

As I suggested a few weeks ago, we're planning an overview of the pastoral care life of Emmanuel, which would bring together elements of the Listening Ministry, that disbanded last year, Prayer Ministry; Home Groups etc., and, whilst structures are helpful and bring a certain amount of accountability into church life, they are only effective, indeed, pastoral care is only effective, if each and everyone one of us are willing to care for those around us. So we're looking for folk to play an active part in pastoral care. It doesn't matter if you've not been involved before, we're looking to establish a new team of those who have a heart for the well being, Body, Soul and Spirit, of those in our church family.

## Conclusion

Romans 12:9-21 puts into a Biblical perspective, much of what I've shared this morning.


1. *Avoid hypocrisy*: be sincere and genuine, vs9
2. *Be devoted to each other*: treat others like the brothers/sisters we are, vs10
3. *Give preference to others*: honour the desires of others above our own, vs10
4. *Serve the Lord*: being fervent in spirit, vs11
5. *Be hospitable*: look for ways to meet the needs of others, vs13
6. *Bless others*: vs14
7. *Return good for evil*: act, don't react, when others hurt you, vs14
8. *Identify with others*: treat others needs and victories as your own, vs15
9. *Be open-minded towards others*: seek to connect with those we speak to, vs16
10. *Treat everyone with respect*: this shows we value and appreciate others, vs17
11. *Do everything possible to keep the peace*: vs18
12. *Remove revenge from your life*: let God be the judge, just love! vs19-21

However, all of this needs a genuine effort, on all of our parts, to live in this way; to prefer the needs of others beyond our own.

### SHAPE'd for Ministry Leaflets

Please take one and think about where God is calling you to serve. Pray, yes, but also be willing to be practically involved in helping to strengthen our growth – age is no barrier to serving the Lord!

So, as we look forward to the year ahead, let us lift the name of Jesus high in our lives, with a renewed offering of ourselves in service to Him. Let us choose to be a balanced and healthy church who are committed to: ***Growing warmer through fellowship; Growing deeper through discipleship; Growing broader through ministry; Growing larger through mission; Growing stronger through prayer*** ... that will enable those who do not yet know Jesus for themselves to be Blessed, to Belong, to Believe and to Become. *The Local Church is the Strength of the Church.*



## Strengthening Our Growth As A Christian Community

*Annual District Church Meeting*

**Romans 12:9-21**

20th March 2011 - Revd Paul A. Carr

## Introduction

Last year, my ADCM talk was entitled: ***'How Do We Become A Healthy Church'*** and I spent some time thinking about the importance of balance in our church life, if want to be healthy and to see growth – whether that be spiritual, financial or numerical. You may remember the five points that I made were that churches: ***Grow warmer through fellowship; Grow deeper through discipleship; Grow broader through ministry; Grow larger through mission; Grow stronger through prayer.***

I'm almost tempted to say 'same again please' because, it seems to me; these are truths which are always relevant for a Christian community. But a healthy church is a growing church and I'm sure we're all encouraged by the growth we've experienced this past year. Some through Alpha; family time; others who were looking for a church and have appreciated our welcome and our worship and have stayed.

An interesting survey carried out by the Salvation Army a couple of years ago suggested that, out of 1000 people questioned, 81% of people remained in the church where they are now because of the welcome they received. Not the worship or the preaching or the reputation of the church or even because of the charisma of the minister, but because of the welcome. And this is one of the most encouraging aspects of our growth.

It's probably an understatement for me to say that the CofE, as an institution is in a state of disarray. Some of that may be self-inflicted because our leaders have not given the moral and spiritual lead (to our church and nation) as they could have done. And it may also have to do with members wanting to create a God/church in their own image which flies in the face of Christian tradition and Biblical orthodoxy.

Just this past week, Archbishop Rowan Williams was quoted as saying that people today are sick of the soap opera of the CofE, when it comes to women bishops and issues of human sexuality (homosexuality). I'm quite tempted to write to the Archbishop (as I've been known to do over the years) and just tell him to make a decision. It seems to me that the difficulties of the institutional church clouds the mission of the local church. However, despite this gloomy picture, I passionately believe that, whatever the state of the institutional church: *The Local Church is the Strength of the Church.*



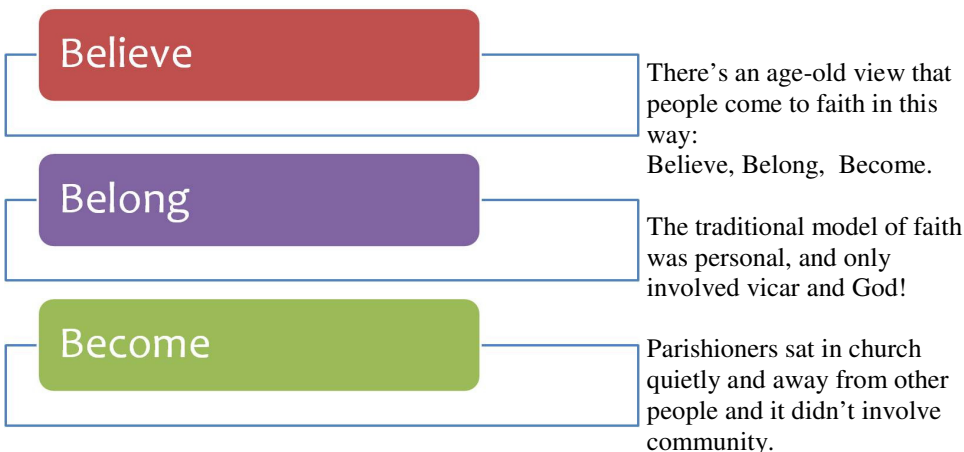
It's also my understanding, that despite what may be happening on a national/international scale in the Anglican Communion, most people today are concerned, not with denominations or institutions, but whether the local church is vibrant in faith and fellowship and whether it provides for their spiritual needs. *The Local Church is the Strength of the Church.*

Our current Home Group series has been focusing on some of the principles that enabled the early church to grow and, I hope you'd agree with me when I say that they are extremely relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> C church. It is my prayer that each of us will find it within ourselves to apply some of those principles to our own Christian lives both individually and as a church both in the way we care for each other and the way we look outwards to the community around us.

I think this is especially true if we want to strengthen our growth as a Christian community and, especially, make the Christian faith relevant to this town of ours. And, especially, it seems to me, to the 20 and 30 something's who are desperately missing, not just in Emmanuel, but in all Billericay churches. It maybe that each church is providing a similar style of church (and I think we are) and there is little in the way of strategic and/or risky provision to meet the needs of the so-called Generation Y. A generation who have little, if any, experience or knowledge of the Christian faith. I don't have the answers, but I certainly want to be asking the questions, but I do believe it's something to do with re-imagining our mission to this generation and hoping this is where Tom will have a great role to play.

And so I just to want to spend a few moments thinking about how people come to faith. Comparing how people come to faith in the past and present and a proposal as to how, and why, we must change if we want to be effective in our mission in the future.

### **Traditional Model of people coming to faith**



### **Evangelism begins in our daily lives**

I've spoke about this many times in the past and I'm sure you know what I'm going to say, but I'll say it anyway: people won't listen to what we have to say about our faith if our lifestyle doesn't back it up. It's so important that we are men and women of integrity and are consistent, loving, caring, compassionate, genuine people.

### **Evangelism begins when we share Jesus, not when we promote church**

We automatically assume, don't we, that people have no interest in our faith. I don't believe that for one moment. Whilst it may be true that they have no desire to hear us talk about church, it doesn't mean that they don't want to hear about Jesus. Our society is an increasingly spiritual society ... they are just looking in the wrong places.

### **Evangelism begins when we can't stop talking about Jesus**

Isn't it wonderful when we get an opportunity to share what Jesus has, and is, doing in our lives? I never cease to get excited by being able to do that. Recent articles in local papers and Pilgrim give us a wonderful and unique opportunity to talk to people about the Jesus who is changing lives.

### **Evangelism begins when we invite people along to an event**

I think it's fair to say that this is an area of weakness at Emmanuel and one we've discussed a few times at DCC/AG's and we can't seem to understand why it is that when we have special services/events so many keep away or see it as an opportunity to take a Sunday off? Whether it be BTCS; Christmas; Remembrance; Special events – we always seem to have a great number of visitors, but few church members in attendance to offer the hand of welcome and hospitality. I genuinely believe that if you are able to bring folk along to a church based event, they will be touched by God's Spirit and will want to know more.

It seems to me that we can't be serious in wanting to grow if we're not supporting the initiatives that provide for those opportunities. If we want to engage in evangelism and invite people to church based events or to attend an Alpha Course we have to make sure that we're going to be present when they arrive. We should be willing to lead by example. And you know, sometimes, it's not about whether you or I will enjoy or appreciate what event is taking place, but whether we can be a friend to a stranger and whether we can share the journey with someone on their pilgrimage of faith. I invited several folk to the Deanery Service on Friday evening, a number came, and I know some of them were deeply moved by the presence of God here and the warmth of the worship.

### **Evangelism begins when we care for each other**

I say this because this is such an important aspect of church growth – as we saw in the latter part of Acts 2. There seems little point in encouraging folk to commit their lives to Jesus if we can't nurture and care for them on their journey of faith and, especially, if there are some of our current church family members 'slipping through the net.'

Now, I'm not saying we do away with them but, it seems to me, that we preach and sing far too much and serve, love and bless far too little. Should we decrease the sermons and songs and our meetings and increase our service and love to create a balanced church that looks like the life of Jesus? Maybe we should. It was quite interesting to hear Bishop Stephen on Friday suggest that there is no shortage of labourers for the harvest (Luke 10), it's just that they are too busy in the barn wondering what colour to paint the Combine Harvester!

I think most of you are aware that one of my passions for church, alongside each individual Christian growing in faith and knowledge of God and being an active disciple, is that we're active in evangelism. It was interesting, and refreshing, to hear Bishop Stephen say this, too, when he spoke to the Deanery Clergy on Friday morning. I know many of you are ready and willing to be part of an Evangelism team and, if you've read the ADCM docs and today's notice sheet, you'll know that we're planning a School of Evangelism during Holy Week in order to train and equip you for evangelism. Can I encourage you to sign up as we make a concerted effort to bring healing onto the streets of Billerica?

### Evangelism

Evangelism is a word that strikes fear into the hearts of most Christians (along with stewardship, ADCM docs page 28). Many people see evangelism as something to be feared or only able to be 'done' by a select few. I disagree with that. Evangelism is a work that all Christians are expected to share, John 14:21-3. However, I think it's important that each of us see ourselves as links in a chain that brings people to a saving faith in Jesus. The ADCM docs remind us that we are co-workers together for the Gospel's sake discerning where God is already working, and wants to work, in the world around. And it involves all of us, young and old alike.

Billy Graham:

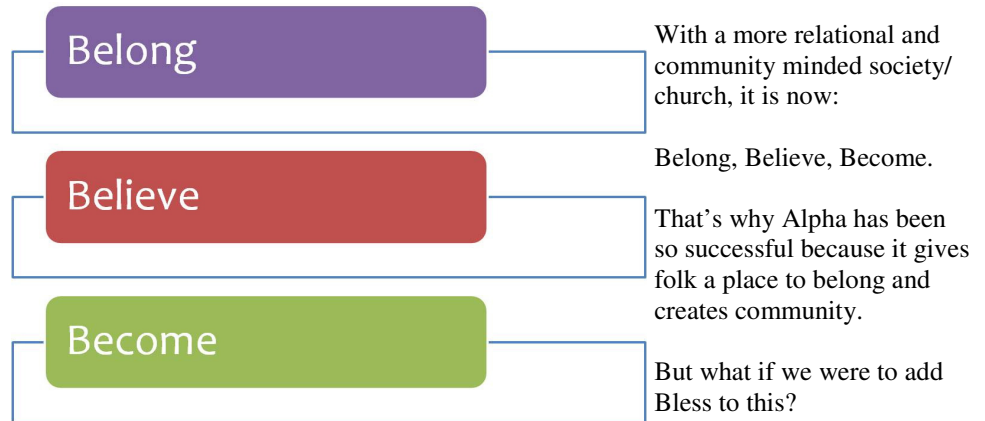
*The evangelistic harvest is always urgent. The destiny of men and of nations is always being decided. Every generation is strategic. We are not responsible for the past generation, and we cannot bear the responsibility for the next one, but we do have our generation. God will hold us responsible as to how well we fulfil our responsibilities to this age and take advantage of our opportunities.*

Where does evangelism begin?

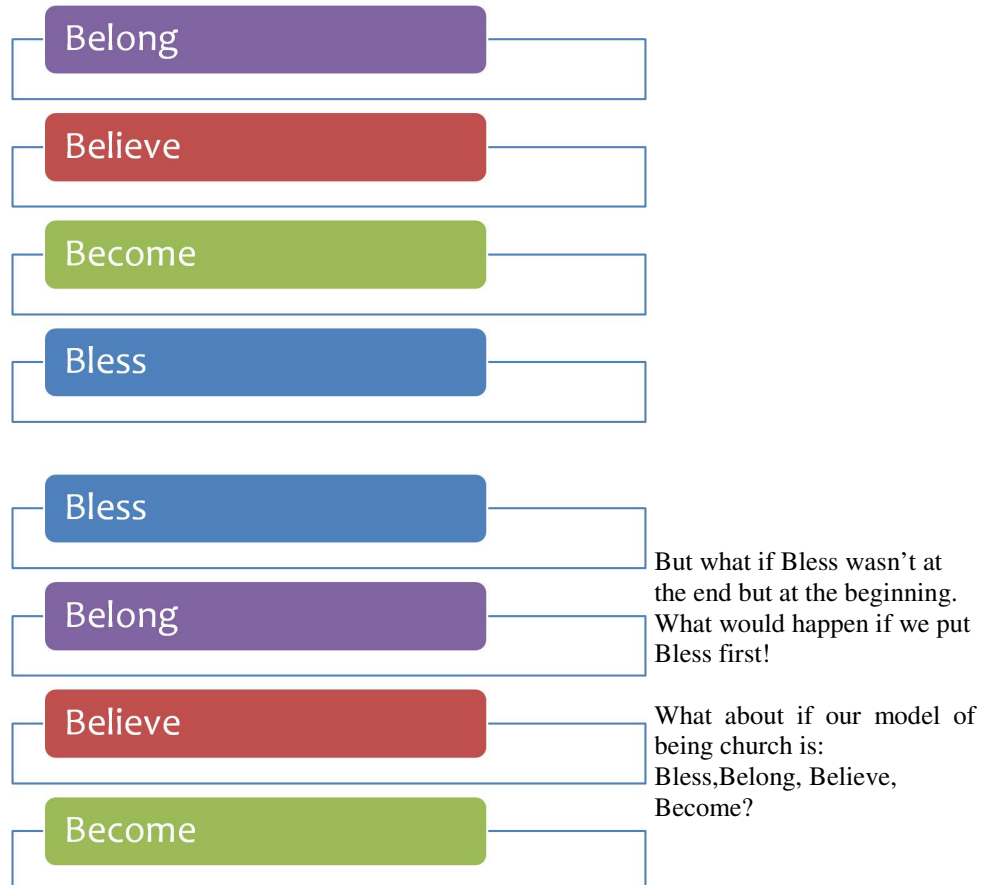
### Evangelism begins here in church

It might seem a strange thing to say and a strange place to start, but it does. Some would suggest that the biggest reason why churches never grow is because those who attend church rarely encourage their friends and family to attend because they feel embarrassed about their church. Yes, I know God is bigger than what we do in Emmanuel, but if we are a doorway to his presence and love and purpose then people will be attracted, or 'turned off' by how we do things. I sincerely believe that a genuine welcome and meaningful worship is attractive, compelling and contagious.

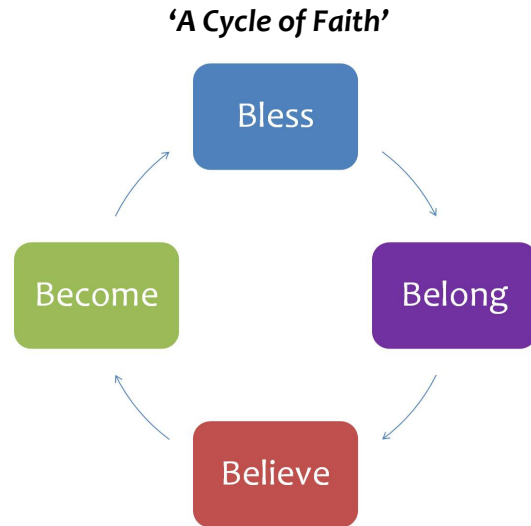
### Contemporary Model of people coming to faith



### A 'New' Model of people coming to faith



What about if our model of being church is cyclical rather than linear?



## Bless

What happens if we seek to bless people before they've even come through the doors of our church or into contact with church members? People don't usually expect the church to be generous, do they? The response to the generosity at family time, for example, has been quite amazing!

I'm really interested to see what would happen if we were to be known as a generous church. Not always in financial terms, but generous with our time and talents and hospitality and willingness to serve others. Imagine what would happen if we were to engage in Random Acts of Kindness as part of our evangelistic outreach in blessing people? What if Home Groups were to commit themselves to a radical blessing of Billericay this year? What could we do? We're only limited by our imaginations:

- Car Washing
- Newspaper and/or Danish Pastries (Saturday's between 10-11am)
- Breakfast Bars as people board the trains on a morning
- Gardening/Shopping/House Decorating
- Giving away Easter Eggs
- Buy chips for everyone in the Blue Boar one evening.
- Babysitting for single parents (or the curate/vicar!)
- A welcome plant as people move into a new house
- Giving away Ice Cream in the summer
- Soup to shoppers on cold mornings

And as we do this, we give a slip of paper that simply says: *With love from Emmanuel*. And so I could go on. We bless because God has blessed us. However, that's not to say that we are not blessing people already, because we do – many of our church activities do this in one way or another.

Let's begin to think in ways in which we can bless our community to God's glory and we do this in the prayerful expectation that, as people begin to be blessed/hear/talk about Jesus, they will want to know more; and begin to:

## Belong

- Strengthening relationships
- Coming along to social events
- Feeling part of the church family
- Attending an Alpha Course (or similar)
- Joining a Home Group
- Church attendance
- What's missing? Men/Women/20 – 30 Something's?

## Believe

- Can't stop talking about Jesus
- Believe that Jesus is their Lord and Saviour
- A desire to growth in faith
- Bible Study
- Committed to Prayer

## Become

- Change of lifestyle: morals, ethics and values
- Serving the Lord through active involvement in church life
- Involved in evangelism
- Training for ministry ... ?

## Bless

- And so the cycle begins again with new members blessing others because of the way the Lord has blessed them.

I'm going to be honest with you here and tell you that the longer I'm in ministry the more concerned I become about the nature of what church is about. I say this because the more sermons that are preached; the more songs we sing together; the more meetings that take place; seem to have little impact on our mission of spreading the Gospel.