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## PLANTING & WATERING (1 Corinthians 3:6)

EFCC Leadership Newsletter (No. 79) – May 2016

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Dear Friends,

### Returning to a Pastorate

**An update** Folk in EFCC who know me well have known for some time that my heart has been increasingly set on returning to pastoral ministry and most of those reading this will know that I have recently accepted a call to the pastorate of Honiton Evangelical Congregational Church. I hope (dv) to commence my ministry there in September 2016 and have resigned as General Secretary – with my final day in post being 31<sup>st</sup> August.

Reflecting on the ways in which God leads us is always helpful to us and often very moving as he knows us so much better than we know ourselves. My friend, Richard Underwood, has always said that he regards a desire to return to a pastorate as being a vital qualification for the role that he plays in FIEC and I in EFCC. That has certainly been true of me over my years with EFCC – I have generally loved the work but have always desired pastoral ministry. Preaching and counselling in a church you do not know well is never the same as preaching in a church where you function as part of that body and know the people you are serving.

I had therefore looked at several different possibilities over the years – both those which would have enabled a continuance of my work with EFCC and those which would have necessitated moving on to a new situation. No door had opened to us which Margaret and I believed to be right and until last year I had resigned myself (not unhappily) to serving as General Secretary through to 2019 and then retiring at the age of 68. Given my current work mileage and demands I did not believe it would be feasible or sensible to attempt working longer than that. Then when talking to a good friend in the ministry about another issue I was suddenly jolted out of the pathway I was in. He gave me sound advice and then said (gist of the matter not necessarily word for word): ‘Now I may surprise you but I think you should go back into a pastorate’. The effect was that I felt I that the question I should have asked, but had failed to ask, had been answered. I am very grateful to the Lord for giving him the wisdom to say that to me.

The questions then became: ‘Would the Lord open a door for me?’ and ‘Who should I approach about a return to a pastorate?’ Having in the past been told that a church would not consider me because I was too old, I was in my early 50s at that point, the first consideration was real. Reasonably not every church would consider someone approaching the age of 65 to be a potential minister. I knew of several churches needing ministers and thought prayerfully about which church I should approach. My criteria in my thinking and praying, was that I wanted to be as useful in God’s kingdom as I can be, given the limited period of future ministry that I now have. In God’s providence I was preaching at Honiton in mid-November and after the weekend, which included a men’s breakfast and a civic service, I talked to Karl Upchurch, the Church Secretary, about my desire to return to pastoral ministry. After discussion he was happy to talk to the other church officers and following the next members’ meeting I sent in the CV, Questionnaire and names of referees as advised in the booklet on ‘Calling a Minister’ which EFCC produces.

One of the reasons for approaching Honiton is that it is a church I know relatively well having preached there once or twice a year for about ten years. They felt the same about me so we dispensed with an introductory visit and went straight to preaching with a view. The services and the sessions meeting with the officers and members simply reinforced the conviction that was growing with us that this was of the Lord. I am deeply grateful that the Lord led them to the same conviction and that they agreed a unanimous call to me on 27<sup>th</sup> April – which was actually my 65<sup>th</sup> birthday. I was able to accept verbally when I received a phone call from Karl and the call was agreed formally within a couple of days. The induction is being planned for Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> October.

**What next?** The EFCC Committee were already aware of what might be happening and had in any case been planning for my retirement in three years time. Details of what interim arrangements are being made while a new General Secretary is being sought will be communicated to the churches in the near future. As EFCC has been a part of my life for over thirty years I am very happy to continue to help EFCC in ways which fit in with the work at Honiton, which will obviously become my priority. Both the Committee and the Trust Board need prayer as they adjust to the situation they now find themselves in and seek to keep things going. The area I think needs great priority in the time of the next General Secretary is the expansion of EFCC both in terms of churches joining and in terms of church planting and renewal.

What is next for Margaret and I provokes mixed feelings of course. Regarding Honiton and what lies ahead we are happy and sure this is of the Lord. We are of course sad to be leaving family and church and friends in Middlesbrough. On a lighter note it is frustrating to leave Middlesbrough when the football team has been promoted to the premiership and I could have got my season ticket at last season’s price and would have got my concession as an over-65! £275 for a year of premiership football!

Please pray for us! I am sure experience and accumulated wisdom are good things but if I rely on them rather than the Lord that will be disastrous. For that reason I am glad that the contrast between Middlesbrough and Honiton – which many people are surprised by – is so great, in that it will help me fight the tendency to rely on experience rather than the Lord. I was recently asked what I would regard as success in the ministry at Honiton – it is simply to be a loving fellowship which functions like a family, which is firmly grounded in God's word and is zealous to reach out into the community with the gospel. Oh that God would be glorified in seeing that happen. Very seriously in contemplating the future the question must be asked: 'Who is sufficient for these things?'

Yours in the Lord,

*Mike Plant*

(General Secretary)

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## **BOOKS ABOUT PREACHING (2)**

Very helpfully Joseph Pettit (Loughborough) responded to my article on books about preaching with some helpful and thoughtful suggestions:

Here are some of the books I've read on preaching. Most are quite a while ago, so my memories of them are hazy:

### Bryan Chapell 'Christ Centred Preaching'

I was told this is like Haddon Robinson, but unlike HR, doesn't just give method for exposition, but more pointedly gets your preaching dealing with the "fallen condition focus" and pointing to Christ. From what I remember it is helpful for getting us to be rigorous in our approach to the passage. But if someone took too literally its method for preparation, they would be turned into a sermon-machine rather like a sausage machine - you put the passage in one end, turn the handle, and out comes the sermon at the other end. I treated it as some helpful hints to get me thinking, otherwise it would have been a complicated strait-jacket. (I think it is very helpful advice – everyone of us reads books at a different stage in our development. They can stimulate us but applied too woodenly can straitjacket us. In the same way listening to only one preaching model can make us clones rather than the fresh and individual preachers we need to be.)

### Spurgeon 'Lectures to my students'

In the inspiring and heart-warming category, as you'd expect. (Spurgeon's 'All-Round Ministry' is much the same but they do inspire and there are times we need that most of all).

### Murray Capill 'Preaching with spiritual vigour'

This takes lessons from the life of Baxter, and from what I remember it challenged me about pastoral practice more than about preaching.

### Art Azurdia: 'Spirit Empowered Preaching'

About exactly what the title says: urging us to dependence on the Spirit's work. (Also helping us think through the relationship of the Spirit to our preaching)

### Peter Adam: 'Speaking God's Words'

More a theology of preaching, than a how-to. Useful thoughts on the place of preaching, including its place among other word-ministries, although in the end I was disappointed not to get the clear definition of preaching I was looking for.

### Christopher Ash: 'The Priority of Preaching'

Taken from Ash's addresses at EMA. Definitely not "how to" but rekindling confidence in preaching. I particularly appreciated and keep reminding myself of his exhortation to "give God the microphone" i.e. preach systematic expository sermons, so God sets the agenda for what is preached.

### E M Bounds: 'Powerful and prayerful pulpits'

A book of 40 readings to get us back to the spiritual realities of what we are doing. (If it is anything like his books on prayer it will be massively moving and inspiring)

### Peter Masters, Physicians of Souls

Says some good things about preaching the gospel, but I find his love of denouncing everyone so annoying that I gave up about a quarter of the way through. (I don't know if Bill Dyer gave up a quarter of the way through but he certainly appreciated the spur to gospel preaching in this book)

### Dale Ralph Davies: 'The Word became fresh'

Typical Ralph Davies: easy to read, entertaining, full of insights on the OT, makes you want to preach the passages he comments on.

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Looking at Joseph's list and comments it does bring out the need to read the right book at the right time. Some of the books he mentions are immediately accessible and inspiring and others require hard work and discipline. When I read Haddon Robinson's 'Expository Preaching' I worked through it like a text book and then did my sermon preparation using its methods as my guide. Recently reading 'Unashamed Workmen' edited by Rhett Dobson it was very different. The book consists of a series by well-known preachers about their convictions and practice in preparation for preaching and preaching itself. The second book is meant to inform and stimulate those who are already practised preachers rather than enable starting –out preachers to develop a working method.

Most ministers would benefit from at least one book on their annual reading list being something substantial and challenging on the subject of preaching. We can all too easily get into a rut and reading and studying the subject can be a stimulus and help in the most noble of callings.

I'm indebted to John Stevens (FIEC) for permission to use this article from his blog – I suspect it will resonate with many church leaders and committed church members – hopefully the vital message it has will have a wider influence than that.

## **LOCAL CHURCH: RECOVERING THE VITAL IMPORTANCE OF "REGULAR ATTENDANCE"**

Last week John Platt won his case in the High Court after refusing to pay a fine of £60 imposed on him by Isle of Wight Council for taking his family out of school without permission for a holiday at Disney World. The court ruled that, under current legislation, his children could not be said to have failed to attend school "regularly" because they had an overall attendance rate of 93%. Teachers reacted angrily to this ruling, highlighting the disruption and extra work caused by unauthorised absences from school and the impact on children's education, and the government has said that it will change the legislation to prevent parents being able to rely on this ruling.

Whatever the merits of the particular case, the issue of "regular attendance" that it raises is just as relevant to contemporary church life as it is to school. As I travel around the country lack of committed regular church attendance is one of the major issues that is affecting churches and gospel ministry. Congregation members increasingly regard themselves as "committed regulars" if they are at church just twice a month, sometime less. Very few are prepared to put church consistently ahead of holidays, visiting family, or social opportunities. Numbers drop when the weather is warmer and people choose to go out for the day, or when there are major sporting events to watch. My impression is that in many churches the only periods of the calendar year when the vast majority of people will be at church every Sunday are in the windows between the autumn half-term and mid-December, and from January until the spring half-term. For much of the rest of the year something between a third and a half of the church attenders will be away on any given Sunday, sometime more.

As a church leader it is easy to be frustrated by this, especially as we are "required" to be at church every week, but it can also be frustrating to other church members who make the necessary sacrifices to put church first week by week. More importantly lack of regular attendance impacts on the ministry of the church. It is more difficult to attract and welcome newcomers and visitors to church if the congregation is small because large numbers of "regulars" are away. It is hard to sustain effective sequential expository ministry if few people are there to gain the benefit of week-by-week cumulative teaching, with more than 50% of the congregation each week having missed the previous sermon. It can be discouraging to those who have put huge amounts of effort into preparing preaching, Sunday School, leading the service and practicing music if others are away. Hearts sink and this is conveyed to the congregation as a whole. Singing is muted and joy is diminished.

This is much more keenly felt in smaller churches, and perhaps one of the reasons that larger churches are attractive is that they can always manage to run everything despite a high absenteeism, and that it is easier for people to skip church without drawing attention to themselves.

The root of the problem is that we don't realise just how much we need church, and just how much church needs us. Just as regular attendance at school is essential to developing maturity through teaching, so the task of the church is to teach us to obey everything that Jesus has commanded. We will not grow as disciples without the commitment to teaching in community. Similarly we gather together to encourage one another to keep going in our faith as we live as a tiny minority in the midst of a hostile world. The mere fact that we are THERE is itself a huge encouragement to others to keep going, and a demonstration that we are prepared to make church a priority in our lives. Parents in particular have a heavy responsibility to model the priority of church to their children, and to be willing to make the sacrifices necessary for them, and on their behalf, to teach them the vital importance of gathering with fellow believers.

In the end it comes down to believing and doing *Hebrews 10v23-25*:

*Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who called us is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

The things that tempt us away from church are very often not bad things, but good things in themselves. There are also always genuine exceptional reasons why people may need to be away. However the cumulative effect of yielding to the temptation of choosing the good over the better, or the immediately gratifying over the duties that lead to long-term growth and maturity, is spiritual impoverishment and drift. The "exceptional" need to be away soon becomes the "ordinary", with the result that it is church attendance that becomes the exception rather than the rule.

I suspect that the church in the UK would be significantly healthier and more effective if those who see themselves as committed believers made "regular attendance" a priority. It might be too much to ask for 93%, but would it be asking too much to try to aim for 75% for a start?

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## **PROPERLY EXPRESSING THE RICHNESS OF SCRIPTURE**

**EMOTIONAL FLATNESS IN WORSHIP**  
Recently I came across a fascinating and helpful book on preaching. The title is: 'Text Message: The Centrality of Scripture in Preaching' and it is provoked by the conviction of the editors, Ian Stackhouse and Oliver Crisp, that: 'Preaching, in the

classical sense, as exposition of Scripture, has fallen on hard times.' That is certainly so both in the wider church and in the wider evangelical church. In his foreword Thomas Long writes:

Running like a river through these chapters is the vision of preaching as a faithful *craft*; that is a skilled and complex practice possessing standards of excellence, embedded in a rich tradition, and performed out of deep theological tradition. ... preaching depends upon an inner call and a set of personal gifts, but there is also a body of knowledge to be acquired as well as a lore about good practice given to the company of preachers over the centuries. ... faithful preaching requires waiting and prayerful expectation for the living Word to be born anew in these ancient texts. The God who became flesh in the incarnation continues to advent in Scripture, becoming living Word again and again.

Clearly there is meant to be something exciting and emotionally moving as we encounter the living God in preaching. I want to pick up some points that it will benefit us to think about.

It is my observation that churches seem to have their own ethos which they prefer – some are dour and reserved and others prize their spontaneity and open display of emotion. Most churches are certainly predictably the same from week to week and we do need to ask if this emotional flatness is helpful? And if it is not helpful, which I am obviously implying, what should be done about it? I am here assuming a deep link between the preaching and the rest of the worship of the church.

**MOVING ON IN RESPONSE TO SCRIPTURE** I want to start by quoting at length from the chapter by Philip Greenslade on: 'Hebrews as a Model for Expository Pastoral Preaching':

Paying closer attention to the various literary genres of Scripture would give our preaching a sharper edge and a deeper colour.

Hebrews segues from style to style and mood to mood. If we view Hebrews-or any part of Scripture-as a contourless landscape of flat propositions, then we may end up trying to liven it up by imposing our personality on it.

Richard Lischer has wise words on this:

The preacher who is only concerned with self-expression may be neglecting the rich array of styles available in the Bible. The text will tell you when to be angry, ironic, funny, or sad. It will tell you when to reason with your hearers and when to tease them with parabolic utterances, when to teach your parishioner and when to soar with them to the third heaven.

Lischer adds: 'The preacher makes adjustment in matters of diction (word choice, figures of speech, and manner of speech (tone of voice) not on the basis of his or her personality or mood

but in deference to the nature of the text and the demands of the occasion.

This is certainly something I have taken on board as regards reading Scripture aloud. In doing so we are to reflect the feelings and emotions inherent in the text we are reading. This way of thinking takes it further and suggests that the style and mood of the sermon – and therefore of the worship service as well - is to flow from the style and mood of the passage being preached from.

Greenslade has one or two very helpful thoughts on how this works out within Hebrews itself as we prepare sermons and preach God's Word:

It might mean recognising that the opening catena of texts in Hebrews (chapter 1) is less a list of proof texts but more a litany of praise which cries out to be preached as proclamation. It might mean also that the sobering typological comparison of Israel and the church in chapters 3 + 4 calls for a tone of warning and a solemn, urgent pleading. It might surely imply that to be confronted by hearers who are 'dull of hearing' and needing immersion in deeper truth is not the cue for a few jokes or light-hearted stories to sugar the pill, but a cue to swallow hard and embark on a patient, careful exposition of truth, that takes the time and trouble to spell out in detail the wonders of the gospel. Finally it might suggest a recognition that chapter 11 is not an over-idealised panegyric to the spiritual giants of faith and to get them to see themselves (and all unsung, home-grown heroes of faith) as a part of this adventure.

**IS THIS PRACTICAL FOR YOU?** I think this advice is correct and helpful but is it just another burden for the already busy preacher? You have all the burdens of preparation and the disciplines involved and now here is another unwanted burden! I believe on the contrary that putting this into practice is simple and straightforward – indeed that there is something perverse about us if we are failing to instinctively do something of the kind.

What steps might we take to achieve this? To prepare to preach and to preach in this way demands our personal, spiritual sensitivity to the text's style and mood. If that is in place we will preach and lead worship appropriately. It involves the recognition that in all this we are servants of the word and never the masters and controllers of the word.

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## MIKE'S ITINERARY

June 5 <sup>th</sup> :	am Cannon Park
June 12 <sup>th</sup>	am + pm Cannon Park
June 19 <sup>th</sup>	am Woolwich
June 25 <sup>th</sup>	Induction Therfield
June 26 <sup>th</sup>	am + pm Whitby
July 3 <sup>rd</sup>	am + pm Bulkington
July 10 <sup>th</sup>	am Nazeing
July 17 <sup>th</sup>	am + pm Pontefract
July 31 <sup>st</sup>	pm Cannon Park