



Rev. Vaughan Roberts

Discipleship at St Ebbe's - Interview with Vaughan Roberts

Rev Vaughan Roberts is the vicar of St Ebbe's, Oxford, and was the keynote speaker at the recent FCA Conference. Malcolm Falloon caught up with Vaughan at the Auckland event and asked him about discipleship.

Vaughan, tell me a little about discipleship at St Ebbe's?

It's a whole mix: we would have kids from a few days old to elderly people in their nineties. The local area is pre-dominantly unchurched and working class including, what might be termed, the centre-city poor. Then there is a student ministry, which is obviously very different. We also get a lot of young people from all over the world; so we have the challenges and opportunities of an international fellowship. Then, being in the city centre, we attract long-term residents from all around – families, kids, etc.

So four very different kinds of demographics! How do you look to minister to them? Do you have them all in one service?

We don't, largely because of space. There is nowhere where we could all fit for one service. So, although I firmly believe the church is a delightfully mixed community of people that God draws together, practically speaking, we can't all fit in the same place. And so, 9:45am tends to be when most of the kids and their families come. A bit later, 11:45am, tends to be when students come. And we have a 4:30pm afternoon congregation that is deliberately focused on the non-bookish. And then in the evening, 6:30pm, tends to be a whole mix, but obviously we don't have young families at that time.

Do you have different discipleship strategies for these different congregations?

The fundamental strategy is the same whoever we reach. Ephesians 4 has been key for me for many years. What I think you have in Ephesians 4 is a wonderful antidote to both clericalism and anti-clericalism. So you have an antidote to clericalism: how is it that the body of Christ grows in unity and grows to maturity? It's as each member does his or her work of ministry. So really the whole congregation are the ministers and the discipleship strategy is to enable as much as we can the whole people of God to be discipling others and to be

pastoring others.

But it's not anti-clerical either, for what produces that ministry are those who have been set apart for the ministry of the word, who act as catalysts. So if we put on a staff member we absolutely don't want that staff member to think, "I'm going to be pastoring and discipling, and the others are going to be receiving." But, "How can I equip others, so that others may minister." In that way, of course, much more happens. But the basic principles are the same for each congregation, though the actual application may differ in practise.

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Student ministry has a particular character, how do you disciple students at St Ebbe's?

Undergraduate students at St Ebbe's are only with us for part of the year, and then only for three or four years. So during that time we are majoring on majors. We want them to go away with deep convictions about the Gospel and on core issues. So we will be preaching through the whole Word of God on Sundays. Mid-week there's a focus on different parts of the Bible, and different books of the Bible.

A lot of it is getting them to be convinced that the Bible is the Word of God and getting them used to handling the Bible well, so that they can feed themselves. Wherever they end up, we would love

to feel that they could be bible study leaders, who know how to handle the Bible, and have experienced its living power. For those who are around longer term, one of the big challenges for mature disciples is how to keep helping them to grow when they've heard it all before. A lot of that is about mutual encouragement.

Are you thinking about students who stay on?

Exactly, and that's a challenge. I remember a bishop, who wasn't an evangelical, saying to me, "you evangelicals have got a big front door but you have a big back door, too!" And he was pointing out how many leave evangelical churches as time goes by because they are not being nurtured.

There's not just one reason for that. But we are not trying to teach them new things, because actually, it's the same Gospel that converts us, and that disciples us – that matures us. But we do want to address people where they are. I think a key is to make sure that the Bible studies are really well earthed and that they are encouraging each other to think through, "how does this actually apply?" They might know it all, but what difference does it make?

In terms of pastoral ministry, it means going deep and applying the Bible to the heart issues. Because, as we go on in our Christian walk, we are very attuned to protecting ourselves against the Bible, and there are patterns of thinking that are wrong and often remain unaddressed. In this regard, we have found the Bible counselling movement really very helpful. So, when there are people struggling with on-going challenges, actually not to think you need some great professional – sometimes, of course, people have serious psychological issues who need professional help – but often there are just spiritual blockages that can be helped by carefully applying the Bible to the heart issues of life.

So do you look to train people in your parish for biblically counselling?

It's early days. At the moment there is just a small number who are doing that. There are in the UK a number of biblical counselling conferences and we encourage people to go to them for training.

There is also a good programme that we have piloted in our parish this year called, Celebrate Recovery. It's a course that has come out of the States and looks to bring freedom to people with hurts, habits and hang-ups, to those who just feel trapped by whatever it is. I don't go along to that, and I don't know who goes – its a confidential group – but the leaders have said that's been a really helpful way for people who have just felt a bit stuck to talk about things in a really open setting where everyone is struggling with something. Again, the principle is exactly the same, to apply the teaching of the Bible to the issues of the heart.

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Finally, Vaughan, in your work with the Proclamation Trust in the UK, what do you see as the wider needs of the Church in terms of discipleship?

It is an issue wherever you go, but it is more of an issue in some parts of the world than others. By and large at St Ebbe's, the issue is not a lack of teaching – we are very strong on teaching – the challenge is helping people to really connect with it deeply and live it. In other parts of the world there can be just a thinness in the teaching. It's partly to do with a lack of training of pastors, and the bible handling skills, and so on. And so, at the Proclamation Trust we recently appointed an international director to try and think how we can do more to help people handle the Bible better. In the UK we have got so much to learn from many Christian communities around the world in terms of passion, willingness to suffer, evangelistic zeal, and so on. But we have a lot to teach them in these kinds of areas as well.