

Apostolic leadership and congregational principles – reflections for discussion

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A context of writing

This essay is written from and for a specific context. It is a theological reflection that seeks to understand developments within Mainstream – a Word & Spirit Network, to fulfil its stated purpose. In September 2006 a gathering of leaders connected with Mainstream met to consider that purpose. Its working document stated:

Mainstream is a Word and Spirit network of missionary leaders and churches intent on making missionary disciples (A missionary disciple is one who pursues the life & aims of the Kingdom as a priority in every walk of life). This will be implemented through apostolic leadership & ministry, mutual accountability, friendship, support, and provision of the necessary resources both human & material.

In order to implement this it further identified a number of structural and others factors requiring specific attention.

...this purpose will involve a major rethink on the selection, release and training of local church leadership teams; membership; church meetings; the nature and leadership of small groups and, of course, mission.

Subsequent reflection in a time of prayer and fasting identified a number of mechanisms by which Mainstream would seek to develop purpose into reality.

1. Apostolic leadership
2. Prophetic steering
3. Regional gatherings
4. Local discipling leadership groups
5. Local models & national campaigns
6. Use of time of apostolic team

Within that time of prayer and fasting it was also suggested through a prophetic word that we should look at the place and practice of church meetings as part of the journey we were on. This was already mentioned in the quote above. This essay is one attempt to understand theologically the direction in which Mainstream is currently moving. It tries to connect its stated purpose as an apostolically led and prophetically steered movement, with its historical setting within a congregational tradition of church governance. I am not offering an academic paper but rather sharing some personal reflections for discussion. It would be best to regard these thoughts as pieces of equipment for the journey that is being undertaken, some of which may be useful, others less so or not at all. Time and practice will do its sifting work.

Apostolic and prophetic ministry - a textual starting point

I want to use Ephesians 2:19-20 as a biblical starting point for Mainstream's aspiration with regard to apostolic and prophetic leadership.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

This text is a statement concerning the events of the early Christian mission as it crossed over from being primarily a Jesus-movement sect within Judaism, to becoming a trans-ethnic inclusive community, fulfilling the Old Testament prophetic hope of a gathering of Gentiles

into God's purpose in some way. Paul felt that way had been revealed within his generation, and in this passage states that 'God's household' was practically founded on the effective functioning of apostolic and prophetic ministry, whilst its focus and integration was Christ Jesus. The traditional exegetical interpretation of this verse is historical. In other words the foundation process to which Paul referred was a once and for all period, a time when God's Church was founded on the ministry of the New Testament apostles and prophets. From this ministry not only a community, but a tradition and institution were formed. Subsequent generations build on that foundation and look back to their ministry and seek to be faithful to that inheritance. Whilst not denying the truth within this interpretation, I assume in this essay that Paul writes with a broader and more dynamic understanding of apostolic and prophetic ministry, which has on-going expression in every generation.

Justification for a broader interpretation is found in connecting this text with what he states later. In what has been labelled 'the fivefold ministry' by popular charismatic exegesis, Ephesians 4:11 indicates that Christ's victorious filling of 'all things' has resulted in a new kind of leadership. Whilst I am aware of recent attempts to understand these five gifts as primarily gifts for all members of the Christian community, and not about leadership as such, I remain persuaded of the widespread exegesis that this verse refers to leadership¹. The context of Paul's argument at this point, is offering an alternative understanding of human social unity and its effects, which contrasts with the Roman imperial boast illustrated by phrases like 'peace and security'.² Paul is saying that far from there being an effective unity in Roman society, in these small, burgeoning communities that include Jew and Gentile, there is a social demonstration of the gospel's power. What's more, the effectiveness of the reconciliation between Jew and Gentile is demonstrated precisely at the point where Rome with all its power failed to integrate Jews into the imperial dream. Of course a strong eschatological framework operates throughout this passage and the rest of the letter, as indeed in the whole of Paul's mission and his theological interpretation of it. Apostles and prophets are a part of this new way of God operating. A new age has dawned in Christ, and a new way of human relating has come into being.

But this 'mystery', as Paul calls it, of a new oneness disclosed by Christ, far from eradicating the individual's contribution, has inaugurated a movement of grace 'to each one'. This is underlined in his adaptation of Psalm 68:18, a skilful and imaginative reapplication of a text. The adaptations couldn't be more revealing. First rather than Yahweh receiving gifts from the subjugated, as in the Hebrew text, now Christ's spiritual victory has released a spirit of generosity and dispersal of 'plunder' amongst the ordinary people. Second, Paul plays with the text as he imagines its silent background, pointing out an implied movement of descent in servanthood, which he argues must be assumed behind the word 'ascended'. Third, subjugated people are not taken captive, but rather captivity itself is taken captive. The adaptations would have been especially weighty for those with knowledge of the original text, but the imagery would have been full of resonance for all his readers. They knew only too well how imperial military policy operated amongst subjugated people. The only movement here was the ascent of aggrandisement, and the only flow of plunder was towards Rome and the already wealthy elite, away from those already poverty stricken. And supporting this political and military policy, was the simultaneous development of Roman ideology through the imperial cult. Since Octavius' victory and the advent of the Augustan order, the Eastern empire had been especially quick in its uptake of imperial emperor worship. There was a lot of 'ascent' going on in cities like Ephesus. But it was only ever onward and upward for the Emperor himself. Public space had been reshaped and rebuilt in the period prior to the New Testament with the imperial cult given pride of place. But Paul envisages the young communities he had seen formed, as places where an alternative and diametrically opposing dynamic operated. The movement came from the Christ who had descended and was now

¹ On the interpretation of the fivefold ministry as for all Christians see M Breen & W Kallestad, *The Passionate Church*, Eastbourne, Kingsway, 2005, and M Breen *The Apostle's Notebook*, Eastbourne, Kingsway, 2002

² See 1 Thessalonians 5:3, which has been recently understood as a direct quote of the imperial propaganda machine. On this whole theme see the paradigmatic collection of essays in R Horsley, *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, Harrisburg, Trinity Press, 1997

ascended, liberally sharing gifts of grace amongst each and every member. And the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers were enablers so that 'all of us' enter the benefits of a unity that effects maturity by means of these communities. This is the opposite of imperial elitism that benefited the tiny minority whilst keeping the vast majority subservient, fawning for preferment through the patronage system.

I want to suggest that unless we highlight Paul's understanding of gifts and ministries as expressions of an alternative dynamic within a counter imperial community, we will miss the fundamentally anti-elitist way of life being developed in these new communities. Paul admittedly continued to be shaped in certain respects by a traditional patriarchal ethos, not least within this letter. However, we fail to appreciate the breakthrough in social relations he was making in the formation of these communities, unless we appreciate just how radical and earthed was his application of the new age of Christ within a set of social relations expressed in mutually upbuilding ministry. What's more, unless we do appreciate this, we will be unable to integrate adequately the range of New Testament material and the nuancing it requires. A failure to engage with such a subtle interplay leads to a bifurcation of different understandings of leadership for church communities today. Whilst on the one hand there are traditions that have grasped a fundamental egalitarianism rooted in the traditions of the early Church, others have openly espoused a restoration of a now rediscovered biblical 'order for leadership', which however dressed up in language of servanthood, has a hierarchical leaning. The former option has failed to appreciate the nature of the authority of leadership that the new age of God's Kingdom requires, whilst the latter option fails to understand the radical social re-ordering that the new age requires. It is the interplay of both these dimensions that Mainstream wants to explore afresh in our generation. Before moving to how this might play out within a Baptist tradition, there is another question we need to ask of our textual starting point if we are to avoid an ill-fitting transposition across two millennia.

Within Paul's radical and subversive new order, apostles and prophets were foundational. Why? Or more precisely, why them in particular rather than all five? The way I want to express this is around the concept of *movement through time and space*. It strikes me that these two, as distinct from the evangelist, pastor or teacher, have a particular role in grasping how the current manifestation of the arrival of God's Kingdom affects God's people as a God-conscious movement through time and entering of space. Paul expresses this sense of movement in time, when he outlines the nature of the mystery revealed to the people of God in Ephesians 1:9-10. The sense of destiny being unfolded in time is strong in these verses, and the purpose of it all is 'to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.' The Church is God's eschatological community, which in its own expression of unity, bears witness to the final unity of all things. It should therefore be the community that is consciously alert to shifts of the historical process, and how God's way is to be manifested within that changed set of circumstances. Thus in Mark's 'little apocalypse' the community is to be attentive – the repetition of 'watch' and being 'on guard' – to such a reading of history and the consequent shift of policy (Mark 13:14). Prophets are those that see the ways in which God's Kingdom is coming towards us. They in Shakespeare's phrase 'take upon's the mystery of things, as if we were God's spies' (King Lear V.3). They express a way of faithfulness to this future in the light of the tradition received from the past. They both criticise and energise. It involves criticism of current practice, which may have become hardened by a presumption that the community has understood the tradition. The prophet comes along and says, 'But have you thought about it this way?' They also energise as they open windows on the new way of the Kingdom that is coming now. They invite reimagination³.

Apostles are those who perceiving this, release God's people into that future by enabling them to turn concept or image brought by the prophet, into reality and action. They enter the space that Christ has already 'filled' in incarnation, redemption, resurrection and ascension (Ephesians 4:10). Or rather they enable the people of God to enter that space. Cultural space of the Gentile, filled in Paul's day or in ours through cross-cultural mission. Geographical space incarnated by communities of the Kingdom through church planting. Conceptual space that the broken or limited understandings of a culture leave vacant for the gospel to fill. |

³ On the function of the prophet see W Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*. Minneapolis, Fortress. 1978; *The Hopeful Imagination*. London, SCM. 1986

believe this is why the apostle and prophet are linked and are foundational in the Church's existence. They both have a particular ministry to help God's people understand where they are in the movement of the Kingdom as it unfolds in each generation in space and time. Because the Kingdom has both come truly in Christ and is still to come fully, the future lies open before us as invitation to faithful obedience. In concert the prophet and apostle apprehend and express God's alternative consciousness and order, and invite God's people to explore this other pathway. The Church therefore needs the prophetic and the apostolic to be expressed in every generation. The first task of apostolic and prophetic leadership is to define. They define reality as experienced now, the nature of the Kingdom arriving for which we have prayed, and the understanding of the gospel needed to offer genuinely good news to that time and place. They express God's alternative way of being, which is offered to humanity and they provide resources for implementation and action for God's people to produce evidence that it is possible to live this way. God's Church should be at the forefront of embracing that future, seeking to come into line with God's ultimate destiny. Without these two gifts the danger is always that the Church becomes lost in time, believing in the good news surely (evangelised), cared for in God's love certainly (pastored), and taught to be faithful to the received tradition definitely (taught), but probably getting stuck and unresponsive to the times in which it lives.

I will express this pictorially to capture and clarify what I am trying to say. The picture is of God's people on the journey towards the destiny that God has revealed in Christ for humanity. This, like all journeys, involves both time and changing geography, however much we desire to be transported to our destination in an instant. They are spread across the landscape, resting on the journey because rest must punctuate the rigours of the trek. Amongst the people are those that keep spirits up by telling people who want to join the crowd the good news of where they are travelling – the evangelists. This brings many to join the people. Others are caring for people's needs, which never stop whether resting or travelling – the pastors. Still others are explaining why they are on the journey, whence they have come, where they are going, helping people interpret their current situation – the teachers. But there are those amongst them who speak of the future that lies ahead, the next stage of the journey and the territory they are about to enter. They are the prophets. They have keen intuitive sense of the landscape that lies ahead. They are the 'seers' of God's future, with a clear sense of the next stage of the journey. Prophets are those who have an ability to transcend the current state of things. They take up positions often at some remove from the rest of the people. This is necessary because assumptions act as controlling perspectives amongst the group: 'This is how it is and therefore must be.' But prophets have an elevated perspective and are therefore able to see the horizon in the further distance. They sense it is God's perspective and dare to utter a word. But there is a problem. The rest has been prolonged because there is a sharp, deep ravine between them and this other landscape. Some are restive. Others are troubled and critical. They search for a way to cross but there seems no obvious or easy path. There are a few who listen carefully to the prophets' description of this other land. They are convinced there must be a way, and through their searching further down the ravine they discover a rope-bridge. It looks and feels dangerous. Surely this can't be the way. But they are so convinced they must move on to the next stage of the journey, they venture the thrill and challenge of the rope-bridge. They succeed and live to tell the tale by returning to announce to the people that there is a way across. Some are eager to go immediately. Others are sure there must be a safer way and that this seems madness. The majority are caught between aspiration and caution, between desire and fear. However, the apostles – as you've already guessed – are on the bridge shouting back to the people, 'Look it's safe. It's OK. Come on. It may be a little unnerving but it'll be worth it.' Already the early takers are saying similar things, and gradually more and more step on to the rope-bridge. This is my picture of the founding role of the prophetic and apostolic.

If this understanding is right it has implications for how we discern the present and future, while learning from the past. It's obvious conclusion is that not all leadership gifts have the same weight and value at critical moments discerning God's approaching Kingdom. Although it meant something different, the final image of *The Road Less Travelled* by Robert Frost captures for me what the apostolic and prophetic are as foundational ministries for the Church, especially at our time in salvation history.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.⁴

Our calling, especially now we have lost any pretension to set the agenda for wider society, is to choose the road less travelled. It is of utmost importance to foster the expression of such ministries. However, because we have been largely bound by a historical exegesis of this text, these ministries have been expressed through an oblique authority and under many different guises and offices. Whereas the recognition of such regular ministry by giving the name 'apostle' or 'prophet' to those exercising it, gives freedom for that ministry to be expressed as the authority of the Spirit is recognised within them.

The essence of congregationalism

But this is where, in our particular tradition, there is another factor that prevents such recognition. In fact some would say we run up against a widespread resistance. We'd rather call leadership by any name other than the names accorded ministry in the early Church! But we need to appreciate that the reason for resistance is strong. It is because our forefathers alighted upon a different aspect of truth, a truth that arose from the heart of the gospel. I am of course referring to the insight of congregationalism. My understanding of the essence of this insight is that if God's purpose of human redemption is to be realised, it requires free human spirits to realise the potential of their contribution within God's overall purpose (Ephesians 2:1-10). This freedom is entered into through faith in Christ's regenerating work by the Spirit's power, as we are ushered into the reality of being children of the Father. But this work is never only an interior spiritual experience, although this is its wellspring. It is formed within the person as we learn to live within community and express ourselves as part of the new humanity that Christ has brought into being. On a day-to-day level this is done through a process of mutual regard and affirmation, of response and if need be of giving way. By this means disciples grow to express the value they are, which they then bring to the human and cosmic project that God has for the whole creation. The local church should be that community where we learn to disclose the beauty of the ordinariness of each person, because 'the centre of our God is everywhere and God's circumference is nowhere'.⁵ So none should feel marginalized. In other words the Church is the sacrament of the unity of humanity in Christ and where we become sacramental to one another.

I express it this way, because I feel congregationalism is belittled if its starting point is a mechanism or method of church government. It turns the poetic into the prosaic and starts with a reductionist approach. We need an understanding of congregationalism that arises not merely from a spurious attempt to read a blueprint of church government from the New Testament, which is highly problematic, but one that arises from an understanding of the gospel. We also need to capture the excitement amongst our forebears in their revolt against systems of social organisation of church communities that destroyed social relatedness through false expressions of power operating over them or even amongst them. Whether it was an established state church that relied on the force of law to cajole and control or a hierarchical priesthood, they said a decisive 'No' to such distorting expressions of power within a community that should reflect the gospel, its Kingdom values and habits. They saw that Jesus, the apostles and New Testament witness expressed this in various ways. Whether it was the 'two or three gathered in (his) name' – a statement promising the release of spiritual authority and power through a dynamic of convergence. Or whether it was 'the Spirit poured out on all flesh' – the true democratisation of spirituality for the many and not the special few. Or whether it was being 'joined and held together by every supporting ligament as each part does its work', or the profligate application of 'one another' to various verbs in the letters of the New Testament. In all these, the vision is not of a priestly class doing something for, on behalf of, or to the people, but the people themselves released into their potential as human beings indwelt by God's Spirit of life. This is fundamental to the Christian gospel. Our

⁴ The Poetry of Robert Frost, London, Jonathan Cape 1972 p.105

⁵ A beautiful phrase repeated in his insightful book by Timothy Radcliffe OP, *What's is the Point of being a Christian?* London & New York, Burns & Oates, 2005

forebears were right to give this primary emphasis because it expressed the social dynamic inherent within the gospel and sought to apply this to the way the community functioned. It refused to take seriously a 'No Entry' sign that told the saints to keep out of special areas of decision and power reserved for a special group. Whereas the role of apostle and prophet, whilst always foundational in the Church's formation and re-formation in the way described above, was only ever strategic and instrumental in helping this deeper teleological purpose into being.

This leads to the obvious conclusion that the apostolic and prophetic are the means, but by no means the end. On the one hand we have the horizon of the gospel's social vision of relatedness, the coming together of all things in Christ of which the Church is to be an embodied witness. On the other hand we have the horizon of the ministry of apostle and prophet, who are especially tuned to the coming Kingdom and the space to be occupied by the people, which has been occupied already by Christ. The secret is not to focus on one of these horizons whilst ignoring the other, but to 'fuse horizons' and so obtain a bearing by which we can navigate the way ahead. How might this be done? The short answer is not the diminishment of congregationalism or its rejection as restorationists advocated in previous decades, but its increase and dispersal, albeit in a transposed form. What do I mean?

Before I answer that question I will digress briefly to make one point relevant to the direction I want to take. The ground of the church meeting and its current state-of-health is well trodden and space does permit detailed consideration, although I have some specific points to make in my final section.⁶ My conclusion from years as a pastor is that whilst I still hold to the vision of congregational polity, I do not think our current traditional practice of it, is an adequate expression of genuine congregationalism. The original vision of a congregational order was one answer to the question arising in the post-Reformation period, 'How can we form a holy people?' Two things in particular have obscured the original purpose of congregationalism and our actual practice of it in recent history. First the legal construct that our later forbears adopted to become a constituted body of church members able to transact business within the public realm, has been a mixed blessing. It gave us liberty to transact that business but, I would argue, it distorted the purpose and original vision of congregationalism. Historically this came about when Baptists moved from being a persecuted body to being a tolerated and then legally recognised one. It liberated us to take our place within society at large, but it brought with it a certain legal requirement to operate in a certain way that had to be verifiable by due process. The church meeting was gradually overgrown by practices of a business meeting. Second, allied to this, but distinct and accelerating this process, was the wholesale adoption of habits and practices of liberal democracy within free associations, with its agenda, chairman, minutes, matters arising, proposals, proposer, seconder, tellers, votes, resolution etc. etc. The traditional church meeting with its specialised language and ways of operating, reflect far more its nature as a legal entity within a framework of law of our society, rather than the underlying theological purpose to form people after the likeness of Christ. The legal construct of congregationalism has squeezed the theological heart and pastoral vision of congregationalism.⁷ The recovery of this theological heart with its attention to the transformation of the human person within community, as it gathers regularly for conversation, prayer, listening and discerning, is territory we must continue to explore.

Releasing the apostolic and prophetic within congregationalism

Returning to the question of what it means to increase and disperse congregationalism I attempt to spell out what this territory looks like. If the distinction between the church meeting as legal construct and theological reality is acknowledged, it would be mistaken to connect the noun 'congregationalism' with a structure called 'the church meeting.' While we maintain this linkage I think we are in danger of missing the point of congregationalism. For instance if the Matthean saying of Jesus, 'where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them' is near the heart of congregationalism, which I believe, we immediately limit the meaning if this link is too direct and rigid. Its application is a lot broader, more far-reaching

⁶ See for instance *Talk: the Mainstream Magazine*, Summer 2003 'Church Meetings & Membership: have they had it?'

⁷ See my brief historical outline in *ibid.* Summer 2003, 'Beware the Construct'

than the monthly or quarterly meeting of members. Congregationalism is a way of being together as disciples of Christ. It is the belief and consequent practice that I need you, and you need me, and we need them, and they need us etc. It is a way of being human as followers of Jesus. When we live this way I have to first learn to find my true self, my authentic voice, what I believe, think and feel as a follower of Christ the true human. I must learn an appropriate *assertion* of myself. The story of the man born blind in John 9 is a vivid demonstration of this process. We hear the blind man first express himself only in verse 9 after he is healed through an act that completes an unfinished creation; surely the significance of John 9:6. In the early part of the chapter others talk about him and for him until he insists, 'I am the man.' He is one of the unheard and insignificant. As we trace this man's story he increasingly finds his voice until, he not only becomes a teacher of the teachers, but a believing, confessing worshipper. Therefore, Jesus not only heals but brings him 'in' from his state of exclusion to being a full member of 'Israel', unlike the outcome for the man at the hands of the Jewish leaders who end up excluding him (John 9:34). Their approach takes us nowhere. We are back where we started. Jesus' action demonstrates that to form a person's worth and significance is core to the disciple forming process. But alongside assertion and also at its core, I must learn to listen to you, so that you find your true self, your authentic voice, and I hear what you believe, think and feel as Christ's disciple. This requires the discipline of *yielding*.⁸ It is a way of being together that eschews the 'lording it' of hierarchy, where I manipulate you into following me, and the leader is identified as the person who gets as many as possible to do what he or she wants – invariably *he* in our circles. For this dynamic of assertion and yielding to take place there must be trust and safety.

Now the church meeting is many things but it is not often the place where blind people are heard into speech. Often it is not even a safe place where trust is the starting point. Frequently it's the same voices, the same types, the confident and articulate, and of course lengthy up-front presentations by leaders, leaving little time for genuine conversation. Most find church meetings intimidating and sit passively listening to the flying thoughts, catching a trapeze idea here, before another flyer hurtles in the opposite direction. Often the conversation is dominated by negative voices. The spreading epidemic of suspicion, rampant in our society, infects church meetings, with members suspicious of manipulation, and leaders suspicious or even fearful of members' contributions.⁹ My point is not that church meetings are wrong. Of course they are not, and the legal construct of the whole community needing to arrive at decisions from time to time by due process is to be safeguarded. But church meetings will only work effectively and, more important by far, achieve their true purpose as a dynamic contribution to human maturing, where the whole community at every level, is permeated by the habits of congregationalism in the way I've described. With this understanding *true congregationalism is expressed wherever, and whenever people meet and interact in this way*. It is primarily a way of being, not a way of deciding, although it becomes this from time to time. It is primarily a *habit*, not a *structure*, although it will need structural form regularly. One of leadership's functions is to seed and foster these habits throughout the community at every level. Congregationalism does not in the end depend on or is judged by whether it has a meeting called 'the church meeting.' Therefore by this criteria it is quite possible and in fact highly probable there are many churches that have church meetings that aren't congregational, and those that don't have church meetings that are congregational in a true sense. I want to argue strongly for what I will call '*habitual congregationalism*' as a counter to purely formal understandings of '*structural congregationalism*'.

This suggests the way in which any ministry, especially leadership ministries, should function within church, between church communities, and within wider society. It either operates collegially where habits of assertion and yielding function, or it does not have the ring of Kingdom authenticity. Jesus indicated that the functioning of power 'with you' within the community of the Kingdom is not to be like Gentile rulers (Mark 10:42-43). Rather we should cultivate an awareness of how power operates amongst us. The nature of power within the

⁸ On assertion & yielding in person and identity formation, see an essay on 'othering' by W Brueggemann *The Covenanted Self*, Minneapolis, Fortress. 1999

⁹ On the 'crisis of suspicion' within Western society see, Onora O'Neill *A Question of Trust: The BBC Reith Lectures 2002*. Cambridge, CUP. 2002

community is that it 'limpets' on to the ego of the individual. I know only too well that my ego is profoundly bound up in my ministry. All I have to observe is the way I respond to praise or criticism. Very different reactions but the same reality within me is being ignited. I need you and you need me, because we have to consistently subvert our egos. Power is the flip side of the ego searching for significance and recognition. This search needs consistent subversion. Of course within church communities we are not talking of great power. But it's precisely because we are 'nice' people, with strong motivations to do good, trying consciously to operate within a framework of servanthood, which makes us a 'sucker' within the tiny power games of church life, oblivious of how it operates within us and on our egos. I am not saying power is wrong, but I am saying power is fact. And unless I operate with this awareness, I will become a sucker for power, and power will suck out genuine spiritual authenticity. So no matter what leadership gift I express through ministry, the same principle applies. It must be done within a collegial context. More important than what I do or the project that I am excited about at the moment, are the questions of who I am and who I am becoming, who we are and are becoming.

The conclusion of this habitual understanding of congregationalism as a human way of being together, is that it should be dispersed throughout every dimension of church life, and should operate at every 'level' of leadership and decision making. If the habit of congregationalism operates, there need be no fear of the apostolic or prophetic, or any other expression of leadership. In fact they will be received from the once descended, but now ascended Christ, as valued gifts plundered through the victory over principalities and powers by his subversive self-giving on the cross. All merely human understandings of leadership are criticised by this redemptive act. My suggestion is that apostle and prophet express ministries without which the Church cannot adequately function as God's community called to be faithful in space and time. However the context within which these leadership gifts operate will be the full fivefold expression of ministry. Without these other dimensions interacting with the foundational gifts, there will be a tendency for the community to become distorted. But a community operating on the foundation of the apostle and prophet will express a definition of leadership, which captures so much of what I am arguing for here.

"Leadership is the communal process of discerning the surprising newness of God for His people and then forming the vehicle, cultivating the imagination, and selecting the practices to take them from where they are into God's good future."¹⁰

This is a sharp description of a communal process founded on apostolic and prophetic ministry. I would want to hold a broader understanding of leadership as a communal process, one including the three other dimensions of leadership. My instinct is that leadership described only in terms of 'surprising newness', of 'the vehicle' etc. 'to take them...into God's good future', will lead to a community in perpetual motion. Other ministries that foster dynamics of stabilization need to be at work in the communal process of leadership, notably those of pastor and teacher, and the addition of new believers that come through the leadership of evangelists.

Suggestions for an apostolic and prophetic agenda

Mainstream believes the expression of apostolic and prophetic ministry today within congregationalism is important and urgent if we are to equip our leaders and churches for the rapidly changing demands of ministry and mission today. It requires a vocabulary that unashamedly uses language drawn from the Bible to describe actual functions of leadership ministry, rather than falling back into the safe language of office that is weighed down by traditionalistic understanding e.g. elder, deacon, minister or worst of all General Secretary (this says it all). Ephesians 2:20 and 4:11 are a good starting point. What would an agenda look like based on the apostolic and prophetic? It should be concerned about God, church and world. These are a few personal suggestions for consideration under Mainstream's three core values.

¹⁰ My thanks to Nick Webb for drawing this to my attention from a blog of Len Hjalmanson, nextreformation.com

Passionate about God

- It will be concerned about presenting people mature in Christ (Colossians 1:28). Therefore its particular role must be about forming church leaders to form people in church communities as missionary disciples. This requires a highly relational approach. The issue here is not organisational or managerial and definitely not about professional development and competency in the first place. Just as our forebears were saturated with the dominant culture of liberal democracy which has had huge impact upon our church meeting culture and left David wearing Saul's armour, so today we are fascinated by the dominance of the corporate culture. Consultants and the language of vision and the latest management guru are all pervasive. We must hold close to our primary calling, which is to form human beings in the likeness of Christ. This is why Mainstream has opted to adopt at least some of the core *LifeShapes* for use in developing small groups of leaders.¹¹
- It will prioritise a decision-making environment where prayer, seeking God and his voice is central to our way of discerning and deciding. I am somewhat sceptical of what committee, focus-group or merely application of management-leadership approaches can deliver i.e. the whole technique of generally how we approach decision-making in our culture.
- It will impart an alive-spirituality. In a society that is increasingly surface and image driven, the need is for us to go on the inner-journey to form the true self. I am here arguing for something more than charismatic spirituality, as important and good as this is. It nurtured many of us and we are deeply indebted to the way it delivered us from an over-cerebral Christianity. But I am arguing for a new catholicity amongst us to the wealth of resources within God's Church that has distilled wisdom from the centuries to help in our walk with God.
- It will seek to reform our inadequate worship liturgy. Too often it is individualistic, sentimentalised, only experientially focussed, largely post-ascension whilst neglectful of creation, lament, incarnation and ethics, with endless encouragement to praise for no adequate reason. This is a liturgy that unwittingly reinforces a key aspect of Western culture, therapeutic individualism, and little that consciously or deliberately subverts this dominant driver of our lives.

Real in relationships

- It will seek to re-establish the language and the habits of meeting together in relationships of friendship and solidarity, which have been lost to us over previous generations. I was trained and released into ministry, exercising the majority of my ministry without healthy and honest relationships. I was in 'minister fraternals' that were talk-shops where we hid behind professional conversations. It was lonely, unaccountable and friendless. We must admit we do not have the kind of relational infrastructure necessary to deliver on-going healthy formation of human beings seeking to minister according to the gospel of the Kingdom. I do not believe this can be managerially organised into being. It can only be modelled and loved into existence, providing contexts where companionship which mixes story-telling with personal and theological reflection in an atmosphere of mutual respect and fun.
- It will focus on developing a culture of mutual respect and release of one another's leadership ministries, and it will be willing to reform the way we discern and decide together as church meetings. I develop the latter more fully in the final section below

Stuck into God's mission

- It must be about the reform and care of the gospel we preach and teach. The apostle is formed and bound by the gospel and the apostolic task is intimately linked with gospel. This is a theological task, and apostolic ministry must enable leaders to have on-going theological conversation. I believe there is much evidence that we have become lazy with our gospel.¹²
- It will press further the renewal of evangelicalism in terms of integrating evangelism, social concern with community engagement. In addition it will explore what the politics of

¹¹ See *The Passionate Church* n.1 above and stream247.com

¹² I have written briefly on this in a short article, 'A Lazy Gospel' *Talk: The Mainstream Magazine*, Autumn 2006

the Kingdom of God looks like.¹³ The lead given over poverty issues through Jubilee 2000 and Make Poverty History campaigns are examples of the way the politics of the Kingdom might operate. There is continued work on this agenda, on human trafficking and sexual exploitation, on the environment, on what it means to be a community of peace, and on overcoming the suburban-urban ghettoisation in which our churches are caught. There are many other issues besides these that the Spirit will bring to our attention. It is only as we go on this journey that we will have the authority and stimulate the imagination to engage in symbolic acts and movements that witness to and resonate with the deeper aspirations of our culture. The Church's most powerful times of evangelisation have been when it has acted with prophetic symbolism. We must rediscover the power of symbol.

- One such area that I believe could have powerful long-term, if not immediate, dramatic symbolic impact, is a sustained practice of neighbourliness by members of our churches. In a period when in society at large we are reaping the whirlwind of repeated sowings of thoughts and habits of individualism, as followers of the Christ who made the love of neighbour central in his Kingdom vision, we have good reason to form people with habits of the heart and life, to work for the good of neighbour and community. This is more than individually doing good and being kind. It is acknowledging that Jesus made the formation of the multi-ties of neighbourliness a way of being a people of the Kingdom that leavens society. It was a social vision as well as being a personal ethic. At a personal level there is little to resist this whirlwind in a society asked to worship daily at the altar of a largely unbridled market system. The church is one of very few places today that can form people to live for the public good and the common-wealth, not because of some contractual arrangement, but because this is the right and proper way of human existence. As social capital reduces and the will to maintain our collective way of being together withers, the church has an open field to occupy as builders of community across the socio-economic and culture boundaries of society.

Habitual congregationalism as a critical tool for church structures

Finally I share some reflections on the need for more self-awareness within our own congregational tradition. The model of habitual congregationalism can be used to critique structural congregationalism. This is an apostolic and prophetic task. The prophet has a calling to question the hardening of tradition towards fixity. I think that one of the things I have found lacking amongst Baptists throughout my ministry is a lack of critical reflection amongst denominational leaders with regard to our own tradition and practice. Such has been the level of anxiety to maintain the Baptist tradition in a period of post-institutionalism and consequent development of a post-denominational mindset, the conversation amongst us in this area has been marked by defensiveness rather than permitting or, dare we hope, encouraging experimentation.

First, I assume as we seek to guard the practice of congregationalism in our tradition we move beyond judging church leaderships on the basis of whether they have a minimum pattern of church meetings in any given year. Examination of whether a church has departed from congregational ecclesiology must be judged more on the basis of ethos and habits, than by what meetings it has, how often they meet, the content of agenda of those meetings, and whether it has votes or not. We are not here to defend one member, one vote. This would be a defence of liberal democracy, not the nuanced working of the body of Christ. One could argue that voting is for the *bene esse* (well-being) of the community, a check – but no more – that ensures freedom within that community, but it is not of its *esse* (being). I can understand that trusteeship lands us with difficult issues here, but if we were able to articulate congregationalism primarily in theological and spiritual terms of a vision of relationships, rather than of governance and quasi-legal operation, then we might have useful and mutually informing discussions amongst us. This should not be heard as an attempt to dispense with church meetings, which I believe are useful in maintaining due process and free communities

¹³ A masterly study that encourages re-engagement with the Christian tradition and its political perspective, see Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the roots of political theology*. Cambridge, CUP. 1999

in key decisions that the community makes. Rather it is a plea that the mode of conversation modulates into an appropriate key when such delicate matters are being explored. I take it for granted that our denominational leaders operate in this way by instinct.

I believe we have common practices amongst us that are at variance with true congregationalism. For instance I have long thought the widespread mechanism by which we appoint deacons or elders is deeply flawed theologically. Thus the annual election (or re-election) of deacons is announced. Nominations are requested by a certain date. Members approach those they think worthy to fill these places. They are duly nominated and seconded, and announcement of nominations a number of Sundays preceding the election. At the church meeting the 'Election of Deacons' is a major item, usually bringing out a slightly larger attendance than usual. In larger churches there might be some introduction of the various candidates to inform all members who we are talking about. The Chair suggests that for such a significant matter it is right that we pray before members exercise their vote. There is usually a clichéd prayer about the Spirit guiding us at that moment and for the candidates as they put themselves into this vulnerable position. Tellers appointed. Vote taken. Minutes later, having gone on to later agenda items not to waste time, those reaching the required percentage – invariably everybody who's been nominated – are declared elected. More prayer for those that will serve. Hugs and kisses after the meeting etc. etc.

Where did all this come from? And all in the name of good congregational practice! I can think of nothing here that is good congregational practice. This is a system of false democracy dressed up in spurious congregational sentiment and spiritual sentimentality. My difficulties with it are numerous. It perpetuates an immature understanding of how to discern leadership by short-circuiting the process through an easy method of decision-making. This is probably the most important regular decision the community takes, to discern those serving in leadership. However using this system requires the least amount of spiritual and pastoral discerning, because it delivers decision without any need of discernment. And human nature being what it is opts for the easy way. Of course, often there is something going on behind the scenes. If a minister has anything about them they ought to be doing something behind the scenes with such a broken system. But the point is, there should be transparency and accountability, not secrecy.

Second it gives free reign to unchallenged individualism, and congregational principles fall at the first hurdle. Third it permits without challenge, even darker movements in people's spirits that might be suspicious of or even antagonistic to current leadership. Hardly sound foundations for spiritual discernment. Fourth it is fundamentally elitist in that usually only confident and well-established church members nominate others, whilst the majority leave it to those who are considered better-placed to come to a judgement. I can think of no theological or practical reason for maintaining such a broken system.

Of course good and spiritually minded people using it often ameliorate it. But the point is spiritual discernment is fortuitous, not part of the process itself, and what's more it's open to abuse by the few and laziness on the part of the majority. Whereas if the habits and practices of habitual congregationalism were spread through the church at all levels, there would be an expectation of collegial discernment of members' gifts, ministries, characters and commitments. Also judgement would be made about the need within the church's leadership at this time. Are certain gifts, temperaments, gender and age-balance lacking currently? Are we sexist, racist, ageist, classist in our perspective of leadership and do we need to bring this out into the open? Within a community with a culture of habitual congregationalism there would be an expectation such spiritually discerning function would operate within the leadership. Someone might object and say what I am proposing is merely Presbyterianism. This is mistaken. I am not arguing that discerning and appointing leaders be handed over to a team of leaders. I am arguing for the whole community being encouraged to engage in this process. It is not beyond our wit to gather people's insights about individuals considered suitable, and this information is used in a time of genuine collective discernment by the church's leadership, before names of suitable candidates are brought to the collective consideration of the body. This essay is not the place to trail detailed systems of appointment. I have written at length on what might seem a point of insignificance, because I believe this system is probably symptomatic of a generally low level of honouring leadership. This I

suggest is pervasive within our tradition because of an ossified understanding of structural congregationalism. We get the leaders we deserve.

Finally the big idea behind congregationalism needs to find fresh expression and forms if it is to live healthily within larger church communities. It is commonly understood that many of our practices were formed within and suit well small church communities. However, many ministers of larger churches have found they ill fit their contexts. There is little help at national denominational level, facilitating the kind of conversation that needs to be taking place to find new forms of healthy congregational practice for larger churches.

I offer these thoughts as personal reflections. They are not the thoughts of Mainstream collectively. I hope they serve the on-going conversation and exploration.