

SCOTTISH BAPTIST LAY PREACHERS' ASSOCIATION

Introduction

Like all good Scottish Baptist preachers, let me begin my 2009 Report with an illustration!

Flying with Ryanair from Prestwick Airport to various European cities such as Bergamo, Dusseldorf and Krakow, has for me, and my wife Adrienne, been an exciting activity over the last few years. Although I love flying once I get up to 36,000 feet, I do get slightly nervous beforehand sitting in the departure lounge at Prestwick Airport! Often I watch people who are more nervous than I am as we taxi out for take off: fidgeting, double checking, triple checking their seat belt, and reading the in-flight magazine for the umpteenth time! As the plane roars along the runway, gathering speed, they get more and more tense, holding on to the edge of their seat and in white-panic they stare straight ahead. Finally, at that moment of take-off, they lift themselves off the seat! Now what they think they're doing is that they are 'helping' the plane get off the ground. Next time you fly, observe any nervous passengers. It's true.

How can one person by 'lifting themselves' off the seat, get the plane with all the fuel, all the passengers, all the luggage and the weight of the plane itself off the ground? Simple answer is they can't. And yet we have churches the length and breadth of Britain, who are trying to fly under their own power. We will never get off the ground, as lay preachers, as a constituency of Scottish Baptists, without the power of the living God and the energising of the Word of God.

Convictions

With the above flying illustration in mind, more and more as I've served as Secretary and in my own preaching ministry, I've become utterly, indeed increasingly, convinced of the absolute importance of preaching and the need for the Word of God to be central in our lives as Scottish Baptists. To be a preacher of God's Word is, without doubt, a high calling and great privilege, but we must guard against what I perceive as a discernable trend away from true Biblical preaching towards an experience-centred, pragmatic and topical approach in the pulpit.

Despite creative and innovative means which some churches have implemented in order to be more relevant, 'seeker friendly' and livelier (albeit in and of themselves these means can have a place), not only have these by and large failed to attract the 'unchurched', but have led to a decline in existing church attenders. My core belief is that a prime cause for this decline is that of a 'watering down' and a relegating to the sidelines of what needs to be absolutely central to the ministry and mission of any church: the preaching and teaching of the Word of God.

Preaching is increasingly seen, when set against the jazzy backcloth of the multi-media, Facebook, Twitter and iPod generation, as being 'old hat', past its sell-by date, dull and boring. If that is the case, to be engaged in preaching today, committed to studying and preaching the Word, creatively yet wisely showing its relevance in a contemporary Scotland, is not only an immense privilege and challenge, but calls for men and women who are counter-cultural and who take time to listen to what God is saying.

We need to re-affirm our confidence in God's Word, communicate it faithfully and fearlessly, remain faithful to the text and relevant to the listeners, so as to teach the mind, touch the heart and target the will. As we communicate the ever relevant Word of God through the foolishness of preaching, we must be visual rather than verbal; daring rather than diluted; relevant rather than redundant; creative rather than conservative; positive rather than pessimistic; selective rather than submerged, radical rather than restrictive and directive rather than diffusive.

The upward trend in applications for membership of the Scottish Baptist Lay Preachers Association has therefore been most encouraging, particularly with a number of younger men and women becoming part of the growing network. Increasingly, in partnership with every Scottish Baptist church, the Scottish Baptist

Lay Preachers' Association, wants to play its part through the service and ministry of its members in helping to grow healthy churches, where the Word has its rightful place.

Membership

At the time of writing we have 81 members, well on our way to achieving the objective set in 2007 of having 100 members by 2010, so that we can better resource and serve the Scottish Baptist constituency well. That is our principal desire. During 2008/2009, since my last report, we have welcomed to the Association Sasha Cheprasov (Wigtown), Jim Ewing (Bearsden), Iain Gillespie (Aberdeen Christian Fellowship), David Holland (Ayr), Graham Kinloch (Bearsden), Kenneth Laing (Tillicoultry), Eric Macarthur (Dalbeattie), Florence Mackenzie (Aberdeen Christian Fellowship), James Mackenzie (Aberdeen Christian Fellowship), Allan Macleod (Tillicoultry), Debbie Meehan (Ayr, Southside), George Ramsay (Springburn), Eric Renfrew (Cathcart), Graham Revie (Cumbernauld, Broadwood), Alan Stirling (Calderwood, East Kilbride) and Andrew Wright (Dedridge).

A few resignations were received during the year, Gordon Baillie (St Andrews), Mark Donaldson (Peterhead) and Andrew Hill (Peebles). Joe Conroy (St Ninians, Stirling) was removed from membership due to personal circumstances, and Douglas Craig (Adelaide Place) 'graduated' in that was ordained to the ministry in January! Shawn White (Duncan Street, Edinburgh) also left us in June to take up an academic teaching post in the United States.

Committee

Foundational to the effective ministry of any organisation is its leadership, and the Committee have worked well during the year as we have carefully considered initiatives, taken time to wisely reflect on issues and made necessary decisions. The present Committee comprises Jim Brownlee (Stenhouse Gorgie), Jim McFarlane (Kirkintilloch), Jim McNulty (Perth), Alan Milnes (Leslie), Andrew Page (Greenock), Iain Telfer (Irvine) and myself.

My predecessor, Fraser Mitchell (Partick) stepped down from the Committee in March after many years of sterling service, and we appreciate all Fraser has done and the contribution he has made. For personal reasons, Bob Leslie (Dumbarton) resigned from the Committee and early next year, Jim Brownlee (Stenhouse Gorgie) will stand down, having indicated his wish to do so. This will pave the way for fresh blood and fresh thinking.

It's been great to have worked closely during the year with Jim McFarlane, our President. Jim and I are very much on the same wavelength. He is a man I can do business with! Jim has provided wise spiritual leadership to the Association and we appreciate his time, his commitment and at a personal level, I have valued greatly his friendship, his support, his encouragement and his humour.

Council and Ministry Resource Group

An encouraging and healthy development is that with effect from Autumn 2008, the Scottish Baptist Lay Preachers' Association will be represented at Council, albeit it with discretionary participation, and will also be able to attend the Ministry Resource Group. Having these arrangements in place can only but strengthen and enhance the good working relationships the Scottish Baptist Lay Preacher's Association have established, and wish to develop, with Council, the Ministry Resource Group and the wider Scottish Baptist family. We place on record our appreciation to Rev Oliver Martin (Irvine), who for several years acted as our representative to the Union. However, with Oliver moving on, we discontinued what we did in the past in favour of a much more effective way of working with the Baptist Union of Scotland, building on the positive relationships established with the Ministry Advisor, the wider Union, and the Scottish Baptist College, in the last couple of years.

Statistics

Now if you're interested in statistics, you'll be encouraged to note that, during 2008, based on an 86% response rate, the Scottish Baptist Lay Preachers' Association undertook 1,161 services (as against 784 in 2007

and 539 in 2006), a most encouraging increase of 48% (or 377 services), of which 912 (or 785) were conducted on a Sunday, with the remaining 249 (or 22%) being midweek events of various kinds.

Of the 1,161 services undertaken, 775 (or 66%) of these were within 96 Scottish Baptist churches, 639 (or 82%) of which were on a Sunday, with the remaining 136 (or 18%) being again midweek events of various kinds. Compared to 2007 (537 services in 80 Scottish Baptist churches), this reflects a heartening increase of 44%. With 172 churches forming the Baptist Union of Scotland for the purpose of these statistics, this means that the Scottish Baptist Lay Preachers' Association was, during 2008, involved in preaching in 56% of them. Primarily, though not exclusively, the figures were higher where the church was/is vacant and/or where there is already a lay preacher presence. Going back to the 1,161 services undertaken, 303 (or 26%) were in other evangelical churches (as against 211 for 2007), an increase of approximately 43%, with the residue being those held in the context of camps, conferences, care homes and even a few on other continents!

Although the increase in figures is in part due to the new members who joined the Association in 2008/2009, it is also attributable to the fruitful relationships which the Association has worked hard to cultivate with many churches, as well as the heightened profile and repositioning of the Scottish Baptist Lay Preachers' Association within the mainstream of Scottish Baptist life.

Learning & Development

Tantamount to an effective preaching ministry, apart from the empowering of the Holy Spirit, is the Biblical basis to handle the Word of God wisely and well as found in 2 Timothy 2:15 : *"do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the Word of truth"*. Theological competence and intellectual vigour are important tools in the toolbox of preaching and married with the fact that we live in a pluralistic Scotland where there is a rebuff of anything that is absolute, a spiritually mosaic Scotland which excludes uniformity, and a knowledgeable Scotland which is sadly Biblically ignorant, the need for training, development and lifelong learning is a very real one indeed.

During the last year, we ran a series of five 'Preaching Workshops' on the first Thursday evenings of October, December, February, April and June at Stirling Baptist Church to make them as geographically accessible to as many as possible, looking at different facets of lay preaching. Facilitating these workshops were practitioners with a particular interest in the subject being unpacked, and these were Tony Sargent (Calling & Competence), Stuart Blythe (Relevance & Relic), Marion Carson (Living & Learning), Peter Grainger (Style & Structure), and Ian Leitch (Evangelism & Exposition). Evaluation of the workshops revealed that 82% of those who attended judged them to be an excellent investment of their time and 83% felt the content and pace of the workshops was just right.

Being launched in the Autumn, in partnership with the Scottish Baptist College and the Baptist Union of Scotland, will be 'Connect Four', a series of training workshops which will be held at Stirling Baptist Church, again to make them as geographically accessible to as many as possible, over four Saturdays in October, December, February and April, with four sessions in each : therefore sixteen overall, looking as lay preachers, with experienced practitioners who can speak with credibility and passion to the subject being addressed, at the areas of Preaching, Evangelism, Pastoral Care and Personal Spiritual Development. We are excited at the way this has come together and of the benefits which participating in it will undoubtedly bring.

Survey

Towards the tail end of the summer of 2008, aware of the need to be relevant to the life of Baptists in Scotland, we conducted an on-line survey, the purpose of which was to identify the value of the Association to the churches, and secondly, to act as a catalyst to stimulate change as appropriate. The findings were predominantly positive, and were published through a Connect Extra earlier in the year, with 47 churches responding, a 27% response rate. Undertaking the survey has given us a valuable snapshot into lay preaching/ lay preachers and the perception/value of the Scottish Baptist Lay Preachers' Association within the Scottish Baptist constituency. Changes, as a result of feedback churches gave to us, have already been

implemented in some areas. For others, more work is necessary before we can consider implementation, and to help us manage and implement changes effectively, Jim McFarlane and I attended a RUN Conference entitled 'Handling Change without Dying in the Process' at Orchardhill in April. We cannot do everything overnight or even in the broad sweep of a year. The old maxim of "Rome wasn't built in a day" holds true.

Website

Put simply, electronic communication is the way forward these days, and we want to be making increasing and effective use of technology, particularly through the vehicle of our website. Due in no small measure to the technical wizardry and midnight oil dedication of our first class webmaster, Phil Magee (Dingwall), we have been able to grow and develop our website - www.sblpa.co.uk - with a treasury of resources, news items, event reports and member articles. Informative and interesting not just for lay preachers, but for the wider Scottish Baptist constituency, it is kept relevant and bang up to date!

RUN

May saw us join RUN (Reaching the Unchurched Network) because being committed to the effective communication of the ever relevant Word of God, our aims dovetail very much with those of RUN : to effectively communicate Christ to contemporary cultures through resourcing with high quality ideas and imaginative material, and identifying and using effective forms of outreach to engage and communicate with 'the unchurched' as well as 'the churched'. RUN is unique in that it does not promote one single model of church practice, doctrine or structure, but enjoys the support of mainstream denominations, and we are happy to be members of it.

Conference

Perth Baptist Church was the venue for our annual conference in March, at which our guest speaker was John Brand. John presented two very challenging and inspiring sessions on 'Why Preach Expositorily' and 'The Top Ten Things to avoid in Preaching'. As well as the opportunity for lay preachers to share with each other, we once again enjoyed what has now become the must for any lay preachers conference : the steak pie lunch! Looking ahead to 2010, our conference will be held on Saturday 13th March at Stenhouse Gorgie Baptist Church at which our guest speaker will be Rev Edwin Gunn. Edwin is highly respected within our Scottish Baptist constituency, with a prophetic edge to his ministry, and we look forward to what will undoubtedly be an exciting day as Edwin shares with us.

Promotion

Because God deserves the very best, we want in all things promotion, to do things professionally, and do them well. Consistently we're looking at how best we can do so, and last year we produced a new promotional flyer and a presentation on the ministry of the Association, which were circulated to all churches and are available for download from our website, the latter of which is also available to download from YouTube!



But that is not all. We also produced, with photographs of each lay preacher, a Yearly Personal Profiles Directory, which is available for download from our website. Its purpose is twofold. Firstly, to paint for Pastors, Church Secretaries and those responsible for pulpit supply, a picture of the background, experience,

church connection, etc, of individual lay preachers as they consider who might be best suited to the type of service planned, and secondly, to highlight the rich tapestry of lay preachers involved in preaching, and to encourage others to develop their gifts in this area. And earlier this year, we launched our new logo which now appears on all documents we produce, to give that sense of, for want of a better term, 'corporate identity'. We want to pass on the Word of God and in the words of Psalm 78:4 : "*we will tell the next generation*".



Identifying those within our Scottish Baptist constituency who are involved in lay preaching, and encouraging them to be a part of the growing network of lay preachers is important, and we will continue to do this. Networking at the Baptist Assembly also provides connections and this year we will be giving a presentation on the ministry of the Association. In all these things, we want to continue to 'raise the profile' of the Association so that it becomes a ministry which every Scottish Baptist church can identify with and a resource they can draw from.

Future

To do all that needs to be done takes time. Change ought never to be rushed. Some changes we needed to make and we have done so. But it is right to take the time to do things properly and well, in a way that primarily honors the Lord, and benefits the Scottish Baptist Lay Preachers' Association and our wider Scottish Baptist constituency. We need to cherish all that has helped us in the past, yet embrace all the opportunities the future affords. Much work yet remains to be done and we have come a long way in the last few years.

Acknowledgements

Let me finish my report by saying 'thank you' : to the constituency that is the Scottish Baptist Lay Preachers' Association for allowing me to serve you as your Secretary, and to Brian More, my Pastor at Newton Mearns Baptist Church, for his encouragement. But above all my thanks must go to someone who is not a lay preacher, but who is always there as an inspiration, an encourager, releasing me to serve : my wife Adrienne. And in this year of all years, allow me to say 'thank you' to my amazing baby son, Lewis, for reminding me that 'nursing infants gurgle beautiful choruses about Father God' and communicate in a way that no lay preacher ever can.

GLEN P CARTWRIGHT
General Secretary