

FOLLOW-UP REVIEW OF WANTAGE COMMUNITY CHURCH
SEPTEMBER 2009 (report date 19th October)
WITH COMMENTS

Introduction

Liz and I very much enjoyed our time in Wantage last weekend. It was good to be with those on the Connect Team, and one or two others as well. Particular thanks to Neil and Dee for their warm hospitality, and to Mike and Karen for hosting an excellent lunch! Our visit coincided with one of the Street Pastors' training days, involving about 10 members of the church, which seemed to epitomise your commitment to transforming the wider community of Wantage.

At first sight, the occasional visitor to WCC might imagine that very little has changed since the review earlier this year. How wrong they would be! For although as yet there have been few visible changes, a great deal has been going on "behind the scenes". You have successfully transitioned to a new team, the Connect Team, and have begun the process of restructuring for growth. You have clearly spent a lot of time talking together! We were impressed with the evident harmony and affection in the team. You are, of course, still in transition, with attendant frustrations and lack of clarity in some areas, but overall it seemed to us that you were on course and at peace, even if the process seems to be taking longer than you might have hoped. Given that you meet but once a month, and that the summer break has interrupted the process, we think you have actually made significant progress.

For the purposes of this report, I will summarise the main recommendations from the last one, before commenting on progress to date, taking each of the original headings in turn.

Rather than write two documents, some comments have been made on each section. The comments are the result of discussions on the content of the report in the Connect team, but also with other teams.
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1. Leadership

The original review recommended the creation of a new leadership team to replace the old one. The new team was to include the elders, embedded in it, alongside others who would bring a greater breadth of gifting, personality, ministry and age. In particular, those with evangelistic and prophetic strengths were to be added, as well as someone to take the role of administrator/communicator. A change of "feel" to the team was also recommended, bringing greater creativity and risk-taking into the leadership, and placing mission at the heart of it. There was also a suggestion that, ideally, no-one apart from Neil should carry more than one main area of oversight responsibility, but that the team develop as a 'team of team leaders', each able to gather and encourage their own focussed teams.

You have made significant progress in this area. The new team has a wider range of personality types and gifting. Sadly, with Mark's departure for Scotland, there

is not a wide diversity of age. Many of you mentioned XXXXX as a suitable candidate to fill the space left by Mark.

But we also encountered a good deal of confusion and lack of clarity over the precise remit of the Connect Team. Is it the leadership team by another name? Or does it 'contain' the leaders (?elders) alongside others whose role is to broaden the base of gifting and personality in a supportive role? Or is it a discussion forum where everyone airs their perspective, following which Neil makes the decisions? If the subtle and nuanced definitions so far employed have left even team members unsure, what hope is there for the church!?

We suggest this needs priority attention and clarification, because everything else flows from it. Only then would it be possible to define individual roles and portfolios more clearly, and make progress towards the "team of team leaders" goal.

Team definition:

Rick's key request is for clarity, and hopefully we have begun to address this at the family meeting in October. To make it clear:

The review team encouraged us to break away from fixed moulds and we wish very much to break away from a classic "pyramid" church structure. We do not believe that the bible requires this structure, and in many cases we believe that such a structure can inhibit a church, especially a church of our size, from being a body in which every person is fully released to the call on their life. Therefore, the new team is not "The Leadership Team".

It is, however, a team whose goal is to see every person engaged with the call of God working together to extend the kingdom and build the church. Its goal is to release as much leadership and engagement across the church as is possible, such that all is working towards our common vision. This team doesn't exist to do everything, it exists to bring togetherness to all that is done and to help release everyone to their call.

New member suggestion

The name of the person suggested by Rick has been removed out of respect for them, should they not feel it is appropriate. However, we are in the process of approaching them.

2. Atmosphere and style of leadership

The original review suggested a change of *atmosphere* in the way that the team operates, to become more obviously *amongst* the people, alongside them and not just over them.

Without spending time with the wider church membership, it's difficult to assess any change in how the new team is perceived. A more equal scatter of Connect Team members across the D groups might help, preferably without the responsibility to lead them, but ultimately this is not so much about structures as it is about heart attitudes, loving people not just leading people, opening your homes and hearts over food, having more fun, eating more ice-cream! You have a preponderance of people on the team who are highly educated, quite cerebral, good with words etc. These are not immediately endearing qualities, not exactly

touchy-feely, and can be faintly intimidating. To avoid seeming aloof, you have to work hard to develop your softer skills.

Mike and Karen have much to offer in this area, and are clearly concerned to improve the sense of welcome in the church.

Hopefully, we are working hard to develop our softer sides! Ongoing work, all comments and feedback welcome.

We are considering, with the D group leaders, whether we should implement the suggestion that there should be the "more equal scattering" of connect team members.

3. Building

The original report suggested it was time to start praying about a building, one that could release more ministry into the community, and raise your profile in the town. It seems you might also be looking for an alternative venue for Sunday gatherings, if the threatened hike in price for your current venue is carried through.

We recommend you clarify what it is you are looking for/have faith for at this point in your journey, and then ask someone (? Mark Tracey) to explore options and report back.

In fact, we are discussing a potential community venue (possibly for free) with it's owner. The outcome of this discussion will help clarify where we go next on this question.

The venue we are looking at wouldn't be particularly good for Sunday mornings but it would provide a base for just about everything else we do that isn't in people's homes. We continue to pray for a solution to both aspects, with the our first goal being the community in which we live.

We receive Rick's suggestion that we need to clarify our goal and then explore options, pending the outcome of our current discussions.

4. Worship

The previous review made a number of specific recommendations, including monthly "family" worship, for the whole church family, and monthly worship led by a youth band. Trading your traditional excellence for increased creativity and involvement might not be safe or even popular, but was nonetheless viewed as worthwhile!

You have made significant progress in this area. Andy Bruce is going to make this his primary focus, drawing together those with a heart to serve in worship, and keeping the entry requirements "bar" low. The Smiths have plans to draw together a youth worship band on a regular basis, though administrative support for this would be appreciated! Already one or two of the younger people have been playing alongside adults from time to time, and this too is good, and helps prepare the way for all age worship. Of those on the team, the Smiths probably carry the vision to develop all age worship most strongly. Can they do this as

well as leading the children's ministry team? And a parenting course? And the youth band?

You have made considerable progress in opening up worship. Key words now are probably focus, definition, alignment of resources, integration of the various elements.

Agreed!

5. Communication

The original review suggested you consider releasing someone to take charge and overview this vital area of church life.

You have grasped this particular nettle and appointed Andy White to the role of "Communications". We believe you also plan to draw together an admin. team, to include Neil, Howard, Andy, Richard and Ian.

It is of course early days, as yet. You have had lots of meetings at a leadership level and you have considered many things. But to the "man in the pew" little has changed, apparently. We encountered a measure of frustration that there has been so little communication to the church as a whole during this process. Even if you haven't anything definitive to announce, people would be reassured to know that you are meeting, and what you are talking about. There is no shortage of grace and goodwill towards you, but better communication would contribute towards the greater atmosphere of openness you are seeking to cultivate.

We suggest there is room to clarify Andy's role further. Is he to take oversight and management of admin and communication in the church in its many aspects, as suggested in the previous review? Or is he serving simply to enable the best communication within the Connect Team? If he is not to take charge or the wider picture, then will this default to Neil, as convenor of the admin team, a job that he could do without and that would not play to his strengths. An overall coordinator who can think strategically and manage people graciously, is required. Is this the job you have given to Andy? Is this the job Andy thinks he's been given? Clarity please!

We continue to recognise the need to increase communication, we hear the provocation to improve.

As with all roles, there is a certain amount of "working it out together" going on here. As Andy said at the family meeting, his role isn't to doing all the communication. Rather, it is to help identify how communication might be done better and think strategically about making that happen. His goal is to enabling and release communication within and without the church.

6. Mission

It's exciting to see lots of initiative being taken to connect with people locally. Several of you have been involved in Alphas; Mike and Karen's group in the village and their plans for the Family Centre; Mark and Gilly's Friday nights with the youth; the Smiths' proposed Parenting Course; Dads Out, Toddler Group, and now Street Pastors' training! And I'm sure this list is not complete. There's

clearly a lot going on. What is less clear is the extent to which these activities are part of a joined-up strategy that you “own” together. For example, is the “Balsam Family Project” going to “belong” as part of the ministry of WCC, or remain a personal ministry. Or, how do the twenty five or so young people who gather in Mark and Gilly’s garden find a bridge into the church family?

You are doing a lot of sowing. What are your reaping strategies? Is it all down to Alpha? Has thought been given to the “discipleship pathway” that you would encourage new believers to follow? If all the resources of the church are devoted to connecting with unchurched folk, there will be little focus and energy left over to concentrate on the welcome and the discipling ministries, without which the church is likely to develop a wide “back door”.

You are calling together a community and outreach team, which hopefully will be able to bring a measure of coordination and cohesion to this area.

Again, the request here is probably for clarity of who is responsible for what. The Community and Outreach (“CO”) team has the following brief:

A team with a heart to reach out to the lost and see them saved, with the goal of encouraging and releasing the whole church into outreach which draws people into salvation and into committed membership of the church.

To be more specific, that would mean

1. Oversight of, encouraging, releasing compassion ministries
2. Developing of welcoming atmospheres and strategies in the church, helping the whole church to be a welcoming church
3. Oversight and development of reaping strategies (journeys, alpha, etc), not necessarily doing them though.
4. Oversight of all events to ensure that the various events that are done are complimentary towards the above goals:
 - Any individual event will need to be delegated to an appropriate team
 - Ideas for events are welcomed from all. A good healthy church social life is open and welcoming to all!

7. Social/relational life

In general, it would be our observation that, as a group, the Connect Team is pretty task-orientated and functional, and this probably is reflected in the atmosphere of church life. Some of your newer members are naturally more outward going and sociable, and doubtless there are others, of a similar ilk, in the rest of the church. We are not convinced that giving responsibility for encouraging the social and relational life of the church to the community and outreach team is such a good idea. It feels like a confusion of focus, given that that team’s primary task, we understand, is mission.

Broadly, this make a lot of sense. To avoid event clashes etc, the CO team “holds the diary” but may not, as Rick suggest, be the team to really drive forwards the social and relational life of the church.

This is an area we haven't got a clear strategy on yet and is a matter for prayer. However, everyone is always welcome to seize the initiative and get a social event going, the only request is to check that it doesn't clash with other things!

8. Discipleship

The D groups feel like an area of the church's life that needs refreshing. From what we can gather, they are mostly fellowship groups, and are appreciated for the sense of belonging and friendship they foster, but they are probably not delivering what their name implies, i.e. provocation, accountability – in short, discipleship. Few people appear to be in any personal pastoring relationship so, all in all, this is an area of church life that looks ripe for reform, root and branch. Perhaps a completely different shape is called for, to rejuvenate things, though we would recommend great care be taken not to undermine that sense of belonging, so precious to many. Ideally, you should aim to liberate those on the Connect Team from the responsibility of running D groups, or whatever may replace them.

A working group (Townsend, Neves, Greigs, Horswells) are going to do this review. There is no plan to change everything for change's sake – rather the goal will be to achieve the maximum life-giving discipleship whilst minimising relational changes. We value the friendships which are already in the groups.

9. Youth

Andy and Liz Bruce are releasing overall responsibility for youth, and Mark's departure to Scotland leaves a gap. Mark and Gillie are passionate about youth and have a vision to run Youth Alpha and discipling programmes for young people. You have a small group of dedicated folk working with the youth on Sunday mornings. Clearly, here is another area of the church's life that is in transition. We recommend bold, risk-taking decisions be taken to appoint fresh leadership in this area.

Agree – action needed.

Finally, we would like to commend the new team for their diligence, faithfulness and serving spirit. Neil and Dee epitomise these strengths and enjoy the wholehearted confidence of those around them. We share that confidence, and feel that WCC is in good hands. You have made significant progress over the last six months, and are well on track. We pray with you, for growing faith and courage to lay hold of that for which Christ has laid hold of you in full measure!

Rick and Liz Thomas

September 2009