



Love, Hope Acceptance

An introduction from Regional Minister - Revd Phil Jump.

In reflecting on our vision for 2016, I want to draw together three strands of thinking. The first grows out of our Association theme for 2015 *'Open to God'*. In exploring it, I often used the story of Peter visiting the house of Cornelius recorded in Acts 10, remembering that Peter needed to discover that God was at work in places and people that he would not have previously imagined. Peter needed to break out of the traditional thinking about who was "in" and who was "out" in terms of being God's people, and recognise that the Holy Spirit was at work way beyond the boundaries of his own expectation.

In our evangelism and outreach, we can sometimes be faced with the same challenge; It is easy to imagine that mission is something that we need to initiate, and fall into language and ideas that ours is the task of somehow "winning" people rather than being open to explore where God might already be at work. We can speak of "taking Jesus" to places, as though he isn't quite capable of being there without us. When we start to think that way, we run the risk of failing to see where God is at work, because we are so wrapped up in our own ideas. Jesus had already told his disciples in the upper room that the Spirit would bear witness to him; the Spirit would convict people about sin, righteousness and judgement. (John 15:26; John 16:8 ff) But Peter had to realise

that the Holy Spirit could and would work in the lives of people who were not like him; people in whose company he might well feel uncomfortable; people who weren't 'his kind of people'. It is one thing to want more people to come and be part of our church community, but how accepting are we? How ready are we to receive those whose lives, identity, culture and background might be very different to our own?

This leads me to my second strand which emerges from the account of the Early Church recorded in Acts 2. I read this chapter some years ago because I wanted to challenge my own church about reaching out to others. I particularly wanted to focus on verse 41 with the big statistic "around 3000 were added to their number." The applications are obvious, wouldn't it be amazing to see a similar expression of revival today – how would our church cope with 3000 adding to our number? But I felt compelled to keep reading – I read of how the early believers shared their possessions and opened their homes; of their devotion to prayer, to the teaching of the apostles, to their shared life of fellowship and how they enjoyed the favour of all people. And I was struck by the final line of this account "and the Lord added daily to their number those who were being saved".

As I read those words I was challenged to stop asking "how many people might we add to our number?" and instead to ask "What kind of church do we need to become if God

is to trust us with the nurture of fragile new believers on a daily basis?" It often seems to me that much of our talk about evangelism is a clamour for the next scheme, resource or big idea to "get them in" or "win them over." As I introduce the 2016 challenge to sharpen our focus on inviting people to become followers of Jesus, I want to encourage that we begin by looking at ourselves. If we are to speak of love, hope and acceptance, and that message is to have lasting credibility, our words need to be matched by our deeds and attitude; we are the Body of Christ, called to be a community of love, hope and acceptance.

And so for the third strand. In 2016, NWBA, as part of Baptists Together will be seeking to participate in "40 days of Good News" - A season of deliberate invitation for others to become followers of Jesus. We will be working with local churches to arrange a number of evangelistic events, but alongside that, we want to invite everyone who is part of our North Western Baptist Community to get involved. On 10th April or thereabouts, we are inviting everyone to take a small card on which is printed a simple prayer of Christian commitment. You are invited during the next 40 days to pray that God will give you an opportunity to pray that prayer with someone, helping them to become a follower of Jesus themselves. That could lead to thousands of conversations about Jesus. Please consider how you might be involved in this vision and initiative.

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