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News:

Resourcing small Baptist churches

How best to resource, encourage and challenge small churches across Baptists Together was the focus of a recent meeting

There are approximately 1000 churches with fewer than 40 members belonging to our Baptist Union, making up around half the denomination. But though they may be small in number, they are a big deal: figures shared at the meeting showed that in eight Associations small churches have a higher baptism rate proportionally than large churches.

The meeting, which took place in London on 20 September, was organised by Hilary Taylor, the team leader of the Small Church Connexion of the London Baptist Association (LBA), alongside Phil Barnard, LBA regional minister team leader. The gathering featured representatives from Associations. General Secretary Lynn Green was also there.

Each brought stories from small churches in their region, before Mike Lowe, Baptists Together communications enabler, led a session exploring the possible future of a national Small Church Connexion.

Stories from around the region

Nigel Manges, regional minister South West Baptist Association shared the geographical challenges of a smaller churches conference. Even a central venue means a 90-mile journey for some churches, so attendance is hit and miss. However, there is an appetite for such a gathering.

Many small churches want to talk about governance; how to encourage people to take on leadership roles, and mission relative to village life. Another major challenge is pensions: nine churches in the Association have experienced cessation events, averaging £45,000.

Four new projects have started in recent times, each with a larger church walking alongside.

One church has explored alternative forms of ministry: it is using its building as a retreat centre and working alongside someone from the Northumbria Community. Another small rural church is exploring looking at developing its building for the community, after recognising it is the only such building in the area with a car park.

There is a focus in the North Western Baptist Association on unlocking the potential, said Jane Henderson. This was about responding to smaller churches in pastoral vacancy and diaconates not so confident in spiritual leadership. The Association has explored hub churches – how a church with a particular strength can support other churches, and helping leadership team embrace change: “basically to say let’s re-imagine how we do church. How can we do things differently?”

The Association is thinking of offering a pre-retirement course to encourage those approaching retirement to reflect on how they might use their gifts. Currently people in this position receive lots of practical information about finance, but not about their change in identity. Many have gifts that could be used not only their own congregations, but others too.

Alison Mackay, a regional minister in the Heart of England Baptist Association, reported on the continued efforts of trying to build relationships between churches, and making larger churches aware of the relationships. Problems occurred with different styles of churchmanship. There was also a reluctance to go down the route of shared ministry, she said.

Alison also shared the story of a how a church in Shropshire, with around 10 members in their 70s, had hosted marriage boot camps, and seen many men attend. ‘It’s an example of a tiny church that’s taken on a radical mission and is punching above its weight.’

Lindsay Caplen, representing Eastern Baptist Association, highlighted how larger churches can also learn from smaller ones. She spoke of the need of sharing resources – people with specific skills – and how the EBA weekly prayer focus often highlighted issues facing small churches, and helped smaller churches feel part of a wider family.

Paul Revill of the Northern Baptist Association spoke of one church whose congregation had dropped to single figures. However, they have been invited to become a learning community, and it’s been a catalyst for them to see new life. They are being assisted by a retired minister, and recently worshipped with a couple of

other congregations in a new worship room. This was an 'encouraging story of one of our churches being assisted in different ways.'

Colin Pye of the Central Baptist Association, said momentum had stalled in terms of gathering small churches together. Only one church bought into a small church day, possibly reflecting 'insularity, or an unwillingness to travel?' He said sometimes churches respond with 'hostility' when he paints a picture of the future, and the need to do something outside the church. On a more positive note, he'd been impressed with a couple of examples of churches setting up community cafes, which have become village spaces, and which are blessing their communities.

A learning partnership involving small churches in the Yorkshire Baptist Association and the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity is being encouraged, noted the YBA's mission enabler Kezia Robinson.

The Association had started a group for the leaders of toddler groups. Toddler groups are one of the biggest fringes on the life of churches; the women leading them don't see themselves as leaders, but in fact are. The Association is also interested connecting more traditional churches with the energy of pioneering groups.

Regional minister Joth Hunt said that 50 per cent of churches within the Southern Counties Baptist Association are classed as small, while 10 per cent are tiny. A number of pioneering situations are emerging following the work of Ali Boulton in the Association. Some churches have been visited by Ali and grasped the vision of something new, and "we're encouraged by that." However, a lot of smaller churches are aged 70 and over and have explored their vision, but a long time ago. 'That's a real challenge.'

SCBA is looking at the whole area of partnerships – of a better-resourced church coming alongside a smaller one. Joth is trying to encourage the Joel prophecy: can older people dream of a future that they won't be part of?

Home Mission is key – the Association hosts well-supported Home Mission days; a lot of Home Mission churches are pioneering, but others are struggling – the days are places 'where two cultures collide'.

Hilary Taylor of the London Baptist Association spoke of how 'it's not about numbers, but growth.' She mentioned her own church, which has 23 people, but has seen six people come to Christ in the last two years.

The number of encouragement days, when a church is visited, has fallen. Last year there were seven, this year only three. 'When people are there they are really encouraged and love it, but this year the people haven't been there,' she said. She

said the LBA database continues to be well used – the database works by people offering their time and skills to smaller churches. An additional nine people had offered to support treasurers. She spoke of leadership team training for small churches (there is an event on 13 October), where one of the sessions will be on identifying gifting, which doesn't often happen. 'It's all about getting people empowered.'

Hilary added that it's a hard job encouraging people to think about mission, not maintenance. 'The moment churches value survival more than mission is the moment they start to die.'

Phil Barnard, the LBA regional minister team leader, co-hosting the gathering with Hilary, spoke of how the Association was very much into recycling and replanting. The Association wanted to get to a point of planting new churches. He mentioned there were success stories – of churches 'getting too big for Hilary', vibrant churches that have gone from almost closing.

Roll out of Small Church Connexion across Baptists Together

How do you encourage small churches to become mission shaped in their setting? What can be done to enable a greater resourcing and encouraging of small churches across our Union? Could there be a roll-out of the Small Church Connexion across our union?

These are some of the questions posed by Baptists Together Communications Enabler Mike Lowe during the afternoon. Mike explained that the idea behind such a roll-out was to strengthen and encourage small churches, and encourage relationships between large and small churches for mutual appreciation and spiritual and practical resourcing.

He spoke of his experience as a minister at Boulton Lane Baptist Church in Derby. A mission facilitator had walked alongside the church, which was very helpful. Gradually the culture of the church changed, even if some members didn't directly participate in the activities. Partnerships with other Christians and agencies was key to nurturing small examples of mission. In time the church was involved in more than 10 activities, despite having just 20-30 members.

It was about an orientation for mission, Mike said. 'If your mindset is for mission and partnership, you don't need masses of money or resource – you can do loads.'

Mike shared a number of ideas that could be part of a national roll out.

At a strategic level, they included having a representative from each Association on the SCC, and the SCC becoming the Baptist voice for small churches, with a voice into Council and the Baptist Steering Group.

He explained for lots of churches, their future is in partnership. They will still be a local church, doing things on the ground, but partnerships will be key to their health. A greater roll-out of the Small Churches Connexion may help that.

Mike spoke about the idea of developing the idea of mission at home – of people using their gifts and time in another church; of being a missionary in another church.

He spoke about developing and growing the SCC presence on that Baptists Together website. It could become a hub for stories and focused resourcing. He also spoke about the possibility of a national database, similar to that which has been created in London, to provide preachers, worship leaders, musicians and help for treasurers.

The pros and cons of these ideas were discussed, with general agreement they could be explored – and that this meeting should be held twice, not once, a year to create momentum.

Following the meeting, Hilary said, 'These meetings with reps from across Baptists Together show that small church is a big deal and it is always inspiring to hear the strategies in the different Associations.

'Many of our churches are strategically located but need to hold mission high on the agenda and focus on fulfilling the Great Commission to go and make disciples of all nations. Let's keep the main thing, the main thing!'

How Baptists planted an Anglican church

A Baptist church in Worcester has developed a friendship with a thriving cathedral in Uganda, discovering its humble roots in a Baptist family called Gardner. It's a wonderful illustration of the parable of the mustard seed, writes Alison Southall

Fernhill Heath Baptist Church is a small church on the outskirts of Worcester and for the last eight years we have been developing a partnership with Emmanuel Cathedral in Arua, north-west Uganda. On the surface, our two congregations do not have much in common: a Baptist church with around 40 members and an Anglican cathedral with three morning services of around 1000 people. However, a deep and fruitful Christian friendship has developed.

On one of Fernhill Heath Baptist Church's visits to Arua, we had the opportunity to visit a memorial stone recording the first missionaries who brought the gospel in 1918, 100 years ago. They were English Baptists, like ourselves: Frank Gardner, his wife, Edith, and his brother Alfred. As we entered the centenary year and plans were

being made by Ma'di and West Nile Diocese to celebrate this important milestone, interest was revived in these Baptists who somehow planted the seed that grew into a thriving Anglican church.

Our knowledge of the spread of the gospel in this area was limited to the beginning of this 100-year period – when there was no Christian presence - and the end of the first centenary – when the church was thriving. Trying to join the dots from each end of the centenary is a wonderful illustration of the parable of the mustard seed: small beginnings of Christian witness which resulted in an abundant crop.

The West Nile district of Uganda had no Christian witness until 1918. Africa Inland Mission (A.I.M.) was developing its work nearby in north-east Congo, whilst the Church Missionary Society, who were at work in the rest of Uganda, did not have the human resources to extend this beyond the Nile. When a group of A.I.M. missionaries en route to the Congo passed eastwards through West Nile in 1917, the District Commissioner asked for A.I.M.'s help.

Meanwhile, the Gardners, Baptists from Chipping Norton, were approaching West Nile from the other direction. Frank, Edith and Alfred Gardner, who had previously served in Nyasaland (now Malawi), were missionaries in the Belgian Congo with CT Studd's Heart of Africa Mission.

They had faced difficulties getting to the Congo. Firstly, Frank and Edith had to make the heart-breaking decision to leave their three-year-old daughter, Edith, behind in England. Then, their plans to sail were frustrated when Frank and Alfred were told that they needed to face a military tribunal before leaving the country (as it was in the middle of WWI).

After a months' delay, they reached the Belgian Congo in late 1916 and worked there for a year. However, some of Studd's policies and his style of leadership caused great concern to the Gardners, along with a number of other missionaries. They were able to transfer to A.I.M, who allocated them to open a new mission station in Arua, in Uganda, and thus to bring the gospel to this area for the first time.

And so the mustard seed was planted by the appropriately-named Gardners. They arrived in Arua on 10 June 1918, along with Frank and Edith's six-month-old daughter, Beryl. But as all gardeners will know, much can go wrong once the seed has been planted.

Edith writes in her diary:

Pioneer work is not easy. To get up a good house with few workers, little money, the language not reduced to writing, no gardens and very little food to buy, is a real job of work.

The land where they were building their home and setting up the mission station had been given by a local chief called Awudele. He had been the first of the Lugbara tribe to make contact with the District Commissioner, Mr Weatherhead when he arrived in Arua a few years earlier. He attended the services started by the Gardners, and continued to attend church until the age of 120, although it was not until he was close to his death that he became a Christian – and also confessed polygamy with ten wives as well as adultery with other people's wives!

The Gardners' desire was to learn Lugbara, the local language, and to begin work preaching the gospel to the villages around them. However, much of their time was absorbed by house-building, and battling illness. Frank and Alfred built mud huts as temporary accommodation, alongside a tent which they lived in whilst they built a permanent house.

In the end, they were unable to complete this building work due to Spanish flu and numerous bouts of malaria. Eventually, one attack of malaria developed into blackwater fever for Frank, a devastating illness that had affected him twice before, and had caused the deaths of a number of other missionaries. This illness nearly killed Frank, and it was clear that, after less than a year in Arua, they would not be able to stay. Edith writes that Frank 'wept as he thought of all he had hoped to do at Arua'.

Frank, Edith and baby Beryl travelled to Kenya where the climate was better suited to Frank, and they continued to serve A.I.M. there for another four years until they returned to England.

However, during the limited time that the Gardners were in Arua, they were able to start a Sunday morning service in the tent or under a large tree. Some of the local Lugbara would 'creep' in, including Awudele. His wife was one of the earliest Christians, and their daughter Rasili, now aged 103, still worships at Emmanuel Cathedral which is just a few metres from the first meeting place. The work started here was continued by other A.I.M. missionaries, slowly at first, but within a few years the missionaries were crying out for reinforcements to help with the large numbers who were responding to the gospel. At an A.I.M. conference in 1933, the work in the West Nile District of Uganda was described as "providing perhaps the greatest evangelistic opportunity before the A.I.M. at the present time." (Inland Africa, Jan-Feb 1933).

The church has encountered many challenges during its 100-year history including church schisms triggered by the Revival Movement, and Civil Wars which devastated the country. However, by the 21st century, the Ma'di and West Nile Diocese now has close to a million Christians, and since the 1940s around 480 clergy have been ordained. It is hard to imagine a time when there was no church as its influence is now so significant.

Edith Gardner described her time in Arua in this way: Sunshine and shadows. This is life all through!

The church in West Nile, too, has experienced sunshine and shadows, but throughout this God has caused that small mustard seed to grow. Frank and Edith Gardner's great-grandson, the Revd Adrian Beavis, sums up their experiences of 1918-19 so well:

I hope this encourages us never to think fruitfulness and faithfulness are judged by size. That even in pain and seeming failure God is still at work.

No matter how small the seeds we think we are sowing today, God is the Lord of the harvest and can 'bring forth a fruit hundred-fold'. So 'don't despise the day of small beginnings' and KEEP SOWING!!'

Alison Southall is a member of Fernhill Heath Baptist Church, Worcestershire

From Brazil to Norwich with a mission of love

Brazilian missionaries Paulo and Cláudia Mussi moved from Portugal to North Norwich in March, and have quickly got involved in plans to create a new community hub for people living in the Mousehold area. Jenny Seal reports

Paulo and Cláudia Mussi moved to Norwich in March from Lisbon, Portugal, to live as long-term missionaries in the city. Leaving two of their grown-up children, their home of ten years and a successful ministry wasn't easy but they felt drawn to work with Portuguese-speaking people living in England.

Originally from Anápolis in Brazil, the compelling couple, who are full of fun, enthusiastic and multi-skilled, have quickly become an asset to Norwich Central Baptist Church (NCBC), which they work alongside. On arrival the couple moved into the manse of what was formerly Silver Road Baptist Church on Mousehold Avenue, putting them right at the centre of NCBC's new community project.

The members of Silver Road Baptist Church last year took the difficult decision to close their church, as the upkeep and ongoing responsibility was proving too much for the aging congregation. Norwich Central Baptist Church, based on the other side of Anglia Square, applied to the Baptist Union to take responsibility for the building and they were given it as a resource to serve the local community. In June they changed the name of the building to Mousehold Hub.

Mousehold Hub, just a few minutes' walk from both Mousehold Infant and Nursery School and George White Junior School, is in an ideal location to be used as a community facility. Members of Norwich Central Baptist Church had already been leading a Messy Church there, as well as going into the schools with an Open the Book team, a lunch club and a junior football team. Now they have the exciting opportunity to develop these activities and offer more.

Paulo and Cláudia are an integral part of the team that is now planning how to do that. Paulo said, 'We are looking at the possibilities we have to serve this neighbourhood in the best way – not with only something we want to give, but with something they need or they tell us that they need.'

In order to find out what that is and to complement existing activities in the area, Paulo and other members of the planning team have been attending local events, talking to community leaders and going around key places with a survey to get people's opinions. So far there have been around 75 responses.

Paulo said, 'All the answers that we had said 'yes, we want you here, we want something we can use, a place where we can stay and spend a few hours for a cup of tea, a cake or just to chat.'

'We have some issues here,' Paulo said, referring to survey responses that point to the prevalence of drugs in the area. 'They are big issues that are not so easy to solve. But we can be part of the community to try to give something that helps.'

He continues, 'The neighbourhood is a multi-cultural place so we have people from different nations and different backgrounds and cultures and languages too. It is very good to walk on the streets here and to hear people talking. When we are looking at the possibility of Mousehold Hub and we are thinking English classes could be a good thing to serve the community.'

Cláudia, who is a naturally talkative person, spoke little English when she arrived in Norwich and her biggest challenge was the fear of saying the wrong thing. Since arriving she has invested a lot of energy into learning the language going to thrice weekly English lessons facilitated by English Plus and Workers' Educational Association in different parts of the city.

Paulo said, 'It's very exciting to see how much she is learning and all the effort she is putting in at home, and outside breaking that fear to make mistakes. She is speaking freely and this is very good. She will be very good very soon.'

Many respondents of the survey also noted a lack of activities for young people in the area. In September, Norwich Youth for Christ move into the top floor of Mousehold Hub, using it as their office with plans to open an alternative education unit working with young people who have struggled in local secondary schools.

In Portugal Paulo and Cláudia were part of their local Youth for Christ organisation. Paulo said, 'There is the possibility that we can work with them for the youth of this neighbourhood. We are open to this and we are praying for this. It's a good possibility.'

'In such a short time we are committed and involved in so many things,' Paulo laughs. Within NCBC he has preached, supported a Bible Society course, joined the leadership team and Cláudia has helped with children's work. Together they have worked on Messy Church at Mousehold Hub and Paulo has joined the Silver Road football team. They also hosted an evening of Portuguese food and football when Spain played Portugal in the World Cup.

Cláudia says, 'Sometimes we observe that there are so many areas that Paulo and me can work at this moment. There are so many opportunities for us.' Paulo agrees, 'We are trying to step-by-step find our place in the church and not lose our focus on the Portuguese-speaking people.'

Their plan is to develop a congregation of Portuguese speaking people that will be part of NCBC. It is estimated that there are around 1,000 Portuguese-speaking people in Norwich but, with no defined community, meeting people has been slower than expected. The couple have started a group that gathers in their home. On the first week, two ladies from Brazil, classmates of Cláudia's from language lessons, came along.

'I got very happy with this,' said Paulo. 'Because we had nothing and now we have two people. It's a start.'

He continues, 'I cannot just walk through the streets knocking on the doors saying: "Hello, do you speak Portuguese? We would like to start a church here, come on let's go." It's not my way. So I pray 'please bring these people to us, we want to be here for them, we want to be part of their lives.'

They saw one answer to this prayer when a man named Antonio spontaneously came along to NCBC's Sunday evening service. He had moved from Portugal just three days before. Paulo says excitedly: 'When our pastor Mark Fairweather Tall called me to meet Antonio I looked at his face and I thought 'from Portugal!'. He didn't speak, Mark didn't speak, but I just thought 'Portugal' and started talking to him in Portuguese. That was a good situation.

'We are sure that the time to be here is this time. Things like this fill our hearts with hope that the things will be good.'

If you would like to find out more, you can contact Paulo at:
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Pictured above are Brazilian missionaries Paulo and Cláudia Mussi outside the new Mousehold Hub in Norwich.

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