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ORGANIZING A CARING CHURCH

Roger Forster and Ray Mayhew

How is a local church to organize itself as a caring community? From their wealth of experience at Ichtus Fellowship, Roger and Ray provide us with a practical and suggestive set of ideas for integrating the local church's social and evangelistic ministries. They stress the need for adequate leadership and nurturing of believers in our churches, emphasizing the community aspect of our lives together as God's kingdom people. They then suggest a number of specific steps which we could take to more adequately fulfil our serving role in society.

Introduction

We are going to briefly examine ten biblical principles that must undergird any comprehensive approach to organizing pastoral care in a growing local church. The paper will be practical rather than theological — the biblical principles being illustrated by our own experience of an expanding local church in south-east London.

The boundaries of our enquiry do not permit discussions of 'Organizing an Evangelizing Church', but it must be pointed out that the two go hand in hand and no false dichotomy must be drawn between evangelism and pastoral care. Qualitative and quantitative growth are both essential. The healthy, caring church will be an out-going, evangelizing church. The body exists to make contact with the world.

Leadership

Functional

Howard Snyder maintains that there are only three fundamental structures in the New Testament church. These are: 1. the eldership structure. 2. the small structure, namely the loving, caring group, and 3. the large coming together. These are exemplified by the Jerusalem church with its body of apostles/elders, breaking bread from house to house, and three to five thousand people gathering in Solomon's porch.

All other structures that develop from this pattern would seem to be purely pragmatic. When the latter have served their purpose, or if they no longer relate people in any interaction of life, they become dispensable.

Within the fundamental threefold construction of the life of God's people the structure of eldership is of course the organizing element of the whole, and it is the elders' task to maintain — on the dual basis of the word and the Spirit — the areas of interaction and service of the members to one another and to the world. Acts 15 illustrates the pragmatic setting up of structures.

The elders must serve the interests of God's kingdom and its citizens by creating structures in which the diverse and even antipathetic elements in the body will be able to 'build up each other in love'. The word, no doubt Spirit-illuminated, was brought from Amos by James (Acts 15:13-18). The Spirit thought good and so did the elders, to suggest certain guidelines for fellowship at love-feasts (Acts 15:28-29). Consequently, a temporary and useful pattern was established for mutual care to reign in the church. Acts 6, with the appointment of ministers for widows' relief exemplifies the principle of spiritual creativity being used to meet a real problem.

This leads us to suggest that at least one or two of the eldership should be visionaries who can see the needs, and that there should also be others in the church who have the responsibility of fulfilling those needs. They must all have the ability to pursue these goals with vision and to lead others along with themselves.

It is essential that such an authority structure exists if organizing a caring church is to be a realistic aim.

Plural

The New Testament pattern is that of leadership teams rather than one-man ministries. We need a diversity of gifts and ministries to meet the needs of the congregation (Ephesians 4:11-12; Acts 13:1-2; 1 Corinthians 12:28).

Balanced

Bill Gothard describes the seven spiritual gifts in Romans 12:7-8 (prophecy, serving, teaching, exhorting, giving, administration and mercy) as basic 'motivational' gifts; the gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 being classified as 'manifestations' (gifts of the Spirit to individuals) and those in Ephesians 4 as 'ministries' (gifts of individuals to the church). All are crucial in building up the body of Christ, and the motivational gifts are

of particular value in providing balance in local leadership. When there is an adequate release of prophecy, serving, teaching, exhortation, giving, administration and mercy, both into the church and out to the community, we are approaching a holistic expression of a caring church.

Prayerful

One of the primary leadership tasks is prayer (Acts 6:4). It is amazing how many practical pastoral needs are remembered as faithful continuous prayer is made for each individual in the congregation. Prayer is indispensable and undergirds all our caring activities.

Growth

Any effective approach to pastoral care must be elastic enough to adequately minister to an expanding (not static) group of people. Whenever our Lord spoke of the kingdom he used models that imply growth, multiplication, movement — salt into the earth, seed into the soil, light into darkness, leaven into the dough. The Holy Spirit brings to our attention the numerical growth of the church in Acts beginning with a group of 120 and quickly moving into thousands. Some of us like small churches that are supportive, intimate and have room for our gifts. Others like larger churches that provide a diversity of activities and ministries. However, whether our preference is for big or small groups, to be biblical they must be *growing* groups; the small becoming big and/or forming daughter churches. Peter Wagner of the School of World Mission has suggested a three-fold structure of celebration, congregation and cell groupings that provides adequate pastoral care for an unlimited number of people. This reflects the New Testament structure mentioned by Snyder above and similar structures provided by Methodism with its system of societies, classes and bands.

Celebrational

This is the large gathering in which the apostolic doctrine may be adequately dispensed within the context of worship. Worship is the ethos in which teaching is assimilated. This nurturing is done by those gifts to the body listed in Ephesians 4. The large gatherings of the people of God, convened by the leadership, have a number of therapeutic values, showing that God's people are not alone in the world, but are moving on in a vast movement of humanity. This identification

alone can heal many basic problems in the individual. Also, it produces the platform upon which needs requiring care can be discovered and met, as well as enough room in which a person feeling threatened by personal confrontation in a smaller group can taste the reality of the message which is proclaimed and the Spirit who is present.

Congregational

Congregations should have a maximum size of 200. They should be as geographically spread as possible and have adequate opportunities to express their common life together. Congregations can participate in activities that the celebration group is too big for and the housegroup too small. ('Borrowit' schemes, houseparties, joint households, extended families, local expressions of evangelism etc.) Two years ago we set a target of planting ten congregational groups (or extension churches) in a three-year period. In most cases the nuclear congregation was formed by two housegroups that then began evangelism in the area. We are now over half-way towards our goal and find the small congregational pattern to be very effective evangelistically.

Cell groupings

These are the smaller entities of house groups which provide mutual edification centred on the inspiration of the word of God. For these to function fully, the leadership of the group is important. A leader should aim to visit each person in their home regularly, help and instruct in the Christian life, help to discover and develop spiritual gifts, and to discern any practical needs. Fellowship meals and breaking of bread contribute the atmosphere in which people can be known and understood. The cell provides a pastoral unit and produces future congregational leaders. These latter can be developed alongside the pastoral figure of that group. The groups should be small enough for mutual support and action and should also facilitate communication which is a fundamental need in a human-being-related society. As the cell or house group is so vital it will be discussed as a separate principle later on.

Discipleship and nurture

The primary mandate given by our Lord in Matthew 28:19-20 is to go into the world and make disciples. The words 'baptizing' and 'teaching' are participles that derive their force from the emphatic command to make disciples. The goal of pastoral care must therefore be disciple-

making (2 Timothy 2:2). In our own church at least four structures assist in producing disciples.

Adequate teaching and preaching

To quote John Stott, 'I believe that nothing is better calculated to restore health and vitality to the church or to lead its members into maturity in Christ, than the recovery of true biblical contemporary preaching.' To effectively communicate to an increasingly visually-orientated society requires ample illustration of our preaching (visual aids, over-head projectors, drama, etc.). In family services special care must be taken to ensure that there is ministry to all age groups. Preaching that combines truth, clarity and unction will produce disciples.

One to ones

These provide an opportunity for the new convert to sit down weekly with a mature Christian and study the Bible in a personal way relating the scriptural truths to daily living. In our own church we have about 80 people giving or receiving one to ones. This provides a foundation for Christian living in the lives of many.

Startrite classes

These are small groups of new converts meeting weekly to cover foundational biblical truths and are essential in the process of making disciples. We can no longer assume that people have any biblical background whatever before their conversion. We therefore have over 100 people in such groups.

Grow-more classes

As the name implies, these are small groups meeting for Bible study on an advanced level.

To provide such a plurality of activities is demanding, but crucial. Like Paul we must 'not shrink from declaring . . . anything that [is] profitable and teaching . . . in public and from house to house', nor to 'cease . . . to admonish every one with tears' (Acts 20:20, 31).

Particular care must also be taken to ensure that sufficient nurture and teaching is given to the young and elderly who may not be able to participate in the above discipleship structures. An analysis of the age

ranges represented in the church will enable the leadership to plan children's, youth or daytime activities to meet these needs.

Special care needs in the church should also be identified and provided for; these may include the handicapped, the deaf, the educationally sub-normal, single-parent families, the unemployed, etc. In our own work a branch of the Disabled Christians Fellowship meets monthly and a club for the unemployed, weekly.

Servanthood

In the training of the twelve apostles our Lord exemplified the principle that discipleship must result in service. The disciple is trained to serve. Exercise is crucial to the body if health is to be maintained. Therefore, adequate pastoral care must provide opportunities to serve — be it preaching the gospel, washing feet (John 13), serving tables (Acts 6), making clothes (Acts 9), remembering the poor (Galatians 2:10). It is crucial that discipleship be expressed in servanthood. Here are just a few examples of the opportunities to serve that could be provided by a local church: workshops (dance, drama, audio-visuals), postal evangelism, social action in the neighbourhood, open-air work, door-to-door evangelism, magazine production, youth work, film work, catering teams, stewarding, etc. Such a variety of activities will ensure that believers with *various spiritual gifts* and of *every age* have an opportunity to serve.

Administration

The word 'organizing' rings the note of spiritual apostasy in the hearts of some, suggesting man-centred activity rather than Spirit-inspired life. However, all we mean by organizing is the planning which will preserve and cause life to fulfil its purpose. For example, there may be plenty of life organically produced within a family, but if the mother does not organize meal times, places and menus, bearing in mind the individual needs of babies, invalids and others, then the life will hardly be preserved, and the family will be unable to achieve its proper ends.

Organization

Israel was administered in thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens, by able men who feared God and were trustworthy (Exodus 18:21). Organization became crucial in adequately caring for the numerically exploding

Jerusalem church (Acts 6). 'Administration' is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Romans 12:7-8). An effective administrative structure must undergird an effective pastoral structure if needs are to be identified, communicated and ministered to.

Analysis

We can pin-point weaknesses and plan for nurture and growth by analysing current growth trends, gains and losses, age groupings, and the geographical location of church members. We should record the various types of growth: biological, transfer and conversion. Statistical information, accurately recorded and visually presented (bar graphs, pie graphs, etc.), enable us to identify points of strength or weakness.

Planning

Effective organization involves long and short range planning. In Ichthus we have set yearly goals which have been prayerfully placed before the congregation (numerical growth, finance, conversions, missionary support, needed personnel). Diary planning is important for the whole church — houseparties, socials, picnics, conferences, seminars, evangelistic missions, love feasts, etc.

Community

A caring church will not just minister to and care for individuals, but will minister to and care for *individuals in community*. We must not emphasize the personal aspects of faith and commitment at the expense of the corporate. Snyder remarks that Israel lost their purpose, but remembered they were a people. We are in danger of remembering our purpose, but forgetting we are a people. The word 'saint' is used 62 times in the New Testament; 61 references are plural. Wesley remarks: 'Solitary saints are as unbiblical as holy adulterers'!

While a robust picture of community life exists in the New Testament, we would do better to draw out *principles* of community rather than legalistic patterns. Worthwhile experiments (with some notable failures) have taken place in recent years along the lines of extended families, community of goods, joint households, simple lifestyle, that have provided high levels of pastoral care. We would do well to learn carefully from them.

The contemporary needs become more obvious when we consider that as the moral/ethical basis of our society moves further and further

away from biblical standards, people will require, more than ever before, not just nurture as individuals but integration into a new community. Likewise, as loneliness and alienation increase in society in general and in urban areas in particular, higher levels of community than the normal church's two meetings on Sunday and one mid-week are capable of providing must exist. The implications of such an ideal need to be thought out, for *koinonia* in the church must not be reduced to providing tea and coffee after the meeting, but must — to be biblical — include deeper involvement in each other's lives on a spiritual, social and material level. In Philippians 4:14-15, 2 Corinthians 8:3-4 *koinonia* clearly relates to financial assistance. The needs to be catered for and the means to do this will be many-fold: some will need greater levels of 'care in community' than others (the widows in the New Testament were such a case). New converts with particular problems, singles, the elderly or handicapped may need the special care provided in the context of an extended family, and other groups and needs will provide various opportunities for the church family to think of other creative solutions capable of enhancing the depth of the new community.

The kingdom

In our consideration of 'Organizing a Caring Church' we have concentrated on internal care. However, care, concern and compassion must also be directed outwards to our neighbour, neighbourhood and nation. Preoccupation with ourselves will produce spiritual hypochondriacs and an unhealthy body.

The church gets in trouble whenever it thinks it is in the church business rather than the Kingdom business.

In the church business, people are concerned with church activities, religious behavior and spiritual things. In the Kingdom business, people are concerned with Kingdom activities, all human behavior and everything God has made, visible and invisible. Kingdom people see human affairs as saturated with spiritual meaning and Kingdom significance.

Kingdom people seek first the Kingdom of God and its justice; church people often put church work above concerns of justice, mercy and truth. Church people think about how to get people into the church; Kingdom people think about how to get the church into the world. Church people worry that the world might change the church; Kingdom people work to see the church change the world.

When Christians put the church ahead of the Kingdom, they settle for the status quo and their own kind of people. When they catch a vision of the

Kingdom of God, their sight shifts to the poor, the orphan, the widow, the refugee, 'the wretched of the earth,' and to God's future. They see the life and work of the church from the perspective of the Kingdom.

Howard Snyder, *Liberating the Church* (11)

According to Ray Bakke, the early church went 'job-hunting'. History tells us that the church at Antioch ran an employment agency (and a secondhand clothing facility!) They also went 'body hunting'; bodies dumped in refuse areas were buried — and the funeral service 'invented'. They went 'baby-hunting', sick or unwanted female babies were commonly thrown over the city wall. The Christians cared for them and 'invented' the orphanage. They went 'sick-hunting' expressing compassion and eventually developing the hospice and hospital. They went 'hunting the hungry' — by the early third century the church in Rome was feeding over 2,000 destitute people daily.

The structure, then, of a church will be out-looking rather than in-looking, that is, down and out rather than up and in! It will be impossible to divide evangelism from good works since evangelism is the best work we can do for anyone and our lips are a part of our lives, even if they are not all of it. There should be no false shame or dichotomy between our service and our proclamation. Added to this, our very actions of love will interpret our message, as it is necessary for most people to see something as well as hear it (save those who are educated in abstract thinking). So Jesus changes water into wine and shows his glory, feeds the 5,000 and presents his cross (John chapters 2 and 6). John Stott has written that our service to the world, namely good works, is like one marriage partner and our message like the other. They must always go along together, even if they are independent and stand in their own right. This may not be the whole truth since the previous two models suggest a closer identification, and perhaps Christ does too in Luke 4. If, then, we would serve the world, there must be channels through which service can come and by which service can be given to the community in need. This requires contact and communication, 24 hours a day (or at least 12!) so that needs (as they arise and are met, or communicated by police, social services, relief organizations, etc.) can be communicated to the whole body, or to those sections of it which have the appropriate gifts to meet the problem. 'We do not have problems, we *are* problems' says Paul Tournier, so consequently we are to meet the *people* involved. Only a realistic contact point and communication pattern can provide an adequate service and it must be staffed by sacrificial voluntary workers or else the community must provide a full-time man to be the point of reference and action. This is as essential a job as that of the pastors of the house groups, elders of the

church or the relatively few public teachers. Within the church of Christ today there exist both the manpower and monetary resources to serve the world with bread of both kinds (John 6:48-51). What is lacking is merely the structure by which this can be accomplished. By organizing such, we express our divine image. In working together with him, the church can creatively meet the world with care and 'salt' society.

Shepherding

One of the most helpful models in developing pastoral care is that of the shepherd (Ezekiel 34, John 10). Some sections of the church are misusing the model and developing dictatorial structures of leadership and authority. Such is not our intention here. The good shepherd is the one who lays down his life for the sheep, not the one who lords it over God's flock. Feeding, leading, guarding and healing summarize a shepherd's task.

Feeding (discussed under 'discipleship and nurture')

Leading

Adequate pastoral care must provide counselling for people in order to navigate through the complex problems, heartaches and decisions of everyday life. The flock must be regularly visited by the leadership — we must know where people are, spiritually, week by week if we are to shepherd them. Counselling 'surgeries' can be organized on week nights and staffed by those spiritually gifted to counsel. We must be careful in such ministry not to depend solely on secular counselling techniques, but must rely on spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians chapters 12 and 14) and inspired application of the scriptures to adequately meet people's needs.

Guarding

'Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians' (Acts 20:28). Paul was keenly aware that 'fierce wolves' would seek to destroy the flock at Ephesus. In our care for the church we must be aware of the pressure on people from the enemy: the occult, false doctrine, false prophets, cults and sects, moral and sexual temptations. As shepherds, we must be close enough to the flock to see if individuals are feeding in dangerous pastures. We must be loving, yet firm and unafraid to exercise church discipline if necessary (Matthew

18:15-17). In our own work from time to time, in order to protect the flock and maintain the Lord's testimony we have had to publicly warn and even put out from our midst certain individuals involved in sexual misconduct. We must not side-step such confrontation if we are to faithfully guard the flock.

Healing

Ezekiel's indictment against the shepherds of Israel was that they did not strengthen the weak, or heal the sick or bind up the injured. James tells us that the task of shepherds ('elders' James 5:14-15) is to pray for the sick, anoint with oil and offer the prayer of faith. We must not turn aside from our responsibility to minister to people's psychological and physical needs as well as their spiritual.

In our own work, as we have sought to obey the injunction in James, we have been encouraged to see God healing the sick. At times a joint consultation with Christian doctors/psychiatrists is helpful in diagnosing the roots of a person's problem and in providing care and ministry.

Housegroups

The use of homes in the New Testament church has been referred to above in the context of the cell structure. Housegroups are an ideal way of organizing a higher level of pastoral care. In our own work we have twenty such groups that meet on two Wednesday evenings and one Sunday morning in the month. The following points indicate how our groups function.

1. They are the basic units of pastoral care. Normally each group has three or four leaders and therefore over 80 people in our own fellowship (not including the eldership) are involved in pastoral care.
2. The groups are flexible, meeting whenever and wherever they want to. Many groups meet informally on other occasions in addition to those mentioned above.
3. The groups are small enough to be personal, intimate, caring and supportive, 12-24 being the average size.
4. The groups are developmental. Leadership and spiritual gifts can emerge and be exercised.
5. They grow by simple cell division. As the groups become too large another group is formed.
6. They have great evangelistic potential. The evangelistic effectiveness of the Methodist movement lay in its 'class' (small group)

- structure. Each housegroup is encouraged to reach out in evangelism and to invite non-Christians to their gatherings.
7. Clear job descriptions must be given to housegroup leaders (visitation, prayer, hospitality, etc.).
 8. Continuous leadership training must be provided. We meet once a month with all our leaders and have weekend or day conferences once or twice a year.
 9. Women are particularly effective in housegroup leadership, and they often have more time in the day for pastoral work than the men.
 10. We rely heavily on group discussion and interaction based on the scriptures, rather than a lecture format.
 11. We encourage all the housegroups to relate socially and many of them are very active in this area.

Contextualization

One of the buzz-words in theological circles today is contextualization — the discipline of relating the *message* to the cultural context of those we are proclaiming it to. However, in our efforts to contextualize the message of the gospel we have neglected to contextualize the *care and compassion* of the gospel. Many of our efforts to care for those in the church or in our neighbourhoods are hopelessly out of context and belong back in the Victorian era. Accelerated cultural change is a feature of most societies today and we must adjust our care accordingly.

We must provide the context in which the single parent, the unemployed, the homosexual and those with psychiatric problems can be counselled and cared for. Counselling and instruction on marriage and family life must regularly be given. Over the last eight years in Ichthus we have organized a 'Jesus Action' scheme of social action in the community. As practical needs are discovered we seek to minister to them. Each housegroup has a Jesus Action representative who is responsible for mobilizing his group in this kind of neighbourhood care. Tasks vary from mending an OAP's plumbing on Christmas Day to decorating flats for handicapped persons! Mother Theresa has often said that the suffering caused by loneliness and alienation in the West is as great as that by disease and malnutrition in the East. Into such a context we must creatively care.

Conclusion

Organizing an effectively caring church in today's society is a

monumental task, but one in which we are co-labourers together with God and recipients of his supernatural enabling.