

Report on Birmingham Gathering to CCCA

I have opted to write a personal description of my UK trip, imagining that distilled reflections will be more digestible and interesting than my full set of notes (though anyone is welcome to these).

The Common Good and Spiritual Receptivity

I was interested in Martin Robinson's sketch on the church in the West since the 1950s onward. He argued that the decline in the church in Europe was not simply a crisis of relevance, but a more profound crisis of *credibility*. "Attractional church" programs imported from the US gained little traction in Europe: the church was perceived as the last place you'd look for answers to life's important questions by the baby boomers and beyond. He suggested that one of the ways the church can regain credibility is by working for *the common good*.

Martin's own local church in became stewards of The Pavilion in Bourneville, one of the assets in a trust set up by the Cadbury family. His church surveyed their community about its needs. The first project that resulted from this consultation was building a playground. Through prayer, seeking God, and responding to local needs, the church has developed The Pavilion as a thriving hub for sports teams. It is in demand by community groups and for events, it houses a coffee shop and bar, and is the meeting place for a growing congregation.

COCWA's sporting complex, COCQld's Kingdom Access points, the many Careworks church partnerships across Australia, the stories of youth action for mission and justice through Embody, are simply a few local examples where initiatives for the common good are not only impacting society positively, but opening doors for gospel ministry.

Indeed, one of the standout impressions from the trip was that evangelism and social action are both a strong part of the Christian heritage. Even on a free day spent at the Birmingham museum, I was struck by memorials to evangelical and Quaker reformers. Campaigns against slavery, for decent housing and working conditions for the poor, for prison reform, prevention of cruelty to animals, education and the like were spearheaded by concerned Christians. Our meetings were held in an area set up as a model village by the Cadbury family in the 19th century. Inspired by their Quaker ideals, they provided decent housing and decent wages for their workers.

Working for *the common good* was suggested as a vehicle to increase *spiritual receptivity*, which is often low in the West when compared to a number of developing nations. Working for the common good generates the questions: "What is it about these people? This community?" Intentional prayer was noted as another way to change spiritual receptivity in a community.

"Proper Confidence"

"Proper Confidence" is the name of one of Newbigin's books (one I confess I haven't read!). Martin expressed the importance of congregations "exuding a *proper confidence* about the gospel." This phrase found resonance with me recently when I asked Ruth Powell from NCLS whether there was a *standout* feature of growing churches. "Self-confidence" she replied. Churches of wildly varied styles are growing in Australia, but they possess that elusive quality of *confidence*.

I suggest this also has echoes with the *credibility* issue. A church lacking self-confidence is hardly going to appear a credible place to find meaning and belonging. Newbigin's famous phrase: "the congregation as constituting the hermeneutic of the gospel" continues to reveal the most important way people encounter the good news of Jesus. Perhaps one of the key challenges facing our movement is developing leaders who are fully confident in the gospel, who can then inspire confidence in the gospel and in the mission of their congregation.

Martin suggested a good grasp of epistemology (how we know anything) may become important as we seek to speak about truth in a deconstructed / fragmented context. In my words, our leaders may well need a new and sharpened set of apologetic tools in order to address emerging questions with genuine confidence and grace.



The group outside The Pavillion

Why are Churches of Christ in the UK Growing?

Churches of Christ in the UK are growing in size and number, despite a minimal resource base. Part of this growth comes from independent ethnic congregations looking for a wider church family, and part from intentional church planting, which is energized by church planter training through the college (now called "Formission College"). The presentations didn't drill down into the detail around this, but offering church planter training through our colleges seems a rather obvious helpful idea to help to re-energize our Australian movement around church planting.

If I were to offer my best guess around this growth, it goes back to the *confidence* issue. That audacious spiritual chutzpah that says: “Let’s aim to double in size in 10 years”. This goes beyond wishful thinking. I suspect casting a big vision releases a spiritual dynamic that raises faith and hope, and opens spiritual eyes to seize new opportunities. It paves the way to ask strategic questions. It energizes risk-taking.

Perhaps it is not only confidence in local church life that leads to growth, but also across movements. Perhaps God is calling us to new levels of audacious spiritual confidence.

Martin expressed a vision of Formission College as helping to create a genuine movement that is cross-cultural, that impacts beyond our tribe, that offers training that will add thousands of leaders to a movement to evangelise the UK, that will transform communities, and create a new vision for what it means to flourish as human beings.

Now that is an *audacious* vision. I like it.

Multicultural Church

One might cynically note that gaining church affiliations via Christian migration can be good for denominational numbers but doesn’t do much for mission. (Having said that, many ethnic congregations are more enthusiastic and effective in evangelism than their Anglo counterparts.)

Andy Hardy and Dan Yarnell spoke of a far richer picture; that migrants to the West are open to the gospel, that they are gatekeepers who can bring the gospel to their countries of origin (which is especially important in countries that are closed to foreign missionaries), and that they are remissionalising the West. That migration patterns are part of God’s plan to reach the whole earth with the gospel.

Revelation chapter 7 paints a picture of every tribe and tongue and nation praising God and the Lamb. Multicultural movements are therefore one sign and foretaste of the Kingdom that is coming.

Dialogue with multicultural church partners can challenge Western individualistic and atomised approaches to spirituality. CCUK are finding ways to be transformed themselves by becoming a genuinely multicultural movement.

A key in building bridges is hospitality. Local churches that offer genuine hospitality to new migrants may identify “gatekeepers” to a whole interconnected ethnic community and open up a new local (and even international) mission field.

Generating Movements

There was an interesting discussion around generating movements in Western contexts, facilitated by Tim Aho, a long-term UK missionary from the US.

The numbers of spiritual grandchildren is the test of multiplying movements: “I’ve made a disciple, who’s made a disciple, who’s baptised.” David Watson describes a movement started in Northern Africa where there are 100 new churches from one, four generations deep, forming every 2 years.

There are no movements (yet) in the Western world multiplying at anything like this rate. Likely reasons for this include the *spiritual receptivity* issue, and because Western relationships are more

atomised than communal. This doesn't mean movements can't be generated, but they are likely to be more like a slow burn than an explosion. Those attempting to plant using movement principles in the UK are still working with second generation disciples after 3 - 5 years of plugging away. Tim suggested we haven't been terribly good at identifying what helps increase receptivity, and doing it.

There seems to be some traction around the 3D Missional Communities at the moment. It was also suggested we are in a time of the "mixed economy": we need all kinds of church planting, and multiple partnerships. There ISN'T a single model that "works" everywhere. It's important to avoid a war between attractational and missional... we need both, working in different contexts.

Potential research project

One thing noted during the discussion in Birmingham was that little solid research has been done around missional communities. While much research has been done in the US in particular around more "traditional" church plants, missional/incarnational communities that focus less (if at all) on Sunday church services, or that are offshoot ministries of more conventional churches, have had less solid research attention (ie, do they grow, do they last, do they multiply, do they make disciples, do they impact their target host community, what factors make them sustainable, what can we learn from ones that have a short lifespan?)



On the Thursday after the Birmingham dialogue I attended a launch for "The Newbigin Centre" in Cambridge with Ash Barker (see left), and met Professor Kyle Small from Western Theological Seminary and Jul Medenblik from Calvin Theological Seminary. I asked some questions about missional communities, and our discussion evolved into the idea of launching an international research

project on this topic, potentially beginning in 2017. Ongoing email discussions have also included Ash Barker, Alan Roxburgh and Andrew Menzies. Although not an issue for the direct involvement of the CCCA, any learnings that emerge may be of interest to state leadership and to our member churches that are launching various creative mission initiatives.

As someone involved in coaching people involved in new mission initiatives, I am personally excited to learn more about the factors that are important in forming healthy missional communities. I may become personally involved in this research project (though if anyone knows of a young person keen to pursue doctoral work in this area, please send them my way!)

Youth Evangelism and Discipleship

- I'd suggest the sessions focused on youth raised more questions than answers. We had opportunity to hear from those involved in youth sports ministry (including one young female "accidental church planter"), and had a session led by Andrew Menzies around youth ministry. I hope I may be forgiven for including the raw notes from this discussion: I don't feel the discussion landed with a clear focus. It is noteworthy that both nations are finding similar complex issues, and that the business of forming young disciples has some particular contemporary challenges:
 - Is God behind some of the drift of people out of the church because the 'church' is not a place of life?
 - Transition periods – child – teen – young adult particular point of loss.
 - Incarnational nature of youth ministry, rather than a programme is what makes discipleship effective
 - 'good enough' – not perfect, slick, flash – real care and compassion expressed.
 - 'youth tribes' – market research
 - are our 'churches' safe places to ask hard questions about doubt/fear/pain?
 - Women in leadership question still an issue in places
 - Establish basics first with young seekers
 - Soul Survivor – UK success story
 - Social entrepreneurs and being Christians in the workplace is often of more interest than being pastors and missionaries
 - Young people appear to be very interested in social engagement
 - Gen X want to start their own show more than joining an established organisation
 - Intuitive connection between work/spirituality/world
 - What about formation/coaching/mentoring?
 - Third culture – how do we manage this in ethnic communities?
 - Larger 'show' in some 'youth'/ large show – consumer experience not a formative community
 - 'community' often mediated by social media
 - new parish movement has appeal
 - constant movement
 - discipleship challenge to stay, to know, to be known...how can this happen in a mobile society?
 - How do we find/track down 'mobile' communities to connect with the gospel?
 - 2nd generation in ethnic churches – disciplined group to operate the 2nd generation congregation
 - our life, not our teaching, is the compelling thing
 - freedom in the West impacts the raising of the next generation in migrant churches.
 - are we able to critique the consumer/education/success narrative of the West (are we immersed in this too?)

- Subversive Mentoring:

- ☒ Challenge being restrictive than liberating
- ☒ Answers start replacing questions
- ☒ Inappropriate ideas fill the void
- ☒ Learner becomes lab rat

Deliberately *unsettling* a person to radicalise. Age 23 males common age of unsettling). Young people are vulnerable to radicalisation , especially if isolated. Take care in how we use power. The 12 disciples were young people “radicalised” by Jesus

Building relationships

When Martin Robinson and Dan Yarnell discovered Churches of Christ in Australia, it was profoundly moving for them to discover people on a similar ministry wavelength: “We’re not mad after all.” Discussions from the former IMT group significantly shaped the direction of Churches of Christ in the UK. It was wonderful to share time together not only learning from one another but fellowshiping in a variety of ways. Some powerful personal stories were shared over our time together. There is always an intangible but powerful element of gathering with like-minded people, where God touches our spirits.

Questions and Plenty of Them

I can imagine myself donning a t-shirt that reads: “I went to the UK, and all I got was this lousy set of questions”.

This is not too far from the truth. Yet I am unapologetic about that.

As most of you would know, I am interested in coaching as a tool of discipleship. Coaching is primarily about the art of asking better questions.

In the commercial world, research has found on average something close to a 600% return on investment from executive coaching. This is primarily because outstanding coaches ask novel, insightful questions to raise awareness, release creativity, and generate fresh action. Eric Schmidt, former CEO of Google, said, “We run this company on questions, not answers.”

I discovered on a drive to Cambridge with Ash Barker a particularly rich question: “What would you differently in ministry if you had your time over again?” (And the related question...“What would you do the same, and why?”) It is a fascinating way to capture one’s best insights about ministry practice, which can then be applied to future ministry plans.

Some other questions I humbly offer for the CCCA include:

- How do we foster and inspire spiritual confidence?
- How do we identify and nurture catalytic church planters?

- How can we equip our people to hear God's voice? Where the prophets? How do we sharpen spiritual sensitivity?
- How do we create a sense of inviting people into a Movement?
- How do we stir up a prayer movement?
- How do we model the values that underpin everything we do, or want to do? What might we need to do differently?
- What's the best way to cast a vision?
- How do we respond faithfully to our multicultural mission context?
- How might we help local churches deepen spiritual receptivity in their surrounding host communities?
- Who are the partners we can learn from, be energized from, and bless in return?
- How can we generate fresh movements from our existing churches?
- How do we develop the kinds of leaders we need for the future? And how do we know what that looks like?
- What kind of audacious vision might God want to release in us?

I was struck by this quote recently by Tim Reed (CEO of MYOB):

"If I were starting my career again.... I think the main thing that I'd change is that I'd think bigger. I put my heart and soul into what I do, and on reflection there were times when the target of my passion was too small. The amount of impact your work can have, and therefore the value you can create, is directly related to the size of the problem you're trying to solve."

There are a couple of big picture questions up for discussion at the upcoming CCCA meeting. One is on national cooperation on regional church planting. One 'problem' might be "where might be the best place to set up a regional church plant?" A far bigger, and richer problem, might be "how might we cooperate to generate a church planting movement across Australia?" In five years' from now, the result of both questions might look the same (say a church plant in Broome). In fifty years' time, the result might be drastically different, because the vision of being a multiplying church that sends out planting teams will have been sown into the very DNA of this hypothetical church in Broome, and in the other regional church plants that we collectively support.

Likewise we might ask "shall we run a national gathering of emerging leaders?" Alternatively we could ask richer and more difficult kinds of questions, such as: "how might we work together, and with other partners, to develop leaders who can multiply leaders who can multiply leaders?"

Of course, the fruit of our reflections is completely dependent on the grace of God and the work of the Spirit. But the Great Commission has always been an *audacious* kind of vision. Perhaps the Spirit of God will release new dreams among us as we ask big questions about how to make disciples of all people groups.

All of this may sound tangential to reporting back on a UK trip and forum. However, I thought it might be generative to share my ongoing reflections on how multiplication dynamics and spiritual

confidence might impact the kinds of questions we ask one another at the local, state and national levels.

I am very thankful to the CCCA for their sponsorship of this trip. I hope that at least some of these reflections will strike a chord, and be helpful in our ongoing discernment of what God is calling us to be and to do to in order to minister faithfully in our unique contexts.

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Churches of Christ in Australia



The Vicarage in Winson Green, now "Newbigin House" centre for urban mission.