

# EMERGING PATTERNS ACROSS THE CHURCHES WE SERVE

By God's grace, over the last year Reach Ministries has been helping church pastors and their teams, from Stirling to Plymouth and across denominations and tribes, in a variety of ways. Over the year we've engaged in 5 church assessments, mentored 25 pastors, welcomed 14 pastors in our online Prepared to Lead course, served 40 churches through regional clinics and elders' days, gathered 14 organic network leaders online and for a retreat in Scotland, and welcomed 128 churches to our national conference. While we're still very much in the start-up phase and feel new, small and vulnerable, God has given us a great start, and the feedback has been hugely encouraging. Praise be to him for his provision.

It's become increasingly obvious that Reach Ministries is meeting a real need. Any serious profession, for example doctors, teachers or accountants, would expect, seek and value in-service assessment and training. In our view, church pastors and gospel workers of all kinds are entrusted by God with the most important jobs in his world. They should have the bespoke in-service assessment, mentoring and training they need for godly and effective ministries and not have to rely on past, generalised college training, or desperately search for practical nuggets from non-specific conferences. For the challenges faced and questions asked by pastors and their teams after 10 years of ministry are inevitably very different to what they were before they began.

Having now engaged with many different churches, some have asked if we're noticing any trends across the churches we serve. It's early days and we'll learn much more from our next National Survey being launched in March (please do participate). Nevertheless, some common features are emerging from the pastors and churches we serve which may be worth sharing - both for our encouragement and for constructive reflection. Here are four encouragements and two causes for reflection.

## Four encouragements

**1. There are many godly and effective leaders out there serving God** by faithfully preaching Christ from his Word each week - supported by wonderful wives, families and elders. I keep meeting pastors I've never heard of labouring faithfully in places I didn't know existed. If we are feeling a bit beleaguered like Elijah was, it's good to remember what God told Elijah, *'I reserve seven thousand in Israel - all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal'* (1 Kings 19). We are not alone in persevering in the burdens of gospel ministry. Of course, God is our ever-present help in times of trouble, our spiritual rock and refuge. But it is encouraging to know there are many, many godly and effective pastors out there, dedicated to proclaiming the same gospel to make disciples of all nations for Jesus. It's been

humbling and encouraging to be invited to help so many faithful and gospel-hearted leaders.

**2. The quality of leadership among those seeking mentoring is high.** Most demonstrate high levels of personal wisdom in ministry. Admittedly we are serving a self-selecting group of those who are humble enough and care enough to seek advice. But it's been rare to come across a leader who really doesn't have a clue. Most are seriously committed to God's tri-fold pastoral ministry of evangelism, teaching and governance (Ezekiel 34) embodied by Jesus and modelled by his apostles. In my opinion there is a higher general level of competence than when I began pastoral ministry 35 years ago when godly and effective evangelical pastors really were few and far between. Over recent decades, Almighty God has wonderfully multiplied Bible-centred, spiritually healthy, servant-hearted and wisely loving patterns of ministry through our various evangelical constituencies and he deserves our thanks and praise.

**3. Leadership patterns seem generally collaborative.** The leaders we meet are genuinely glad to take counsel from lay elders and from us. Some lack confidence or are overly fearful in a season marked by bullying and coercive behaviours that have rightly been called out. But most seem to have a healthy commitment to leading clearly and courageously in collaboration with fellow staff and elders (though again I suppose those who seek mentoring or training are by definition wise leaders likely to be courageous and collaborative).

**4. Most churches we meet are growing steadily.** None are seeing dramatic revival, but some are enjoying the much discussed 'quiet revival' among young adults, and nearly all report a steady trickle of conversions and baptism of new believers. Whether we ourselves are labouring in a lean or fruitful season, it is encouraging to hear our brothers and sisters out there are witnessing unbelievers coming to Christ, which is what our lives and our churches are ultimately for!

These are significant encouragements and it's a privilege to come alongside such faithful pastors.

**Now for two common causes for reflection and response:**

**Very few churches have a ministry training course of any kind for their own membership within their own church**

I don't mean training for ministry trainees who expect to leave and minister elsewhere. We have too often limited our notion of 'training churches' being those which historically have prepared many young adults for professional ministry. To be clear, such churches are a huge blessing from God. Our nation needs more churches training students and workers for a lifetime of gospel ministry.

But I don't think the New Testament limits ministry training to this. When Paul tells Timothy, *"You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others"* (2 Timothy 2), there's no suggestion he is only thinking of training those with potential to be planters and pastors elsewhere. He is surely speaking of the need to train people for ministries *within* the church as well as for elsewhere. Indeed, it is out of the overflow of such a training culture within a church that some will surely emerge with potential to serve elsewhere.

All churches should be training churches. Our apostle says the risen Christ has provided Bible teachers *"to equip his people for works of service, so the body of Christ may be built up"* (Eph.4:11). How did we find ourselves in a place where a 'training church' is only a church full of students and young workers with potential to be pastors elsewhere? Did we think the church was our denomination or ministry tribe and our job was just raising leaders for them, to the neglect of the local church we serve?

I'm not suggesting for one minute we only selfishly train leaders for our own church and forget gospel work elsewhere. Far from it. But I wonder if the current shortage of people training for wider ministry *outside* their own church is partly a reflection of how few churches are training anyone for ministry *within* their church from which more gospel workers will emerge. After all, getting involved in a ministry team within a local church can help someone gain confidence and help them experience the joy of ministry in the lives of others. And this can help those who lead the church to identify those with potential to serve within and beyond the local church. Indeed, the needs of a church for leaders can often be better served by training apparently ordinary people we know well than by recruiting people from outside we don't know.

The benefits of a ministry training course within a church are at least threefold:

**First**, when church members are trained to serve by leading and training others, a full range of healthy ministries are multiplied. And not only Bible teaching ministries, but all the other ministries required to keep the Bible teachers focussed and bring more people to hear them.

I've experienced the benefit of a ministry training course for a range of ministries, in the local church I served for 29 years and the planting network which grew from it, largely through multiplying leaders. Like so many suburban and small-town churches, we had no students attending our church and only a few young professionals. But there were some in their twenties eager to learn how to serve in whatever way they could.

We developed a course we called 'Prepared to Serve' and this was the only course I led myself every year. In each year, a cohort with potential to lead in a range of ministries, would meet in our home 3 out of 4 weeks in a month (the other being the church prayer meeting).

When we started, and our church plant was small, we began with the elders and their wives, then anyone leading in church, and then anyone with potential leading a ministry team of some kind. From among these some emerged to train as ministry trainees and then become church-planters, pastors and missionaries. But the first benefit was seen in multiplying those with a shared biblical understanding of what we were trying to do by God's grace within our church.

**Second**, this brought an increasing unity in a shared gospel purpose to those at the core of the church. Every year another 15-20 people in our church gained a deeper, applied biblical understanding of the gospel ministries of our church including how and why we came to our view on disputed issues. This preserved and grew a great theological and practical unity of purpose at the heart of our church.

**Third**, leaders of other churches who do lead such a course testify how one chief benefit is how each year another 10-20 people get to know them and get behind the vision for gospel ministry within the church and beyond it. And the senior pastor gets to know those with potential and better understand how to deploy them across church ministry teams. There were many over the years I discovered I had underestimated and with some investment of training emerged to lead ministry teams of all kinds. In time this proved to be the source not only of welcome team leaders, children's and youth workers, connect group and growth group Bible study leaders, and leaders of all kinds which a growing church will need, but also many who went on to train to be planters, pastors and mission workers.

A few churches do invest significantly in training their Bible study group leaders which is excellent. But what about all those who don't lead Bible studies? So many in ordinary churches couldn't lead a Bible study but do have potential to lead ministries for which they need biblical motivations and a biblical blueprints, which together grow the church. This has the added benefit of enabling the lead pastor to build teams of ministry leaders to spread the burden of leadership beyond an increasingly exhausted few.

We will be eager to revisit the issue of training for ministry, within as well beyond our churches, at the 2027 Reach Conference. But in the meantime, may we encourage pastors and vicars to consider leading a ministry training course for those with ministry potential within our churches - perhaps based on studies in the pastoral epistles, or mixing chapters of a book on ministry (e.g. 'Gospel DNA') in with your own material as you write it (and we hope to get the 'Prepared to Serve' course used by some churches in London written up asap).

Let's endeavour to make all our churches 'training churches' where many are being equipped for their ministries which will collectively grow the local church, and in so doing, yield more workers for the Lord of the harvest near and far.

## Very few churches have prayerfully clarified any kind of vision for their church (what they are praying and working toward)

Lots of churches have what we might call a 'ministry statement' to reassure visiting Christians (like 'reach - build - send' or 'knowing God to make him known'). Or they have a 'culture statement' to reassure visiting non-Christians, like 'loving God, loving one another, loving our neighbours' or 'a church for real people sharing real life with the real Jesus'. Such statements are very helpful. But they don't describe what kind of specific future the church is praying and working towards. They don't have a clear vision of what they are praying and working for.

When I say, 'vision' I certainly don't mean an extra-biblical revelation. I mean an inspiring picture/idea of the kind of God-glorifying church we are praying and working towards, which is specific to our church and the community we are trying to reach. Such clarity helps us make decisions about what not to do and who not to appoint as well as what to do and who to appoint. Without such a vision, leaders and churches can lurch all over the place, finding themselves thinly stretched with staff and ministries they no longer need, unable to invest adequately in sensible ministry development because of undirected decision-making and random appointments in the past.

Of course, the ultimate, 'vision' of every church is the vast multicultural church described in Rev.7, *"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"*. This glorious future inspires our commitment to Jesus' great commission to 'make disciples of all nations' for him.

*"The mission of the church, as seen in the Great Commissions, the early church in Acts, and the life of the Apostle Paul - is to win people to Christ and to build them up in Christ. Making disciples - that's our task"*. (What Is The Mission of The Church? - DeYoung & Gilbert).

But no one church can reach everywhere or everyone. We need to clarify our own local goals that can contribute to Jesus' global mission. Craig Hamilton writes, *"The reason vision, mission and strategy matter is because they help you provide clarity. And clarity is what everyone wants and needs. People want to know what they are supposed to be doing and how they're supposed to be doing it. If you're the leader, then it's your job to clarify those things for them...clarity is the key"*.

Of course there are dangers of two kinds...

**Too much focus on vision:** we should beware of distraction from word ministries and people in need, wearying the church with confusing processes and jargon and pride in

unrealistic fantasies. This is certainly a problem for some churches I've visited abroad but rarely in the UK. Here the reverse is usually the case...

**Too little focus on vision:** beware of pious passivism which forgets God gave the growth through Paul planting and Apollos watering (1 Cor.3), defensive cynicism which scorns anything new, tribal reductionism which condemns strategy as a *distraction* from word ministry when Acts 6 demonstrates it is necessary to *enable* word ministry, and proud inertia which likes to feel elite without any need to change to grow.

We need to prayerfully clarify who our church, as the people we are, could, by God's grace, bring into our church disciple-making over the next few years. Are we realistically able to reach city professionals, students, estate residents, diaspora communities, seniors or young families? Then we need to pray, consult and **decide** upon a healthy and compelling vision of that future to work towards. And then we need to present it, explain, promote, reinforce it, recruit workers to it and train our ministry teams in it. Then refresh it in 5 years time and give God all the glory for any growth.

In my view, our evangelical constituency has a history of 'pious passivism'. There is a strength in this: we must remain committed to a piety of prayer and expository preaching at the heart of our churches because it equips all the others (Eph.4:11). But such piety becomes a weakness when we use it as an excuse to ignore other ministries which need our help to collectively reach the lost and grow the church to the glory of God. You may have seen Don Carson's devastating rebuke to pious passivists in Themelios,

*"As important and central as is the ministry of the word of God, the thoughtful pastor/ elder/ overseer will devote time and energy to casting a vision, figuring out the steps for getting there, building the teams and structures needed for discharging ministry and training others, building others up, thinking through the various ways in which the gospel can be taught at multiple levels to multiple groups within the church, how to extend faithful evangelism and church planting, how to engage the surrounding world as faithful believers, and much more. Just because someone is an able preacher does not necessarily make him an able pastor/ elder/ overseer. Indeed, if he shows no propensity for godly oversight, then no matter how good a teacher he may be, he is not qualified to be a pastor/teacher/overseer."*

Symptoms of neglecting a clear vision include reduced willingness to serve, give or stay; division and conflict among staff, leaders or members; and confusion, frustration and boredom in the church family. This results in few trying hard to bring friends or wanting to train for full-time gospel ministry. Napoleon Bonaparte was right when he apparently said, *'small plans to not inflame the hearts of men'*.

This is where Reach is available to help where we can. One of the most common early requests in a Reach mentoring relationship is help for pastors and their church councils/elders to clarify an inspiring and compelling vision which helps make wise and healthy decisions which guide our formation of ministry teams.

Can we help you? Would you like help to develop your own ministry training course for your church? Would you like help in clarifying a wise, godly and inspiring vision for your church?

Why not [contact us](#) to book a consultation with one of our mentors?

But despite these causes for reflection, let's not forget the encouragements with which we began: there are many fine pastors and gospel workers out there through whom Christ is growing many churches which are steadily making disciples of all nations for Christ to the glory of God. To him be all the glory.