

A Journey with God

Part 1

The story begins in March 2000 with the visit of Sagemont Church, Houston to Teesside but there were some key events that happened prior to this that I feel shaped the course of what was to come! I, therefore, need to go back to the late 1970's when an American, Chuck McComb, was working for Monsanto on Teesside and worshipping at Middlesbrough Baptist Church. From 1974-79 he was a faithful member of the church and when he returned to America he left behind a strong reputation of being a Godly man.

Fast forward 20 years to 1999 to where I now was at that same church, having been in charge of the youth work there for about 8 years. It had been brought to my attention that the World Baptist Youth Conference was being held in Houston and I had 4 young people that I thought would be just right to send to that event. They were 16/17 years old and although we managed to raise the money for their airfares and other expenses we did not have any more money to send an adult with them. I shared this problem with the church and a dear old lady, Anne Dickie, piped up and said, " Chuck McComb, he lives in Houston. He will look after your young people." There was no, he might or he may, it was a clear conviction that this Godly man would look after my young people!

I rang Chuck and introduced myself to him and sure enough when I explained the situation, without any hesitation, he said, " Send them to me, I will look after them." Our 4 young people went out to Houston for two weeks, attended the conference, stayed in Chuck's home and God just poured into them. So much so that when they returned and were given the opportunity to report back to the church at the Sunday evening service the 4 of them spoke for an hour and a half!

By this time in 1999 Chuck had retired, been to seminary and had a vision to be an interim pastor. If a church was without a pastor for whatever reason Chuck would offer to do interim ministry even, if necessary, taking his huge RV to provide his own accommodation and draw no salary from the church. Not long after our young people came back from Houston our pastor was called to a church down in Derby and we knew it would take about 12 months to find a new

pastor. The thought came to us at the church that it would be great if Chuck could become our interim pastor in the meantime. And so I picked up the phone again and invited Chuck to become our interim pastor, a position he was delighted to accept and which he would be able to start in April 2000.

Chuck and his wife, Pat, attended Sagemont Church where John Wills was serving. John and Kelly Wills had dinner at the McCombs and Pat McComb suggested that Middlesbrough Baptist would be a great place for a Sagemont team to serve. and John hearing about this offer and connection with Middlesbrough Baptist Church thought it would be good to bring a group to Middlesbrough from Sagemont. He wrongly thought that Chuck and I were friends from way back but up to that point Chuck and I had still not met! I remember receiving the phone call from John asking if he could bring a group to Middlesbrough and I remember saying something about did he know where Middlesbrough was and the sort of town it was and that it wasn't near London! John assured me he had taken a group to Huddersfield previously and so that was good enough for me and so I said, "Yes." I then asked how many was he planning to bring and he said, "37 ." I thought that was a question I should have asked before saying yes and then he said he wanted the group to be in the schools! We had now gone from the very difficult to the nigh on impossible – the size of the group was way bigger than my church could handle and to get into the schools – what had I said yes to!?

The first thought was to split the group up and share them around other local churches that I knew. I rang 4 of them and 3 came back quickly and said yes to hosting the group and so an unmanageable group of 37 became a somewhat easier to manage 4 groups of 9/10. Then for the group coming to my church came the difficult task of getting them into 5 schools for the week, a different school each day – John Wills had said after all that he wanted to be in the schools, plural! I knew I could get him into my school for a day but that left 4 schools to fill the week. With much prayer and trepidation I started ringing schools in the area thinking how do I sell this. I can only describe what happened next as 'God goes before us' because barely were the words out of my mouth but the schools were saying that they would love to have them in for a day!

John and his group arrived in March 2000, a month before Chuck was to begin his interim ministry, and God truly blessed that week. The churches who hosted, the schools they went into, the team that John

brought, which also included for a short time Voddie Baucham, were all touched by God. Such was the experience that at the end of the week John Wills said to me that he wanted to come back in June, with a smaller group, to see whether this was of God or of him just enjoying a great week. John came back in the June with a group of 12, shared between my church and Billingham Baptist, and at the end of that week John declared that it had been better than the first week. He now wanted to make this a yearly trip and open it up to other churches in America.

What I had said yes to, thinking we could do this once and it would be interesting was now transforming itself into something else altogether but when you say yes to God and take that first step, be prepared for an amazing journey that God is about to take you on!

By John Rhodes, Deacon and Youth Leader, Middlesbrough Baptist Church in Cambridge Road, Middlesbrough, UK