

REPORT ON FREE CHURCHES CONSULTATION ON TRAINING FOR MINISTRY

September 20, 2003

Arranged through the 9:38 Web

Written by David Jackman

Between 40 and 50 ministers and elders gathered for the event and 16 others sent their apologies and a variety of helpful comments, which were fed into the discussion.

1. Programme

Michael Ovey welcomed us to the College, on behalf of the faculty, underlining the passionate perspective of Acts 20:26-27, matching theology and practice which characterises Oak Hill's ethos. Andy Gemmill then led us in an excellent Bible study of 2 Timothy 2, linking verse 2 closely to verse 1, and identifying strength in Christ's grace as demonstrated in commitment to, and active practice of, the training of others. He concluded that in his own city of Nottingham, to see 5% of the population involved in evangelical churches would require 100 congregations of 140 members and 100 pastor-teachers. There is a vast job to be done.

David Jackman further identified and focussed the challenges we face, and Glenn Nesbitt outlined the "apprentice schemes" currently promoted by the 9:38 Web with their emphasis on training young people in three competencies--knowledge, godly character and ministry skills.

A wide-ranging discussion followed, in which many helpful observations were made and current initiatives were described. There was strong emphasis and agreement on the need for action and the following ideas received general approval and commendation.

2. Action

- i. The 9:38 Web should have a "free church leaders" section of its data base, so that information about its conferences, newsletters, regional events and apprenticeships can be more widely disseminated. If you would like to be part of this please send your e-mail or postal address to Glenn Nesbitt at 2 Roger Bacon Lane, Oxford OX1 1QE, Tel: 01865 204, E-mail: Gnesbitt@hotmail.com
- ii. It was agreed to encourage a number of larger free churches, with greater reserves for training, to act as centres for an area of 10-20 mile radius around them, so as to provide basic training, on a much wider geographical base. I will liaise with ministers and FIEC representatives to try to get this underway. A partnership of this sort, with conservative evangelical Anglicans, is in its early stages in London and the Southeast, and it was generally agreed that where such local initiatives could be developed among those sharing the same theological and ministry convictions, across the denominational divides, this should be actively pursued.

- iii. The need to relate ministry training to church planting and evangelistic outreach was readily agreed. Simply to see ministry as maintenance of existing churches and structures is a disincentive to many young people. Fruitful evangelism and planting new congregations liberates gifts and stimulates desire for involvement in ministry.
- iv. Mentoring was identified as a key need. A booklet on best practice might well be jointly produced by Prepared For Service and the 9:38 Web. This is being actively followed up. The need to mentor teenagers was stressed, to identify and channel gifts early, as well as students and young workers. This would help to develop a "route into ministry" pattern, which at present is lacking in many churches.
- v. The value of young people serving on summer camps and ventures was stressed as a major factor in gaining positive experience of gospel work and ministry. Several spoke of how these had been formative in their own lives, although it was also pointed out that some free churches have no access to these networks. One such opening readily available for young leaders is Christian Camps in Wales, which runs six camps in July and August. (For details contact Pastor Gwynne Evans, 28 Farris Avenue, Hayes, Middx UB3 2AT, Tel: 0208 569-0669).
- vi. Funding was still seen to be a major issue in the provision of theological education. It was stressed that more flexible and accessible structures were needed in the training institutions, combining theory and practice more effectively through the provision of part-time or day-release courses. The growth of such part-time courses was to be expected and encouraged. But also funds need to be sought for full-time training to be available to more good Free Church candidates.
- vii. Support for pastors, ongoing training and encouragement, the opportunity to continue study and develop best practice were all cited as largely absent from the thinking of many churches, which made ministry a much less attractive option for professionally-minded young men. Poor conditions of service and inadequate financial remuneration were still too often apparent and provided a negative view of the ministry in the thinking of many of our most able and gifted potential workers.

3. Conclusion

We shall seek to follow up on each of these areas and keep you informed of progress via the 9:38 Web contacts (if you sign up!). This can also serve as an ongoing forum and a clearing-house for ideas and opportunities. Please send all reactions, questions, etc, to Glenn Nesbitt, as indicated under action point (i).

Above all let's heed Matthew 9:38 and "ask the Lord of the harvest to thrust out his workers into the harvest field".