

## Re-imagining our Future:

If we were starting from scratch: what would church gatherings look like, how would we use buildings, at what times would we meet, and why?

The first steps of reopening are appearing on the horizon but as yet we have no idea what kind of restrictions or conditions will be imposed on us all as local churches. Church gatherings have been identified as particularly problematic. People are close together, shake hands, and exhale and inhale through singing. Visitors can bring or take the virus with them across the globe. So, the authorities are unlikely to recommend that church life simply goes back to “as was”, in the short term.

Some churches have started using digital communication through social media, video channels, and conferencing programs. There is no reason why they would stop using all of these tools after lockdown.

The question is, what can we, what should we, do differently that would help one another as sister churches within Baptists Together or in an Association of Baptist churches?

Part of this involves a radical reconsideration of the reason for churches and how that demands practical applications that are pertinent at this time in history.

A church is ultimately “people summoned together by God to carry out His purposes”. We gather together to be equipped to carry out a co-mission with God in all aspects of life.

Buildings are the means not the end. They are tools to do a job. Buildings can be used for the following, but they do not all have to be in “church” buildings:

- Training disciples to make disciples;
- Educating disciples to obey the commandments of Jesus;
- Equipping leaders and members to serve in the wider community;
- Gathering people to respond to God in worship;
- Nurturing children and equipping them to deal with faith matters in school;
- Helping young people to develop faith and godly living.

We gather in order to be “sent out” - better able to take the good news of Jesus into our homes, places of work, educational establishments, or leisure world. For example, many people are finding in this time of lockdown greater opportunities to talk with their close neighbours. If one of the ways disciples are encouraged to continue to connect to neighbours is through eating together, then ‘equipping’ may involve both practical advice regarding hygiene, cooking, entertaining, and help in starting conversations about matters of faith and practice.

If we want to encourage our members to connect to community organisations then we provide training to help them become better and more equipped volunteers so that they can make a valued contribution.

Our church buildings are primarily “mission centres” and some (but not all) may also be “worship centres”.

In some locations the value of the building is not in gathering large numbers for Public Worship. Instead they can be places where disciples can grow through training and by

ministering. Or, they can be used to reach out to meet the needs of people living or working around that location.

It may be that we need to ask if a particular building we use is primarily

- A mission centre
- A worship centre
- or Both

#### A Mission Centre:

A mission centre is a place where the church resources mission by using its own buildings for connecting to the local community through activities that need to be in a suitable location. These would include ministries like After-school Club, Alzheimer's Support Group, Asylum Support, Autistic Clubs, Children's Ministries, Community Café, Counselling Services, Foodbank, Older People's Meetings, Parents & Tots' Group, Preschool, Youth Ministry, etc. Resourcing mission is not necessarily the same as just renting out rooms to outside organisations. However, if a useful service or ministry is offered by others then you can facilitate mission by helping them in their work.

A key purpose of a mission centre is to reach out to the people in a local community to meet the needs they know they have and then to show, and tell people about, the love of God. The focus is on the church as (in the words of William Temple) "the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members."

Although people have physical and emotional needs that they can recognise, they also have spiritual needs which may take second place to their more pressing and obvious needs – but those spiritual needs have eternal consequences and we cannot ignore those needs as we minister to people in practical ways.

#### A Worship Centre:

A worship centre, on the other hand, is there to be a venue where Public Worship is open to all.

Recognising the difference between church buildings as mission centres, worship centres, or as both, affects the way we set up and use our buildings.

It may be possible for mission centres to open while worship is restricted.

If singing is considered inadvisable, then how do we rediscover "Public Worship" like our forefathers before singing songs became the norm? Have we reduced our concept of worship to just singing and this is an opportunity to rediscover what worship really is?

Dare we ask if God is encouraging churches out of their public buildings and into homes or other places?

#### Key Questions:

- What do Christians need in order to grow as disciples?
- What do Christians need to do to serve God and others?

### Helping each other after the Lockdown is over:

As lockdown restrictions are gradually lifted some churches without pastors and with small or elderly congregations may need outside help to restart, others may never reopen as they did before.

Even for stronger churches, we need to ask should things be as they were before?

What options are there to start thinking about how we can help each other to “help each other”?

1. Some churches could make space in their schedules and allow their staff and volunteers to repeat their own Worship Service elsewhere (even if it means changing their own Public Worship times or even reducing the number of services per week in their home location)
  - a. To pioneer a new gathering in areas not currently served;
  - b. To partner with a sister church in a location outside its normal catchment area but close enough for the team to travel to;
  - c. To replant a new congregation by using an existing sister church’s building to offer a different form of Worship Service. (The existing congregation can have their own Worship Service at a different time).
  
2. Smaller churches could invest in equipment to allow them to livestream from a partner church.
  - a. This will require a TV screen and either a broadband connection in all the churches in partnership OR a recording on a USB stick.
  - b. Someone with basic tech skills will be needed “on site” to ensure that the technical connections are made.
  
3. Smaller churches could co-operate by amalgamating into a single charity with multiple locations.
  - a. As churches are required to register as Charities or CIOs, a group of churches within a local government area (District/County/Unitary Authority) may decide to amalgamate their formal organisation to create an umbrella charity of one church with multiple sites (or buildings).
  - b. Staff and trustees would serve across all the sites.
  - c. Children’s and Youth Ministries could be repeated across all the suitable sites. (The same material being delivered in different places at different times).
  - d. This releasing of resources could promote growth across all the sites of what would be one church using multiple sites – some as mission centres others as worship centres.
  
4. Repurpose some church buildings to be “Mission Centres” and others to also serve as “Worship Centres” for multiple congregations.

- a. The notion that it's not "church" without a preacher and an organist is nonsense! But some buildings are better suited for Public Worship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century than others.
  - b. Other buildings could be used better for missional purposes if they did not have to be set up for public worship on the weekend.
5. Churches and Pastors could co-operate to produce videos and materials for use in small groups across all the churches.
- a. Small Groups meet in homes or church buildings and as long as there is a suitable TV then sessions could be led by volunteers using a pre-recorded video presentation and accompanying notes.
  - b. Preparing a set of six sessions can be demanding on a pastor expected to prepare 6 sessions for each half-term (36 sessions a year). If our pastors and churches were prepared to co-operate at Association level and use each other's materials then it would help everyone if we could work together to develop six sets of Small Group materials per annum.
  - c. Pastors can meet together and suggest themes and then each could choose a theme to develop. They then write a set of six sessions which can be recorded and copied using a team of technicians arranged by the Association. This way a Pastor may only need to produce and present one set a year or two but small groups in churches across the Association are resourced.
6. Churches within a small Local Authority (District or Unitary Authority) could meet for Public Worship at different times.
- a. There are currently moves by HM Government to suspend Sunday trading laws for a year. This, of course, could become another step towards a 24/7 economy.
  - b. If there is increased pressure on health, commerce, and even educational sectors to develop a seven-day a week provision, then this demands a response from the churches to make it possible for Christians to gather at times in addition to Sunday mornings.
  - c. In an agrarian society, meeting after the animals were fed and cows milked made practical sense. That is why many churches still meet late Sunday morning (although not many attendees milk cows before the service). When artificial light was installed in church buildings evening services become possible. Gospel Services were introduced for those young people "in service" as maids and footmen were given Sunday evening off work.
  - d. It is no longer just about children's sports on Sunday mornings; as more and more people have to work on Sundays, including doctors, nurses, carers, etc. do we need to consider how to make it practically possible for Sunday workers to be fed and encouraged spiritually?
  - e. Could some services be held on Saturday mornings or evenings, or Sunday mornings, afternoons, or evenings to cover times when shift workers may be free? It may not be practical for one church to organise five or six services over a weekend but churches could co-operate on when they offer Public Worship within a Local Authority area.

If we were starting from scratch would we do what we did?

Would we do it the way we did it?

The re-opening of churches after the lockdown is the nearest opportunity we will ever have to “start from scratch”. What will we do? – and are we willing to co-operate as Baptist Churches to benefit the propagation of the Gospel through all of our sister churches?

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