

# Grow your own Teaching Team

by Jon Garvey

## *The need for a teaching team*

One essential for a healthy church is a strong Bible teaching and preaching ministry. Michael Griffiths (*Ministry Today* #1) points out that a pastor should encourage the development of teaching gifts within his own congregation. But for many churches this is not only desirable but essential, for they have no trained ministry on which to rely. Many Anglican churches have lost their trained pastor. Many house-churches never had one. This is also the case in our church in Danbury, Essex, which like many is an independent evangelical fellowship with its roots in the Brethren movement. Perhaps our experience in the development of a ministry team may help those in a similar situation.

## *Assembling the team*

In 1987 we were fortunate enough to have gained a theologically trained full-time elder. He shared the pulpit with a number of those from the fellowship who had been preaching for years. It was not long before he decided that the standard was so appalling that he would take a group to one side and train them to preach.

In the event, the group had only just come together when the elder was called to another church, leaving them with no alternative but to train themselves. That first group of five consisted of a bank official, a mathematics teacher, a computer programmer, a doctor and a fund manager - not quite the "rude mechanics" of anabaptism in Baxter's day, but not graduates from Spurgeon's or Ridley Hall, either. Their experience of teaching came from a mixture of youth work, house groups and lay-preaching. Only two of the five were from the eldership.

## *Getting started*

From the start, it was felt that the church ought to have the benefit of serial, expository teaching, and the first project was to preach through Galatians - nobody was ever quite sure who had suggested it! The initial task was to provide an overview of the book, which meant each member studying it for themselves in the light of every commentary and teaching-cassette available to them. The group met (and still meets) at 8.00am every Saturday morning to pool their ideas, and to everyone's surprise a remarkable degree of unanimity emerged about the message of the book.

Thereafter, the letter was divided into "bite-sized" chunks, with each of the group being responsible for a passage in turn. Each Saturday, the relevant person would present his thoughts on the passage, and the others would add their own contributions. In the light of this discussion, he would prepare his message and deliver it, usually from 2-4 weeks later, giving plenty of time for further reflection.

## *Further developments*

Although the benefits of the exercise were very quickly obvious in the life (and growth!) of the church, it became clear over time that further training would be desirable. So over the years group members have availed themselves of such things as distance-learning (for example, that provided by *LBC*) and the Beginners' courses offered by *Proclamation Trust* (despite the disquieting experience of being the only person in the room without a dog-collar!). One member spent a year in South Africa getting a diploma in theology, though the worst effects of this wore off after a few months. All these opportunities have benefited the entire team, and the quality of the ministry as a whole.

From time to time people have moved on from the church, but the Lord has always provided replacements, and the team has remained at five (sometimes known as "the Pentateuch!") for most of

the time. Because there is no identifiable hierarchy, new members have fitted in very well, including our present full-time elder.

### ***Strengths***

The group has proved that God *is* able to equip an ordinary church with adequate teachers from its own ranks. There have been additional benefits from the plurality of ministry.

The first is in breadth of insight, so that our Arminianism is checked by our Calvinists, our Conservatism by our Charismatics, and so on. This very variation, disciplined by the need to present a unified message, is an incitement to spiritual and doctrinal unity which is a living example to the church.

The second advantage of plurality is variety of style. We now wonder why any congregation should have to endure the same preacher week in, week out when they can have scholarly, impassioned or down-to-earth approaches from the same pulpit, all grounded in the same basic scheme.

The third advantage is in workload; a significant factor when teachers have other employment, but also a blessing when it comes to illness, holidays or sabbaticals.

The fourth advantage is that one can consider church-planting with every expectation of transplanting a viable ministry of the Word from the start.

### ***Weaknesses***

It is hard to say from our experience that there are serious weaknesses inherent in this concept, at least when one considers the alternative of *not* doing it in a church without a trained pastor. Our main frustration is the lack of time to pursue theological study, but this must be common to many busy ministers. We are also concerned from time to time that we ought to be more critical of each other's delivery, though the fact that there is *any* feedback would be disquieting to some full-time people. Indeed, feedback from the congregation (usually positive, always constructive) is quite common, and is encouraged. The perception that work and discussion has gone into the teaching ministry, I believe, engenders responsible learning, and encourages others to undertake their own ministries.

### ***Conclusion***

The development of our teaching team can hardly be called "an experiment", because it was largely born of necessity and providential accident. No doubt similar (and better) models exist elsewhere, but ours has at least helped to transform the life of Danbury Mission for the better, and for this we thank the Lord, who after all has promised to equip his church.

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