**SEASON TWO LAUNCH MATERIAL**

**GROWING IN FRUITFULNESS: RIPENING**

**Towards identifying two areas in which your congregation wants to prioritise growth**

**This material can be used as a sermon outline or in Midweek or Home Bible Study settings. It offers a way of moving from the fruitfulness material introduced in John chapter 15, towards the congregation being prepared to identify two areas of congregational life and witness in which they want to prioritise growth.**

**Together for Fruitfulness**

**I. Corinthians 3v.1-9**

***A way into the passage:***

**GROWING IN GOD’S WAYS FOR US**

As we have been thinking about fruitfulness, our thoughts have turned to what God is at work to grow in and through our work as a congregation. Growth can come in many forms – sometimes it’s a growth in numbers, in other seasons a growth in depth, in still other areas, a growth in the influence we bear for Christ beyond our own people or premises.

The verses we are going to look at in I. Corinthians chapter 3 v.1-9 are yet another place in the Bible where the theme of growth in the church appears. This time it is Paul writing to the congregation in Corinth about what God wants to grow among them, how He does it and some of the things that get in the way.

***A way through the passage:***

**GROWING TOGETHER IN CONGREGATIONAL LIFE and WITNESS**

1. **Growing as members of the congregation v.1-4**

Congregations are never more than the sum of their parts – their members. This passage begins with a picture of human growth and development. The expectation is that members of the congregation will grow from being infants in the expression of who they are in Christ, to become a mature community of His followers (v.1and2). Calling the Corinthians ‘mere infants in Christ’ sounds harsh, but Paul is appealing to a natural expectation and desire for growth that all of us have in every area of life. As much as we often nostalgically reminisce about what it was like to be a child, adults who still behave like children are an embarrassment. So is a congregation whose members are not maturing in their depth of faith and the expression of how it shapes their lives together (v.2).

One mark of growing as members of the congregation is a focus on God and His purposes for us together, rather than on ourselves as individuals, the particular pieces of work we are involved in and our own preferences. The former always brings us to pursue ways to work together, the latter always pulls God’s work among us apart.

In Corinth, self-centred tensions showed themselves in jealousy, quarrelling, cliques and factions (v.3and4). Those things in a congregation are evidence of human worldliness, not the growth of God’s kingdom among us as His people. The Corinthians were spoiling the good work God had done through Paul and Apollos by setting one part of what God was growing against another.

*What do people in your congregation expect being a member both offers to them and asks of them?*

*In what ways do you see your congregation showing increasing maturity by working together?*

*In what areas do you sometimes see a pulling apart?*

*How might having a shared vision of what it looks like to grow in fruitfulness help your congregation join in with the growth process with which God wants you to join Him?*

1. **Growing as a congregation in living out God’s purposes for our life and witness v.4-8**

When any one area of work, or individuals associated with it, loom too large, congregations lose connection with the real source of fruitfulness. Programmes, preferences and personalities take the place of remaining in Christ, the ‘True Vine’ without whom we can do nothing (John 15 v.5).

Paul draws the attention of the congregation in Corinth to how that happens in these verses. They had personalised their preferences into priorities for ‘planting’ and ‘watering’. These tasks had become identified with two big characters and influences in their congregation’s life, Apollos and Paul (v.6). Paul had spearheaded the initial evangelism programme that had brought the Corinthians to faith in Christ. Apollos came after. He became the influential figurehead for the work of helping the Corinthians grow in their faith.

Paul calls attention to two things here of which we also need to be reminded and to return to regularly if our congregational life and witness together is to be fruitful.

Firstly, he depersonalises ministry and mission by taking the spotlight off any particular individual. He depersonalises both Apollos and himself when he says *‘what’*, rather than *‘who’*, is Apollos and *‘what’*, rather than *‘who’*, is Paul (v.5)? Anything any of us do in the life and witness of our congregation is always as a ‘servant’ to whom the Lord has ‘assigned to a task’ (v.5). We all contribute to God’s greater purpose of what He is doing through us together in the congregation (v.8), but never in a way that builds ‘our kingdoms’, instead of His (v.7).

Secondly, Paul throws the spotlight back on God as the only one who can make things grow. He repeats this twice in consecutive verses as if to really make his point (v.6 & 7). We need that emphasis to be drummed home today as well, because if we are trusting in a few key people and the latest programmes, rather than in God, for growth in our congregation’s life and witness, we have well and truly missed the point!

Both ‘planting’ and ‘watering’ are necessary for God’s work to flourish among us. Congregations need to give attention to the balance between reaching out to others and stretching up in their life towards God. Worship that enables encounter with God requires hard work, but connecting and sharing Jesus with others outside the church doesn’t come easily these days either. Creating a caring community in the church is important, but so is equipping members to live as followers of Jesus in their everyday lives.

In any particular season of congregational life and witness particular area require greater or lesser attention and priority, but none of them ever become unimportant. This is what makes growing together in fruitfulness so challenging. It can only be done when we prayerfully discern what God is doing, and wants to do, among us.

*What preferences do we find ourselves in danger of personalising into priorities for everyone in our congregation?*

*When we see ourselves as servants given a task by the Lord, rather than leaders of particular ministries and organisations, how might that help us fit our* *contributions into the bigger picture of what God is doing in the congregation as a whole?*

*Where do we see our congregation’s life and witness to be strongest and weakest? Where is it imbalanced? What might need to happen to gain greater balance and how do we feel about those sorts of adjustments?*

1. **Growing in our appreciation of what fruitfulness looks like v.9**

It is no accident that Paul brings the Christians in Corinth back to an agricultural picture of how God works in and through His church. He describes us as God’s ‘fellow workers’ and then places us in both ‘God’s field’ and ‘God’s building site’ (v.9). From verse 10 onwards, Paul will develop the image of the building site, but in the verses we have looked at, he has located us again in the world of the farmer. As in John chapter 15, the picture of the church is of a field, not a factory.

Like many of us in the church today, the Corinthian Christians had got used to living in a rapidly changing, fast moving, individualistic and success absorbed society. Paul contrasts God’s ways of fruitfulness in the church with all of those impulses. Seeing the growth of His Kingdom often requires patience, careful nurture, working together and eyes to see what He is making grow. That doesn’t mean we sit back and doing nothing. Rather we need to learn how to join in as ‘fellow workers’ with a growth process which God ultimately paces, guides and controls.

Appreciating God’s ways to growing fruitfulness for congregations is always best done together. We are God’s ‘fellow workers’ in the plural, each contributing to what He wants to grow in the field of our congregation’s life and witness.

*How has living with the picture of fruitfulness challenged and changed our way of viewing our congregation’s life and witness?*

*What might it mean for us to learn to join in as fellow workers with a growth process which God ultimately paces, guides and controls?*

*How could we create the time and space to hear from the widest cross-section of members of our congregation as to what they sense God is calling us to prioritise together in the next season of our life and witness?*

***A way out into our congregational life and witness:***

So, how might we develop eyes to see what God is growing among us and what fruitfulness might look like for our congregation in this season of its life and witness? Here are some ways to begin to do that.

* Begin to read and listen to God’s Word, not just as speaking to you as an individual, but to you as part of your congregation
* Begin to ask each other the question, ‘what is God doing among us’?
* Find out more about what is happening in organisations or activities in which you don’t participate
* Be generous and gentle in looking for fruitfulness, it often ripens slowly
* Recognise that fruitfulness often comes and goes in seasons – be honest about what seems to have been barren for some time and may need to be reshaped or cut off by pruning
* Pray expectantly that God will help your congregation hear His voice as you move towards identifying some priorities – your ‘one purpose’ (v.8) - for pursuing God’s ways together in the next season of your congregation’s life and witness

Use the Fruitful Congregation Prayer

**Fruitful Congregation Prayer
Based on John 15v.1-17 and I. Corinthians 3v.1-9**

**Lord of the Church, in every time and place,**

we thank you that You are the God who makes things grow.

We thank you for signs of your fruitfulness among us as a congregation.

The power of Jesus, the true vine, flowing in us and through us,

is what causes our life and witness as Your people to flourish.

**All knowing God, who sees our hearts,**

We confess that often we have been unfruitful,

not because You have not wanted to grow your Kingdom among us,

but because we have:-

Not listened carefully to Your word and followed it;

Lost our expectation of Your Spirit’s work among us;

Demanded our own preferences, rather than surrendered to Your will for us;

Not pulled together in Your one purpose for us, but pulled apart in jealousy, quarrelling, cliques and factions.

**Forgiving Father, who tends our congregation’s life and witness,**

we thank You that we are already clean because of the word of Your pardoning grace.

Prune us, cutting off what bears no fruit;

Shape us, so that we can be even more fruitful in living out Your purposes for us;

Teach us, showing us through Jesus, Your living Word, what we need to learn;

Enable us to better remain in Him and to know His life flowing in us.

**Sovereign Lord, who chooses and appoints us to go and bear fruit,**

in this season of our congregation’s life and witness,

help us to hear your voice and follow where You call.

We ask for grace not only to look to our own personal agendas, preferences and advantage.

We ask for that spirit of love that lays down all of that in the service of the glory of God and for the good of others.

We ask for clarity to know Your will for our congregation – nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.

**Only Wise God, generous in giving wisdom without finding fault to those who ask,**

as fellow workers in the field that is Your church,

in these often bewildering times of challenge and change,

we seek Your face.

Remaining in You and desiring to be shaped by Your word,

we ask, believing, that You will guide us,

as we now listen to discern Your ways for us.

Make known to us the next steps towards Your growing in us greater fruitfulness for our Father’s glory.

**Amen**