

attending your services and meetings, and their financial support will now go into the new work.

If you are only concerned about comfortably maintaining your own fellowship, you will never become involved in church planting. Only when you and I are passionately gripped by the need of men and women without Christ, will we have the hearts to initiate programmes such as these.

May I ask:

For how many years has your church been in existence?

How long has it been since your congregation planted a daughter church?

Has your church EVER planted a new church?

If not, why not?

It is my earnest plea that every congregation in our denomination will consider investing in the Kingdom of God by aiming at planting a new church within the next year. ■

This charge came from the Presiding Bishop of the Church of England in South Africa.

The same passion: Hybels, Bibles & Willow Creek '92

by Mark Thompson

In October 1975, an unusual Chicago youth group began an independent church designed to attract non-churched people. Seventeen years later, around thirty members of what has become one of the largest churches in the United States came half-way around the world to share their dream with Christians in Australia. Willow Creek Community Church presents *Building a Church for the Unchurched*.

A number of years ago, Willow Creek began to take their Pastors' Conferences 'on the road'. With little variation, the Sydney conference contained material presented in a number of other locations around the world. The aim was to introduce the Willow Creek strategy, to present a typical 'Seekers' Service'

and 'New Community' (Believers' Service), and to encourage local churches to do some hard thinking about how they could build effective, culturally relevant, local churches.

I visited Willow Creek a little over two years ago and attended a very similar conference (see "A Passion for the Lost", *Briefing* #56). Since then I've listened to countless tapes, read a number of books, and even watched the occasional video produced by this amazing church. So, has anything changed since 1990? What happened during those three days at the Darling Harbour Convention Centre?

The same strengths

It is great to see that Bill Hybels and the team have lost none of their passion to see lost people saved. Evangelism is still the driving force behind this church. Hybels himself actively searches out opportunities to present the gospel to unbelievers and there is a phenomenal degree of commitment amongst his team. In this way, the conference delivered both encouragement and a challenge to Australian churches. Are we prepared, even in our congregational gatherings, to take evangelism seriously? Are we prepared to create an environment where the gospel message can be clearly heard? Are we prepared to explore the negotiable aspects of our congregational life and be creative in our approach?

These sorts of questions call for hard thinking, both about biblical principles for 'church' and about the people we are trying to reach. It is in the latter that the people from Willow Creek excel. They try to think through the impact of every facet of one of their meetings. How will 'Unchurched Harry' (their term) respond to the appearance of the building, the type of music, the drama, the words used to introduce songs or to pray, even the car parking facilities? They have learned to walk through the experience of an unchurched person, step by step, in order to anticipate his or her response. Nothing must be allowed to interfere with the impact of the message.

Willow Creek continues to strive for excellence, but not simply excellence for the sake of excellence. They see themselves as involved in the most important mission on earth, and nothing less than the best they can give is appropriate. If God did not settle for second best when it comes to his dealings with us, how can we be satisfied with mediocrity?

Bill Hybels and the team at Willow Creek remain committed to creative use of the arts in their various gatherings. Music and drama feature prominently in their services, particularly the 'Seekers' Service'. A lot of effort is put into shaping each service so that the 'audience' is brought to the message with a receptive frame of mind. That point is often overlooked in critiques of the Willow Creek strategy;

undeniably, the message remains important in their meetings.

One of the most attractive features of Willow Creek, just as it was back in 1990, is the transparent honesty and humility of the Senior Pastor, Bill Hybels. His concern for personal integrity and his obvious commitment to the honour of Christ continues to inspire both the leadership team and those who attend their conferences. He openly shares his thoughts, his feelings, his failures and his dreams. And he makes it clear that the spectacular growth of this ministry has taken him by surprise. He never planned a mega-church. He just wanted to see lost people saved. His passion reminds you of his Master.

But what about the Bible?

For all that is good about Willow Creek—and there is much that is very good—some serious flaws were all too apparent during the three days of the Sydney Conference. The most obvious weakness was the way in which the Bible was used, not only in the talks, but also in the self-proclaimed typical Seekers' and Believers' Services (listening to tapes has confirmed this observation). Four things come to mind in this connection.

1. Although the service introductions and closing prayers often mention the Bible, it was not at all clear that the Bible was the basis of their teaching, either in the conference sessions or in the services. At best, Scripture was used to illustrate a point Hybels had already made—at worst, it was not there at all. The Bible was central in neither the Seekers' Service nor the Believers' Service. This has significant ramifications for the ongoing growth of Christians under such a strategy. A most important question needs to be asked: Can this really be taken as evidence of a profound confidence in the Word of God to change lives? The seriousness of this flaw is obvious. It is serious enough to raise larger questions about the Willow Creek strategy.

2. When the Bible was used, it was not immediately clear where the advice of Hybels ended and the authoritative Word of God began. Bible stories were elaborated and developed (not necessarily a bad thing), but often Hybels' point was made from his elaboration and not from the text itself. More often we were being given good practical advice, wise Christian counsel, or sound management principles, but not the Word of God. People observe not only *what* you teach from the Bible but *how* you teach from the Bible. I am not endorsing dull preaching, but preaching *from the Bible* does not have to be dull!
3. As is obvious in Hybels' book on prayer, he allows a certain kind of mysticism to encroach upon the authority of the Bible. In *Too Busy Not To Pray*, Hybels encourages people to pause in silence and wait for God to speak to them. At the conference the team spoke of their desire to create 'moments' in their services. They were looking for points of existential encounter between the person attending the service and God himself. This might happen through the drama, or through the music, or through the message. Once again, almost imperceptibly, the Bible has been moved from centre stage.
4. The small groups at Willow Creek are meant to be another important avenue for serious engagement with the Word of God. There is a two-year syllabus which is meant to provide group members with a grasp of basic Christian doctrine and Bible teaching. However, after that two year programme has been completed, there is not necessarily any further teaching in small groups. Service groups and community groups are in place, and a group member might

lead another group through the same two-year programme, but after the initial group it is expected that the believer will get taught at the Believers' Services.

What is negotiable?

It was a good conference and there is a lot we can learn from the ministry at Willow Creek. We cannot afford to be complacent or simply dismissive of what God has been doing through this group of committed Christian brothers and sisters. We can be encouraged to see a group of people committed to serving the Lord Jesus and seeing lost people saved. We can be challenged about the extent to which our commitment to structures and form have made it difficult for us to think creatively about how to reach the millions in our cities who are heading for judgement and hell. We can be stimulated to do our own thinking about our own context and come up with our own strategies.

However, there are some things we must not learn from Willow Creek. We must start with the Bible, not with our own observations or assessments of human need or receptivity. I suspect more careful attention needs to be given to just what are the *non-negotiables* when Christians gather or when Christians engage in evangelism. But we must not only start with the Bible, we must stick with it. It is the Word of God, the sword of the Spirit of God, which makes lasting change in the lives of men and women. We must not trivialize it or obscure it, even with good and true Christian counsel or management practice. In our congregations we need to encourage *and model* a serious engagement with this life-changing word of the Living God. ■

(Mark Thompson lectures at Moore Theological College, Newtown, and was on the organizer's committee for the recent Willow Creek conference.)