SHAPE Up and Ship Out!

By Jefferson Bannister

SHAPE in the United States has responded to a Macedonian call from pastors in Barbados to “Come over and help us!”

Paul Dreger, national SHAPE coordinator, will come alongside two indigenous Barbadian certified coaches currently pastoring in the United States to shape up a plan and ship out SHAPE to Barbados in the Caribbean.

Pastor Whitfield Blenman (extreme left), of Solid Rock Church of God in Orlando, Florida, will join Pastor Jefferson Bannister (extreme right), of Grace Church of God in Brooklyn, New York, to give back to the Barbados Church of God, which played a critical developmental role during their formative years.

At the Global Gathering, this heartening news was announced during a luncheon at Golden Corral in Anderson. It thrilled Martin Goodridge, chairman of the Barbados General Assembly (second from right), along with a twenty-five-member contingent of pastors and leaders of Barbados. Present also were some thirty-five supportive leaders from the Grace and Solid Rock Church of God congregations and Paul Dreger. Three pastors, Lennox Boyce, of Silver Sands; Vasco Perry, of Chelsea; and Junior Spooner, of Orange Hill (center), expressed a hunger to be coached; they hope for sustained help to develop their leadership and pastoral skills.

The Barbados General Assembly tried using annual conventions to invite topnotch leaders, pastors, and professors from Church of God institutions in the United States and Canada. These outstanding leaders (continued on page 2)
came, equipped pastors and leaders in workshops for one week, and left. The effort did provide needed knowledge, but it lacked the kind of lasting engagement that pastors need for transformation.

The Barbados General Assembly made a shift and called upon Pastor Bannister to focus on church discipleship. Using the discipleship model from his Navigator partners, he ran a workshop, but next steps failed to materialize. He became busy leading both the Eastern New York district and the Eastern States Ministers’ Retreat (ESMR), and sitting on the Business and Leadership Resource Committee of the General Assembly of the Church of God in the United States and Canada, all while pastoring.

Upon reflection, we realize that God was shaping all three leaders to coach from the position of practitioners in pastoral and leadership ministry at all levels. First, SHAPE was brought to the Eastern states when Jefferson was leader and Paul was initiated as a national coach trainer. Second, the relationship between Paul and Jeff continued after the ESMR SHAPE experience when Paul became national SHAPE coordinator and Jeff became a national coach trainer. Third, the Barbados Assembly began leaning on Pastor Blenman, who also took up a post on the Ministries Council of the General Assembly of the Church of God in the United States and Canada.

God, in his creativity, gave us SHAPE as a discipleship and coaching model, and when the cry for help came, Jefferson was able to recommend it to help fill a pastoral leadership developmental need in Barbados. Paul was encouraged to say yes, for Paul and his wife had already made several missionary trips to Barbados and had built relationships with pastors and leaders there. In this initiative, Paul will spearhead the training of these pastors as coaches and then leave Pastors Blenman and Bannister to continue engaging the pastors in Barbados for three years in a cluster. Only God knows where SHAPE will be shipped next!

Here and There: SHAPE happenings across North America

• Training began for SHAPE cohort 3 in Louisiana, October 24–25, at Camp Pollock, near Alexandria, Louisiana. Present were Michael Brady, Shawn Waggoner, and Michael Williams. Regional coordinator Ray Jones also attended. Training and the launch of cohort 3 are anticipated to take place in early 2014.

• Leader training continued for the launch of cohort 1 in the Carolinas, September 30–October 1, in Myrtle Beach. The cohort 1 orientation retreat is scheduled for January 12–13, 2014.

• Please be in prayer for the remaining 2013 training and orientation events and for the first ever international SHAPE events, which will take place in 2014.
Back in my younger adventurous days I attended a five-day conference sponsored by Rev. Moon and his Unification Church. We attended plenary sessions regarding their theology and participated in small group sessions led by members of the Unification Church. My small group comprised parents of young people who had become involved with this group and Christian pastors who had been invited to the conference. Emotions ran high as parents sought to understand why their children would embrace this perspective of spiritual life and as pastors sought to defend their theology. I have never been good at arguing my point (well, don’t ask my family about that!) and chose to spend the first small group sessions just sitting, observing the group dynamics at play, and listening. In fact, I listened for two full days, not saying a word, except for asking for clarification regarding certain points of conversation.

What did listening do for me? First, it helped me understand the group dynamic itself. Without an understanding of the relational makeup of a group, genuine communication and meaningful interaction will suffer. Second, it helped me understand the nature of Unification theology: it helped me hear what was really being said from their perspective. We tend to hear through the filter of our own perspective and experience in ways that can skew our understanding of another’s view. So I worked very hard to put myself in their place and put my own ideas aside for a moment.

By the middle of the third day, I was ready to constructively enter into the conversation and speak from an informed position that was not rooted in emotion or the need to defend my theology, to participate in a way that could lead my group leaders into a deeper questioning of their own beliefs. As I questioned their positions based upon the inconsistencies I found, I was increasingly confronted with responses like “I don’t know” and “Well, I am not sure.” At the closing banquet on Friday evening, my small group leader introduced me to a vice president of the Unification Church who had flown in from New York City. In the midst of the conversation, he said to this executive of the Unification Church, “Paul knows our theology better than I do!”

Too many of us have lost the powerful art of listening. Listening opens up tremendous opportunities for learning and growth and strengthened relationships. Listening helps us truly know another person and understand the dynamics that are in play in our relationships. How can we more effectively practice the art of listening?

First, know God intimately. Psalm 46:10 says, “Be still, and know that I am God” (NIV). Do you only know what you think you know about God, or have you stilled yourself before him enough to truly allow God’s Holy Spirit to take you to depths of understanding and relationship that you could never find on your own? The more deeply you know God, the more effectively you can accomplish the next step.

Second, know yourself and be at peace with yourself. Very often our need to be heard, to defend ourselves or our beliefs, to feel that our ideas, beliefs, perspectives are valued, keeps us from taking time to truly hear another person. We can be so preoccupied with our own thoughts, desires, and interests that we spend little time tuned in to the life, interests, and needs of others, even our own family members. To come to the place of saying with Paul, “I have learned to be content…” (Phil 4:11), is to enter into a new realm of personal peace that allows us to hear in ways we otherwise could not. When our identity and purpose are rooted in the creative energy of God and a growing relationship with our Creator, we find freedom to not be threatened by others and truly listen to their ideas, their perspectives, their heart.

Third, grow in love. Love allows us to enter into another’s life in ways nothing else can. If I love, I want to know the person, to protect them, to journey with them in growth and maturity. The capacity to most effectively listen does not begin with our ears or even with our mind, but with our heart.

Fourth, take time to build relationships. Listening takes time. Perhaps time is the best gift we can give to family, to friends, and to the world we desire to introduce to Jesus.

I earlier referred to listening as an art. Perhaps it is more accurately described it as a discipline. It is a discipline that we desperately need to develop if we are to fulfill the mission that Jesus has entrusted to us. Take time to listen. You will be blessed by what you hear!