

## Reinventing our mission

by Anne Wilkinson-Hayes

*“The key task of the church in this era is to reinvent herself for mission”.*

This was the core of our vision for Baptist churches in Victoria, Australia. But, as the Regional Ministry team reviewed our work over the past year, we discovered that around 40 per cent of our time had been working with churches in some kind of conflict, or crisis of relationships. How could divided and unhealthy churches realistically engage in mission? Some showed signs of corporate depression, others felt embarrassed to welcome newcomers into such a stressed and judgmental environment. So much energy was taken up with internal strife that there was little real heart to reach out with the good news of Jesus. Banging on about mission was only going to make people feel more guilty and miserable. Mission requires some degree of health, and so *Fit4Life* was conceived.

If our churches are to be mission minded in outlook and structure we need to learn or relearn some basic disciplines of healthy human community. In church we spend a lot of time talking or reading about *fellowship* and *community*, but we don't seem to spend much time learning and practising the core skills of listening, communication and collaborative process that make communities actually work.

Peacemaking is a learned behaviour which involves the fairly arduous process of what the Mennonites call *re-reflexing*. This means working on our behavioural reflexes so that they become those of Christ. *Fit4Life* is a manual of interactive exercises for churches that help in this process of re-reflexing.

The first section is about self-awareness. There is no good having great structures and processes in church life if they are continually undermined by dysfunctional individuals who are unaware of how they operate. We all need to recognise that our past, our personality, fears and dreams all affect the way we impact others, and developing a greater self-awareness is critical to acknowledging the sub-conscious agendas we bring to church meetings, that can distort our process and limit our ability to discern the mind of Christ. Stories, Bible studies and role-plays help open up this area.

The second section is about encouraging us to both listen well to each other and to be disciplined in our use of language. For example, how often do we hear in churches the immortal words “people are saying...”? If we can only learn to share our own opinions and use the ‘I’ word rather than any anonymous collective. Similarly, if we can discipline ourselves to talk about ‘I’ rather than ‘you’ in our conversations, much grief in church life could be avoided. The accusation “you always criticise me”, is likely to get a defensive response and exacerbate the situation, whereas the admission that “I felt really hurt when you said...” is likely to elicit a kinder and more thoughtful response. These are the basic skills of peacemakers and they require practising until they are our natural reflexes.

The third section is a mini-conflict transformation course which draws on much of the material developed by Bridgebuilders in the UK. The key learning here is to enable churches to see difference and conflict as normal and in fact a God-given opportunity for new life and growth. The tendency is to ignore contentious issues in case they cause division, rather than improve our skills in dealing with difficult stuff. We have

developed an introductory exercise which helps churches think about issues that tend to go into the 'too hard basket'.

The next section is all about good process in decision-making. It seems as if Baptist churches often get derailed by difficulties in discerning God's will; by not recognising that when we use theological terms like "priesthood of all believers", we may actually all have different understandings; by not knowing where certain decisions should be made; and by rushing processes. It has been said that "surprised people tend to behave badly" and sadly this often happens when decisions are demanded too quickly.

The fifth section faces the problem of unclear or unrealistic expectations of pastors, leaders, or any ministry role, and encourages people to develop clear job descriptions for all church positions.

The whole manual works towards the final section which looks at developing a church covenant for health. We are familiar with membership statements that talk about what we believe as members of a Baptist church, but what about committing people to behave in certain ways because they follow Christ? A behavioural covenant helps us to hold each other accountable to living out our faith in specific ways. Some churches covenant to follow the Matthew 18 process in any disagreements; others enshrine values such as not speaking ill of anyone, ensuring that everyone is listened to, not appointing anyone to a role without a clear job description, and so on. Others include missional aspects such as promising to spend time each week with people who are not yet Christians. Covenants need to be developed slowly and revisited each year, so that the practices and values they describe are fully owned by those making the covenant each year.

In this way we are hopeful that the culture in our churches will gradually change and that a future generation of healthy churches will be better equipped for mission and peacemaking.

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