

Sharpening the Union's mission focus

Simon Jones talks to Jonathan Edwards, General Secretary of the Baptist Union, about mission, obedience, contemporary worship and maximizing the potential of two thousand shop windows.

Most retailers would give their right arm for Jonathan Edwards' shop windows: two thousand strategically situated outlets in virtually every significant population centre in England and Wales. But as the board of Marks & Spencer and Sainsbury's know, having a presence is not as important as what you do with it; presence does not equal impact.

Baptists account for 8% of all churchgoers in England and 19% of free church attenders. But although 32% of Baptist churches grew in the period 1998 to 2005, the overall picture is still one of decline with attendance projected to dip to near 200,000 by 2020 – a loss of a third over 40 years.

Statistics can make people gloomy, but not Jonathan Edwards. He says that we need to look the numbers full in the face (if that's not too mixed a metaphor) and then get on our knees.

'We have huge resources,' he says. 'over 2000 shop fronts, 1700 ministers, a host of other gifted and willing people working away; two thousand distinctive and unique opportunities for making the gospel known. And we need to seize those opportunities with both hands.'

Jonathan has a seemingly simple, even disarming approach. The key, he argues, is being obedient to Jesus and that obedience begins and is resourced in prayer.

But having laid that simple foundation, Jonathan is then able to offer some quite sophisticated thinking about the nature of our society and the needs of our churches and, perhaps most importantly, given his role, how the Union can help churches rise to the challenges we all face.

'When people talk about missional,' he says, 'I want to know if anything new is being said. Our fundamental challenge is to be an obedient church – obedient to God's call to make Jesus known. If all we're doing is speaking trendy new language, I'm not interested. I'm interested in all of us being more effective in obedience to Jesus.'

'How can we help this to happen as a Union?' he continues, 'well, the Mission Department is clearly integrated into the lives of local churches, helping them to do their task more effectively. I'm so excited at the appointment of Ian Bunce to head this department because he is a real mission entrepreneur.'

Rising to his theme, the General Secretary continues: 'missional language is really the language of obedience to Jesus and so it's got to infuse everything we do as churches and as a Union. So all five departments in Didcot must be working for mission – not just the Mission Department. And my task is to keep people on message and ensure that it flows out through the regional associations to the churches.'

It's always been a tall order offering leadership to Baptists. As we all know, where you have ten Baptists in a room, you have 11 opinions – more if those Baptists are ministers! This is the reason Jonathan is keeping his language simple and his focus direct. As Ian Bunce says 'We need to do a few things well.'

Jonathan observes that most Baptist churches are prepared to be creative these days and argues that core Baptist DNA needs to be expressed differently in different places. This means that churches – especially their leaderships – need to know their communities as well as be on top of the major trends affecting society. What are these?

'Affluence, materialism, immediate gratification,' says Jonathan.

The church response to this, he says, 'needs to be deliberately eschatological, exploring the relationships between the now and the not yet, holding hope out to a people who see no worthwhile future. Furthermore, we need to be offering creative ways of exploring relationships and spirituality. The church must be avowedly counter-cultural.'

'Our trouble is,' he adds, 'that we've found ways of engaging with culture that have led to us being far too comfortably at home in that culture.'

We were speaking at the time when the Sexual Orientation Regulations were being debated in Parliament. 'I think our culture will become increasingly hostile to anyone or any group that believes anything strongly,' he observes. 'The SORs debate, the incitement to religious hatred bill and other recent proposals indicate that the Government really doesn't understand how this type of legislation denies people and communities the right to hold distinctive views.'

'In the name of tolerance, society is becoming very intolerant of strongly held views. People with strong views are always labeled fundamentalist. It's arguable that Government action in the area of human rights has been a bit crass,' he says. 'And our mailbag at the Union indicates that this is a real anxiety among people in our churches all over the country. We need to be talking about this to one another and to the world.'

Of course, many groups are doing this – groups like Faithworks and the Evangelical Alliance. On top of this, many churches around the country are forging growing links with local and national government for the provision of all kinds of social welfare. Intolerance of strong views is growing alongside these developing partnerships. Such is the complexity of our context.

Perhaps this complexity is part of another trend: we are becoming more spiritual as people at the same time as the national culture – especially the political culture – are seeking to become more secular.

'We're not successfully engaging with the spirituality of our day,' warns Jonathan. 'Alpha has been very helpful for us but we need to find other ways to meet with people to enable spiritual conversations to take place.'

At the heart of this, he thinks, is the whole issue of worship – by which he means (in this context) what we do when we gather for an hour or so on Sunday. 'Our gatherings are traditional,' he observes. 'Our chosen tradition at the moment is charismatic evangelical.'

'Many want and need a traditional service – whether that features new or old songs or a mixture of both,' he continues. 'This is good so long as these folk are nourished and built up in their faith – after all, that's the purpose in gathering. But this has no relevance to the rising generation.'

Jonathan is only too aware of how complex this issue is for individual churches – juggling the competing demands of various groups within a fellowship can be taxing in the extreme. He knows this from many years in local church leadership. But this should not stop us from wrestling with the issue and seeking a shape and pattern of gatherings that meets a variety of needs and offers a gospel to everyone.

'The need for security is a deep need,' he says. 'We need to be secure in church. But we also need to be open to the challenge of a radical Gospel. So traditional worship must be set in a missional context. We embrace the heritage of faith – and it's good to be part of that and our worship must reflect that. But God doesn't let us stay put in the past – that's nostalgia. What we do in our gatherings should help us to engage with today's world.'

Looking back over the past twenty years or so, Jonathan suggests, 'In the songs versus prayer contest, songs won. They won over Bible reading too. And we have to ask whether this is really nourishing people for radical twenty-first century discipleship. Or is this one area where we have been shaped by our culture and we are just offering light Christian entertainment? The Welsh Revival left us nothing but a few good songs. We mustn't go there.'

He argues that our style of doing things in some of our churches is profoundly off-putting to newcomers as well as increasingly dull and dissatisfying to regulars. 'Why oh why do we sing things over and over again? Can we banish that hateful phrase "a time of worship"? What's that about? What does a block of singing lasting twenty minutes or more do? What are we trying to achieve through it? Is it really bringing us closer to God?'

'But the fundamental missional question here is this,' he says: 'who is this worship for? It ought to be inclusive of non-Christian people. We ought to want them to see what it means to be a Christian and experience something of the reality of God in our gatherings. When I began this job I embraced a prayer theme and it's passionately held because it really is game over if we do not relate to this magnificent, majestic, terrifying God in our churches.'

'So our worship needs to be accessible to outsiders, people on the fringes of our fellowship, new Christians and long-standing believers of every generation,' he adds. 'This is a tall order for leaders. But we need to recognize that there is very little understanding of the Christian faith out there in the world beyond our doors. Actually, I wonder whether we appreciate that there's a poor grasp on things even among those who've been with us for a while.'

Jonathan passionately believes that in our culture, the Sunday gathering for worship can still be a significant shop window for those who don't yet believe in Jesus. 'So it worries me that churches that aren't seeing non-Christians in their congregations are not being missional, are not making significant contacts with those outside the church. This is the normal way church should be.'

At the same time, however, he is keen that we ask fundamental and far-reaching questions about the nature of the church. 'For instance,' he says. 'Where should church meet? In a pub, working men's club, café? All those places and others. We need gatherings that are appropriate to the context they're happening in and the group of people accessing them.'

'For this reason we also need to ask about timing,' he continues. 'Does church really have to be so long? Services are far too long for all sorts of people – elderly people who find sitting for long periods a pain; newcomers who are not used to being static for more than half an hour or so; teenagers and twenty-somethings who want something mobile, liquid. And then what day of the week should it happen on? Is Sunday sacrosanct? What day suits the people you're catering for?'

'There is something good about a main act of worship being a focal point in the church's life that embraces a broad range of people and activities,' he emphasizes, 'but around the edges of that, we need variety and creativity.'

Mainstream has been one of the places where Jonathan has learnt his churchmanship. 'When I didn't know whether the Union could achieve the things I thought were important, Mainstream was a vital word and Spirit network for me. And I wanted to be a part of it. I knew we needed to use the Word of God more seriously, thoroughly and creatively and expect the Spirit to take us where he wanted to. We Baptists are a large and diverse family. We need people encouraging us, stimulating life in us and enthusiasm among us. Lots of groups are doing this. And that's a good thing.'

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