

The Church on the move! Cornerstone, yesterday and today.

Richard Underwood interviews Peter Lewis on 40 years of ministry at Cornerstone Evangelical Church, Nottingham.

1 How has life changed over the forty years you have been in ministry – both in secular society and in the church? What has been the impact of these changes on church leadership?

In secular society people did fewer things and many lived very simply. When we started, and for some years after we came, we had no central heating, no television, no washing machine, no freezer, no fridge (!) and no car (and no money!) Many of our poorer church members had an outside toilet and a tin bath on the back door. Their houses though were warm and cosy warmed by coal fires. Mobile phones were not around and the only blackberries grew on bushes.

Life for many was less pressured forty years ago, jobs were often for life, job changes and short-term contracts taking people to different parts of the country were still in the future for many. Today we have to manage a constant flow of people whose jobs (in Cornerstone many of our people are doctors and nurses, midwives and medical students) take them away after a few years. It took many years for me not to think the church would fall down without this one or that couple. But as many as went out were replaced by others coming in and God has unfailingly provided and blessed.

One man ministry was usual. Services were conducted by the minister as was the mid-week bible study. Services were traditional with four hymns, formal prayers and a sermon. There were no new songs and little innovation and services were an hour in length. Today many churches have multiple ministries where differing gifts and passions produce ministries of even quality and excellence.

One minor but noticeable difference: dress codes have changed. Once people dressed up for church; now they come in very casual clothes. In fact so many live and work in a highly professional world of suits, pin stripes and power dressing that I usually say if they came like that on Sunday I'd be afraid to preach to them!

The success of Cornerstone under God can be summed up in one word: TEAM. God has brought us so many excellent men and women and among them in these years at present are Pete Brown our youth minister, Amanda Smart-Gosrani our children's worker, Liz Middleton our International Student worker, Spencer Hampton our Church Manager (whom I once described to the church as the most important person in my life next only to Valerie!), our minister-in-training, John Russell, and the church's assistant minister and evangelist, Colin Webster, who has been with us for twelve years now and who has been a major part of all our energy, vision and growth. There are also full-time apprentices and support staff, mostly young.

However, it was all very different forty years ago: in secular society and in the churches. The patterns of life were different in ways small and great which affected church life. People did not travel so much at weekends. Shops were not open and there was less organised sport on a Sunday. Committed members of the church were expected to come twice a Sunday or three times if teaching in a Sunday School. The suggestion that because society and work patterns and travel was changing family life therefore we should expect that families should only come once on a Sunday and spend the rest of the day together was greeted with outrage!

Some churches, however, pioneered longer all-family services (and lunches) where the morning services were much longer and more flexible and diversified. Sunday was fast becoming the only safe, uncrowded day and the best time for special courses for training, discipleship, membership etc. as well as Sunday school. Such short courses could, for instance, occupy the sermon-time for a few weeks in different parts of the building, the various groups rejoining the rest as the courses finished.

2. How well-equipped do you feel you were when you first stepped into pastoral ministry? How has that influenced the way you have helped young men for the ministry since then?

The church we came to was in a very poor part of Nottingham with all the problems associated with urban decay. The church was small, had never been strongly evangelical, and had not had a minister for some years.

I was 24, full of theology and sermon-zeal with plenty on the back shelves as well as in the shop window but with a very conventional Welsh chapel background. My young wife came from a secular, professional family, had done five years in art schools, one year in an International Language college in Switzerland and two years in a Bible College. I was rather prim, very traditional (say aspiring Victorian!), very limited in my picture of 'the ministry' and extremely short-sighted in terms of strategy and how to respond to a changing world. If I had listened to my wife, Valerie, and allowed her to work more publicly with me I would have made far better progress in my earliest years.

When I began I had a natural pastoral instinct but no idea how to run a church. The patient support and direction of some of the deacons made up for a great deal and they guided the young rookie with gentleness and encouragement. Chief among them was a man still with me, now in his eighties and honoured as the 'elder elder' in our church. The first church meeting I chaired was the first I'd ever been to and I recall asking out loud who this AOB person was? I soon took my first funeral, my first wedding, as well as my first deacons' meeting.

I was hugely single-minded: preaching and pastoring were central and administration didn't exist. Fortunately others did it very well, especially the afore-mentioned deacon, John Hopkin, who for years acted as both secretary and treasurer.

From the start I attempted to gather young men for future ministry but tended to duplicate only my own strengths in theology and preaching and followed the way I had myself been trained. It was all too parochial. Now I encourage our apprentices and other future leaders and preachers to go to such courses as Cornhill, Midlands and Northern Training and Prepared for Service as well as a wide diversity of colleges preparing them for home and abroad ministries. At home they serve in various ministries and develop a hands-on acquaintance with church life and leadership. Our present Minister in Training, for instance, is overseeing the house groups (we have twenty-odd groups and over fifty house group leaders) and about to start a men's breakfast as well as preaching, studying, engaging in student ministry and elders' meetings.

It was only later that I discovered the strategic potential of a Church Manager and the discovery quite literally changed our lives. The week our first full-time manager took over, Valerie and I did more pastoral visiting in that week than we had done in the previous month! Church managers are 'liquid engineering' in a growing church, enabling the other ministries to achieve their full potential.

3. How has the Lord sustained you through dark times in the last forty years?

Early on, a section of the diaconate and some church members found my preaching too hard, too challenging and perhaps too evangelical. Critics met in groups, church meetings were tough and some personal relationships became sour. Valerie suffered from this more than I, mainly because there were no young women available who were on her wave-length spiritually or intellectually. Often the preacher has an outlet that the pastor's wife has not and they can suffer more than we.

In such times we must regularly revisit our motives and our decisions but if we have clear and biblical priorities and wise friends then we can and should treat critics and resignations courteously and gently while continuing a steady forward course. To say 'prayer helps' would be a massive understatement! Preaching helps too!

Other dark times? Readers may like to read chapter 36 of my new book *The Lord's Prayer* on Valerie's cancer in the eighteenth year of my ministry here. The book is a much-expanded version of an earlier book and partly autobiographical throughout. Sometimes the dark times have been other people's tragedies, such as the death of new-born babies when we have simply wept together as a church – and held on to God and each other in the dark.

4. You and Valerie have been a great example of a ministry team; tell us some of the ways in which she has been a great help to you?

Readers will find my first answer under your first question. Valerie's great contribution to the church has varied over the years as she has started different ministries and then handed them over to others when developed: the student work, the student lunches, the crèche, co-ordinating and developing

admin. and management, liaising with our missionaries etc. etc. and always continuing as the church's Pastoral Assistant.

Always aware of contemporary changes, Valerie encouraged me out of my quasi-Victorian persona and into the cultural realities which now we take for granted but which were resisted by many churches of our Reformed theology. She can see the wood when I can see only the trees in front of me; she can spot the pastoral strains and needs before I do; she has a sometimes-remarkable instinct for what is to come.

Her balance, her even-temperedness and spirituality are strengths not only in my own life but in the church at large which loves and values her greatly. Speaking quite personally and for my sons the quality of our home-life through the years has flowed from these things in Valerie and anyone who knows anything about us knows that I have been completely in love with her for all our forty one years. Indeed I can truthfully say that there has not been a single day in our married life when I have not consciously rejoiced in her and given thanks to God for such a gift. I only wish I had so lived that the same had been true for her!

5. Leaders are always looking to the future; what challenges and opportunities do you see for gospel churches as you look into the next few years?

First as to our own future as a church: in forty years Cornerstone has grown from forty to six hundred adults with an added hundred and fifty children. My vision is very much for the future and to a generation yet unborn. For sixteen years, having grown too large for our previous church building, we have met in a large school. Now we are on the brink of buying land and buildings in a very prominent part of town. We have raised three and a half million pounds from church members past and present but will need several millions more in order to fully-refurbish the buildings and site.

My ministry has always been in the classical Reformed tradition with its heavy emphasis on expository preaching. Over the years God has added to this a very regular evangelistic activity, a strong emphasis on world mission, and a strikingly international congregation (largely because of scholars coming from China and elsewhere to the University of Nottingham). My aim is that Cornerstone will continue this for the next hundred years in Nottingham. When you look at a church like Charlotte Chapel, Edinburgh, for instance, you see that it can be done. (I tell our folk 'I've been here for forty: you only need two and a half Peter Lewises and you're there!").

As for the challenges and opportunities for gospel-churches of the future: the opportunities will change along with the challenges and they will demand flexibility, a willingness to change (even at speed if necessary), a rock-like firmness with regard to the fundamentals of the faith and the priorities of mission, and a sense of meeting God each week in the corporate worship of the church which touches our doctrine with devotion and fuels our work with joy.

When 'the powers' of a secular society appear to be irresistibly strong we must be aware that they are also brittle, that the human heart needs what we have, above all that God is sovereign, Jesus Christ is Lord over history, that the future belongs to us because it belongs to him and that we can work and witness now for then, links in a millennia-old chain which is golden and unbreakable.

5. What has been the unexpected in your ministry?

When I began I saw myself simply in a traditional mould as a minister to local people. Instead, I found myself challenged early on to accept the future in changed patterns of worship and church life. Consequently I have ended (not yet entirely I hope!) preaching to and pastoring generations of young adults who have gone out into churches of many kinds and various denominations in Britain and beyond. Also I must record the amazing fact that our ever-growing world mission now includes many scholars from mainland China who are going back with huge potential having been ably reached, disciplined, and cared-for by a succession of extremely able and dedicated International workers in the ministry team here at Cornerstone.

It has all been privilege and I am over my ears in debt to God and good people. In my early ministry God birthed a prayer in my heart that has never left me: 'Lord, make me useful not just ornamental'. I should be glad of your Amen to that for me and for the Cornerstone church here in Nottingham.