



# A long obedience in the same direction

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*Malcolm has ministered for nearly 30 years in a ribbon development of overgrown commuter villages along the A70 to the south-west of Edinburgh, now including Wester Hailes (a UPA area) and more recently a new congregation in Livingston, West Lothian. Over this time he has seen a small single-handed church of 50 attenders grow to 500+ attenders with 20 staff.*

In this seminar, we will use the St Mungo's experience to look at how to sustain long-term growth in a Scottish suburban context and consider what is a workable strategy for a mission-minded church in 2017. We will also consider what the place of the Holy Spirit is in a healthy and growing church. There may be some unexpected answers!

“A long obedience in the same direction” is the title of this seminar. Here we examine what mission and church growth look like in and through a suburban local church. From the beginning, the mission of the congregation was focused specifically as ‘evangelistic’ mission: *telling* good news, not just *being* good news.

In this seminar, the subject is being explored through the experience of one minister's ministry in one local church, St Mungo's, over 30 years. The church was originally focused on the Scottish Episcopal parish of Balerno, a commuter village 7 miles south-west of Edinburgh. It now includes the Urban Priority Area of Wester Hailes to the east and a brand-new congregation meeting in Livingston to the west. The specific question to be addressed is how the church has

managed to grow through its mission and ministry from an average of 50 attending on any given Sunday to well over 500. What are the missional principles that can be drawn from this particular case study?

The initial starting point was 1 Thessalonians 1:4–8 (NIV):

For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere.

This passage raises questions for mission in Scotland in 2017. For example, what would it look like for us to be able to say: *‘our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.’* To put it in other words, how can healthy growing churches become a model to all the believers? And how can we make sure that the Lord’s message rings, trumpets, echoes out clearly and positively into our communities and cultures?

The view has been expressed that ‘mission’ has become a ‘greedy’ word to cover almost everything and anything, and therefore has actually become technically meaningless. The argument here, however, is that true mission must prioritise communicating the good news of Jesus Christ through evangelism and bringing people into a personal commitment to Jesus as Lord and Saviour and into his Church. Using Jesus’ own ‘mission’ agenda – Mark 1:14–15:

Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come”, he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Various examples can be given of some of the things that may have affected St Mungo's growth and mission. They are as follows:

- i) A clearly articulated vision – expressed originally as M.U.N.G.O.S. – ‘We aim to be a missionary, united, nurturing, growing, offering, serving church.’ This is now expressed more concisely in the mission statement: ‘Our vision is to be an infectious centre of spiritual health.’
- ii) An ongoing commitment to church growth and church growth principles.
- iii) A continuously updated strategy for evangelism, which currently includes practical combinations of guest services, Alpha courses and evangelistic outreach. The aim is to create a culture where every member feels encouraged and equipped for their own faith sharing.
- iv) Deliberately staffing for growth and mission, e.g. a Director of Evangelism has just been appointed.
- v) Creating accessible, contemporary, exciting worship services, that meet the needs of Christians and non-Christians alike.
- vi) Emphasising the place of the Bible and expository preaching in bringing conversion and discipleship.
- vii) Seeking the experienced presence and power of the Holy Spirit.
- viii) A focus on healing and wholeness.
- ix) An awareness of the vital place of small groups in integrating new people and helping to disciple new Christians and mature long-term church members.

All these and other factors are presented as important to the growth of a lively, healthy, mission-minded church. Two slightly controversial suggestions might be added.

Firstly, mission shouldn't be equated primarily with social action and community transformation. While it is a vital and non-negotiable expression of a local church's kingdom life, it rarely brings significant church growth or conversion on its own. In fact, it can exhaust a church and hasten decline unless coming out of a healthy, growing, evangelising local church that can sustain such ministry. A healthy

evangelising local church will be able to express God's love through social action, but evangelistic mission must be the primary expression of mission.

Secondly, despite having listed all the key principles that have helped St Mungo's to sustain growth over a long period of time, it is the writer's belief that actually the congregation was grown intuitively – by creating a service that he really wanted to go to, a church that his wife wanted to go to, and a church that his children wanted to go to. The principle was this: that if the writer and his family liked this kind of church, others would as well – including 'not yet Christians'. This has proven true in the case of St Mungo's. The mission history of the congregation has now been brought right up to date with a brand new missional service recently pioneered in a high school in Livingston. This has not only re-energised the whole church, but already is attracting many un-churched and de-churched people. Local church-based evangelistic mission must be creative and imaginative. It is my contention that the future of mission in Scotland must be through lively, attractive, growing, mission-minded, evangelistically-focused, outward-looking *local churches*, where every member is mobilised to care, and share their faith. A healthy local church, a healthy local congregation, is still the most effective missional body in Scotland.