

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SOUTH BIRMINGHAM VINEYARD CHURCH

The following is a brief account of the life of South Birmingham Vineyard Church from its beginnings to July 2003. In writing it, we have tried to highlight some significant events and words from God that have influenced us over the years but this is in no way an exhaustive account. As we reflect together on how God has shaped our history, our prayer is that together we can know more fully his purpose for our future.

Small Beginnings

The church that we know now as South Birmingham Vineyard grew from a small group in Gaynor and Townley McNeil's house in Halesowen somewhere around 1988. Although the half a dozen people that first met there had been followers of Jesus for some years, they knew there was much more of God's life and power to experience and so met to worship, pray and seek God together. In 1989, David McNeil spent 6 months at a Vineyard Leadership Training School in California where he had a vision from God of a huge geyser of water springing up from the ground and on the top was a church. David knew that God wanted to birth a new church that was to love God, extend His kingdom and see others come to know Him. On his return, David and his brother Andrew shared the vision with the group and set about planting the church that they knew would one day grow, plant other churches and be a source of God's life to the community around. In Aug 89 after meeting Andrew and David and hearing their story, Simon and Keely felt that God was calling them to commit themselves to Andrew and David and their vision.

Pete and Alison Bird joined at the end of 89 and a second group was planted in their home in Harborne. At the end of 1990 both groups met together for their first celebration in the New Cobden Hotel on the Hagley Road. During the summer of that year Andrew McNeil spent three months in the States, researching the Vineyard's approach to Church Planting. Someone who he had never met shared a vision of Andrew carrying a satchel passed down from his Grandmother's side (his grandparents planted a church in South Wales). Andrew was going around the US filling it with resources and tools that he would need for the return to the UK. When Andrew finally opened it up however, only Jesus shone out and he realised that despite all the tools and resources, Jesus was all he needed. Jesus was the one who promised to build the Church. (Matthew 18)

As Andrew and David led this small but growing church, they continued to seek God as to how things should develop. Sitting in the garden one day Andrew noticed a strawberry plant and was struck by the way in which it sends new shoots to start new plants which remain connected to the main plant. The strawberry plant reflected his conviction that God wanted to see fruit in different communities that was interconnected by a common heart and vision for the city. The vision was to plant new kinships and churches in different parts of the West Midlands and maintain a network of relationships with shared values, resources and vision.

Official Birthday

Although the small church was not officially part of the Vineyard Movement (the bank account was in the name of "Halesowen Kinship Group"), Andrew and David pursued relationships with the other Vineyard leaders. John Mumford, the UK overseer had known Andrew and David for some years. The official start of SBV, when it did come, was on 26th May 1992. By then there were 40+ adults gathering monthly in the Apollo Hotel on the Hagley Road and John happened to be the guest speaker on this particular occasion. During the evening he officially welcomed us into the Vineyard family of Churches and prayed for God's continued blessing on our future.

Interestingly, Andrew and David had felt that the church should be called "Birmingham Vineyard". David believed that one day there would be a kinship group in every postcode of the city. John advised calling the church South Birmingham Vineyard in order to make room for other churches to grow in the city. Andrew and David followed his advice but still kept in their hearts a vision for the city.

As momentum gathered, numbers grew steadily and more groups were planted in various districts of Birmingham. By now there were kinships in Selly Oak, Harborne, Stirchley, Halesowen, and significantly, a number of groups in Sutton Coldfield. Sunday Morning Services started in January 1993 at the teaching centre of Westhill College with approximately 60 adults and 20 children.

The importance of generosity

Right from the start, Andrew and David knew that church planting was on God's agenda. During 1994, David and Tania knew God was calling them to plant a new church in Sutton Coldfield with the 2 groups that were already meeting there. As Sutton Coldfield Vineyard was 'commissioned' there was a great sense of celebration. Along with the desire to bless what God wanted to do in that part of the city was an equal desire to work together and share resources in a number of areas.

It's interesting to see that even back in 1995 with two churches in the city, there was a sense that 'working together' was part of God's plan. Both David and Tania and Andrew and Rosie have recognised that in practice both churches got on with the immediate local work and the plans for joint training and outreach didn't really get off the ground. With hindsight it's perhaps easier to understand why this happened. With David and Tania leading and growing in their own environment, and Andrew and Rosie expanding SBV, the vision for working together became eclipsed.

A Season of Planting

The church in Sutton Coldfield was the first in what became a rapid season of church planting. Around 1994/95 Andrew and David believed that God had called them to plant "*Ten Churches by the Year 2000*". Although exciting, it seemed an audacious goal, but the word was confirmed one night when Andy Park, a visiting worship leader from California, prophesied exactly the same phrase at a crowded worship meeting in the recently acquired offices on Dawlish Road (Selly Oak).

At the start of 1996 God called Simon and Keely to plant out Halesowen Vineyard with 3 kinships. Simon has reflected that this was a little confusing as he really had a vision for the city, but nonetheless it was definitely God and so they went.

Over the next five years, other churches were planted so that there were indeed 10 churches by the end of 2000. Some started with a couple of kinships, some with a small core, and others with just the leaders but in all cases there was a sense, both on the part of the leaders, and of the leadership team, that this was how God was furthering His kingdom. In most cases, the leaders and core had worked on gathering, envisioning and training their people whilst still part of SBV, with Andrew and Rosie overseeing and training them on the job. Then, when things had become established, the church was formally 'released and commissioned'. Halesowen was followed by Redditch (Brian and Lindsay Nash), Daventry (Steve and Tammy Gee), Leicester (Rajni and Tricia Kaneria), North Devon (Paul and Rachel Jones), Coventry (Nick and Vicki Sutton) and Wolverhampton (Terry and Teresa Waterworth). Tamworth Vineyard (Lee and Claire Guffick) and was planted from Sutton Coldfield Vineyard, (technically a 'granddaughter' from SBV) and Redditch planted Leamington Spa. The leaders of these churches met together regularly for personal relationships and support, but in reality because of the geographical spread there was little working together apart from the occasional large scale 'celebration' in different locations. During this period the Church sent Danny Morris and Mike Buckley to help establish a church plant in West Beirut called the Olive Grove. This connection with Lebanon has developed since then with the Morris's and the Phillips' moving in 2002.

As well as the churches that were planted, some people were exploring expressions of church in other places that were not 'planted out'. As well as Steve and Jackie Philpott looking at the possibility of church planting in Worcester, Paul and Dot Hendon developed gathering events through the kinships in the Shirley and Solihull area. Paul and Dot's vision was to remain part of SBV whilst expressing church in a local community.

At the time, there was no model for maintaining a connection with the main church – all other such ‘celebrations’ had developed into church plants. As a result it was difficult to communicate vision and purpose in the context of the wider church. Faced with the choice of staying or going, Paul and Dot did not feel at liberty to ‘go’. It seems now that this early attempt at a congregational model was a little ahead of its time!

A Vision for the City

Having almost reached the goal of planting ten churches by 2000 the natural question was ‘what next?’ There were several kinships in various diverse communities, and ministries such as Satur8 and Skills for Living were connecting with a number of different people. Looking at all God had achieved was really exciting, but having planted so many churches, SBV didn’t have a ‘blueprint’ for the next season. As we started to ask God for a fresh sense of call and purpose, a number of words were given which seemed to point once again to God’s heart for the city. One significant word during this season was shared by Trevor Baker - Pastor of the Grace Centre, Dudley in Feb 2000. The word described SBV like a tree that had grown up slender through planting many churches and that God wanted to increase the size of the trunk and the reach of the branches. A small part of the word is reproduced here;-

“What I sense the Lord saying this morning is that this is the time for the work on the girth to begin so that it sustains the work of the boughs which ultimately support the branches upon which I will bring much fruit into this place and into the city...”

In the early part of 2000, God clearly spoke to Andrew and Rosie and Simon and Keely about Halesowen Vineyard coming back to be part of something new. This was dramatically confirmed by many people in a number of ways and in May 2000 HV joined SBV. There was an underlying sense that God wanted to establish something new through the marriage of the two churches. A key verse that was given at the time was from Hebrews 10:9 ‘He sets aside the first to establish the second’. A young man in the Church who knew nothing of the situation shared the story from Luke Chapter 4 where two fishing boats join together to land an enormous catch of fish. There was always a sense that this costly obedience to God and the strengths of both churches would be used to build something new to reach the city and beyond.

The Future

In the three years since the churches joined we have celebrated what God has done but also taken stock and called out to God for the next steps in His plan for us. Although we could see what the future might look like, finding the vocabulary and tools which might take us there has been a challenge, as well as coming to terms with God’s conviction that we have been ‘lukewarm’ in our faith. (Revelation 3:15-18). As we continue to walk out this repentance, we believe God is calling us to be more dependent on Him and to position ourselves to be fruitful. A word that God gave to us was from Joel 3:9-10 – God re-fashioning us to be more effective in accomplishing His purposes.

David and Andrew are exploring ways of working more effectively together as Vineyards and also as churches across Birmingham. Together with Nigel Tween at BCC, they have helped to initiate “4 the City”, a monthly meeting of pastoral leaders from across Birmingham which is “developing commitment to each other and to the city”. Out of these times of prayer and relationship came our first joint city centre event with BCC on 6th July.

This story to date clearly shows God’s grace and purpose for us, his people in Birmingham. We have always tried to walk in humility and obedience to God through these past years. We hope that this story inspires in you faith and a sense of confidence as we continue to follow God together.

SBV Pastoral Leadership Team
July 2003