Mainstream baptists for life and growth

Time for God

All of us, I imagine, could point to a book that greatly impressed and influenced us when we were young - a book that taught us our job and moulded our expectations and that even now, long afterwards, leaves its mark on our thinking, to which we return periodically for inspiration or assurance. For me, such a book is 'The Christian Mind' by Harry Blamires, first published in 1963, the year (coincidentally) of 'Honest to God'. It is still worth reading for passages like the following:

There is much in the day to day chatter of committees, conferences and Church journalism which expresses a way of thinking subtly infected with a mechanistic bias. One reads such generalisations as the following:

> It was agreed that the industrial field is the largest and most important area of national life on which the Church is at present making little impact. Urgent measures are needed to rectify this defect.

When men talk like this, willy-nilly, they give the impression that there is some other way of spreading the Christian gospel than the slow personal process by which the priest or the layman brings the Church's witness to bear on Mr. X or Mrs. Y. That other way is never defined, but in the back of the mind there resides a hazy notion that it exists as some form of nebulous impersonal mechanism. You only need some organisational change, some redeployment of resources and this quick, efficient, unspecified mechanism for spreading the gospel can be brought into play.

"This is the kind of delusion fostered by much loose thinking and speaking today. There is talk of 'the Church' making 'an impact' on the industrial field, and straight away one tends to picture a large scale advance by the forces of Christendom, which by comparison dwarfs the laborious gains made week by week in the parishes. One is seduced into conceiving of a sudden change in the machinery of evangelism by which a massive network of new contacts is built up, linking vast numbers of factory workers with an imaginary administrative centre, where priests sit at desks with telephones in their hands."

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This still needs saying in 1984, when we agonise over the inner city and the unemployed, rave about video and sweat for Mission England (there are no friends to be made in attacking Mission England, the Royal Family or the Baptist Union Assembly, so I won't!) We are still prone to imagine that better planning and better hardware are all we really need. In place of 'impact' one commonly hears the word 'strategy' in connection with the Church's mission. It is a beguiling word.

Strategy is a word which applied to our own work makes the mediocre and ad hoc sound big and important. It is a deceiving word. It masks the reality of a few undertrained and overworked people allocating pitifully small resources, in the face of relentless institutional decline. it is a word that makes us feel we are influencing events, that we are doing something, when in reality we are only talking in committees. Above all, it is a word that makes us feel little less than God, that we know where things are going, and have forces at our disposal whose wise and vigorous deployment would deserve the name of strategy and we don't.

But God is everywhere at work, not often through the proper channels, or in proportion to the expenditure of vast sums of money and the distribution of reams of paper. In every city, new Churches are springing up, new ministries are being launched - "new lamps are lit, new tasks begun" - beyond our power to predict, record or suppress, like wind-borne mustard seed. The strategy belongs to the Lord our God, and I doubt if He's telling us what it is, but the orders for the day belong to us and our children that we may do them. It is the time to take the Kingdom, with this prayer on our lips and in our hearts, "and now Lord take notice of the threats they have made, allow us your servants to speak your message with all boldness. Stretch out your hands to heal and grant that wonders and miracles may be performed through the name of your holy servant, Jesus".

The Editor.

Exploring the Church Meeting

As someone who finds the thought of Church Meeting rather exciting, I confess I have found it somewhat difficult to get excited about writing this article! In the context of general agreement that no definite church order can be deduced from the New Testament it seems strange that so much ink can be spilled in current debate about church structures. On the one hand there is an understandable tendency to appeal to the principle stated by Dr. West, "A Baptist church without a regular, well-attended church meeting becomes something other than a true Baptist church". On the other hand there is an equally understandable tendency to belittle the church meeting on the pragmatic grounds that it so often fails to live up to the high ideals embodied in it.

Each of these approaches leaves a lot to be desired. I am no expert on international church life, but in talking to missionaries and others I get the impression that in many countries (e.g. India, Zaire, Brazil, U.S.A.) the place of the church meeting in Baptist churches is somewhat different from here. But presumably no-one is suggesting that certain B.M.S.-founded churches have become "something other than a true Baptist church"! Such a perspective, however, gives in itself no support to a move away from the church meeting. Because some have ignored its values cannot possibly mean that we too therefore are somehow set free from the same

values. If we agree that the church meeting **ought** to be the high point of church-life, are we really reduced to a faithless pessimism which denies that the ideal is actually workable or worth working for? It's in the area of exploring that out-working, rather than in making definitive statements about the church meeting, that I am happy to spill some ink of my own.

1. **Exploring in theory**

It was in my final year at college, four years ago, that I had the opportunity to do some study of the church meeting. The first striking discovery was that Baptist writing on the subject is almost non-existent, the major contributions all coming from Congregationalists. If, as West states, the church meeting is fundamental to the existence of a Baptist church, then this dearth of literature is certainly remarkable, and perhaps explains some of the present uncertainty and confusion. Nevertheless, out of the commonly and clearly held Baptist belief that a church is constituted by the gathering together of God's people around the Lord present in their midst, then the concept of the church meeting emerges. Daniel Webster defined it as "the place where all members meet together regularly and, in an atmosphere of prayer, share their deepest spiritual concerns and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit about all the matters which affect their common life as the family of God".

(a) **An atmosphere of prayer** Irrespective of the size of the church, the Lord's promise is to be there with them (Matt. 18:20), and first and foremost the church meeting reflects this fundamental basis to church life. At the same time therefore it is essential that the church meeting recognises this Christ-centredness through prayer and **worship**, thus providing the only valid context for any other activity of the meeting.

(b) **"Share their deepest spiritual concerns"** The church gathers not as a club but as a community, and in the meeting together of committed members of the family needs are to be made known, and encouragement and edification given. Such **fellowship**, like worship, is not of course reserved exclusively for the church meeting, but it should certainly be found there.

(c) **"Seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit"** Perhaps it is in this application that the church meeting is most expressive of a fundamental understanding of the local church, namely that he alone is Lord of it and that its autonomy is always centred on his authority. In other words church government is essentially theocratic, and the church meeting is a consequence of this understanding, "the occasion when, as individuals and as a community, we submit ourselves to the judgments of God that we may know what is the mind of Christ" (Baptist Quarterly March 1984). The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers does not mean that the church is a democracy, as is sadly so often thought. (Congregationalism, wrote P.T. Forsyth, "was the mother of political democracy, but not its child"). Rather it is a vehicle for **guidance**, not with regard to what we as a group would like to do, but with regard to what Christ, the head of the church, is calling us to do. Every member of the body has a part in this discovery, for any believer, as a priest before God indwelt by the Holy Spirit, may well be used in bringing the Lord's word to the assembled congregation. The church meeting is essentially "a finely wrought instrument..... for helping us to discern his will and to live together in harmony as his children". (P.T. Forsyth)

No wonder R.W. Dale wrote "To be at a church meeting is for me one of the chief means of grace"! But theory is one thing. How does it work in practice?

2. **Exploring in practice**

When I arrived at Frimley the church was still a branch cause of its mother church, Camberley, and so it was two years before we held a church meeting at all! Autonomy was granted in July 1982 and monthly church

meetings have been held since then, but in many ways our monthly fellowship meetings prior to that date were embryonic church meetings and certainly they paved the way for our subsequent meetings. It was at fortnightly fellowship meetings in the early part of 1982 that we grappled together with compiling a church constitution, giving particular thought to the church we wanted to be, and the church meetings we wanted to have. We arrived at three statements of principle regarding the church meeting:

1. The church meeting is the gathering together of church members to seek the will of Christ for the work of the church and as such shall always incorporate an act of worship.

2. The church meeting is responsible for all matters of church life and administration. All members should, therefore, seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit about these matters, be willing to share their own insight and to hear what the Lord is saying through the meeting as a whole.

3. It is desirable that decisions made by the church meeting should be unanimous. Where this is genuinely impossible, a substantial majority of all members present will be required before the church can accept any vote as indicating the Lord's will. If there is no substantial majority, it may be God's wisdom that any decision be deferred until the church receives fuller light.

The procedures, which do need agreeing beforehand for the good conduct of the meeting, were listed in a secondary section - our aim was to underline the principles, so that we would hopefully not lose sight of the wood for the trees. The whole process was a very valuable exercise in clarifying what the church meeting is for, though inevitably it has been in the subsequent experience of church meetings that these lessons are beginning to be worked out. We certainly don't think that our church meetings are anything particularly special, but there is an encouraging attempt to fulfil the ideals.

(a) "**An atmosphere of prayer**" Generally the first 30 minutes (of a 2 hour meeting) will be used for worship, prayer and a word of exhortation or encouragement from the scripture. Prayer may well be made at occasional points in the meeting e.g. after a decision, for new members etc.

(b) "**Share their deepest spiritual concerns**" Without doubt this is the hardest aspect ot fulfil, though comments are usually made frankly and caringly. Two members have asked if they can share their business difficulties at our next church meeting (the A.G.M.!) in order to receive prayer and moral support. As a church without a building, the relaxed atmosphere of meeting in a home encouraged informality, and this was affected when sheer pressure of numbers (about 30-35 of a membership of 90) forced us to use a school-hall. We have now moved into a school classroom - it may lack a little in style, but the closer contact encourages friendliness and participation. Receiving reports on new members is always encouraging to the whole meeting, and often takes a fair amount of time.

(c) "**Seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit**" It has been particularly encouraging to see the church meeting genuinely proving to be a means of discovering God's will. As a new church we have had a constant succession of important topics before us, and it has been exciting to see the Lord bit by bit building our church life, with guidance coming through the church meeting. Inevitably and rightly as much as possible is deputed to the deacons or others, but any significant development in church life is brought to the church meeting, not out of a dutiful sense of, "We need to get their agreement" but rather, "This way we will find out if it really is of God or not". Effective leadership is vital, and in the context of

mutual love and trust the church will often endorse suggestions made by the diaconate, but this is no automatic rubber-stamping, and the leadership - well aware of its weaknesses as well as its strengths - have often been grateful for re-direction received through the church meeting.

This does not mean that unanimity is always possible - it might almost be said that a Baptist church without different opinions becomes something other than a true Baptist church! - and we have faced difficult questions, concerning for example worship and an expensive building scheme, where inevitably basic personal disagreement exists among the members. Sometimes the tension of that disagreement has been felt, but overall there is a guiding recognition that we are looking for God's will for the church, not our collective personal inclination (or disinclination). It is generally possible to discern the feeling of the meeting without taking a vote, but this implies no despising of voting which remains a valuable means of easily enabling every member to express his or her own conviction in order to clarify the degree of any uncertainty within the meeting. To be bound by a simple majority of votes cast would indeed be to make the church meeting democratic, but to use the vote as a way of testing the meeting in the search for guidance seems to me to remain true to its theocratic basis. The actual size of the "substantial majority.... required before the church can accept any vote as indicating the Lord's will" in practice depends on the importance of the issue involved (though the procedures specify 75% for those issues which require a Special Church Meeting). In many matters there will be a ready acceptance of whatever is indicated by the majority, but otherwise the matter will be left for a month. Though this may sound a formula for inaction, it has generally resulted in clearer thinking, fuller guidance, subsided tension, and a final decision which is clearly "better" than what we were first thinking of, thus encouraging us that the Lord's hand was in the process all along. It is this conviction of the sovereignty of God which lies at the basis of the church meeting and which gives rise to the two principles essential for its effectiveness:

a. It is **God's will**, not our own, that we are looking for. When we vote, therefore, it must always be a vote for **what we believe God is saying to the church**, not for our own wish. Often of course these will coincide, but as we well know from matters of personal guidance, this will not always be the case. Our approach to the matters of church life should therefore be an extension of the same means by which we seek and test personal guidance, out of the same concern to find and to do God's will.

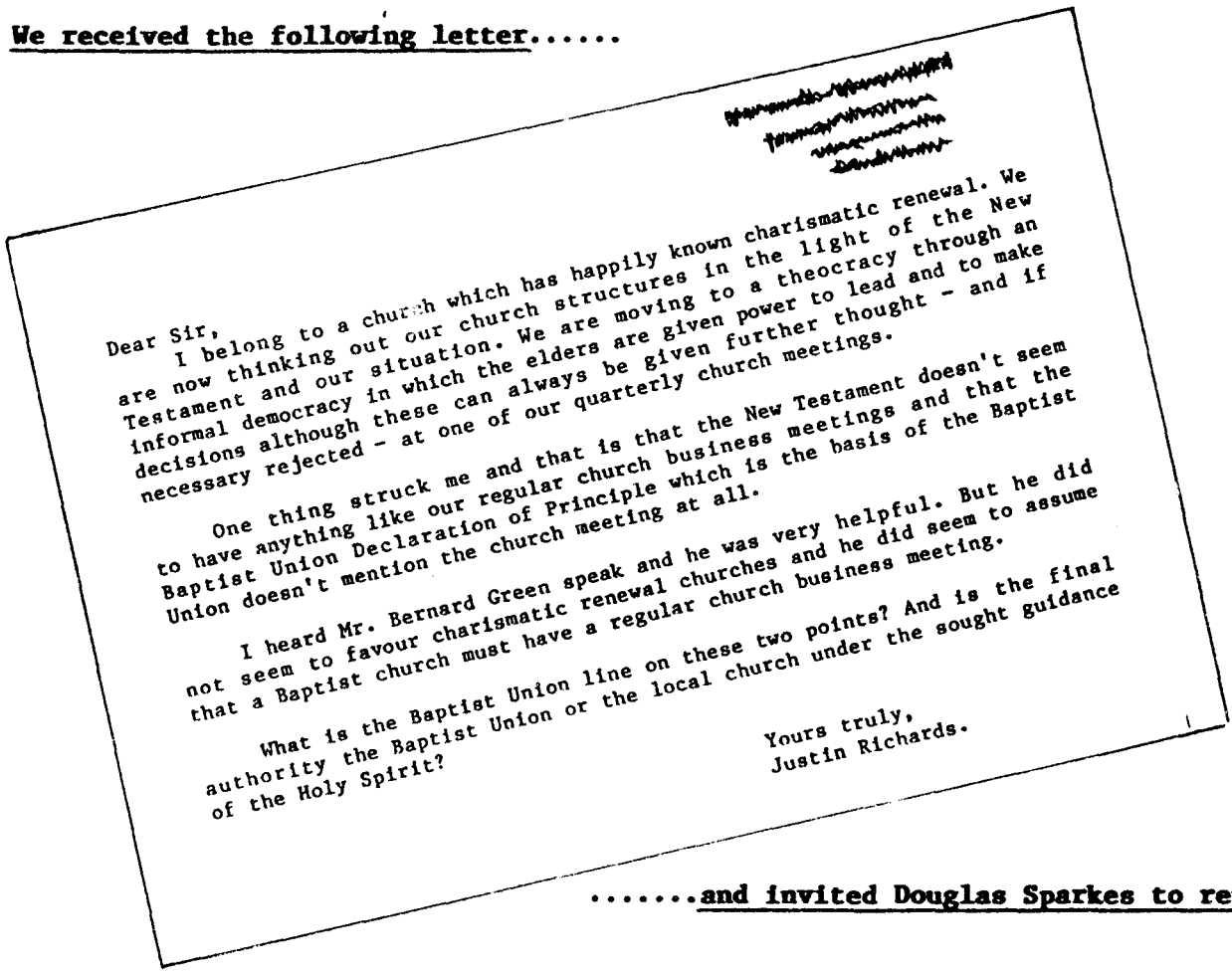
b. It is **submission** which is vital, not necessarily agreement. In the church meeting we stand subject both to God's Word and also to one another in the basic Christian spirit advocated in Phil. 2:2-4 (and illustrated in 2:5-8). Of course our guidance is not infallible but it is more likely to be right if we have sought God's will together and not just individually. So the will of Christ revealed in the decision of the meeting should then be **accepted and embraced by each member**, irrespective of his own previous opinion. No doubt most ministers would say a hearty 'Amen' to that, but please note - the same principle applies also to church leaders! As leaders they have properly had particular opportunity to influence the church, but they will not always be right, in which case God will indicate that through the church meeting. I am well aware of ideas which seemed right and urgent to me but which the church meeting rejected with a wisdom that has proved right with the passage of time. I too need the guidance of God given through the church, and must therefore submit to that guidance - and not merely tolerate it out of necessity or political expediency - however difficult and frustrating that may be, in the conviction that it is God's church and he is on the throne. Unless a leader is himself prepared to demonstrate such a spirituality, he is hardly in a position to bewail an unspiritual approach to church meetings!

In many way it is true that we have been blessed at Frimley with the opportunity to start from scratch, but at the same time the value of this should not be exaggerated. Human nature is still the same and in any case our church meetings are in many ways quite ordinary. This is not a testimony to wonderful church meetings, but to the value found, especially in the area of guidance, in attempting to apply the church meeting principles. Not least that benefit is felt in my own life. As a young church leader of a young church (and both full of ideas!), and with a sense both of responsibility and of fallibility, it is very liberating to know that God is able to confirm, amend, extend or refute what I personally feel he is calling us as a church to do. The church meetings provides both a framework for support and a safeguard against mistake in the adventurous business of being God's servants in one of his local churches. That's why I find it exciting.

Geoff Bland (Frimley)

Church Meeting and Renewal

We received the following letter.....



Dear Sir,

I belong to a church which has happily known charismatic renewal. We are now thinking out our church structures in the light of the New Testament and our situation. We are moving to a theocracy through an informal democracy in which the elders are given power to lead and to make decisions although these can always be given further thought - and if necessary rejected - at one of our quarterly church meetings.

One thing struck me and that is that the New Testament doesn't seem to have anything like our regular church business meetings and that the Baptist Union Declaration of Principle which is the basis of the Baptist Union doesn't mention the church meeting at all.

I heard Mr. Bernard Green speak and he was very helpful. But he did not seem to favour charismatic renewal churches and he did seem to assume that a Baptist church must have a regular church business meeting.

What is the Baptist Union line on these two points? And is the final authority the Baptist Union or the local church under the sought guidance of the Holy Spirit?

Yours truly,
Justin Richards.

.....and invited Douglas Sparkes to reply

Thank you for inviting me to respond to what your correspondent has written. I appreciate the opportunity, even though these few paragraphs cannot hope to do more than to point the way on a most important issue.

I am sorry that your correspondent says of the General Secretary that "he did not seem to favour charismatic renewal Churches...." As every reader will know 'charismatic renewal' can have a variety of meanings. We all know churches which have, in recent years, recovered their confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit of God. Where that has happened, General Secretary and Baptist Union alike rejoice.

It is interesting to note, however, that your correspondent is particularly concerned with the place of the church meeting in the life of the Church. Here there is a great deal on which to reflect.

Your correspondent would be right in saying that "Bernard Green... did seem to assume a Baptist church must have a regular church business meeting". If he likes to read carefully what the General Secretary wrote in his letter of February 1984 to ministers and theological students he will discover the reasons why that is a valid assumption. But then your correspondent himself alludes to his own church's quarterly church meetings, and does not seem to be unhappy about them.

Thank God that we live in days when denominational divisions are not emphasised - as once they were - to the breaking of the essential unity of the people of Christ. We recognise in Christians of other traditions the mark of the Holy Spirit. In such a climate accepted practices in any one tradition are frequently challenged - and it is healthy that they should be. In common with other Christians, Baptists are thus challenged. In a few places the spiritual worth of the church meeting has been directly questioned and it has been most easily threatened where it has failed to fulfil its true role or where Christians from other traditions in which the church meeting plays no very important part come into a Baptist church and exercise influence.

But should such a church meeting be regarded as essential today? Have not the Diotrephes (III John 9) among us discredited it? Is not a church meeting an exercise in democracy, whereas government of the people of God should be by theocracy? What justification is there in the New Testament for the church meeting? Are not there leaders to whom the people of God should submit themselves and obey the lead given (I Peter 5:5; 1 Cor. 16:16; Hebrews 13:17 etc.)?

It must be frankly admitted that whoever looks for one New Testament blueprint for the church's pattern of life will look in vain. Some have found in the Scriptures warrant for authoritarianism. Undoubtedly many sincere Roman Catholics would justify the authority of that church's hierarchy by appeal to the New Testament. The stricter expressions of the Plymouth Brethren have done the same. Others will find warrant for synodical church government. Why then do Baptists still insist on the church meeting?

In answering this question let us begin with negatives. The church meeting is not to be perpetuated for no other reason than that Baptists have always held them. That would be traditionalism of the worst kind.

Nor are church meetings in the form in which they are found in a few churches defensible. Where God's purposes are frustrated by the dominance of an individual or a small group, or by the obstructiveness of the inflexible, or by political in-fighting or by those who hold the purse-strings, the church meeting is as dishonouring to our Lord as is a bad bishop!

Nor are church meetings to be defended because they are democratic. If democracy is "government of the people, by the people, for the people" the church meeting ought not to be democratic! The people of God have only one Head, and He is to rule amongst His people.

Nor, again, are church meetings to deny to those whom God has called to special responsibilities in the life of His church, their God-given ministries. It has been known for a church meeting to try to dictate to or control a minister the Church.

So it can be admitted that here, as in every other sphere of Christian living, the ideal will not always be reached. That is no reason in itself, however, for embracing another form of church government which, however attractively and persuasively it is presented, has its own failings and, to boot, has the demerit of being based on convictions on the nature of the church from which Baptists have had to turn away. In some quarters today, authoritarianism has a vogue, whether it be thought to be vested in an individual or a group. "Let the spiritually mature rule in the church" is then the expressed or implied cry - and it can be presented with an air of sweet reasonableness. Baptists, however, have, through the years, rejected such a stance. It is not, of course, true to say that Baptist churches should not have leadership. Of course God grants leaders to His church, and their position and ministry must be recognised. Baptists, however, cannot ascribe to such leaders magisterial authority. They may not expect the people of God to give them unquestioning obedience - nor should the people of God promise it.

But why not?

To begin with, our understanding of the nature of the church is that although its members are at differing levels of growth in grace, Scripture does not teach that there should be a spiritual elite who should control the church (Matthew 23:8-12).

Then, however spiritually mature a leader may be, he can still, on occasions, be wrong. His understanding - or the understanding of any group of leaders - needs to be tested by all the believers (Ephesians 5:21; I John 4:1, etc).

Again, however spiritually immature a member may be, God can still, on occasions, speak through them to all His people (Matthew 11:25.f). A proper place for this ministry to be know is in the church meeting.

Although the New Testament talks about subjection, it clearly does not intend that there should be unquestioning obedience. If it did, Christians in reading Romans 13:1 would be unable to challenge the power of an evil ruler. A slavish recourse to every reference to submission and subjection without bearing the whole of the New Testament in mind can be seriously misleading.

Yet again, the church has to help its members grow into maturity in Christ (Ephesians 4:15f.) Members who are called upon simply to obey certain leaders will not be able to grow so effectively.

It must surely be curious that church members who have been spiritually perceptive enough to call a minister to the pastorate, or others in the church to leadership roles, should then be told by these very people they called to such ministries that they are not spiritually competent to take other important decisions!

And again, no follower of Christ is immune to temptation. From Demas (II Timothy 4:10) onwards, the story of the church is bespattered with disappointments. Leaders who began with great promise succumbed to pride or the lust for power or the lure of this world. Many such have continued to demand - and to receive - unswerving loyalty from those over whom they ruled, when Christians from outside the immediate situation could see plainly that they were no longer fit to lead.

Most damaging for this concept is the word and example of our Lord. He saw how, in this world, some people ruled over others and expressly forbade it to His followers (Mark 10:42-45). His sign of authority was the towel and the basin of water.

None of what I have written denies the truth that there needs to be leaders in the church. There were in New Testament times. God has always so willed it. But leadership is one thing. Control is something else - and there are some today who want to control the church of God, confident that they know better than most if not all others in the church, what is God's will for them. Such, on their knees, should read I Peter 5:1-3.

A leader within the people of God is not to exercise a ministry that tries to please everyone. The leader's task is to please his Lord. Yet he or she must always bear in mind that it is to the Lord's people they belong, that it was through the Lord's people they were called to service, that it is from the Lord's people that they receive support and it is within the Lord's family that their leadership is exercised. They are not super-spiritual beings, elevated above others to control them. They too can sometimes be blind, prejudiced, wilful and faithless. To them may be committed the responsibility of trying to discern the way that the people of God should make pilgrimage, but the convictions that possess them need to be endorsed by the people of God, according to the pattern so often alluded to in Scripture (Acts 6:1-6; 15:3, 12, 22, 30; etc.).

For these reasons amongst others we believe that to all Christ's followers is committed the responsibility of seeking and discovering His will and that in this adventure each one of us needs the help, the confirmation and the correction of all God's people.

So let me respond to two specific points raised by your correspondent.

It is true that the Baptist Union's Declaration of Principle does not use the words "the church meeting", but it does say"

"that each church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to interpret and administer His laws".

That is the function and responsibility of the church meeting.

It is true that the New Testament does not use the words "the church meeting" but a careful reading of such chapters as Acts 11 and 12 shows the business of that early church.

(a) It was concerned with the admission of members. The major issue that the whole church had to decide was whether Gentiles could be welcomed as believers, but it is evident that the church recognised as members, with them, of the family of God those who came from very diverse backgrounds - cultural and educational as well as racial (11:1-23).

(b) The whole church was involved in setting aside people called by God to particular ministries including the winning of new disciples (11:22,28f).

(c) The whole church responded in love to need, and demonstrated the Gospel by their compassion and giving (11:27-30).

(d) The whole church was concerned for its members who were in especial need of the grace of God (12:5,12).

These concerns remain the responsibility of the people of God. If you are inclined to say 'my church meeting is not concerned with such things' that is no reason for discarding it. Rather it needs to be redeemed along New Testament lines that the people of Christ may fulfil their God-given responsibilities.

Baptists need to emphasise again the watchword of an earlier generation - "Let the church be the church".

D.C. Sparkes
March, 1984.

Church Planting

The following article is the first part of a paper given to the Church Planting Conference and subsequently published in The Harvester. We are grateful to the author, the editor of The Harvester, and to Monica Hill, British Church Growth Association for permission to reproduce it here. Further information and papers from that conference are available from BCGA, 59 Warrington Road, Harrow, HA1 1SZ.

Part 2, Building Bridges for the Gospel, will appear in our next edition.

Understanding the Environment

Of all the households in Great Britain 34 per cent live in local authority housing. The majority of these homes are on corporation estates of varying size from 500 to 70,000 people. Such housing provision has greatly improved the living standards of many who could not afford to buy their own home. There is, however, an easily recognized uniformity of layout and architecture. The reaction against this loss of personal identity is evident when a householder does buy his own council house. The first signs are the changes in external decoration in order to look different. This may take the form of an additional porch or new front door or just a change of outside colour. The tower blocks have highlighted the feelings of isolation. There is no garden fence over which to talk. Unless one happens to come up in the lift at the same time as a neighbour one may rarely see them. The gospel of Jesus Christ can bring purpose and worth to lives and is able to counter the impersonal factors of environment. Jesus said 'Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered so don't be afraid, you are worth more than many sparrows'. (Matt. 10:30-31 NIV) The local church must be identified with its surrounding community and yet be salt within it.

A Biblical Basis for Church Planting

Look closer at Acts 18, verses 1-11 to get an account of the establishing of the church at Corinth. When Paul arrived there he was aware of God's concern for the city and his responsibility before God (v.6). It was compassion as well as compulsion that motivated him. He settled in the home of Aquila and Priscilla (v.2) and shared in their trade as a tentmaker (v.3) and visited the synagogue each sabbath (v.4). He continued to preach to the Jews (v.5) until they opposed and reviled him (v.6). Then God directed him to a different community of people within the city, as he cried 'From now on I will go to the Gentiles' (v.6). How was he to reach that community?

Identify with the Community

Paul moved his centre to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a Gentile. To reach the Gentiles he moved to the house of a Gentile. He became identified with the community in which he was serving God. If we are to reach our housing estates effectively we, too, must become identified with that community. It is not sufficient for us to come in our cars and hold our meetings and then leave, using the local church as an outpost.

There are two practical points of challenge here for all of us. First, if God has called us to witness in an area which is distant from us, we must prayerfully consider how we can best be involved in that community. Many Christians travel several miles to a large church, while on their doorstep is a struggling work on an estate. It is not easy socially, and it is not always convenient for our secular work, to move to the 'house of Justus', but it may be necessary for the work of God. It was certainly not easy for Paul. Socially, he was very much at home with Aquila and Priscilla, particularly with their Jewish background. As for his secular work as a tentmaker, the new centre at the house of Justus was rather inconvenient. Despite all this, for the sake of the work of God he identified himself with the community in which he was called to work.

Reach your neighbours

In *Acts 18,* one of the first converts to Christ was Crispus the ruler of the synagogue — which was next door to the house of Justus! He had not been converted in the captive congregation of the synagogue but is now reached as the next door neighbour. We cannot emphasize enough the need to reach first our own neighbour. This is the unchanging challenge of 'first Jerusalem and then all Judea'. We initially lived in a little close of 36 houses with a few more on the corner. It was here that our ministry began. All of these homes were reached with the gospel, and the first converts came from these families.

We may often feel that our own neighbours are the most unapproachable. Perhaps this is because we are more closely conscious of their apathy or antagonism. Paul could have felt that about his neighbours, especially as they had just reviled and opposed him, but here we see Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue next door, believing in the Lord. It is encouraging to notice Paul's reference to his old neighbour, Crispus, in his first letter back to Corinth in *1 Cor. 1:14.* Yet even more thrilling is the

mention of Sosthenes as a brother (*1 Cor. 1:1*). If this is the same Sosthenes whom the Greeks beat (*Acts 19:17*), he would be the man who replaced the converted Crispus as the ruler of the synagogue, and thus became Paul's new neighbour. What an influence Paul must have had among his neighbours! Today, on the housing estates, we face this challenge, especially in areas having no roots of neighbourhood or extended family life.

Build a Family Atmosphere

Some estates were part of rehousing schemes or overspill areas or linked with a particular industry. (61 per cent of the unskilled labour force of the country live in local authority housing.) The points system for obtaining a house and the order of preference for the housing area you would like has often meant the emergence of an unwritten league table of better and worse housing areas. The families with the greatest social need have taken the first house that is available whatever the area offered. Families with less pressing needs have waited and even turned down houses until their first choice is available. There is a lack of extended family life. The system of housing allocation makes it difficult for the son or daughter to get a house around the corner. It is vital for the local church to meet this need in the sincere care of fellowship life. We need a family atmosphere as in the Early Church where 'they broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts'. (*Acts 2:46*).

Help Whole Families

As soon as Crispus believed, all his household was reached. This was a key factor in New Testament evangelism. It was Cornelius and his kinsmen and close friends who were spoken to in *Acts 10*; Lydia and her household in *Acts 16:15*; the Philippian jailer and all his family in *Acts 16:33*. A housing estate is a concentration of families, and it is vital that we interest the whole family. When we have Sunday School or mid-week children's work, we must regularly visit the children in their homes and meet them with their parents as a family. We must see our youth or young wives' work in the context of reaching the family. If one of the women from the women's meeting comes to Christ, it is important that someone soon makes contact with the husband. It is sobering to note that with most of the families converted in Acts, first the husband believed and then the whole household followed. We must touch the fathers of our community for Christ and see the whole family growing up together in the Lord. When a brother and sister, or mother and son, or husband and wife are together born again of the Spirit of God, then home life can become a help to spiritual growth instead of the usual hindrance. We have been thrilled to see mother and son and husband and wife united in the Lord. The family is a God-given unit, a fact we must recognize.

Nurture Young Converts and Train Leadership

These early converts at Corinth believed and were baptized. In *Acts* almost every baptism we read of was within a few days of conversion. The multitude of three thousand souls added to the church in *Acts 2*, under Peter's ministry, received his word and were baptized the same day. The men and women of Samaria and even the magician, Simon, in *Acts 8* believed and were baptized. The Ethiopian eunuch in *Acts 8* believed and was baptized. The careful follow-up and instruction of the young converts was another vital principle in the growth of the local church. Note how Paul and Silas (*Acts 16:32*) spent time with the Philippian jailer and his family speaking the Word of the Lord, although it was gone midnight.

On the housing estate we have held small neighbourhood study groups for young believers, particularly instructing them concerning baptism and the first steps of their faith. The freshly transformed life of the young local convert is a most powerful message in a close-knit community. The public testimony of baptism openly identifies the convert with Christ and the local church. It is amazing how much time a caring mother spends with her newborn babe during the first days and weeks. Almost every hour she is washing, clothing, and feeding the babe. She is willing to lose sleep and make all kinds of sacrifice for the welfare of the child. We, too, must not leave a young babe in Christ starving and naked and cold for the want of care: what mother would leave her baby to feed itself in those first few days? The birth of a child is a family occasion, when all rejoice together and the babe feels the warmth and love of a home. There was this circle of love and care in the family of the early church, in which the young convert was nurtured.

The nurture of new Christians is especially important in an area where there is more instant response but less stickability. The discipling must be ongoing to produce leaders from the grass roots who are able to relate the Scriptures to the real needs of the community. It is important to recognize spiritual gift more than searching for professional qualifications. So many of the keener young people go off to college and qualify and never return to live on the estate. The Lord Jesus chose a nucleus of ordinary men 'that they might be with him' (*Mark 3:14*). They were to become the leaders of the early church. On the estates, with so many instant demands upon time, it is essential to make time to train leadership.

Continuity of Care

Paul continued for eighteen months with the young fellowship at Corinth. It is challenging to realize that Paul, in the midst of such a busy evangelistic programme, and at such a crucial stage in the early spread of the Gospel, should reside for one and a half years in one place, building and establishing the work. There is a great need in our day for this kind of pastoral evangelistic ministry, especially in the young growing fellowship. It was the study of Paul's stay at Corinth and his two years at Ephesus that finally convinced us personally of the value of spending two years living and serving on the housing estate in Bristol. We praise God for those who were converted in the first few days, but we are thankful also for those for whom it was many months of consistent, continuous caring and praying that finally brought them to faith in Christ. We think also of the heartaches and disappointments and the long hours of intercession which are all a part of this labour of love. We must be prepared to spend time with people, so that we really make contacts in depth. Note, finally, it was the teaching of the Word of God (v.11) which strengthened and established those young believers. Consistent, consecutive teaching of the Scriptures knits together the work of God. We have seen in *Acts 18* unchanging New Testament principles for reaching a community; by having an insight into divine strategy, developing an identity with the community, beginning with an influence among neighbours, winning the interest of whole families, giving instruction to young converts, and then spending time integrating the work of God through the Word of God.

Prayer and Fasting....FAD or FRONTIER

"This kind can come only by prayer and fasting". Yes, I do realise that the words 'and fasting' were not original to Jesus and were added by "some ancient authorities." But those words must have been an accurate reflection of the mind of Jesus to these authorities as they presented their account of His teaching, saturated as it was in the religion of the Old Testament.

The Bible treats Fasting as a **partner** to spiritual life. It has no independent merit. Fasting alone indicates dieting, or anorexzia, or starvation! When it is a companion to spiritual discipline fasting indicates serious commitment to God, saying in effect, "Lord, we mean business with you". That is what God requires of us today, together with the conviction that in such activity we are acting directly and practically on the world.

Fasting accompanies Repentance, Judges 20:26, Jonah 3:5.
Fasting accompanies Intercession, II Samuel 12:16, Ezra 8:21-23.
Fasting accompanies Integrity, Isaiah 58, Matthew 6:16-18, Luke 18:12.

Fasting accompanies Decisions, Acts 13:2-3, Acts 14:23.

The implication is clear that Fasting does not produce easy victories or glib praise - although it might well bring much needed breakthroughs in worship - . It is a recognition of spiritual struggle and battle, acknowledging Jesus' description of discipleship as "self-denial," Mark 8:34. For me fasting is an acute form of self-denial!

It could be that Fasting is the next gimmick, promoted by those of us who are desperate for novelty or for those spiritual results which are not yielding to conventional means. It's equally possible that God is restoring to us a spiritual discipline which is essential to that work of Intercession and Deliverance which is ours today.

I'm a beginner in all this, yet sensing as I dip in my toe that there is an ocean and not a stream before me. Reluctantly, I reckon with the Holy Spirit sifting the seriousness of my desire for a spiritual outpouring on my life and on our church, on our nation and on our world. I've fasted, usually for one day only, on a number of occasions in the past seven years. In November 1981 our church held a day Prayer and Fasting in which the Lord clearly made us willing to vacate the much loved premises we now occupy, and He has since led us to school premises thirty yards away(!) which is twice the size of our existing site. We shall move in a few months time when the necessary work has been done. In November 1983, again with reluctant, I joined a group of fifty men from S.E. England for two days of prayer and fasting, praying for England, and for areas which seemed to be spiritually strategic. These men are not part of our denomination but they lovingly opened their fellowship to me. Major burdens for London and for Canterbury were laid upon us.

Last autumn the Lord challenged our church to specific growth in 1984. We believe that the call is to progress from the present membership of c.440 to 600 by the end of the year, as people come to faith in Jesus Christ, expressing that faith in baptism and church membership. The challenge was not received in the church with unanimous enthusiasm, still less the decision to enter 1984 with a month of prayer and fasting. Some in larger churches are embarrassed by a declared commitment to numerical

increase. I can't fathom why a church of 600 members in a town of 90,000 and a Birmingham conurbation of about 2,000,000 should be embarrassed, but such is the nature of the current prejudice against large churches which have the nerve to expect to become larger. The words, "God so loved the world" remain in my Bible. Now we are pursuing the consequences of such growth, preparing new House Group leaders, Nurture Group leaders, Discipleship Class leaders etc.

At the beginning of 1984 we set a four week period for Prayer and Fasting, starting with a commitment service on January 8th. Each day one of our House Groups fasted, coming together at night for prayer evening which was open to all. Two separate days were allocated to each group, and it was interesting to learn later that a number of church leaders, independently, had decided that they would fast one day each week as an example before God of leadership responsibility. The fasting days were difficult. Many struggled badly, some didn't join in, and others failed to complete their day without food, grilling furtive toast in the evening. Several prayer evenings were hard going, affording new insights into spiritual warfare. At the same time, many entered a new dimension of christian life and vision through their initiation into this discipline. God is suggesting to us that there are battles to be fought which we do not enter until we indicate to Him a commitment in understanding and experience. Through many failures we're trying to follow Him in ways which are totally applicable to small churches.

Perhaps you remember Clive Calver's expressed conviction in our Mainstream Conference communion service this year that the present occult explosion will issue in streams of people seeking Jesus for spirit ual reality. Can it be a coincidence that in our weeks of prayer and fasting, in which we prayed actively against the occult world, we saw a number of people deeply involved in occult practice seek out the church and its worship in order to find Jesus Christ as their Deliverer?

Maybe it could all happen without Fasting, but it doesn't, and it didn't. I dislike fasting. But I know that the Lord often checks my integrity of purpose, and He has done this with regard to fasting when I've prayed for individuals, e.g. in their job applications. It's a biblical demonstration of seriousness before God which He seems to use in breaking open situations which previously had remained closed. It learns quickly the nature of that Intercession which knows the reality of Ephesians 6:10 ff.

In these days of joyful Celebration, to which I give an unreserved welcome, there is a place also for deep seriousness before God, Luke 5:33-35. Jesus reckoned with Fasting. He taught it, and He practised it as necessary to the battle in which daily He engaged. Is it any different for us?

Alan Pain.
Sutton Coldfield.

Your Letters

Dear Alastair,

I was disappointed by Nigel Wright's brief article in the January 1984 Mainstream Newsletter. He began with what seems to me to be pertinent questions, but then ignored them and wandered off into rather vague generalities. May I have a go at answering his three initial criticisms of the church meeting?

(1) "The church meeting, far from being the high point of church life is in fact the low point - the time when 'members' who participate in precious little of a spiritual nature in the church turn out to exercise their "constitutional rights" and usually against what God is wanting to do". This, he admits, is a gross caricature. Even if it contains more than a grain of truth I would suggest that the answer is not in the abandonment of the church meeting but in doing something about the nature of church membership. Partly it is a matter of better teaching concerning christian discipleship, the responsibilities of church members, and the church meeting. Also, I would advocate a return to membership based on a covenant, which members should be called on to renew periodically. I have been minister in a church where this is done, and the result is a membership which is very committed and involved, and an attendance of ca. 80% at church meetings.

(2) "Many of us find it hard to reconcile the obsession with procedures and correctness and propositions and voting that prevails in many churches with anything we read in the N.T. where they simply seemed to do 'what seemed good to them and the Holy Spirit'". Here there is some rather sloppy thinking. The verse alluded to (Acts 15:28) relates to the decision of the Council of Jerusalem - the decision of a committee which, if it cannot be called a church meeting could be compared to an Association Executive Committee. In fact this verse shows that the early church had the conviction that the Holy Spirit could, and did, speak through committees as well as prophets and preachers. Note too that the decision was reached only after "much debate", some of which was probably quite heated.

(3) "The church meeting seems to have very little biblical foundation". My answer to this is that it does have some biblical foundation, whereas rule by the unilateral decision of a group of elders/deacons/bishops does not. The foundation is in Matt. 18:15-20. Here the verse which is often used to stress the importance of prayer meetings and worship meetings does in fact refer to a church business meeting called to deal with a matter of church discipline. It is amazing that, as far as I can ascertain, no English version of the N.T. other than J.B. Phillips takes seriously the fact that the verb in v18 is a future perfect, "will have been bound/loosed". Moreover, most commentators ignore this too. However, I would suggest that it is theologically vital. The promise is not that God will rubber-stamp church meeting decisions, but that when a church meeting gathers "in Jesus' name" it will be able to discern God's will ("what has been bound/loosed") and so conform to it, with the result that what the church binds/looses <u>will have been</u> bound/loosed in heaven already. If our church meetings are failing it is not because they lack biblical warrant, but because they are not meeting "in Jesus' name". This brings me back to my initial point - what needs examining is the matter of church membership, are those who attend "abiding in Christ", and teaching about the church meeting, it is the place where we seek to discern God's will and confirm to it, not a place to air grievances, grind axes, rubber-stamp elders/deacons decisions etc.

Yours sincerely in Christ,
Ernest Lucas.
Southport.

Dear Alastair,

As a regular reader of Mainstream, I read with interest the prophecy given by Sergei Tarassenko which was reproduced from **RENEWAL** magazine in the January issue of Mainstream.

Since we are commanded in the Scriptures to weigh what prophets say, and to test all things (1 Cor. 14:29; 1 Thess. 5:20-21), I feel moved to pass certain comments.

Firstly, on the nature of prophecy and prophets. As I study the New Testament, I do find times when specific messages are given direct from God, but these are not nearly as frequent as is often claimed nowadays. In the New Testament, the prophet is often a preacher, in full possession of mental capacity, and I would see the gift of prophecy to embrace many kinds of spiritual ability to put over God's word in intelligible form (as opposed to the gift of unknown tongues - see 1 Cor. 14).

Secondly, we are warned about false prophets. There are those who speak who are merely putting out their own opinions. While we should not despise the sanctified common sense that God gives to any believer, is this to be always elevated to the level of prophecy? Or is it not true that often those who are immature or unstable clamour for their ideas to be heard by claiming that they have a "word of prophecy"? Where is the scriptural warrant for this use of "word of prophecy" as a normal thing?

Thirdly, what about the person of the prophet? I have never heard of Sergei Tarassenko before. This may just be my abysmal ignorance, but I feel that some explanation is needed. Is this a man of God who has previously given proof of spiritual wisdom and discernment? Has what he has previously said as a "word from the Lord" been fulfilled? If this is so, then let us be told, and we will give due weight to this utterance also.

Fourthly, coming to the actual prophecy, I feel most worried. While I readily admit that God does sometimes speak to His people in a very direct way, I confess I have doubts as to whether this is one of these occasions. These may well be good sentiments of man, but are they more than this?

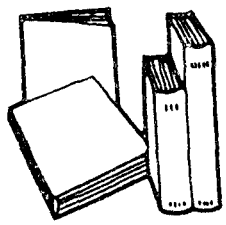
The rather frantic hectoring tone does not seem to me to accord with the Holy Spirit. Like many things which are claimed as "words of prophecy", it seems more like the well-intentioned outpourings of some writer like Patience Strong when having a bit of an off day. Also, I was reminded of some of the attitudes of the late Chairman Mao, who desired a continuous revolution. There are times when God's people need stirring up, but this is not always. Perpetual turmoil is not right for true spiritual growth. Continuous reformation, yes; but hardly continuous revolution. The command of the Lord is that we should feed His sheep, not flay them.

Lastly, there is a dangerous self-fulfilling note in this prophecy. Anyone can stand up, put up a preposterous scheme, and then say that because there is no revival this is due to the non-adoption of their scheme. If done frequently, this can be a sign of nervous unbalance. Frequently, too, such schemes are notoriously vague. The true prophets of the Bible were specific in what they advocated. I am totally unable to see what practical steps the prophecy of Sergei Tarassenko seeks.

I do not know whether others will offer their opinions on this prophecy. For myself, after careful weighing, I feel it to be merely of man. If I am wrong, I will accept correction. What do others think?

Yours sincerely in Christ,
Mike Smith.
Golcar, Huddersfield.

Book Reviews



LET THERE BE LIFE - the pain and joy of renewal in a local church
Andrew Kane, Marshalls

In this tightly packed book Andrew Kane tells the story of God's dealings with Durrington Free Church, interspersed with outlined principles, potted sermons and prophetic vision. Similar books have appeared before, but this is the first account of renewal in a Free Church setting.

I greatly appreciated Andrew's positive outlook. He is into building rather than demolition. His creative appreciation and use of many streams of the Holy Spirit's influence today is a key factor of the story. This, together with visionary leadership, a people willing to follow, and much prayer, lie at the roots of the explosion of life and growth that is Durrington Free Church.

An unique feature of this church is its approach to overseas mission. The chapter on this is a thrilling and much needed challenge to the niggardly introspection of many churches and the unimaginative stolidity of some missionary societies.

Towards the end of the book Andrew raises what is an increasing problem for many of us..... the relationship of local churches and leaders to the various streams of renewal on the one hand and the denominational scene on the other.

Many of us, like Andrew, have a great love for the Baptist Fellowship which has given us so much. We long to share with it what God has given us and to see all the Church of Christ renewed. But we cannot contain the wind of the Holy Spirit as one option among many, as others would like us to do. Holy Spirit renewal is not a brand of churchmanship, it is a response of grateful obedience to the Lord of the Church.

At the same time we are being drawn into a wider and deeper fellowship based on the joyful recognition of kindred minds and hearts. Covenant relationships are growing and translocal ministries developing which exist in an uneasy tension with denominational structures. These are questions which we will have to face more and more in coming years, and Andrew has some stimulating and helpful things to say on this issue.

Michael Jobling.
Stony Stratford Baptist Church
Milton Keynes.

HEALING THE HURT MIND by Dr. M.David Enoch : pp 190 : Hodder & Stoughton £5.95

The Adviser to the Archbishops on Health & Healing, Bishop Morris Maddocks, chairing the Annual General Meeting of the Churches' Council of Health & Healing, stated that one of his aims would be to bring the work of doctors and the work of the church in healing closer together. In this book we have a Christian consultant psychiatrist who does just this in bringing together medical and Christian insights.

Many church members who feel that they would like to understand and help those who suffer from emotional or mental illness will find help in this book. Dr. Enoch deals briefly with some mental illnesses and their medical treatments.

He then shares how, at the request of the vicar of his church in Liverpool, he arranged to train a group of lay members. He writes, "This was a step of faith, my own professional pride had to be broken, and I had to accept the fact that non-medical men and women could be trained in this way." Dr.Enoch writes of such training for his listening and 'talking cures', and of the use of "Christian resources including prayer, church fellowship, scriptures and above all Jesus Himself present with us by the Holy Spirit."

The book concludes with appendices on 'taking a case history' and 'basic principles of lay counselling', followed by a useful glossary of some medical terms, and a bibliography.

There are wise guidelines in this book for those who feel called to the ministry of helping those with emotional illness.

Ian Prentis.

'HALF THE DENOMINATION' - Baptist Union, Department of Ministry

This report has not received the attention and appreciation due to it from Mainstream. Apologies are in order. It is a very clear account of the plight of many of our Churches. It is very positive about the advantages and untapped strengths of small Churches. It is extremely realistic about the unsatisfactory nature of much that goes on in small Churches (and large ones, too!)

The best things in the report are the new models it offers for the small Church itself and for its leadership. A small Church should not try to behave like a big Church, reproducing its worship patterns, structures and buildings. Instead, "a small Church may best see itself as a cell". This is in line with the best current thinking going on in some larger Churches, and it is a pity that the reader is not referred to some of the literature coming out of the cell movement for practical implementation. As for the new model of leadership, "an effective ministry is most likely to be built up when the need for several part-time participants is fully accepted, with each understood to be contributing on a limited basis, but all working together in a conscious planned partnership." Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, in fact - amen!

What seems to be missing from the report is, first, any acknowledgement of Transcendance, any suggestion that the growth of the Church might require more than good organisation and good will on all sides. Second, any acknowledgement of spiritual conflict, any suggestion that the factors inhibiting change might be demonic, and need to be opposed, both by prayer and courage (for example, a clear analysis is given on page 8 of why a young minister in a decayed urban Church moves on - but suppose he doesn't? Suppose he believes God called him there? Suppose he stands upto some of the pressures to conform, and the people who oppose change?)

At the end of the day, I still have to say that the focus of the report is on the local Church's existence rather than on its mission. There is lacking any clear picture of the purpose and mission of the Church in terms of the great commission. It is assumed that we know what Churches are for, but in fact we cannot agree. Do we exist in order to evangelise, or merely evangelise in order to exist?

Alastair Campbell

THE CHURCH IN THE HOME - David Prior : Marshalls. 192pp £3.95

'Why on earth - thought I, not without a certain irritation - should the editor suggest I review a book with chapters on 'green beans'. 'yellow volkswagens' and 'stagnant water'? It takes a while to discover that each chapter heading is plucked from a splendid document from Brazil entitled, 'The church people want'. Printed in full as an appendix, the document verifies one of the author's main contentions, that the church here has a great deal to learn from the new Christ-life in many third world churches, notably Latin American ones.

The main thesis of this book is that house-meetings, or cells, (now greatly proliferating) should be understood and encouraged to be the church in their locality. The 'church in the home' was the normative New Testament expression of the Christian experience, and any proper understanding of the New Testament church's worship, teaching, fellowship, mission and ministry has to derive from that perspective - namely a Christian community of 20 to 30 people. That group is the church in that locality. (This is not an apologia for the House Church movement. In David Prior's scheme there would be a network of home churches under the enabling ministry of the parish priest or pastor). Much is made of the Latin American 'grassroots communities' as having rediscovered the New Testament reality, and he gives many informative instances of their growth and impact, particularly among the Catholics of Brazil.

There are chapters on most aspects of how the home-cell of 20-30 Christians can 'be the church', including the discovering and releasing of gifts and ministries, compassionate involvement as servants in the surrounding community, evangelism, worship and celebration, and further church-in-the-home planting. There is a brave, though not wholly convincing, attempt to plot a course for middle class church situations in this country, most of the third world developments being among the poorer of the world's poor. There is also a good discussion of shared leadership (the author inclines to a model of complementary ministries).

This is a good book, well above the common run of paperbacks. It is rich in example from the New Testament, Church history, and today's church, and it will prove very stimulating and suggestive for those who are thinking and praying through the goals, definitions and principles which appertain to home-cells and groups.

Peter Ledger.

For Your Information

BCC COMMITTEE ON EVANGELISM

In the past the British Council of Churches has not been well known for its zeal for evangelism. Steps are being taken to remedy this in a new committee. Already the Salvation Army has seconded a senior man, Lt. Col. David Guy, to head up this work.
Information from BCC, 2 Eaton Gate, London. SW1W 9BL.

INNER CITY

The Baptist Union, on the recommendation of the Mission Main Committee, are giving £12,000 to set up (in conjunction with the Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission) a scheme of mission in inner London.
Information from ECUM, 130 City Road, London. EC1V 2NJ.

Another £12,000 goes to a scheme for Salford Manchester.
Information from Rev. Trevor Hubbard, 41 Earnsdale Avenue, Darwen, Lancs. BB3 1JW.
(ECUM are publishing an Urban Workbook).