

Article reprinted from *CrossWay* Issue Autumn 2003 No. 90

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

Building a (missionary) congregation in a small village

David Bourne

Not that I've any particular expertise, simply 19 years of ministry in the north Bedfordshire village of Riseley. Even then these 19 years have all been about trying to implement Another's agenda, to follow His principles and to use His resources. So, as they say, the errors are entirely mine and the praise belongs to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But first a puzzle, where is Riseley? Somewhere between the A1 and the M1? Not bad and as close as most people get. Riseley is one of a network of villages, surrounded by fields, but populated by commuters with a population of 1400, lower and middle schools, one shop, a blacksmith (for machinery, not horses), a garage, a residential home and two pubs (how things have changed, there used to be 7).

Congregations here and in nearby Bletsoe were tiny, there was little money and the two medieval buildings needed urgent repair. My predecessor had been the first evangelical and it had been hard. Even if the PCC's had known what an evangelical was (which they didn't) they knew they didn't want one and said so! However, there were people, just a few amongst the few who were praying and looking for change.

It's obvious to say, but town or country, God's agenda doesn't change. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners and He commanded His disciples to teach that good news and to make disciples. No rocket science here, but if we're to pursue that agenda directed and equipped by the Holy Spirit, we need to put in place the priorities God has given us.

First priority - teach the Bible

Get people together, use every opportunity to teach the Bible and help them to discover "wondrous things" in His Word. It meant a new emphasis on Sunday mornings, bringing all ages together with a pattern of expository preaching for adults and good Bible teaching resources for newly formed CYPECS groups. It meant an existing midweek group becoming the key Bible study group that grew to up to 30 people before growing into the 5 groups that now meet. It meant using the PCC to teach, from gutters and downpipes to the gospel. We discovered a hunger for the Bible and a growing excitement at its 'surprising' relevance. Bit by bit people were converted, for others their faith was awakened and they began to feel the power of God's Word in their lives. This led to new opportunities for discipling. Our first Careforce volunteer arrived in 1987. Just the resource to do one to one nurture with young mothers and we've tried to pursue that ever since, most recently with discipleship groups for young people.

The second priority - getting people praying

In the first place wives for their non-Christian husbands. Wonderfully God was pleased to answer many of those prayers by bringing husbands to Christ. Those initial prayer triplets became the pattern for over a dozen prayer cells meeting for mutual support but with a priority for God's work among their friends and neighbours, although we'd readily admit that keeping on praying to a missionary agenda isn't easy and the monthly whole church prayer meeting rarely draws more than the dedicated core.

The third priority - get people thinking church

Particularly in a village like Riseley with many good community organisations there needs to be something distinctive about church. It must stand for something, faith in a living, reigning Lord Jesus, it must be something, a welcoming, caring to community and it must expect something of those who become its members, to grow and to serve Jesus. Over the years it is that insistence on a distinctive community that has caused most friction with those who would have felt happier if the church were a museum or who would have preferred a message that speaks neither of sin and a Saviour nor of discipleship. Yet, however gently we do it, church needs to be distinct otherwise what have we to offer? But I think there is more. We need to teach people to think corporately. Christians belong to a new family and it's meant to be their first family, and family brings responsibility. Church is not 'them', who've failed to do what I think they should do, it's me, it's my family and I'm responsible with my brothers and sisters to grow with God together.

A fourth priority - think mission

Spell out God's missionary agenda and get people thinking and praying for growth. We need to work at that in our PCC's. Mission in some form needs to be on every agenda and at least every three years we need a thorough review so that, as the community changes, and it does even in a village, we are also changing, looking for new and better ways to share God's gospel. That's been really important as house prices have risen and the proportion of young families in the village has decreased while positively many 'grannies' have come to the village and to Christ. This led us to reassess our strategy and to plant a monthly midweek congregation. We teach the Bible, provide lunch and encourage 'grannies' to reach out to other 'grannies'. It has seen significant growth and, much as we'd like to see them join the main Sunday service as well, for some this will be their church. Equally, conscious of the need to re-establish good links with young families we've begun a Sunday club for the under 9's, making progress after a year, and we're soon to begin a midweek Mum's and Toddlers group. Once again this is not rocket

science, simply continuing change to make disciples and grow the church.

However those universal priorities have been expressed here in a number of ways:

1. Training

Don't just teach the Bible, train people to teach the Bible. Train up Readers; we used the Moore College extension course as a learning source to meet the requirements of the Diocese. Train the PCC; we've used some excellent Good Book Company materials. Train house group and young people's leaders, make sure they get really good material to work with and earmark money to do it. Make the most of opportunities like Word Alive to break down any rural isolation; it's had a huge impact for good here.

2. Full-time workers

Recruit people for full-time gospel ministry, and set aside the money!

Two members of the congregation took early retirement, a retired teacher leads our work with children and young families, while an ex-community nurse oversees our care of older folk. A series of Careforce volunteers have undertaken a whole range of activities and God has used them wonderfully to lead many to go on with Christ. We've even had volunteers from India and Ghana, what a talking point in an English village, who were able to reach people we would have never reached. They've had a refreshing impact and, together with occasional students from Oak Hill and Ridley, have kept things a-changing. Seven years ago we took what was then a huge step to recruit a full-time youth and schools worker, Roger Fawcett. He has done a great job - we are now looking for a replacement!!

3. Buildings

Yes I know we spend too much on buildings but in many villages they are still a plus in terms of mission. So if we've got them make the most of them and if we're able (DACs and the like permitting) make sure they're warm, bright, welcoming and adapted to serve the gospel. We've no hall so we move the pews (cheap Victorian ones admittedly) to make way for the snooker tables and if space runs out and it's just too expensive to develop the building why not try a vicarage extension!

4. Schools

It can be time-consuming but over the long term it has given us great opportunities. Starting with a regular involvement in assemblies and RE, organising Christian clubs, supporting staff, serving as governors, hosting carol services and more, only make sure it's not just the vicar doing it!

5. Mission Links / A Sending Church

Develop some good links with God's people in another part of the world. Crosslinks put us in touch with an African pastor studying here, we got to know him, kept in touch, they made him a bishop and three years ago a couple went out to work with Hilkiyah Omindo in Mara, Tanzania. A personal contact, and a shared commitment have led to a rich friendship. From that we began to realise that even a village church needs to be a sending church and young people have gone to serve God with Careforce in London, WEC in Chad and at Miracle House in South Africa.

6. A Spiritual MOT

An annual "spiritual MOT", borrowed and adapted from the Baxter model, is an opportunity each year for individuals or couples to come and talk about their lives, their relationship with God and their ministry. Very encouraging, though not always taken up by those who would perhaps benefit most!

7. Gospel Partners

If you can find other churches nearby who share the gospel vision, see what you can do together. We've worked very closely with Sharnbrook Evangelical Church, 4 miles away in another village. They've helped to employ the youth worker, joined us for special services, shared a weekend away and I meet monthly to pray with their pastor.

8. Gospel Networks

If you are the minister then recognise that in God's time you have a limited shelf life. As I often tell the PCC, I may fall under a bus (they think they're safe, not too many buses here!). But seriously, we need to prepare our congregations. Lay leaders need to be confident in their evangelical faith and know where they can find support when they need it to chart the stormy waters of the C of E.

Twenty years on what we've seen has not been sudden or dramatic but a gradual growing of God's people through times of gain and of loss, of frustration and of opportunity. The Lord has taken us from a regular Sunday congregation of barely 20 to one of 70 adults and 35 young people with other 'congregations' linked in. Having said that the current climate is very tough, the village has grown more affluent and more indifferent while Christians often become weary of a regular commitment to grow and to serve and it is often hard to attract young city bred Christians to join us in rural mission. Yet we rejoice because God is faithful, His Word is effective and Riseley can testify it is 'the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes', in the country too!