

Chris Hucker's memorable experiences as a Pastor in the American mid-west for sixteen years were shared with Kyrle Probus Club members on Thursday 20 December. He arrived in the small mid-west city of Belleville, Illinois (population 41,500) on September 1<sup>st</sup> 2011 and was starting his second week when a sensational and unforgettable event took place.

Chris, a Kyrle Probus member, said he was to be interned at the St. Paul United church and was visiting Eden Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, on September 11, with a senior pastor.

"We arrived just after ten to nine in the morning. We found students and staff standing in front of a wide-screen TV in the reception area. The first plane had just hit the North Tower in Manhattan. Shortly after that a plane hit the South Tower. Like the rest of America that morning, people were stunned. It took a while to sink in that these were not airline accidents – America was being attacked."

By lunchtime over-zealous staff were rushing around organising blood drives to take to Manhattan, about 1,000 miles and a 19-hour drive away. "As it transpired, there was no need for extra blood in Manhattan that day. America had no real experience of terrorist attacks on this scale, and nobody knew how to deal with the results," said Chris.

Chris said he had some experience with the aftermath of IRA bombings. "I warned my colleagues that people might well turn to the church as the day progressed. We hurried back to Belleville to make preparation. By 7pm crowds had gathered outside the church door, and most of the church doors across America."

A year of 'phenomenal experiences' followed. Chris said that from the start his stay in America came as 'a major culture shock to me'.

In 2001 membership of St. Paul, Belleville was around 1,800. Combined attendance at the three Sunday morning services was about 900. The church building was the size of a large cathedral.

One 'mega' church Chris visited – the Community Church of Joy in Phoenix, Arizona – had a car park so large that the church ran a fleet of electric golf carts to ferry people to the church doors on Sundays!

Another 'mega' church – Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago – claimed 8,500 members: "Very definitely a black membership church, and very wealthy – members of the congregation were expected to pledge 10 per cent of their income to the church each year".

The senior Pastor, Jeremiah Wight, who gave the sermon "came up from a doorway in the centre of the stage like a magician in a pantomime!"

After his 40 minute oratory, Pastor Wright sent out a team of 20 collectors and asked everyone to give generously. "He told the congregation that the mortgage needed paying and that their mission work was expanding." When the collectors returned,

Pastor Wright looked into each of their tall white collecting bins and declared "That's not nearly enough!" With a flamboyant wave of his arm he sent them out into the congregation again!

