

The Beginning of the GSBM - Pastors Training School as recalled by Mark Gostlin

My purpose is to recall the events that culminated in the development of the Pastors Training School, a ministry of the Good Shepherd Baptist Mission under the leadership of DH Easter.

In the early 1990's many, if not most, independent Baptist churches were either stagnant or in decline with regard to attendance, active involvement of the members, and effective soul-winning outreach in the communities, all of which aggravated a worsening state of affairs for global missions. But rather than curse the darkness, Bro. DH Easter, having grown increasingly burdened about this sad state, determined to find what was hindering the progress of the ministry and discover whether something could be done to help the pastors and churches overcome it.

While the effect of a problem is easily seen, revealing the actual problem requires close attention. The root cause, and more so, the solution, is much more difficult to arrive at. As he visited churches in various parts of the country, Bro. Easter began to note certain commonalities in stagnant or declining church ministries. After categorizing his observations and discussing them with close friends, he determined to isolate the root causes of these hindrances and see what biblical solutions might be offered to help overcome them.

I had the privilege of spending some days with Bro. Easter in his home office simply passing every observation he had made through a filter of key questions. . The filter was very simple, really. We asked the question, "Generally speaking is 'X' functioning well in our churches?" If the answer seemed to be negative, we asked, "Does this problem create a 'bottleneck' for growth of the church and the development of its ministries?" Then we itemized the various facets of the ministry that might be found in a 'typical' local church and ran our observations about these through the same filter.

Phone calls to other brethren were made during those days to gain greater perspective. If a problem seemed to exist in many churches but was not really a major hindrance to the progress of the cause of Christ, we put it aside. If, on the other hand, it appeared that a common problem was causing a 'bottleneck' in respect to the mission of the church, we asked a further question. "Is this matter already being effectively addressed?" Sometimes that answer was, 'yes'. For example, many churches suffered from having a membership poorly equipped to witness for Christ, which can be a major problem, but which could be remedied by the employment of numerous strategies well-known to pastors and other church leaders with materials readily available.

Finally, we compiled a list of major problem areas with some suggestions for further study and development of biblical teaching that might address each area.

Our meeting concluded with a determination to seek the Lord's will for the development of a course with a similar structure to the one week 'Missionary Training School' that Bro. Easter was directing annually in Spencer, Ohio, at the church where I was the pastor.

Over the next few days, Brother Easter fervently sought the wisdom of the Lord and concluded that every 'problem area' that we had identified related to one or more of four larger aspects of church ministry and that weaknesses in all four areas were rampant. I doubt that I had ever seen anything more striking in my ministry than what he presented to me in regard to those four areas.

They are as follows: (F.L.O.W)

- Full Holy Spirit Control: The Holy Spirit must clearly direct every ministry of the church.
- Leadership: Pastors must demonstrate and teach Christlike leadership rather than an abdication of their responsibility or, on the other extreme, dictatorial lordship over the church.
- Organization: Church ministries must be properly planned, developed, and nurtured by employing biblical values, proper organizational planning, and responsible financial principles.
- World Evangelism: Every aspect of the church must ultimately enhance the church's fulfillment of the Great commission.

It became overwhelmingly clear to both of us that some vehicle (like the Missionary Training School) must be developed to address these four crucial aspects of pastoral ministry, none of which were being adequately addressed in our Bible Colleges, conferences, or any other well-known methods of leadership development.

Bro. Easter shared all of these things with the team of men (most of whom were pastors) that he had already formed to conduct the Missionary Training School, having been in communication with them all prior to and throughout this process. Now that a plan of action was in formulation, he knew that he needed them fully engaged in order to produce something that none in the group (or any group of men that we knew of) would be capable of producing. We had learned by experience that the Holy Ghost could use the wisdom and experience of a team of yielded men to produce something greater than the sum of their abilities.

The team responded enthusiastically about the project but every man expressed no confidence in his own ability to help produce what was needed. At the same time, all of them made the self-sacrificing commitment to take time from his own ministry and family and to come at his own expense, if necessary, from around the country to pray together and try to formulate a plan to produce a Pastors Training School. These men were Ralph Taylor, Pastor of Oakside Baptist Church in LaGrange, Georgia; S.T. Janney, pastor of Hilliard Baptist Church in LaGrange, Georgia; Alan Jenkins, Pastor of Columbia Road Baptist Church in North Olmsted, Ohio. Steve Williams, Director of Harvest Baptist Mission and Associate Pastor of Columbia Road Baptist Church in North Olmsted, Ohio; Mark Gostlin, Pastor of First Baptist Church in Spencer, Ohio, and Darwin Easter, Director of Good Shepherd Baptist Mission, which was then a ministry of Midway Baptist Church, Proctor, Arkansas.

As plans were made for a meeting that would change the course of our lives, each member was assigned at least one subject that had been defined in the days that Bro. Easter and I had met together. If a resource existed and was already known, the team member was referred to it for the development of his class. Much discussion over the phone and in emails ensued until some months later we assembled to spend two days together wherein each man would have 10 minutes to present his research and a course outline from which a class might be developed. Sometimes more time was necessary for the presentations. Always the period of evaluation was thorough, lengthy and intense. The way in which the group interacted and the things we accomplished together were astounding.

Nearly every aspect of every course presented was deemed to be utterly deficient. Passionately held opinions were openly challenged. Prescriptions from a veritable 'committee' of men with no previous collusion were agreed upon, assigned, and accepted by the recently corrected team member with an attitude of thankfulness for the insight, the correction, and most of all, for the opportunity to better his own understanding of the topic through the process.

The most remarkable and memorable moment for everyone present was when Pastor Ralph Taylor, a man considered a spiritual giant by the most critical of all people, his best friends, presented his material for a subject of core importance to the school. There was a pause afterward because what he presented was in all points biblical, useful, and correct – but it lacked the approval of the Holy Ghost that it was on point for the project. We all knew that no one had any disagreement with what he presented but that he would have to start over from scratch. Our immense respect for him caused us to keep our silence. He insisted on the feedback until Bro. Easter had to verbalize what everyone, including Bro. Taylor, already knew. It just wouldn't work. Without batting an eye, he leaned forward with his pen to write and asked what he needed to do to make it work. It was this kind of Holy Ghost inspired humility that set the tone for the rest of meeting. We knew that something great was coming because no human being could lay claim to whatever would be accomplished from that moment on. God had taken control.

The schools were scheduled, hosted, and then evaluated with the same grueling, humbling intensity in the years that followed. Errors were made. Adjustments followed the errors. The first PTS was the most awkward as we learned how to introduce a team of men to a group of pastors who were meeting each other for the first time and guide the experience in such a way that they could meld together and yield to the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. It was profitable for those who came, but most profitable for those of us privileged to be used of God in the preparation of the school.

Subsequent schools were so much the better because of the refining process that the Holy Spirit had taught us to employ. In some respects the curriculum is a settled matter now. But practically, adjustments continue to be made even as the Lord has brought new men onto the team. My opinion is that this happens because the PTS remains a living work and because it is the will of God that it remain fresh in the hearts of minds of the teaching team.