

# **THE EXTRAORDINARY IN THE ORDINARY**

## **The No 1 Priority**

I think there is a case for saying that this is a really good church, it has a purpose and we know what it is. “ To declare God’s praise; to develop Christian disciples, to demonstrate Christian love”. We have a set of values that we say make us the people God has called us to be. We are a Gospel people; We will be motivated by God’s free gift of love in all that we do. We will be real as we care for one another and work together. We will serve those in the local community and beyond with integrity and love. We will share the Good News of Jesus with anyone who does not know him. We will identify, develop and use our God given gifts. We will be good stewards of our time, talents and possessions. We have a vision statement that we believe is God’s best for us, and as we seek this vision God will be able to work in us and through us. We believe this vision gives us direction and it has served us well. Because of vision we have seen the church flourish, we have seen the number of ministries grow - we have well over twenty different ministries; ministries to all age groups in a wide variety of activities.

This is a church that is, according to all the statistics, bucking the national trend. Nationally church attendance and membership is falling - in this church it is the opposite. This church is growing. We have more members now than ever before. We are bucking the trend with children and youth ministry too, children and young people nationally are leaving the church faster than they’ve ever done. In this church we have about one hundred and fifty children and young people each week, and that does not include those who attend Parents and Toddlers. There are 12 different groups in children and youth ministry - all with a slightly different focus and range of activities. This is a church where many people serve using their God given gifts. Sixty four people serve in one way or another in Children and youth ministry alone. We have a different set of musicians every week because we have so many gifted people who are willing to serve. We have people who will preach and lead in other churches - today Dave Lindridge is at Greenfields Baptist Church doing just that.

I could go on and on and give examples from all the ministries of the people who are willingly to serve. This church has a gifted, dedicated and growing staff team. One of the reasons that the church is growing, is because of the development of the team, different people with different gifts, released to serve where they are at their best.

Last week we celebrated the 124<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the church - and the 4<sup>th</sup> anniversary of moving into this building. When Rob May came to speak, he said we have been and continue to be, an inspiration to the folk at Horley. They are on the journey we have been on - we’re just a bit ahead of them, and it’s been an incredible journey - hasn’t it? As a community we have raised 1.9 million which I think is extraordinary. People have made sacrifices to achieve that - in some cases huge personal sacrifices. Out of that we have been able to give away £ 145 000 in tithe money to help other churches with redevelopment projects. We have been able to help our brothers and sisters in Hunedoara build - literally - their church. We have been able to help 13 churches in the UK who are redeveloping their buildings. Four of those being churches in Crawley. We have been able to help five other organisations with donations to their work for the Kingdom, and we have been able to help Spurgeon’s College where I trained - as they continue to train men and women for service in the church.

This building is being used more and more by groups outside of the church, We currently have a slimming world; a debt advice group; a serving group; an anti natal depression group; an art group and creative memories using the building regularly. We have been asked by a local Bangladeshi community if they can use the premises to teach English to their community! We are having real problems cleaning the building because there's hardly any time it can be cleaned! The phone never seems to stop ringing - and Clare and Carol do a great job fielding the callers and dealing with all the request and calls that come. The vision for the use of the building really is taking off! There is, it seems to me, a strong case to say that this is a good church, and I want to say that it is a good church especially if you measure it in these ways and I find it all extraordinary.

Here's an ordinary group of people - most of them followers of Christ and yet what they can do is extraordinary, but the question that haunts me is 'Is this all enough?' and more than that 'Is it biblical?' Genes 1 v 26 -31. Here God creates men and women crucially God creates men and women 'in our own image' men and women are the pinnacle of God's extraordinary creation and there is something of God in them. Scholars are still trying to figure out exactly what it means that we are created "in our image" but it does seem clear that it is a relational thing. Our image, not my image, like the relationship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that is the way we are created to live. Jesus' prayer in John 17, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, was a prayer about relationships, it is a prayer about unity and harmonious relationships but there are other places in scripture that seem to suggest the high priority God places on harmonious relationships.

A book I've been reading - Living Below chapter 2 -lists the following. The ten commandments are all relational verses; 1 to 4 are all about relationship with God; verses 5 to 10 are about relationships with people, and the point of the ten commandments is God saying to his beloved people - if you want to live well in community here's how to do it! It is estimated that 44% of the content of the epistles has to do with relationships. The epistles are letters written to the early church and nearly half of what they wrote about was directly to do with relationships. Within the church letters like 1 Peter talk about all the different kinds of relationships - within families relationships between husbands, wives and children - within work relationships between employer and employee and vice versa. - within the church congregation relationships between leaders to people; people to leaders and people to people. Within society relationships towards governments and towards our enemies. The Greek word 'alleles' is normally translated 'one another', 59 times it is used as part of a specific command. We are commanded to; love one another, to be devoted to one another, to accept one another, have concern for one another, carry one another's burdens, forgive one another, submit to one another, pray for one another and confess our sin to one another! The most often repeated command in the New Testament is "love one another".

When Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment is ... he answers "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbour as yourself. What are the qualities of love? Paul says that love is two things; it is patient and it is kind. They are both relational responses to those around us, he also tells us what it is not; it is not boastful, or proud, or rude, or easily angered or self seeking, it keeps no record of wrongs and it delights in the truth, again relational responses to those around us.

Simply put, love is being committed to the highest good of one another, and Paul says - without love we are nothing. We could be the biggest growing church in the country .. but without love

.. We might have the biggest children's and youth ministry ... but without love .. We could have the best and most gifted staff team in the history of the church .. but without love.. We could have everybody serving in their area of gifting .. but without love.. We can raise £ 1.9 million and be able to give £ 145,000 away .. but without love.... We could have the best building of the churches in the town - one that many people want to use .. but without love.... Maybe we are a good church .....but without love ..

I spend time regularly with a friend and we talk about church, he is a man who has a wide experience of church and is regularly asked to speak at Spring Harvest, he tells me that the biggest churches are not always healthy churches, those with massive programmes, great speakers, lots of money and huge attendance because, he will say, they have the wrong priority. The No. 1 priority for God it seems - is harmonious relationships.

We can fool people that we have a good marriage when really we know it's not true, we can look like we are a team player, when really we just want to do our own thing in our own way. We can say we support our leaders, but we never speak to them, encourage them, thank them or turn up! We can say we are a good church but continue to gossip about people we don't like, we can say we agree but hold that critical spirit in our heart. We can say we forgive but hold un-forgiveness in our heart. We can say we appreciate the gifts that others have but remain competitive towards them. We can say relationships are important but never invest in them.

It seems to me a really good church will be a vibrant family, one where there are extraordinary relationships among ordinary people, because the ordinary people have grasped the No. 1 priority that is on God's heart. So ... how about this church?