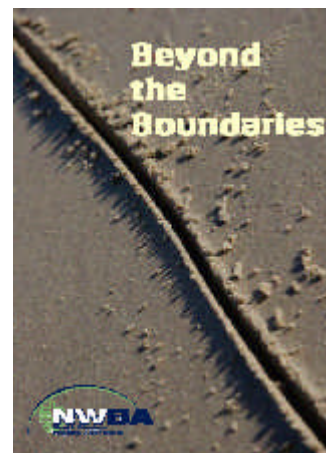


Beyond the Boundaries

It is now some time since NWBA churches were introduced to the *Beyond the Boundaries* Initiative. Regional Minister, Revd Phil Jump reflects on how this has developed and on plans for the future.

More than anything else *Beyond the Boundaries* is a call to prayer. If I'm honest, I'm not sure that all of our churches have grasped that; we have had feedback that quite a few feel they are being asked and expected to launch new mission projects – this is certainly our long term vision, but is not the phase we are seeking to pursue at the moment. I do sense that God is calling us as North West Baptists to look beyond our existing horizons, but it is vital that anything that develops from that is genuinely Spirit-led and not simply a reaction to the latest programme that the NWBA team have devised.



If I'm honest, I feel that too much mission today is programme led, and the vision of "Beyond the Boundaries" is to invite churches to create space for God to speak to them. The key questions I feel we need to ask is "How does God speak? And "What might He be saying?" My response to the first question is that God speaks in many different ways – it may be through a handful of people beginning to attend our church from a particular neighbourhood or ethnic background. It might be that a church discovers that a new housing development has appeared or is planned within its environs, or simply becomes burdened for a specific area within its community in a way that it hasn't previously been so. It might be that a group of individuals within the church have a shared vision to develop a new approach to worship or a programme of outreach aimed at a specific people group.

An important milestone in the Beyond the Boundaries initiative is our next Association Forum, planned to be held in Colwyn Bay on 9th October this year. My hope is that delegates will arrive having already worked through a clear commitment to this vision in their own local context, and ready to share with the wider Baptist family what God might be saying to us as a whole. This does not mean that we will have a whole raft of new initiatives to talk about, but I hope that every church will be able to say that they have created the time and space to explore one simple question together – "What is God calling us to do that we have not done before?" Some folk may well conclude that the answer to that question is "nothing" – that's fine, what matters for me is that they have stopped to consciously ask the question.

But if churches have reached that conclusion, this does not mean they have no further part to play. My hope is that by sharing in the vision and aspirations of other local congregations, some might say "we can help you there" – perhaps because they already have some experience of working in an area that will be new for another fellowship; they might even have some capacity to offer practical support to a church which might not otherwise manage to realise its vision.

There's a fascinating Gospel story which begins at the outset of John chapter 9. The disciples of Jesus encounter a man born blind, and the fact that they know something of his history suggests that this is not the first time they had met him. They did show an interest in the man, but it was largely a theoretical one, what they failed to see was that his presence presented them with an opportunity to display God's power and love in a new and creative way. Beyond the Boundaries seeks to capture the essence of that moment. I hope that many churches have already caught the vision and are setting time aside to pray, reflect and give God space to challenge them to mission either through sights that are familiar or by exposure to previously unseen challenges and opportunities. For those who have not yet, the forthcoming summer break offers the ideal opportunity to take stock and explore the questions that have been outlined above.

My vision and earnest desire is that when we come together in the Autumn there will be much to share. This to me is what Association is all about – yes there are central resources and initiatives that we as an NWBA team can develop, but these need to arise from the needs and aspirations of our churches. If Church Planting is to be a key feature of our work in the next five years, it needs to be so because our churches sense that God is leading them in that direction, not because a small committee has decided this should be the case. The same can be said of fresh expressions, outreach to new ethnic groups, café church, youth and children's or anything else that we might seek to resource and enable.

It is for this reason that I return to my original premise. *Beyond the Boundaries* is first and foremost a call to prayer; and invitation for the people of God to seek out and listen to the voice of God. In many respects it is

simply an invitation for churches to do what they should be doing already, yet sometimes we need a catalyst to give it focus and shape. And everyone has a part to play, I invite every reader of this article to stop for a moment and reflect on the encounters, the concerns, the changes the inner stirrings that have been part of their experience in recent months. Ask yourself the question – is God saying something to you; ask your friends the question – is God saying something to them and then join with the rest of your church in considering what might await beyond your present boundaries.