

A Journey with God

Part 2

Following his own two visits in March and June 2000 John Wills then brought a group of 10 youth pastors to Teesside in the December of that year to see firsthand the splendours of the area and the opportunities for ministry! By now God was really at work and through His Spirit 9 of the 10 said they would bring a group in 2001 and the other, because he had already fixed up a trip for 2001 said he would bring a group in 2002. A 100% positive response – you see what I mean about God getting down to work.

Back in those early exciting years I handled the arrangements for the groups coming in on the mission trips. Looking back I can see God opening doors of opportunity which meant that I could cope – more churches were coming on board, schools were opening up and homes were welcoming – a real work of God. Things were developing quickly and in 2002 we had 3 gap year workers, Sarah Levine at South Bank Baptist, Sarah Kabell at Guisborough Fellowship and Lori Stoneman at my own church – all females – committing themselves to serve God on Teesside.

Alongside this we were also developing AIPM (American Interim Pastorate Ministry), founded by Chuck McComb, where pastors and church leaders would come from America and pastor at some of our churches who were without a minister committing themselves to 6 month stints. Some churches, Thornaby Baptist in particular, had a series of interim pastors one following another and benefitted hugely from this provision.

By 2003 things were getting pretty hectic as more and more groups were coming – I remember we even placed a group at Beacon Lough, Gateshead which was well out of our area. Fortunately, God was again at work and had brought Jon Burns back to Teesside and Jon had a vision to establish a YFC on Teesside. We met and saw the mutual benefits and Jon, with his usual vigour and energy, soon had TVYFC up and running and I had the privilege of being its first chair person with Jon as my director.

At this stage there were a couple of decisions to be made. The Northern Baptist association were interested in partnering with the

American teams that were coming in and so I met with two of their representatives. Their area stretched from Berwick-on-Tweed (Scottish border) down the east coast to Hull and they had one person dedicated to youth work in that entire area! The fledgling TVYFC were going to concentrate just on Teesside and already had a number of youth workers up and running. A no brainer really and so an unofficial partnership sprang up between TVYFC and the American mission teams with me being involved on both sides. AIPM, and rightly so, did partner up with the Northern Baptist Association and that worked extremely well placing American pastors in churches across the north east of England.

TVYFC benefitted enormously from the work done by the American teams and fledgling gap year workers in that schools were open to Christian ministry and Jon reckoned it had saved him a year in his planning. TVYFC was then one of the fastest growing YFC's in the country and went on to become the 3rd largest in the country. Jon was a driving force in seeking to bring the Gospel relevantly to the area and in 2006 launched NE1, a huge one-off event involving 150 American young people alongside 500 British young people housed in a tented village just below the Ushaw monument in County Durham. Each day hundreds of buses would head out to help to various communities with social action programmes bringing the love of God in practical ways. Each night they would return and the worship meetings each evening were something to behold!

In 2008 Jon moved on to found More than Gold, Lion's Raw and concentrate on being pastor at the Vine Church, Yarm and was replaced at TVYFC by Andy Robinson who became the new director. By now TVYFC were handling a lot of the paperwork involved in bringing gap year workers across with Fiona Toop being instrumental in that side of things but as yet there was no official organization that represented the American gap year workers either on this side of the pond or back in the States.

God again was at work and had stirred in the heart of an American that he should uproot his family and move to Teesside.

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