

Forge Podcast with Hugh Osgood.mp3

Peter Wooding: [00:00:11] Welcome to the Forge Leadership podcast. This week Simon Barrington is joined by Rev Dr Hugh Osgood, President of Churches Together in England and moderator of the Free Church Council. Hugh has over 50 years of ministry experience and shares his overview of the UK church.

Simon Barrington: [00:00:29] So welcome to the Forge leadership podcast. Today on the podcast I'm joined by the Rev Dr Hugh Osgood. Hugh is the President of Churches Together in England and also a Moderator of the Free Church Council. Hugh welcome.

Hugh Osgood: [00:00:42] Thank you for having me. It's great to be here, Simon.

Simon Barrington: [00:00:44] And it's great to be in your offices in Bromley, a borough of London. You're a London boy?

Hugh Osgood: [00:00:50] Well I was born in West London and then I grew up in Brighton and Hove came back to university and London expected to be working in Africa and ended up church planting in London. So I've been here ever since.

Simon Barrington: [00:01:01] And a lot of your life has been involved in ministry across London and seeing big missions across London. You were involved in Billy Graham and Mission 89.

Hugh Osgood: [00:01:09] Yes I was. Actually I was quite impacted by the earlier Billy Graham missions you know back in the 60s I was a student at the time. And then I suppose really my first experience of London wide mission was with Louis Palau which was the same time as Mission England and Mission to London saw me getting quite involved with counselling and follow up. So at the end of that there was this big thing about can we keep all the connectivity. And so I was asked if I would help set up a London wide Evangelical Alliance and then it was really quite opportune when the Billy Graham organisation came to talk about Mission 89 because it was suggested that I did the follow up for that. I was a little bit reticent at first. I was doing lots of student ministry and I couldn't quite see how I was going to fit it in but in the end I agreed to take on a follow up and then I had to take on the counselling as well, because Wyn Lewis who was going to handle that felt that it was too much so I ended up being Chair of both both counselling and follow up for that which was a huge opportunity really working with other people with the organisation and great learning experience but also gave me an opportunity to get to know London. I got to know where the dynamic churches were, where the challenges were, which churches needed strengthening and I'm just a huge huge privilege and I've sort of kept that London awareness ever since. And obviously done many other things that have been London wide since 1989. London has changed a lot over the years.

Simon Barrington: [00:02:36] London's changed a lot over that time, you know its now home to the world really you know with over 50 languages spoken here and the church has changed a lot during that time as well. We've seen a lot of immigration into London and ethnic minority churches planted what's your role been in that.

Hugh Osgood: [00:02:55] Well it's quite interesting. Role in that is quite an interesting statement because I remember when I was a student I was looking at doing medicine and dentistry so I was Barts and then I was at the Royal Dental Hospital in Leicester Square as it was then and one of the things we found when we were trying to evangelize fellow students was that a lot of them were just saying well I'm already a Christian you know, I was born in a Christian country and so a big thing that we were praying about was Lord take the nominalism out of the church for our church to be so

much stronger if all the nominalism went out of the church. And then the other thing we prayed because many of us you know having looking at doing medical stuff and looking at maybe serving overseas were beginning to think well you know we could go to some of these countries but wouldn't it be better if people came here. Where we had an opportunity to evangelize here and so we started praying. Lord, why don't you send all of these different people from different faiths into this country where the church can have a real impact. So when you asked me you know what was my involvement. There have been a few people who've suggested that my prayers caused a lot of problems. Not that I was the only person praying that but it did significantly end up with a huge change in London in terms of the way the churches, the way that the population is, so huge changes really. But yeah that's how it began and then and then after that, obviously when you're looking at doing London wide things one of my big challenges during the Louise plower mission was trying to go to the Caribbean churches and out of that. We set up what became the African Caribbean Evangelical Alliance which I was one of the trustees and then when it came to Mission 89 we were just beginning to get a lot of the African churches planting. And so I was trying to engage the African churches at that particular point. So I've always been aware of the diversity in London and had a real heart for integrating people and making it all work together.

Simon Barrington: [00:04:46] And do you think the churches work well together across the ethnic divides or what are the challenges in seeing that and what's encouraged you in it I suppose.

Hugh Osgood: [00:04:56] Well I must admit that one of the things that's really helped me is that when I finished university I expected to be going out to Africa in fact, by that time I actually persuaded the Sister in the intensive care unit to marry me and we looked as if we were going out to Zambia be doing, I was going to do some dental work and Marian was going to be involved in nursing and and it all looked set and we'd been accepted by the African Evangelical Fellowship. We knew where we were meant to be going. Churches had been very supportive in releasing us right at the last minute we were told we couldn't go because the economy in Zambia was being reconstructed and there was no finance with the particular project we were going to. So we were put on hold for four years, but whilst we were preparing to go out to Africa we had it absolutely drummed into us that you're not going out there like the former colonial power. This country has just got independence. This is the time when you go and absorb yourself in their culture to be supportive. So for me when I didn't go to Africa I mean someone gave me this crazy word, they said you're not meant to go to Africa, God's going to send Africa to you and I said what on earth does that mean, you know. But it did mean when sought of Africa arrived on the doorstep, for me it wasn't a case of standing in my own culture to try and reach out to others. It was a case of knowing that I needed to immerse myself in their culture. So I've never felt I've really worked cross culturally I felt more sort of multiculturally really and I think that's helped. And when I look up where the churches are at that I think there are not enough people that manage to do that.

Hugh Osgood: [00:06:43] You can have this sort of patronising attitude which says oh you know these these ethnic churches they're so wonderful you know they pray all night and this kind of thing. And I think that's a bit, you know technically I think you'd call that exoticism where you are you're not being realistic in relationships and then on the other hand you know you get people trying to relate to English culture and just can't cope with a constant self-effacing you know they say if you don't think you're any good why should I think you're any good ! And so we get these miscommunications but I think things are working through and I think it's great to see the diversity.

Simon Barrington: [00:07:24] And do you see any great examples of where that is working really really well I mean I was in Holland last week and there was a Pastor there whose church has been deeply impacted by the refugee and asylum seeker immigrants into Holland and they have five different congregations within one church. One is Farsi speaking and what is Suriname speaking. One is Arabic speaking. Do you see examples like that in the UK.

[00:07:52] Yes I do, but the one thing I am noticing is that a lot of the examples where you think this is great this is integration it's great integration on a racial level sometimes but actually when you're looking at socio economic diversity it's not at all. So I could name two very significant churches where you can say this is an amazing black and white combination but it's you know let lawyer speak unto lawyer really. So so we can sometimes find these good examples work because there's some other unifying factor. We're all of the same age group, we're all working in the same kind of area. So I think the challenges exist and I think you know church always tends to want to end up more monocultural than it should. And so we constantly have to think whether that's saying let's be more generationally diverse, ethnically diverse, socially diverse. All of these challenges are there for us really all the time now.

Simon Barrington: [00:08:57] What have you learned about leadership from engaging with the black majority church leaders. How has your leadership changed been modelled, been affected. Have you learnt good things?

Hugh Osgood: [00:09:12] Leadership styles are very different. I know that I like to lead from in the midst rather than sort of way up front. It is not here am mI follow me. I'm sort of you know let's get a consensus and go together. Which is a slightly different style from that which you'd find in a lot of the African churches. But I certainly don't go in to criticize or comment you know. What work, works. People have got different cultural backgrounds. My leadership style probably works better for people that used a leader that's happy to be without that kind of distance. You know I struggle with the concept of pastoral distance, whereas a lot of people promote you know I think it was General de Gaulle that said "Authority comes from distance". And I think well some people's authority does. But when you look at the way that Jesus operated it wasn't like that. So I suppose what I've learnt is that leadership is diverse and it to some extent you have to start leading a group of people from within their comfort zone. Otherwise they're not going to follow you anyway. But then maybe you can as you go on change that comfort zone so that actually you're introducing other concepts of leadership. So you can begin to reintroduce a sort of servant leadership, leadership in the midst, consensual leadership. But sometimes when you start that's not where people are at. And so that's part of our difficulty. I've also seen some situations where the leadership is so consensual that they never go anywhere because no one is prepared to say let's go in this direction and that you know and it's this diversity of leadership which makes me feel that we've got to be prepared to have a certain amount of flexibility in our leadership style and to respect other people's leadership styles and thinking that in different situations different things might work better.

Simon Barrington: [00:11:18] And that requires a lot of ability to listen and to really hear what other people are saying and sometimes to translate as well.

Hugh Osgood: [00:11:28] And I think the other thing it requires is a certain amount of security and your own identity and that's something which you develop over time. I certainly didn't start off being secure in my identity I was like everyone else. I think most of us in leadership have insecurities and the more we own up to them the more likely we are to move forward.

Simon Barrington: [00:11:49] Are there specific moments in your own leadership where there's been no transition to that greater sense of security of identity.

Hugh Osgood: [00:11:58] Yes I think you could probably chart it almost like an upward trajectory but it probably does have steps in it and there probably have been times when something's happened and I think that's really a good opportunity to go away and learn. Actually you learn more from the painful bits than you do from the successes really. I think you know go through something and you think really did I do that in the very best possible way? And having space to reflect. Having people

around you is important to. I don't ever want to be that isolated. I am quite self-sufficient as a person and that can be a big disadvantage and I know that there are times when God has really dealt with my self-sufficiency. There was one was one time I actually preached at the beginning of a year a January sermon about God wanting to deal with our self-sufficiency. I'd really worked at this sermon through and I could find examples in Scripture and I was really preaching on this. And then a few days later something happened and it really sort of knocked me. I mean I wasn't expecting this and it was like an I was I was sitting at home at the table. Marion, my wife came and said whatever's happened to you. I said, I think God is just dealing with my self-sufficiency and she said she said and I suppose you're going to sit there and sort it out all on your own. And it was just such an apositge comment because that's exactly what I decided to do and she'd got me summed up to a tee. And so I'm constantly having to learn that you know self-sufficiency is not the way forward. And appreciating other people and bringing other people in and testing your ideas and looking for partnerships. I've always wanted to work in partnerships but sometimes particularly in some of the cultures I've worked in partnerships are a little bit looked down upon. You're not meant to be working with others you need to be leading everybody. So that's been painful at times where people have misunderstood my desire to work in partnership.

Simon Barrington: [00:14:12] And partnership requires us to think about how we use power and how we abuse power as well. What's been your own experience I suppose giving up power in partnerships..

Hugh Osgood: [00:14:26] Well I've always been fascinated in working across generational divides really. I mean obviously I've done a lot where I've worked across ethnic divides but working across generational divides has really excited me. I look at the fact that when I started leading churches I was in my 20s and you know I can see I can see the church congregational age going down and the leadership age going up and I think that's wrong. So I'm forever trying to you know work alongside younger leaders and work out how to encourage them. So there are times when people have misunderstood and think you know how can you give so much away to someone who so much younger than yourself. I get all of those kind of things and sometimes I'm more secure in the relationship than the people around me are secure with the relationship and I've had situations where people have actually worked to to bring a relationship down because they couldn't handle it because they didn't think it was the way the leadership worked. I'm a bit inclined to want to experiment in some of these things. I look in the scriptures and I think you know how Paul worked with Timothy, how he worked with Silas. I think he was probably more self-sufficient than I am but he found ways of doing it.

Hugh Osgood: [00:15:40] He had lots to boast about didn't.

Simon Barrington: [00:15:44] In your work with emerging leaders what do you see changing across the generations as you're working with emerging leaders and how can leaders of our generation I suppose help emerging leaders to really stand up and make the maximum contribution that they can.

Hugh Osgood: [00:16:00] Sure. I think the biggest thing is there's a sense in which some kind of help is almost too much help. It's like you know I'm going to show you exactly how to do this and you've got to be like this. And a lot of it for me is about letting people find their own expression and find their own feet. And what does it look like for them. You know you reach a point to be honest where you lose sight of your own preferences. I said to my wife the other day I said ah, another worship conference, I can't remember what I really like anymore. You go with where you are at. And I think sometimes our preferences can dominate to the point where we don't allow other expressions to come up. And I think that certainly working with the younger generation of leaders, for me, one of the big things is give them space, give them opportunity, give them support, don't

emphasize mistakes, emphasize successes. Allow them to fail but then don't harp on about it. You know sort of let's get that one over and get you back up again and move forward

Simon Barrington: [00:17:12] We tend to you know we kind of forget our own failures and forget the mistakes that we made when we were 20 and 30 the people around us.

Hugh Osgood: [00:17:27] Some of them, some of them still haunt.

Simon Barrington: [00:17:27] We forget what it was like to be a young leader starting out on their own. Now, your role as President of Churches together in England you must see a great diversity in the charge and you have I suppose the advantage of having a bit of a birds eye view of whats going on across the regions across the UK. What encourages you in Churches in the way they are working together in evangelism and mission together. now your role as president just to gather any mean you must see a great diversity in the church and you have I suppose the advantage of having a bit of a bird's eye view of what's going on across regions across the UK. What encourages you in church is the way they're working together in their expressions of evangelism and mission together. So that was encouraging.

Hugh Osgood: [00:18:04] Sure. First of all it's a real privilege to have an overview. I am one of six Presidents at the moment with the Churches Together in England. I'm technically number three I think it comes I think it goes the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Cardinal Archbishop, the Free Churches moderater which is myself and then it rolls, but we all work together. But one of the great things about being in that position and actually the Free Churches still constitutes about a third of the congregations in the UK. So we're roughly you know you could say very very broad terms you know the Anglicans have got more congregations, the Catholics have probably got more congregational members, but you could say third, third, third and then there's others as well. And I've got Methodist, Baptist, United Reformed Church and Salvation Army. Looking at that I can see huge diversity. But one of the advantages of the overview is that you see the growth alongside some of the areas of decline. So we've got decline at the moment right across the country in rural communities and a lot of the Methodist churches for example are in rural communities and the Anglican church is as well. Rural communities have real challenges, but we see a huge amount of church growth in urban communities. And it's having that overview and realizing that these days a lot of people who live in rural communities prefer to travel to church in urban communities. So when we feel at times that congregational levels are dropping, some of it isn't just because there's a greater disinterest. Some of it is because there's different ways in which people do church, where they want to go. You live in a rural community, but you want to be part of a dynamic big church which you are not going to get in a rural community so you drive to the nearest town and become part of the church there. And obviously I mean we've got lot of the Pentecostal churches in the Free Churches group so I can see some dynamic growth alongside the decline and one of the things I try to do with the historic Free Church denominations is I try to encourage them to to regain some of you the energy that they had in their in their roots and to say look some of that still valid. You didn't start big. So you know decline is not necessarily the end of the world. If you've got something distinctive that you can bring. And I love the variety. You know I mean as a child I was in the Salvation Army so I've got some affinity there and I did a lot of preaching around Methodist circuits when I was in my teens and at university so I'm used to the breadth and obviously I was a youth leader in an Anglican Church I've pretty well covered a range here and I married a Baptist but I love the diversity but there's so much that each of these have got but they can bring into the mix and it's knowing how to to reenergize some of that vision. I'm working with some youngsters in the Salvation Army at the moment looking at how the original founding vision that the Salvation Army had could actually be dynamic and relevant now. So you've got all of these possibilities are bubbling away out there and I find it really exciting.

Simon Barrington: [00:21:17] What are the frustrations I suppose. What are the challenges.

Hugh Osgood: [00:21:22] The biggest challenge is lack of confidence in a lot of leaders. Once the leadership in a church has lost its sense of confidence in where it's going and everything else it's very difficult to take things forward. And I do find that disappointing and I know how hard it is when you're in a challenging situation to keep up that confidence which says God's going to do something in this community and to know actually how to celebrate the successes when you know the successes are rarer than the failures. But I've noticed that where we can see leaders that can celebrate the successes, keep that sense of confidence in the Gospel, confidence in calling, that actually you can make a difference. But the frustrations are in a lot of places we haven't got that in our leaders and we need to feed that back into them.

Simon Barrington: [00:22:24] And how does that best happen. I mean how can those leaders best be encouraged, supported, ministered to.

Hugh Osgood: [00:22:33] Well I think that obviously if we look at it in a denominational setting I think denominations have got to take some responsibility for bringing their leaders together and encouraging them. I think a lot of church leaders just get left to get on with it and they don't get any denominational encouragement. They don't often get local encouragement to and I think getting that encouragement that comes from other people. One of the things that has been quite challenging to me is that those that are encouraged tend to flock with those that are encouraged rather than actually to spread their encouragement to those that are discouraged. I don't know why the encouraged think that they might actually end up being disaffected if they meet with the discouraged, where actually it goes the other way. The light shines in the darkness the darkness does not overcome it. So I'm really excited about the possibility of people that are enthusiastic and seeing that growth, finding ways in which they can infuse people that might be somewhat disenchanted and to give them the opportunity to be in a vibrant environment from time to time because that infuses. I was at a big worship event last weekend and just having church leaders come into that and a lot of them did. It was just such an encouragement to them. Now you don't go back and then say oh but it's not going to work where I am. You need to carry something of that enthusiasm, that confidence back into the local situation.

Simon Barrington: [00:24:03] It's almost like having a field hospital for people who've been wounded in the battle

Hugh Osgood: [00:24:08] Yes and I've been there, I've been wounded in the battle I went through a period of chronic fatigue where I could preach on a Sunday but then I'd spend most of the rest of the week in bed. I was absolutely exhausted, but I did sense that you know that that God would restore the years you know and the field hospital was very much the vision I had in my mind. Wounded in the battle but that doesn't make you want to give up the fight.

Simon Barrington: [00:24:35] What advice would you have for Church leaders who find yourself in that position who may be get up and preach on a Sunday, who are tired for the rest of the week or disillusioned the rest of the week. What advice would you have for them.

Hugh Osgood: [00:24:49] I would say find someone who can encourage you you know. It might even be someone in your congregation who has got a positive view that you can share with. Just don't spend all your time sharing with the ones that are going to bring you down. I think a lot of people haven't realized that in church leadership you can actually get a huge amount from the people that you're pastoring. So for me because I don't have a great commitment to pastoral distance I'm quite happy to think now who have I got here that I could sit down and talk to where sometimes we think oh goodness I don't want to share my burdens but actually it's not just sharing the burdens

it's receiving other people's encouragement and other people's feedback that will make a lot of difference.

Simon Barrington: [00:25:35] What I've found amongst emerging leaders and Millennials in particular is that they are looking for that authenticity in their leaders. They're looking for the willingness to say we don't have this also sewn up but let's go on a journey together because God's in this and he's leading us.

Hugh Osgood: [00:25:52] Yeah and that's a good example where you know if a senior leader is being authentic with a younger leader the senior leader can gain so much from that younger leader and people have got to stop thinking of it as one way traffic. You know I'm the mighty man of God who is giving to you. You know you've got stuff that you can give to me and we all need to realize that we're on a journey and I think one of the dangers of leadership is thinking that we're ahead of the rest and some time some leaders get so far ahead of the rest it's just what's the point. You know at least at least when the children of Israel were led by the pillar of cloud it stayed within view it didn't just disappear off over the horizon and they were left shrugging their shoulders and going well that was very impressive but where do we go now. Staying in view is really important.

Simon Barrington: [00:26:41] So I hear a lot of what you are saying is about proximity.

Hugh Osgood: [00:26:45] Yeah it is very much.

Simon Barrington: [00:26:47] Which is really encouraging for someone who is in the role that you are that has such an oversight of Churches across the country. Now looking back on your leadership journey what didn't they teach you a Bible College

Hugh Osgood: [00:27:05] But this is why I confess that I did not go to Bible College. I was expected to. They were trying to get us out to the mission field so quickly. They said there's a real need out there you know you need to go. And then when they put it us hold for four years my wife and I had this big discussion about what do we do now. And she was very keen that we went to Bible college as a couple which I think would have been great actually in terms of joint ministry. My big fear was I'm a bit of an academic swat and I could see myself going to Bible college and you know tick off the Masters, tick off the doctorate, and then lecture. And I thought actually I do know that God wants me to do hands on stuff and we were quite challenged in those early days by Michael Griffiths who said don't do anything overseas you haven't done at home first. So that's when we started looking at church planting in the UK. So I did everything in the wrong order. You know I did I did a Masters in Divinity late through Pakistan believe it or not, and then I did a PhD in religious studies at SOAS. So I said I did it all the wrong way round. So they didn't teach me anything in Bible College because I didn't go. But there there are things that I would say that I really benefited from from learning hands on and I think that sometimes when I've talked to friends that went down a different route you know that we train you , we ordain you and then we find out whether or not you can do it. Then if you can't you're left high and dry. I'm actually quite grateful that I had the opportunity to find out if I could do it and then pick up all the additional stuff that I needed along the way. Yes yeah yeah Im grateful for that.

Simon Barrington: [00:28:49] In those early days of practical hands on what were the big learnings for you

Hugh Osgood: [00:28:56] Goodness me. I mean pastorally I was a disaster to start with. I wanted to teach. I didn't realise that actually when it talks about the 5 fold ministry the idea is that you don't become expert in one area but you become a generalist because we are all meant to be being equipped. I thought I'm a teacher, don't come to me with your problems.

Hugh Osgood: [00:29:21] And I had to learn actually you need in ministry you can't say you know I won't deal with that because I'm not a pastor I won't deal with that because I'm not an evangelist, I can't lead you to the Lord. You've got to be a generalist and I think the big lesson I learned early on was stop thinking of yourself as an expert in an area and realise that ministry is about being there for people whatever they need and be prepared to be that rather than limit yourself and draw up others around you, not self-sufficient in that sense it's I and I only. But to have that rounded ministry that you can bring other people in to so that you do start with your weakness. That's a really important principle rather than just gathering people around that are just like you. Gather some around that add things that are completely different from what you've got yourself.

Simon Barrington: [00:30:14] And that are better than you.

Hugh Osgood: [00:30:16] It doesn't take much.

Simon Barrington: [00:30:17] Hugh Osgod thanks so much for sharing with us today for being so honest and there's great wisdom there from someone who's been in ministry for quite some time.

Hugh Osgood: [00:30:29] 50 years plus - it is really frightening.

Simon Barrington: [00:30:32] How can we pray for you in roles that you have and the significant responsibilities that you have.

Hugh Osgood: [00:30:38] I think you used the word proximity and just pray that I never lose that because I think that's so important. And if I can model something of that and be an encouragement to others who might feel drawn in that direction then that would be a real blessing.

Simon Barrington: [00:30:53] Thanks so much for joining us today.

Hugh Osgood: [00:30:55] Thank you Simon.

[00:30:55] Thanks for joining us on the Forge Leadership podcast this week. Make sure you don't miss a single episode by subscribing whenever you get your podcast from. Be that iTunes Stitcher SoundCloud Tunein or somewhere else. We'd love to hear from you. Please email us at hello@forge-leadership.com with questions and comments.