to show his love and to bring his freedom to humankind.

The mission of the church is to continue the work of Christ: to remind people of the injustice, brokenness and oppression of living outside of God's purposes and to declare and live the freedom that is found in Christ. See Galatians 5:1.

Learning to be Missional from the Old Testament

- Genesis 3. God created humanity to be in fellowship with him and to rule over his creation as good stewards. However, people disobeyed God and sin entered the world, which devastated the oneness between God and his people and the perfect creation that God has made.
- Exodus 19:3–6. God's mission was to save his people from themselves; to create a community and a society which reflected holiness, love, compassion and generosity. He chose the people of Israel to be a special people through whom he could show the other nations his care and presence.
- In seeking to shape a people who would honour him and live just, good and generous lives, he gave the Law as a guide as to how to live in prosperous communities and live under God's rule. He gave the people of Israel judges to put them back on the right path when they went wrong; he gave them prophets to show them the direct consequences of not following God's leading.
- Isaiah 61:1–2. God's pivotal act was to promise the Messiah, one who would save people from themselves. 'The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour ... to comfort all who mourn.'
- The mission of God is for a community which cares for all; where the broken are restored, the sick are healed and all understand that God offers forgiveness, joy and hope.

The Mission of God through Christ

- In fulfilling Isaiah 61:1–2 Jesus was sent by the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit to announce God's kingdom of justice and peace. He lived the truth of the kingdom of God in healing, loving, showing compassion, confronting unjust structures and teaching. Jesus was sent to establish God's community, the church, and to bring repair to the broken relationship with God through his death and resurrection.
- Ephesians 2:1–10. We have become so familiar with the work of Christ that we forget the wonder and love of God. Unpack this passage reminding us all that God chose not to give up on us but when we were lost and refusing to accept the way of

God he gave us his gift of salvation, salvation being wholeness before God in body, mind and spirit, healed, forgiven and made holy.

Being a missional church today

- A missional church is a community sent on a mission together to continue the ministry of Jesus, so that all people and all creation might experience the love and holiness of God. God has designed the church of Jesus Christ to be a 'missional' fellowship, a community sent to do God's work.
- Explain where members of the church have been sent. Give examples, as varied as possible, of how all of us are sent to be Good News whether that is overseas or in our own home.
- The church cannot do God's mission unless she is equipped for it. God empowers and gives gifts for mission by the Holy Spirit.

Conclude with a story of God's transforming work through the church. Find a video clip or simple example to bring this to life.

MISSIONAL: GROUP OR PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY

Do you think only 'special' people can be missionaries?
Or are we all called to go and reflect the love and presence of God?

The great commission Matthew 28:16-20

- What do these verses suggest God's mission is about? Are we fruitful in making disciples today?

The Holy Spirit mandate Luke 4:18-19

- What does this passage suggest are some of the key components of mission for the church?

As the Father has sent me John 20:19-22

- What insights do we gain from these verses about living as a missional people?
- What are we to understand from verse 22 about our role in forgiveness?
- In what ways do we see this concept of mission being worked out in the book of Acts?
- How did Paul understand mission according to 2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2?

Reflections on the mission of your church

- Who are you going to?
- Is God enabling you to be fruitful?
- How is mission supported and inspired by prayer support within your fellowship?
- Is the Holy Spirit leading you into particular areas of mission?
- What one thing might God be enabling you to do in this area of being missional?
- Does the church exist only for its missional function? Is the function of the church to make disciples of all people or to bring glory to God in the world?

GROWING HEALTHY CHURCHES: INTENTIONALLY INCLUSIVE

Introduction

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. Revelation 7:9

In Revelation 7:9 we are given a vision of God's people gathering in worship from every nation, tribe and language. It is a powerful picture of God's kingdom people and God's heart and love for people of all nations and backgrounds. To be inclusive is to share the heart of God for people of all ages, backgrounds and cultures and to reflect the new reality in Christ, Galatians 3:28. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, slave nor free.

*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.
Galatians 3:28*

Without intending to, our Baptist churches can become exclusive. The worship, witness, prayers, giving and serving fit with our interests and perspectives and exclude others. Being inclusive is, in part, about standing in the shoes of others and seeking to feel as they feel and to include different perspectives in the values, attitudes and practices of our church.

Healthy churches are welcoming to all and determine roles according to God's gifting and the leading of the Holy Spirit, not because of age, gender or background. We have failed at times to be inclusive, allowing prejudices or shallow thinking to guide us rather than being open to new ways of being led by those whose experience and perspectives may challenge our own.

How far do our buildings and services provide a barrier to people with mental or physical problems, disabilities such as loss of sight, hearing or mobility? How can these barriers best be overcome?

The challenge of inclusiveness is not new. From the earliest days of the church there have been the twin dangers of excluding those who should be included and including those who should be excluded and the New Testament guides us in facing them.

INTENTIONALLY INCLUSIVE: PREACHING NOTES

Revelation 7:9–10; Isaiah 40:5 A vision of God's inclusive kingdom community

- Paint a picture with words, for your congregation, of God's vision of a community of all races and backgrounds.
- Explain how this enriches our worship and service of God. We are not limited by the culture of one group or tribe but the diversity and depth of every culture comes together to bless God.
- Show how the foreigner and the stranger should find their place in the local community. God's compassion and welcome is for all who seek to know him and unite with his people. See Deuteronomy 10:19.

1 Corinthians 12:12–31 Valuing and including all in our church life

- The body of Christ reminds us that everyone is included in discipleship and mission and has a part to play. If a person is excluded from participating, for whatever reason, then the whole body misses out. See also James 2:1–4.
- Paul's teaching on gifts reminds us that people should be appointed to roles and responsibilities in God's kingdom with a mind to their gifts and character. Often irrelevant or unhelpful factors, such as family connections, are used to decide who is a deacon or involved in leadership. See Titus 1:5–9.

Acts 15 Recognising our blind spots and weaknesses

- The Council of Jerusalem and the inclusion of Gentiles in the church: explain what a transition it was for the Jews to understand that Gentiles were to be included in the church and did not need to be circumcised or to follow the food laws.
- Reflect on how being inclusive today may need to be worked through and prayed through just as the early Christians did.
- Raise the issue of how we might unintentionally be prejudiced and not be open to people who are young or from other racial groups being welcomed generously.
- Apply locally and consider who your church is likely to fail. Consider whether worship, leadership and fellowship are accessible to all.

2 Timothy 1:9 Inclusion of all those seeking to lead holy lives

- Our intention as Baptist churches is to enable all disciples to lead lives which honour God and seek to be holy. So there are limitations on inclusion.
- If a person is not seeking to lead a holy life and wilfully going against the godly lifestyle presented in the Bible then it is appropriate to be wise and to discern whether it is appropriate to affirm them in membership or leading. How does the 'exclusiveness' of 1 Corinthians 5:9–11 and 2 Corinthians 6:14–18 modify the need to be inclusive?

INTENTIONALLY INCLUSIVE: GROUP OR PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY

God's inclusive plan Jeremiah 3:17

Discuss or reflect on what this says about God's inclusive plan for his community.

- In what ways is this exciting and inspiring?
- Does this vision cause us concern?

God's love and welcome Colossians 3:11

The church is a place where strangers and foreigners, old and young, employed and unemployed and all others should find God's love and welcome. How might we unintentionally exclude people from our fellowship?

An early church problem Acts 6:1-7

- Who were being excluded and why?
- What parallels might we draw from our contemporary church life?
- What lessons can be learned with a view to better inclusiveness?

An early Jerusalem church council meeting Acts 15:1-21

Read this passage carefully reflecting on:

- The issues the Jewish Christians had to consider as God's mission extended to Gentiles.
- What issues in our church are not central to being a Christian that we may need to change in order to welcome and include others?
For example times of services, style and the culture of the church.
- An intentionally inclusive church acknowledges that change is needed to include those who have different lives to ours. What changes might be needed for your church to reach the local community more fruitfully?

How inclusive are your prayers?

Do you pray for the following:

- The young, those in employment, seniors, children – or is your prayer time only a list of those who are well known in the church?
- The world in which we live – war zones, crisis areas?

Social justice and being inclusive Deuteronomy 10:17-20

- Read this passage and reflect on what it says about God's character and concern for those who are powerless in the community and often excluded from the prosperity of society.
- Consider what issues of social justice your church should be championing as part of being intentionally inclusive.

What are the barriers in our church to being intentionally inclusive?

What are our blind spots and weaknesses when it comes to welcoming and including all whom God calls to be part of our church? Who might feel unwelcome among us?

What changes might we need to make to be a church which reflects the diversity of our community?

GROWING HEALTHY CHURCHES: COMMITTED TO PARTNERING

Introduction

In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now...

Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only...

We all know how much easier it is to work alone or at least with those who do it 'our way' than it is to partner with others outside of our immediate circle. And yet we are called to partner with each other so that God's kingdom purposes might be fulfilled among us. Philippians 1:4-5 and 4:14-15 express the Apostle Paul's gratitude that the Christians in Philippi share his concern to take the love of Christ to others and are willing to share the troubles and difficulties that this brings.

Our model for partnership is God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, working together in perfect harmony and relationship to fulfil God's eternal plan of salvation and renewal. God chose to create us and honoured us by calling us to work with him in his purposes. He called people like Abraham, Moses, David, Deborah, Ruth and Esther to work with him and so partnership is a biblical model of going forward with the gospel.

As we think about partnering our focus may be on sharing with other churches in their needs financially, through prayer, or working together in evangelism. Partnership will result in being enriched by the different understandings we have and the new insights we gain from each other.

If we do not share in the good things God is doing beyond our own boundaries then we will miss out on the breadth of God's mission and his purposes for us. As we partner locally, regionally, nationally and internationally our vision of God's kingdom is expanded and deepened.

We are the body of Christ locally and more widely. We need one another to fulfil all that God calls us to be and to do. We need each other and the wisdom and gifts we bring in order to serve God's kingdom in the most fruitful way.

PARTNERING: PREACHING NOTES

We are better together.

1 Corinthians 3:9 We are God's partners

- All of us are servants working for the King of Kings. Our primary partnership must always be with our Lord and Saviour.
- We should partner together, sharing our gifts and the opportunities God gives so that kingdom purposes might be fulfilled.
- Explore how this might be expressed locally within the church, locally amongst the churches of the area and more widely in terms of national and overseas links.

Proverbs 27:17 As iron sharpens iron so one person sharpens another

- If we are to be the best we can be in serving God's mission purposes then we need to be challenged, inspired, encouraged and at times corrected.
- In partnering we will find ourselves with a greater understanding of God's grace and power.
- God has given us to each other to enable us to support each other and that may not always be comfortable but it is good.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."
(From chapter 8, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C S Lewis)

2 Corinthians 8:1-15 Learning from each other and being generous in partnership

- Partnering in God's kingdom work is a privilege that the Macedonians understood, verse 4.
- Even in their poverty they gave generously to others out of an overwhelming love for God.
- First they gave themselves to the Lord, verse 5; and then they could follow the leading of the Spirit in partnership.
- Reflect on the partnerships that God has called us to share in and how our attitude and approach might be that of the Macedonians.

John 17:20-21 Conclusion

Jesus prayed that we might be one as he and the Father are one. If we are to be effective in serving and loving each other we need to learn to partner together.

PARTNERING: GROUP OR PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY

Opening discussion:

*What partnerships for the sake of the kingdom have you been involved in?
What have been the benefits? What have been the difficulties?*

The mind of Christ 1 Corinthians 2:16

As Baptists we have emphasised the importance of the local church, being led by the Holy Spirit and discerning the mind of Christ for itself. In what ways can partnering with others enrich our local church in discerning the mind of Christ?

An example of partnership Romans 15:26–27

- What example of partnership do we read of here?
- How might this apply in our churches today?

Partnership in tough times Hebrews 10:32–34

Read Hebrews 10:32–34 a couple of times.

- Reflect on what these verses tell us about partnering with others in suffering, difficulty and tough times.
- How might we more actively partner in this way?

Different callings Galatians 2:1–10

- What do these verses suggest to us about respecting different callings as we partner together in God's mission?
- How might this be evident today?

Inappropriate partnerships 2 Corinthians 6:14

- When might we say partnership was not possible?
- Might we be able to serve the community in many ways alongside those of other faiths or none, for example at a Food Bank?

A cord of three strands Ecclesiastes 4:9–12

These verses speak of the value of partnership with one other and of a cord of three strands not being quickly broken.

- How have partnerships like this been important to you?
- A cord of three strands is often used of God and a married couple and yet it can be God and any human partnership. How might partnerships with those of other cultures or who are different to you in some way be fruitful and supportive if God is a clear part of the venture together?
- From this discussion and study what one thing do you think God wants you to particularly remember?
- From this bible study what one thing do you think God wants you to do?

Conclude by praying for partners in the gospel in your church, area, and nation and in overseas mission.

GROWING HEALTHY CHURCHES: OPEN TO NEW THINGS

Introduction

Healthy churches, like healthy people develop and grow. This will lead to new life, new things happening and developments which some will see as exciting and adventurous and others will find challenging. Recognising that some find change difficult is no reason not to change and be open to new things. It is a reason to think carefully, value everyone and move forward graciously, generously and courageously.

Traditions develop in all our churches, some of which are healthy and some of which are unhealthy. A commitment to worship, bible teaching and reaching out to others represents important priorities, which remain fundamental to who we are. How we worship, learn biblical truth and connect with our communities will change over time and needs to change if we are to be channels of eternal truth and life to a 21st century society.

God recreates as part of his purposes and history.

If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. 2 Corinthians 5:17

I am making everything new! Revelation 21:5

Those communities of faith in Christ who are adaptable to new social situations and changing generations and to the new leading of the Spirit of God will be open and unafraid of going forward and being willing to be used by God.

OPEN TO NEW THINGS: PREACHING NOTES

Introduction

- Imagine there had been no change in the past 50 years. What would church be like? Explain how irrelevant such a church would be and how uncomfortable for all of us physically, spiritually and emotionally.
- Reflect on the thousands of changes that have taken place for those born in the 50s and 60s. Many websites talk about the world in which baby boomers grew up and the world today.
- Suggest that being open to the Holy Spirit for new things is not about being novel or innovative for the sake of novelty but being a community that relates in the 21st century. Give examples of churches that have found it difficult to be open to new things and have declined and died.

Isaiah 43:16–21 God makes all things new

- Explain the difficulty and struggles that Israel faced as Isaiah spoke these words from God.
- This prophecy speaks of God's perfect plan which will bring refreshment and new life; there will be change and transformation. The people had to listen carefully to God and his prophets otherwise they missed God's leading and guidance to enter into all the new things God has for his people.
- For the people of Israel it was hard to keep having trust and faith that God would act and do a new thing. As Isaiah 30:15 says 'In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it.' It is only as we trust God in the tough places of life that we begin to see the new things he wants to bring about.

Acts 10:9–23 A vital lesson for Peter

- Peter had to learn that God was doing new things as the church grew. It was not for Jews alone but for Gentiles and many of the food laws which meant so much to a devout Jew were not part of God's 'new thing' for the Gentiles.
- Apply this by referring to examples of things which we hold on to which God might want to make new, for example times of services, styles of worship, bringing unexpected people into leadership roles.

Genesis 12:1–3; 17:3–8 The story of Abraham

Pioneering is a Baptist priority that needs to be recaptured.

- God calls his people to be light and he sends them to new people and new places so that others might know of his presence. In the story of Abraham he was called and sent to be an example and a father of many nations.

Isaiah 60:2–3; Jonah 1:2; 3:2 God's love for other nations

- God used Israel as an example to show other nations his love and sent his people to other nations.

Matthew 5:14; 28:18–20 Keep shining and get going

- Explore what it means for your church to be sent as light and whether as a church the sense of pioneering has been lost or compromised in all the business of being an organisation.

By his Spirit God is renewing and transforming

- Being open to new things comes from the purposes of God, involves being sent to take Good News to new places and people and also involves being renewed and transformed as a community of God's people.
- God's renewal has an individual focus. See Ephesians 4:22–24; Romans 12:2.
- God's renewal has a corporate or church community focus. See Nehemiah 10:28–29; Matthew 9:16–19.
- Explore issues of personal and church renewal and how you might be led as a church to move further into God's renewing purposes.

OPEN TO NEW THINGS: GROUP OR PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY

What do you most like about your church, something that you would find difficult to see change?

Think of times when God has surprised you by unexpected new developments and share those together.

Grumbling Exodus 16:1-3; 1 Corinthians 10:10

- In the wilderness Israel grumbled and complained about the hardship of the desert. God was leading them to the promised land but it was hard. Have you had experiences which have been hard but you know God was/is leading you?
- What would have been a better attitude for the nation of Israel in the wilderness rather than grumbling?
- How can we change our behaviour when we grumble in church and in a sense grumble against God?

Individual renewal Colossians 3:10

What has God been saying to you over the past three months? Over what has he rebuked you? What has he encouraged and inspired you in? Perhaps you have not heard God's voice at all – share that.

- What are the first steps to being open to all that God has for us personally? See Deuteronomy 11:1.
- If God is to lead us into new things what will he require from us? See 2 Corinthians 10:5.
- Why is it always better to be in God's will, which may be hard and uncomfortable, than out of God's will but comfortable? Think of the example of Joseph in Genesis 50:20-21.

Church renewal Isaiah 40:21-31

- What do these verses tell us about God and his ability to change and renew his people?
- What instructions do these verses give about finding renewal in God?
- In what ways do these verses inspire you in your faith and discipleship?

Church pioneering Acts 15:12-21

Be prepared to go to new people and places and face the challenges which that brings.

- What was the issue that the Jerusalem church was struggling with?
- What encouragement did they receive from Paul and Barnabas?
- How might this example of grappling with new developments in the church help us as we pioneer?
- In what ways could your church be pioneering? What might God be saying to you as a fellowship about this?