

## **'Baptists and church planting: work together and learn from each other'**

Baptist Union Assembly, May 2008

Stuart Murray

### **A. The Vision Document**

1. Thank you for sending me your vision document.<sup>1</sup> This helped me to understand the challenges you face and the priorities you have identified.
2. Many other Baptist Unions and other denominations across western culture are also grappling with these issues in a post-modern and post-Christendom culture:
  - How do institutions recover the dynamism of movements?
  - How do churches move beyond maintenance and become missional?
  - What role can church planting play in these transitions?
3. But I particularly appreciated three aspects of your vision document:
  - Your recognition that missional *thinking* is not the same as missional *behaviour*.
  - Your awareness that church planting is most effective when pioneers are allowed to experiment with new possibilities.
  - Your determination to work together and learn from each other rather than each church exploring these issues alone.
4. I believe these three insights are important and I want to explore them with you today.
5. I also share your conviction that the early church and the radical reformation can offer us helpful resources. The early church was pre-Christendom; the Anabaptists were anti-Christendom. Both were missionary movements on the margins of society.
6. I do not have time to say more than this today, but I encourage you to draw on these resources – to learn from the past for the sake of your future.

### **B. From Missional Thinking to Missional Behaviour**

1. Your vision document rightly insists that missional *thinking* is not enough. I would add that missional *language* is not enough and that missional *activities* are not enough. Many churches and denominations today are using missional language and bolting on missional activities, but few are truly missional in their behaviour, priorities and instincts.
2. Why is this?
  - (a) Focusing inwards and prioritising maintenance are very deeply rooted in church life after centuries of institutional Christianity – much deeper than most of us realise.

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Gemeentestichting: een baptisten perspectief.' (Unie van Baptistengemeenten, 2008) voor Stuart Murray vertaald in het Engels.

(b) Becoming missional requires change at several levels – institutional, local, financial, intellectual, strategic, emotional and spiritual. If any of these are missing, the change we need will be short-lived.

(c) Becoming missional requires persistence and watchfulness – the danger of slipping back into old ways is always present (like trying to walk up a down escalator).

(d) We need to embed the change in regular disciplines and practices that over time will change our instincts and reflexes. Even missional behaviour is not enough: we need to develop missional *reflexes*.

3. So what can we do to encourage this paradigm shift? My instructions for today were to be practical rather than theoretical, so here are some practical suggestions – examples of what I think will be needed.

4. In the local church:

- Introduce church members to the notion of *Missio Dei*, encourage worship of this missionary God and insist that the New Testament is a mission document.
- Simplify church life and reduce church activities to release church members to be involved in mission. Find a balance between *sustaining* and *sustainable*.
- Encourage testimonies of what God is doing in the daily lives of church members and where they see God at work beyond the church.
- Ordain church members for new jobs and new roles in the community and pray regularly for them in these roles (not just in their church roles).
- Interview church members about the challenges they face at work and help them to think missionally about opportunities at work.
- Prioritise a pattern of congregational prayer that embraces the needs of the local community, global issues, the groaning of creation and the call to make disciples of all nations.

5. In the denomination:

- Recover the apostolic, prophetic and evangelistic ministries marginalised in the Christendom era and develop training processes to equip such people.
- Revise the seminary curriculum to teach *all* subjects from a missional perspective and train *all* students as cross-cultural missionaries.
- Appoint to translocal roles people with pioneering and strategic gifts, men and women who are committed to envisioning, risk-taking and change-management.
- Develop a 'mission accompaniment' process, making available to each church someone to help them become missional – a critical friend who will journey with them over a period of years (not months).
- Work towards church planting becoming normal, rather than exceptional, so that every church explores ways of participating in a church planting strategy.

6. At local church and denominational level, commit to spending over half of all funds on mission – even if this means radical reshaping and painful decisions about spending cuts. Why? Because finance is a measurable indicator of progress that goes beyond thinking and language.

### **C. The Contribution of Church Planting**

1. I am convinced that planting new churches is essential for the health of the church in all contexts, but especially in times of culture shift and especially as a means of restoring the mission dynamic to the church.

2. Why is church planting crucial?

- Church planting explores new ways of being church in a changing culture.
- Church planting allows us to experiment, to do things differently, to push boundaries.
- Church planting provides a context for the risk-takers and pioneers who are vital for our future.
- Church planting enables us to test out new possibilities without disrupting what we already have – church plants are mission laboratories for denominations.
- Church planting helps us re-integrate church and mission, to recover the dynamic of a missionary movement.

3. But only certain forms of church planting will be helpful, as your vision document suggests:

- Church planting that reflects deeply on the cultural context in which churches are planted.
- Church planting that pays attention to the criticisms of those for whom present forms of church are not working.
- Church planting that attempts to incarnate the gospel into areas and people groups beyond the reach of existing churches.
- Church planting that refuses unthinkingly to replicate familiar models of church or imperialistically to impose models on communities.
- Church planting that is not isolationist but open to share insights with and receive critique from the wider church.

4. We need church planters willing to pioneer on behalf of the denomination, concerned for corporate renewal and transformation as well as the success of their own initiative.

5. We need the denomination to invest in church planting, providing resources, support and accountability but also listening and learning so that church planting can inspire and renew others.

6. And we need to foster a spirit of receptivity in existing churches so that they benefit from these experiments, a readiness to test new developments carefully but also to allow God to renew them for the challenges and opportunities ahead.

7. Church planting is not the only way to become genuinely missional, but it is a 'change lever' and denominations are unlikely to become missional without investing in church planting and allowing this to shape their future.