

Developing the Kingdom in the Community

I have been considering for some time now how God desires His people to be carriers and demonstrators of His Kingdom in the community, and several experiences I have had, started to shape my understanding of God's heart.

About seven years ago I was invited via a fellowship announcement to join a group of volunteers from a local church travelling to Thailand, to help a small Christian charity with their work and vision amongst vulnerable people groups. Up to that point in time, I had no interest in Thailand and no desire to go, yet it was one of those God moments when you know He is speaking to you outside of your natural boundaries and comfort zones. I didn't really know anyone on the team, I knew nothing about the charity but taking this unusual step has changed my life and perspective of God's Kingdom.



I sit here today having recently returned from my seventh trip and I am passionate about the work in Thailand and the relationships I have made, and I guess that the first thing I have learned about God's Kingdom is that it is built and carried through relationships and practical contexts. The biggest thing that spoke to me that first visit was that this Christian group of people did not put their main emphasis on preaching to, or at people, or trying to establish a Western model of Christianity around a church building and meetings, but their emphasis was to express God's amazing Love and Hope and Grace practically to those around them, in their

community. They did this by firstly respecting the culture of those they were amongst and their own belief systems, and simply stood alongside and loved and helped them. Young and old alike have had their lives impacted and changed by their actions and faithfulness and because of this have wanted to know about the God they serve and follow.



I have also been deeply challenged on my return home by God that this approach and life style isn't just for Thailand but is His heart for everywhere.

John 13 vs 34 -35 Matthew 25 vs 37-40

Around the time of my return home from Thailand, I had been feeling a greater and greater desire to see God's church rise up as 'ONE CHURCH', impacting our community together as one expression of God's heart. So that people would see the unity rather than the divisions and differences.

Although I could see that it wasn't practical for there to be one huge church that everyone attended, in fact, the disciples set in place elders in each town and city they visited, and Revelation talks about the Churches in different cities, so the model of several churches is a biblical one, I struggled with the fact that we had so many 'churches and fellowships' in one town and felt that it wasn't due to practicality and our desire to reach out further, but due to our differences in what we believed.....how sad..... and how did that line up against scriptures such as:-

John 17 vs 11 Acts 2 44-47 Ephesians 2 vs 19-22 Ephesians 4 vs 4-16

God gave me a picture of His church without walls whose characteristics were the balance of 'Unity and Diversity' and whose foundation stone and bedrock was a revelation of Gods son 'Jesus' and whose only outer perimeter was the fiery hedge of His Spirit.

If we look closer at the scripture **Matthew 16 vs 15 -19** we see Jesus asking Peter who he thinks He is. Peter replies by saying 'You are the Christ the son of the living God'

Jesus says that this is a revelation that Peter has received direct from God and not from man. He then says an amazing thing ' On this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it, and I will give you the keys of the Kingdom to bind and loose on earth as in heaven'

What was this rock? Peter? a man
God's new organisation? The Church?

No..... what Peter had just encountered was not a set of plans or a model but a revelation of who Jesus Christ was and this would be the bed rock and context and substance from which the church would express itself and the release of the keys of the Kingdom of God.

So as I pondered the varying groups, fellowships and denominations we belong to with all our differences and histories and traditions, I asked God

' How did we get to this and how do we get back toOne body, one Church, one rock!'

God gave me **Philippians 3 vs 8- 16** in this passage Paul talks about counting everything as rubbish other than the knowledge of Christ Jesus, he talks about leaving behind what is past and pressing on to take hold of the things that God took hold of him for and he finishes by saying 'Let us who are mature have this mind and if in anything we think differently God will reveal even this to us. Never the less to the degree we have attained let us walk by the same rule and be of the same mind'

God led me to the story of Nehemiah:



Here we have a man who one minute was a cup bearer to the king steadfastly going on with his natural life, and the next minute he has an encounter with God, where God allows him to see His kingdom through His eyes and it breaks Nehemiah's heart and causes him to rise up in the strength, resources and authority of God to do something about the situation.

God highlighted the following things to me out of this story:

1. Firstly Nehemiah shares the burden and purposes of God with God's people and encourages them to rise up and build (**Neh 2 vs.17 +18**)..... and they listen

2. Secondly the people receive the vision and burden into their own hearts and within their varying groups and family units (Approximately 40 in number) and in unity of purpose and mind take on a section of the wall each. Working within their own groups concentrating on their own bit, yet side by side with their brethren encouraging, helping and supporting each other to the common purpose. **(Neh 3 vs. 1-4)**

3. When opposition came they lifted their voices together in prayer to their God **(Neh 4 vs. 4)**

4. When attack came upon them because Satan did not want God's kingdom established they:
 - Made their prayer to God 'together'
 - Set a watch day and night
 - Fought and built within their groups supported by each other
 - Remembered that the Lord was great and awesome and on their side **(Neh 4 vs. 8-9 and 13-14)**

Together they dealt with bad report, despising, head on attack, oppression, and conspiracy against their leaders. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder and built and completed the task God had given.

When I thought back to the things God had done in the past in our town through 'THE CHURCH' it was always centred around 'purpose and context' and always had someone who had been bold enough to encounter God's heart and then share the vision.

That is what happened in Nehemiah with the rebuilding of the wall.

Around this time my eldest daughter returned home from 'Trumpet Call' in Birmingham fired up with a vision for 'HOPE 08' Hope in the Community. As she shared the vision with me one aspect of it.... 'the whole church in every town and city across the UK delivering a million hours of kindness to the local community' stirred our hearts and I felt God say to me here is my purpose and context to carry my kingdom to your community.



We prayed together and believed the Lord said go to the Christian young people and church youth groups they are the carriers of this...

So we set about visiting as many Christian youth groups in the town as we could sharing the vision of 'Hope to the Community'

The Church of God through its young people delivering acts of Kindness to the needy.

Within four months we had a group of young people and their leaders working together towards blessing our community and going back into their respective churches to motivate their congregations to get involved.

HOPE 08 was a great success, not only for blessing the community but for drawing together God's church in our town, and although there were those who had been sceptical, many more people and groups came on board for HOPE 09 and HOPE 10 events.



It was a joy to see Christians from all walks of life and all ages standing side by side serving together and carrying Gods Love and Hope to those who didn't know it.

I guess the question that remains is, how do we become carriers of God's kingdom together into our community 365 days of the year and not just for a long weekend. A lifestyle and Beacon rather than an event. God gave me two final pictures.



1. A team of climbers, revolve the person who is the lead climber when they are attempting to climb a mountain. God said be ready to lead and take the initiative when I call you, but also be as ready to follow and support when I am calling someone else to lead. (Are we as enthusiastic about what God is doing through others as we are in the things He gives us?)

2. A picture of individual candles on a small plate and as they allowed themselves to be close they not only gave off more light but actually melted into one candle with many wicks, maybe a picture for the churches in our town, and our relationship with each other.



Finally, when I first went to Thailand I felt I was going to give and serve, but actually the people I met with nothing, often had more than me..... quite a challenge!but that's another story.