

"Looking for Church Growth in Stoke Poges"

Early in October I joined Harry, Liz, Nigel, Simon and Yann on a two-day conference on "How to build a Growing Church." The conference was held at Holy Trinity Church, Brompton (HTB for short) which many may know - if not by reputation, then as the church where the charismatic Nicky Gumbel of Alpha fame is based. I faced the prospect of two very long days with excitement, but also apprehension as a "church conference" would be a first for me and a few years ago I would never have believed my involvement in such an event was possible!

I need not have had any anxieties. The course was attended by over five hundred people of many differing Christian denominations. It was superbly organised with precise timing, choices of tasty packed lunches, accomplished speakers and at least a hundred helpful, friendly volunteers. It was interesting - with fifteen different seminars on offer, inspirational - there were visionary and practical group sessions with opportunities for discussion, and it was prayerful and spiritual. The large group meetings started with rousing hymn songs backed by a band and ended with ministry where everyone had the opportunity to be helped through prayer on an individual basis. The Holy Spirit was there.

The experience of the conference is with me still and I would like to share just a few things that had meaning for me in the hopes that it will stimulate thoughts or actions on the part of others. The seminars covered a huge range of topics from raising future leaders and building character in people to planting churches, taking groups into prisons and encouraging corporate prayer and worship. I chose "How to encourage the missing gender (men) into the church," "Working with church structures" (i.e. the bureaucracy) and "Planning for growth" (tools to make things happen smoothly and effectively). Some speakers introduced controversial ideas and challenging views, but, impressively, all had a background of success in their endeavours to create healthier churches.

So.... what thoughts have stayed with me?

The church needs to re-shape itself to relate to the 21st century and what is meaningful for young people today. It needs to make God's word relevant to people, and prayer and worship needs to be active. In the Vicar of HTB, Sandy Millar's words "If change happens faster outside than inside death is inevitable." Tradition and ritual are important and loved by many, but many people today are not responding to this. The church has to be relevant to people with increasingly busy lives and should not necessarily be "Sundays only." Implementing change involves teaching (explaining what it's about), time (it won't happen overnight) and testimony (demonstrating what has worked).

How do we grow a healthy church? These are a few thoughts:

- Go for numerical growth. **The church should have "a big front door"** inviting in and welcoming everyone regardless of views and backgrounds. It should be multi-congregational, allowing for different types of worship. You build through people. One Vicar can't build a church on his own and significant work can be done by small teams of people with selected leaders.
- **To bring people into the church go out to them** - people need help where they are based. Do something in and for the community. For example HTB started a now well established charity called Besom. It involves church volunteers assisting the poor or disabled in the community by doing practical tasks such as painting and repairs. A Vicar in Ealing runs a ministry which is very "events" based. There are entertainment and leisure groups such as wine tastings, football Saturdays and film nights. There are learning groups such as money management and parenting courses, discussion groups for skeptics and agnostics and even Alpha groups in the local pub! They all attract people who otherwise might not think of being involved with the church.
- **The promotion of Christian values** (as opposed to Christianity) **through personal contact and by example** is likely to have more impact on non-believers and result in the church becoming the first place they turn to when in need.
- Tension between churches and the church hierarchy are inevitable when, as so often happens, objectives differ - and the importance of give and take negotiation requiring "a cool head, but a loving heart" was stressed. **The self-sustaining church**, i.e. independent of the central hierarchy, particularly financially, was seen as a possibility in the future. This runs in tandem with the concept of church planting where a successful church sends out one of its leaders to revive and help sustain a failing church until it, too -- using the principles of Growing Healthy Churches -- is able to stand on its own feet.
- There was emphasis on **always doing things well** with careful attention to planning, organisation, feedback and review, but with a readiness to take risks and a focus on teamwork, ownership and quality. The important fact to take on board, however, is that **God is the permanent Chairman and His Word underlies the vision**. HTB certainly demonstrated it was a living example of a fast-growing and very healthy church. I am sure with all the good will in our church and Harry's guidance we, too, can be on the way towards fast growth and good health!

Simone Evard