

A Toronto Experience

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March 5, 1995

Like everyone else, I'd heard some of what was going on in Toronto. I can remember the barbecue at the manse after the membership service last July, for example — some of that evening was spent exchanging stories we'd heard from the Airport Vineyard. I even mentioned it in my Harvest letter last year. So when Paul and Miranda Hopkins rang me in early September to say they were going, and did I want to go with them, I was interested.

There were one or two obstacles to overcome, of course. Not least was the fact that I'm a Methodist Minister — supposed, therefore, to be a pillar of society, respectable, grave, sober and above reproach. Not given to rolling in the aisles, falling to the floor or otherwise having a good time in church. In addition, there was work to do here. Meetings to go to, sermons to write, meetings to go to, people to visit and meetings to go to. So my response needed some consideration. "Give me 24 hours" I told Miranda; "I need to ask God about this first". There was no point going to get blessed by God if He didn't want me there in the first place.

So I prayed. Pretty quickly I had a peace about it, coupled with that excited feeling I get in my stomach when God's speaking to me. Next day I told them I'd be going. An additional confirmation that it was what God wanted was the fact that the week they had in mind to go, from 1st. to 8th. October, was almost totally clear in my diary — a minor miracle in itself.

There was still the Staff meeting to negotiate, seeking permission to be released for the week while I went to investigate this phenomenon. The other Ministers were unsure, either not knowing anything of what God was doing in Toronto, or having heard negative reports through the newspapers. But they were gracious, and, against their better judgement, agreed that I should go in Circuit time, on behalf of the Circuit. It's fun watching God work.

So, through the night of 30th. September I drove down to London for Air India flight AI187 to Toronto. It was in the middle of the plague occurring

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in India, and the airline was in disarray. Plus, I was sitting next to a hugely fat Indian man whose body spilled out in all directions, including mine. But these were small prices to pay for meeting God in power, I thought.

Paul and Miranda had travelled separately *via* friends in Boston, and we met up in the hotel recommended by the Airport Vineyard church — filled almost entirely by Christians there for the same reason. On my way from the airport to the hotel, I was surprised to learn that my taxi driver hadn't even heard of what I'd travelled round the globe to see. "Well I never", he said; "Jesus happen in my own backyard and I don't hear about it!"

That first Saturday night I was disappointed. We were there in good time, but the crowds queuing outside for 30–40 minutes before it started had taken all the seats. (Queuing? To get into church?) So my expectation was fairly high. But I failed to see what I'd come several thousand miles for.

If I'd come for the music, well, the band was OK (better than the Praise Rave band, I agree) but nothing to write home about: just a bunch of teenagers playing some songs. In any case, from a 7.30pm start it was 10.15pm before we came to one I even recognised. The church architecture would not have won any prizes, except possibly as a B&Q warehouse with seats. And if I'd come for the preaching, the guy would have failed as a Methodist Local Preacher on trial. "Maybe I've got it wrong", I wondered; "perhaps I shouldn't be here after all".

There was really nothing special. Just a format which (I later saw) was repeated every day of the week (except Mondays, when God got the evening off.) It started with worship (guitars, drums, vocals, overhead projector) till about 8.15pm, then two or three testimonies from people who'd been there a few days, or who were on their second visit and could tell what had happened back home in the meantime. Then about ten to nine there'd be an offering, and some time around 9.00pm the preacher would start — for anything from 15 to 45 minutes.

It was all so ordinary! And yet the place was full to overflowing with visitors from the four corners of the world, who'd paid good money to fly there. Were we all suckers in some ecclesiastical confidence trick! No. Because God was there! Why He'd picked an unimpressive little place like this to do a new thing, I don't know. It was all very reminiscent of choosing a stable in little old Bethlehem when there were so many more suitable places around. But God was there! Around 9.30pm the chairs got stacked against the walls of the warehouse, sorry, church... the band came back on the platform and started playing again... people stood around and the 'Ministry Team' (identified by coloured badges) came round praying for people. And like as not, the people

would fall over, or burst into tears, or start laughing, or go jumping round the room. The place was full of people doing funny things and bodies lying on the floor. All very strange — even if you'd heard the stories in advance and knew what to expect.

It left me pretty cold. Not offended; not upset. Just not really interested. If that's what they wanted to do, that was fine; but it wasn't what I wanted. So I was pretty quiet: perhaps the other Ministers back home had been right after all. Perhaps I'd endured the Indian fat man and risked catching the plague for nothing.

Paul and Miranda were more positive; they encouraged me to receive prayer anyway, since I'd come this far. So I watched the Ministry Team in operation, and identified the least oddball one among them — a friendly, normal-looking guy in his 40s, with a beard. He asked me my name, and whether there was anything in particular to pray for. He reassured me that I didn't need to fall over, but that someone would catch me if I did. He told me not to try to 'do' anything, just to receive from God. And then he prayed, asking the Holy Spirit to come upon me. And the Holy Spirit came.

It wasn't the first time I'd been slain in the Spirit (or 'rested' in the Spirit) by any means. But as I lay there on the carpet of Toronto's Airport Vineyard church, God started doing something new with me. And throughout that week, He came time and again to fill me with power and reshape my life more the way He wanted. I didn't always fall over: on the Sunday night I was prayed for by the main pastor, John Arnott. I just stood there while he prayed; he didn't seem bothered.

In all the week I never rolled about laughing, or pogo-ed round the room. I didn't shake; I didn't twitch. But on at least one evening I broke down in tears for three-quarters of an hour, unrestrained and unconcerned about who was watching (they were mostly all crying anyway), as someone brought a prophetic picture about the spiritual state of the United Kingdom, and the River Thames flooding to irrigate the dry land. One evening I was privileged to 'catch' for one of the Ministry Team as he prayed for people — after which he bought me pizza in the café next door and explained to me the things I didn't understand. I still have my fluorescent badge of office, saying 'Toronto Airport Vineyard: **Ministry Team Helper**'. And in the course of that week, God brought a freshness and anointing which I hadn't had before, coupled with a powerful new love for Jesus.

My problems still weren't over, however. What would happen on my return to Wales, where, on the very next Sunday we had a Praise Rave

scheduled at Rhosymedre, and all the world and his wife knew that I'd have just come back from Toronto? I was concerned. On the flight back, that Saturday evening, God gave me the things I needed to say in the address (about what He was doing in Toronto). Fresh from a week seeing Him do amazing things, it all seemed perfectly natural. He also told me to offer to pray with people at the close of the Praise Rave. I wrote it all down, longhand, missing my computer badly!

I landed at Heathrow that Sunday morning about 11.00am. I'd left my car at my brother's, and he came to collect me in his. Three attempts to start my car resulted in a bang, a puff of smoke and a flat battery. "Lord", I said, "I need to get back to Wales for the Praise Rave". I turned the key a fourth time: I didn't hear anything at all, but when I looked down at the rev. counter, the engine was turning over. The strange thing is, that, at the time, it didn't seem strange...

A swift drive up the M40 got me home at 3.30pm; I jumped in the shower, ready for the practice before the Praise Rave. As I later faced our own people, the message God had given me on the plane didn't seem quite so straightforward. "Lord" I said, "if I give that message I'll get thrown out". But I did, and I wasn't; rather, as I preached, the Spirit of God fell on the congregation, bringing stillness and expectancy. When I later offered to pray with people, a dozen or so came forward. I had no idea what to do — I was on unfamiliar territory — but as I simply prayed for them, God did there in Rhosymedre what I'd seen Him do in Toronto. Of the twelve, 11 fell to the floor under the power of the Spirit, and the twelfth stood there laughing his head off. Strange happenings — and yet it all felt so natural.

And so to the present. I've reported back to the Staff meeting (they didn't quite know what to make of it). I've preached my 'Toronto' sermon wherever I've been (usually they don't quite know what to make of it). I still pray with people, and mostly they still fall over (whether they know what to make of it or not). Sometimes they laugh, sometimes they cry, sometimes they sit still and rest in the Spirit for a while.

But what is important to understand is that the key is not what you see God do on the outside, but what you don't see Him do on the inside. Anybody can fall over, anyone can laugh, cry, sit still or pogo round the room (arthritis permitting). But only God can change the heart. What we're seeing is people suddenly falling in love with Jesus all over again. We're seeing changed lives; we're seeing the fruit as well as the gifts of the Holy Spirit. And we're seeing a power in people's lives, as God flows through them and reaches other people. It's exciting to live in it and minister it.

If you're interested and challenged, or just want more of God, can I suggest you do three things for starters:

- Ask me for a copy of my 'Toronto' sermon to read
- Listen to the tape about Toronto by Eleanor Mumford, speaking at the Holy Trinity Brompton church last May (again, I have copies)
- Come to our fortnightly 'Carpet Fellowship' meetings, currently being held in the Eisteddfod Pavilion (Monsanto Suite) on alternate Tuesday evenings — and see for yourself

And if you're not interested, and don't want more of God — why ever not?