

Richard Coombs: Church Planting 2611.2015

Introduction

I have to begin by saying that I feel that I am speaking today under false pretences. I have never planted a church in my life. I am church plodder rather than a church planter! Rather than planting a group of Christians somewhere new, like a number of us here, I have been called to grow a new church in place of an old dying church. It was the last thing in the world I was expecting to do.

I did two curacies in large evangelical churches in London and I think we assumed that we'd end up in the suburbs. We looked at various churches which either we didn't like or, more often, they didn't like us and we felt the Lord pushing us further and further out of our comfort zone. Eventually we told the Lord that we were prepared to do anything but not non-evangelical, rural or more than one parish. And then I was persuaded by a friend to apply for Burford with Fulbrook and Taynton, Asthall and Swinbrook with Widford, six churches, rural, liberal catholic. You should never say never to God. So we arrived in fear and trembling with three small children in 1998.

I felt like Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones, 'Son of man can these bones live?' the Lord said to me and I replied, like Ezekiel, 'Oh Lord, you alone know.' Because planting a new church in the beautiful Windrush Valley felt like planting a church in the valley of dry bones, bones that were very dry! But like Ezekiel, we believe in a God who can work great miracles and over the last 17 years we have seen the Lord breathe new life into the slain so that they might live.

Let me tell you briefly some of the strategies that we have used to plant a new church in a dead church.

1. Prayer

I am convinced that one of the main reasons that God called us to Burford was to teach us to pray. There was one Christian couple that we knew of when we started and we didn't really know where they stood so Nicola and I decided that the first thing to do was to pray. So we set aside an hour every Tuesday morning to pray for at least 3 years. It is quite remarkable to look back through our prayer diary and see so many the answers to those prayers not least in changed lives. We felt that we had faith to pray for one person to be converted in our first year. On the anniversary of my induction no-one had been converted. We thought God must want us to persist in prayer for another year. Then my phone rang and a woman who I had been talking to about her alcoholism asked to come and see me. I had lent her John Stott's 'Basic Christianity'. I asked if she had enjoyed it. Yes, she said, he's loved it. 'Did you notice a prayer in the back of the book?' No she hadn't. 'Would you like to read the prayer?' 'Oh that's a good prayer!' 'Would you like to pray the prayer?' 'Yes, I'd love to pray that prayer!.' So she asked Jesus to take over her life on the first anniversary of my induction to Burford.

2. Preaching

This goes without saying. But it was completely new in our parishes 10 years ago. One of the very first things that we did was to put NIV Bibles in the pews of every church. This was considered pretty radical by some especially because it wasn't the KJV! Then for the first couple of years I did little more than teach the Bible at every possible opportunity – sermons, of course, PCC meetings, wardens meetings, one to one discussions, baptism visits, wedding preparation. The aim was to inject the Bible into every level of the life of the churches. I had never preached in a setting where the Bible had never been taught before. I began by preaching very short sermons on the lectionary readings. But it had a remarkable effect. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 2:16, to some we were the smell of death, to others, the fragrance of life. Some people quickly left the church and we had some big rows but not as many as I expected.

Others began to be intrigued that they were beginning to understand something that they had believed all their lives. One lady who eventually became a church warden said, 'I used to be a God person but now I'm a Jesus person.' That was her way of saying that she'd become a Christian and there are many more like her.

On the Sunday before my induction I was in the congregation and a family came to the door. The church warden turned them away saying that this wasn't a service for children. We realised that we needed to make Bible teaching available to all ages and so we began a Sunday Club on our very first Sunday. Nicola, my wife, started it with 17 children but very quickly it grew as families discovered that they could come to church and there would be something for everyone. Again, this was a radically new idea for many people.

3. Priorities

The four parishes that I came to in 1998 had no evangelical heritage or tradition. They were doing little more than just managing to keep the services going every Sunday for a dwindling number of people whose average age was 70. It was a dire situation. The one thing that was very obvious was that change was needed! These churches hadn't changed anything for about 200 years. This is true of many rural churches up and down the country. There is a desperate need for change but there is also a massive dead weight that fights change tooth and nail. How do you begin to make gospel changes in a rural, multi-parish, non-evangelical setting? It may sound trite but the way to bring about change is to bring the gospel to bear on every part of church life.

That's no different to ministering in an urban or suburban setting the gospel needs to be packaged and presented in a very way that is sensitive to the setting. I think that this is something that some evangelicals have not always understood in non-evangelical settings. They've quite rightly put their trust in the gospel to implement change but they've done it in an insensitive way which has made unnecessary enemies. Paul was very clear that the only offense should be the offense of the gospel. Sometimes we are offensive to people for non-gospel reasons.

For instance, some evangelicals insist on not wearing robes or stoles or immediately remove the altar frontals and the candle sticks and snuff out the sanctuary light but these things are not primary gospel issues. Please don't misunderstand me, I don't particularly like wearing robes, altar frontals or sanctuary lights but they are and were not the first things to change to my mind. I have found that it is far, far more effective if the gospel changes people and then they suggest the external changes rather than me imposing change from above. For instance when I arrived one of the church wardens made me promise not to remove the tabernacle and sanctuary light. I made a non-committal response. Every Sunday the vergger replaced Jesus in the box and closed the curtains. I didn't think very much about it. Then about 5 years later we had to decorate the chapel where the sanctuary light was. We didn't replace the light or the box or the curtains and no-one turned a hair. That's because Jesus himself had become more important than the box containing Jesus. Of course, you need great wisdom to know what is a central gospel issue and what is not and it will be different in ever place.

4. Maintaining Diversity

One of the big differences between rural and urban or suburban ministry is that people don't travel if they don't like what's going on in their church, they just stop going. So, as far as possible we try to cater for everyone and try not to exclude anyone for non-gospel reasons.

We have a wide range of style of service from BCP Mattins, Evensong and Communion with sung psalms and canticles to informal worship led by a music group. We aim to do all services as well as possible even if it's for small numbers and make sure that the sermon at a small and traditional service is as good at the sermon in the bigger services.

In a multi-parish benefice, the temptation is to do the same in every parish. That seems to me to be a recipe for continued decline. We need to create centres of excellence because people will travel to find Bible teaching, contemporary worship, children's a youth work and fellowship. So, we operate on two tracks more contemporary and more traditional. That way, as many people as possible are catered for.

There's much more I could say but under God, over the last 17 years a church of 30 people with an average age of 70 has grown to an all-age church family of over 200. Why has that happened? Because as we have done our best to prophesy, like Ezekiel, the Spirit has breathed life into the slain and the dry bones have come to life.

There are hundreds of valleys like mine in this diocese, and throughout the country, beautiful valleys of death where it would be impossible to plant a church. My prayer is the more will take the challenge of prophesying to the dry bones and seeing life spring up from death.