



## Practice and Principles

### Main video

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God believe also in me.”  
John 14:1

My reading for this thought comes from John 14 and right through to verse 16, which is a bit long to read in this short segment, but I invite you to maybe pause and do that now or to have done that before we got here.

My point, when you look at these very familiar words, is that we often treat them as three separate things. There is the “In my Father's house there are many rooms” message, and we read that and are assured about eternity; there is the “Ask anything in my Name” message and we read that and believe it and go out and try harder; and there is the “Holy Spirit who comes alongside as another advocate or paraclete”, and we read that and we need that and we ask for that too. But they are all together and there is a direction of travel there too. It is because we are assured of many rooms that we are then able to ask in the Father's name, and because of that we then need the Holy Spirit to come alongside us.

What I want to do in this section is to describe something of our church's story in a little bit more detail, not saying “Copy us”, but with the idea that one story sparks another.

Our model in our church, and we have been following this for 7 or 8 years, is that in addition to our main Sunday services we do what we call “Alternative Gatherings”. Each of those are different ways of meeting with the primary aim of reaching those who foreseeably would not come to any other church in our locality. Some of those are based around interest groups and some of them are based around needs in the area.

So, for example, there is a one that plays golf very early on a Sunday morning, called *Early Birdies*, and those who take part in that have a discussion and a theme to talk about while they are having a round of golf. There is a meal-based thing for people who are homeless and vulnerable in our city. We take over a local sports centre for young people and families and each of the sporting activities stops and there are half-time team talks with a message about Jesus. There is a mountain biking group called *Mud, Sweat & Gears*, that stop and look at creation and open up God's Word and share together. There are groups that go out to various old people's homes and take services.

Each of those in our case, for the people who are running them, takes place instead of attending our main Sunday service. They are each only doing that once a month and so we take the view that it is much more important that they are out doing that once a month - they are with us for the rest of the time - but the aim, as I say, is to reach those who foreseeably wouldn't be coming to our church or, more importantly, any church. We try to keep those as lightweight and low maintenance as possible for the people organising them and keep to a missional aim very clearly rather than just a social



activity. We try to make it possible for couples and families to make different choices, so some might come to their missional community (or Alternative Gathering) at the same time as someone else in their family is going to the main Sunday service, and it hasn't cost them any time in doing that. We commission the people leading that and pray for them and believe this is one expression of our church reaching out.

So, accepting that principle that one story might spark another, what does that inspire you to think about? We've reached the point in our church life now where we currently reach as many people across the month in those 8 Alternative Gatherings (which might shortly be 9) as we do in our main Sunday services and we have definitely seen people commit to Jesus that we would not have seen come through our doors otherwise.

### *Feedback video*

So, one question that flows from describing our Alternative Gatherings, particularly some of them, is "How do you keep those gatherings genuinely missional when they could just be social activities taking place?"

So, for example, take the golfing one which is a subject more close to my heart than some of the others because it is a personal interest. That could so easily become just a bunch of men and women taking part in a golfing event. How do you keep a spiritual edge to that? Well, first of all you need the right people leading it and, secondly, we give each of our missional communities (or Alternative Gatherings) a clear, one sentence missional aim that describes what they are doing in terms of a spiritual aim in reaching out and how that particular activity might do it.

Take the example of golf. We give those taking part a discussion point as they go around and have a round together; something specific to talk about. They are not going to talk about it for the whole time they're out on the golf course but it's going to come up sometimes - hopefully not in the middle of someone's back swing! - but when they're walking. So, there might have been a national event that everybody's talking about - maybe some piece of good news or some tragic news and we could ask, "Where was God in that difficult news?", for example. It's something people are thinking about already.

With both with the mountain biking and the golfing events, for the people who take part in those events who are not yet believers, there is probably something in them that just loves being in the outdoors so that's a starting point. "What is it within us that connects with the outdoors, what is it that feeds our soul and where has that come from?" is a possible topic for conversation.

We also just look for what might appear very blatant opportunities. So, in the Alternative Gathering that's a golfing one, which we call *Early Birdies* (one of the youngest people thought of that title), we have a trophy for the person who does the best at the end of the year. In fact we invented the trophy because the person we worked out who did the best through the year was someone who didn't come to our church, so we invented a trophy and said to this person, "We are going to present the



trophy in our church service if you'd like to come." Well, he really wanted to come and he brought his whole family to see him receive that trophy! They came to our service and, although we were never particularly aiming for them to come to our services - our aim is for them to commit to Jesus - they loved our service and their whole family now comes regularly and are part of our community.