

Vision for GBC March 2006

I want to make clear from the beginning tonight, something I have said many times already, that vision does not come in neat packages for me; nor is vision to do with targets and programmes and strategies. For in the end I have a vision to simply be a church with all the messiness that involves. After all, there is no such thing as an ideal community. The church lives between the now of Christ's resurrection and the not yet of his coming, with all the tensions that implies. So whatever else is said tonight about specific projects, goals, strategies – and I dare say there will be numerous projects and activities that we will be involved in over the next few years - this must never be mistaken for the core of what we are about which is to be a real live Christian community, bearing witness through our worship and our life together to the love of God in Christ Jesus, and to the kingdom that is to come.

In that sense vision is less about programmes and grand strategies and more about a way of being – living in the light of the great vision which is that of Christ ruling and reigning. And from that original vision and revelation comes not a five year strategy but as I heard Steve Gaukroger speak of last year, 'a series of small obediences'; the church attending to those things that churches have done from the very beginning: the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer, which become the source of Christian mission. Outwardly it doesn't look particularly sensational; nor does it seem very cutting edge, but done well, and done faithfully, I am convinced it will enable something sensational to happen here at GBC and beyond, as the Lord adds daily to those being saved, which is at the end of that description of the church in Acts 2. In fact, it is my deep conviction, having received a considerable amount of feedback on the book: *The Gospel Driven Church*, and having spent a good deal of time sharing this with colleagues from other churches, that in recovering this way of being church, we at Millmead may well act as an encouragement for other churches, large and small, who have similarly been burdened by the programmed, trend-driven approach. And I can report that there is widespread agreement in the eldership that the Spirit is leading us to explore this rather simple way of being a church.

No wonder then, that most of our conversation over the last couple of years has focused not so much on vision, in terms of coming up with a vision statement, because in a way that trivialises what we are about. Rather, we have spent a lot of

time talking about values: the kind of values, or culture, that we see in the New Testament, that we want to embody here in this very unique and particular setting of Guildford Baptist church, bearing in mind that vision must always be worked out in the very local setting of this actual church, as it is, as opposed to what it isn't. And the top of the list of course, in terms of values, is gathered worship, meaning not just singing, which is vital of course, but the whole array of things we do when we gather on a Sunday or in pastorates or smaller groups still: preaching, teaching, hearing scripture, baptising, communion, prayer, intercession, the laying on of hands, prophecy, tongues, words of knowledge, that contribute to the building up of the body of Christ.

Speaking for the full-time staff of GBC, I want to say that a significant amount of our time has been and continues to be devoted to ensuring that those times of gathering together, on Sundays and mid-week, are of the highest order, not so much in terms of excellence of performance, but in terms of expectation of what happens when we gather. For it is our conviction, outdated as it sounds, that gathering together in worship is at the core of what it means to be a member of GBC, and the bedrock of an authentic spirituality in which daily we encounter the love of God for ourselves. Sunday is not about trying to get more people into church, nor simply exhorting the church to do more things, but about having a fresh revelation, through word and sacrament, of the love of God in Christ Jesus, which then issues forth in practical Christian living.

This of course has practical implications for the way we organise the church, because if worship is at the heart of who we are, then the ordained ministry of the church, so to speak, needs to be set free to attend with others in the church to these overtly pastoral and theological tasks, rather than getting drawn into administration. After all, if we believe that Millmead is to be a place where the Word and the Spirit are given primacy, a place which is biblically strong, liturgically meaningful, as well as open to the Spirit, then time needs to be given to finding creative ways of expressing this. Moreover, if we truly believe in pastoral care and spiritual direction as the bedrock of the church then space needs to be made for this to be given proper attention by those involved.

So, it is my pleasure to report that with the addition of Sara Sims, Bob Manson over this last year to the admin staff, and with the effective work done by the deacons of the church, it is becoming increasingly the case that the Pastoral staff, Pastorate

leaders, Youth ministries, Prayer ministry team and Elders of the church are able to focus on these things; although the issue of balancing management and spiritual care is still a very real one, with the tendency for the activities of the church to predominate. So we are proposing in this next year the appointment of an extra person on staff, who will be primarily responsible for straddling those two worlds: a kind of executive pastor if that doesn't sound a contradiction in terms, or better still an associate pastor, who will be a part of the pastoral team but mainly responsible for the church programme: in particular to co-ordinate the Pastorates; to assist in the processes by which people become active members of the church; as well as activate a programme for the 20-somethings in the church, which is an area we would like to see developed. It is our hope in appointing this person, which we believe will strengthen the effective management of the church, that the church will be better equipped to focus on first things, which is to love God, serve one another, give good pastoral care, and reach the world.

Indeed, it is my hope that with others running the programme of the church, not only will the ministries and elders be freer to seek the Lord, and give spiritual direction, but also we as a whole church will be freer to seek the Lord in prayer, both personally and corporately, for prayer, after all, is the highest thing we have been called to do: prayer for mission, prayer for healing, prayer for the town, but often the first thing to fall by the wayside in a busy church. And so alongside a growing commitment to intercession when we gather as a whole church on a Sunday, we also want to see prayer develop throughout the week, here in the Centre, and also in Pastorates. We have made a step in that direction with a daily prayer time here in the centre for all the staff, but it is my vision that over time this will become something that the whole church can embrace.

Continuing with values, what happened last Sunday [March 5th], when we took a number of the Chinese Fellowship into membership, confirmed to many of us that one of the most important things that the Lord has been doing at GBC is creating a genuinely multi-ethnic, multi-generational church. It has been a great personal joy for me, since joining Millmead, to see more people coming from all sorts of different cultures and social backgrounds. This vision of course, or should I say value, is right at the heart of the New Testament definition of what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ, in which there is 'neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, but all are one in Christ Jesus,' (Galatians 3:28) and therefore, particularly in a town

like Guildford, it will be a powerful witness to the gospel when we embrace within our concept of fellowship, as we have been doing, people from overseas, for example, single people, university students, children, widowed people, single parents, teenagers with no church connections, alongside what we might term the large numbers of married people. But by 'embrace' I mean more than simply offering a greeting on a Sunday morning: I mean giving what is the greatest gift we can give anyone who is vulnerable and that is hospitality; both here at the Centre in the things we put on, but also hospitality in the home. Having come from a church in London which excelled in this gift, I saw firsthand how powerful this was in terms of the church flourishing. And if we take the words of Jesus seriously, we should see the gift of hospitality, both giving and receiving hospitality, not simply in terms of mission but also as a way of encountering the Lord who is found in the setting of a church which is actively 'loving one another' but also extending its hospitality to the 'whosoever' the Lord brings among us.

It is worth saying in this context that later this year, alongside our Pastorate programme, and in co-operation with the Pastorates, we would like to restart an Alpha course. And whilst it is by no means the final word on our evangelism and the challenge of catechising new believers, which is another thing we are anxious to develop over the next few years, the great thing about Alpha is the experience of sitting down together around tables, and creating a sense of belonging. Indeed it is my hope that starting Alpha will stimulate us to explore, once again, the ways in which we can further develop the Centre here as a place itself of hospitality, in which people, young and old alike, come to worship God, to receive instruction, and also find a place of welcome and safety.

Clearly our homes are places for that to happen too, but it is our conviction that this Centre is a place and a space for this to happen. Indeed, in thinking about how we might develop this site, central to our thinking about the possibility of a brand new centre, (which is one of the options presently under consideration), would be a building that would express within its design the whole concept of openness and welcome. But if that is to happen, it seems to us that we need to make our present building work as best it can in that way, thus making us worthy of some new project. To a significant degree this has been happening. New Focus continues to be a place of real welcome and encouragement to the many people who come here on a Wednesday. And the Mother and Toddlers group is becoming ever more focused on

reaching the many who come on a Friday with the gospel. Moreover, I am delighted to report to you that on Friday evenings this place is packed with young people many of whom have no association whatsoever with the church. And talking to Ant, and Dave and Linda, I know that this is a very important part of their Youth strategy: to develop our young people in their own Christian discipleship through small groups, and other church events, but also to embrace a wider mission to their peers, to reach young people for Christ. So rather than be depressed about all the people we have not reached, let us be encouraged by the large numbers of people we are developing friendship with on a regular basis, and let us realise the huge opportunities that living in a town like Guildford gives to us, and more specifically the huge opportunities that come to us by being a large town centre church, with a strong Christian presence in places as far and wide as Farnham, Godalming, Onslow and Mellow. Clearly we are not the only church in town, and we will be seeking fresh ways of working together with other churches, but I believe the Lord has called us to be who we are, and to model in our life together something that could have implications as far as the ends of the earth. Which brings me, finally, to say something about global missions at GBC.

This last year has seen a number of changes in our missionary portfolio. And again, I want to encourage you to pray for the Martin and Andrea Klopper, Chris and Gillian Bamber, the Mark and Lesley Lawther and Jean Woolley as, in different ways, they seek God's will in this time of transition. Furthermore, I want to remind you to keep in your hearts all of our other missionaries, including Ian and Juliana Horne and Simon Walsh, whom I will be visiting next week [March 20th – 28th]. For global missions remain right at the core of our mission at GBC; not to the detriment of what happens here, because of course Guildford itself is a place of international mission – hence our commitment to Friends International – but as an overflow of our discipleship here. For we believe that a church which is teaching about discipleship, and seeking to flesh that out in real practical ways, will end up developing missions on three fronts: vocational mission in the sense that everyone is called to be a missionary in the workplace (hence the interviews on a Sunday); home mission to the community, such as The Besom, Matrix Trust, Prison ministry, London City Mission, and Baptist Home Mission, which we continue to support, but finally, global missions, which involves GBC as a sending church, as well as support for the BMS. In fact, we anticipate that our involvement over the years in sending people onto the mission field, and partnering with other churches will increase not diminish, even if

the strategy might change somewhat with more emphasis on supporting national leadership; because, despite all the emphasis upon every one called to be a missionary, which we whole-heartedly want to promote, there remains something quite unique about global missions, which we want to continue to reflect in our giving. As far as I see it, people like the James', the Barrys, Simon Walsh, Nick Ruffle, etc, are an extension of the ministry here at Millmead, and a way in which we fulfil the great commission to take the gospel, which is shaping our own lives, to the ends of the earth.

And so the vision is a bit like a ripple - the grace of God, forming a people of praise in which there is no distinction, who embrace one another, who work in the world, and send to the ends of the earth.