

OIKOS

SPRING 2020
Vol. 29 No. 3

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DIRECTIONS

SHALOM MY FRIENDS, SHALOM

I admit I was curious to see what God was doing in His Kingdom in recent months; with limits put on freedom of movement, His kingdom is still breaking out across our nation and beyond.

I've been inspired with the stories emerging. Across this nation, many believers are discovering their discipleship journey growing richer and simpler as they discover different ways of being church. Amongst the Oikos network, people have found creative ways to love and serve and plant gospel seed. One person reported making up gift coffee cup packs and leaving them on neighbors' doorsteps, offering to fill them at their home and offering support.

Others in NSW prayer walk weekly in their local town, building relationships; loving & serving people, and have seen a number of baptisms in recent months.

Another shared of recently starting chaplaincy in a school- an awesome opportunity to be salt and light in Aussie schools with children and their families and have been praying for people and sharing gospel seed.

One Jesus follower in South Australia has an L shaped back yard and has a BBQ down the back corner where he connects with local blokes and seeking to make disciples. Another in Tasmania is collecting pot plants and growing succulents and using the funds to help with anti-trafficking – getting the local community on board. They currently have a number involved in a bible study group including an atheist.



In WA, George collects donations for impoverished African communities and involves the local community. On other days he participates with a cycling group and intentionally seeks to bring the *Shalom* of God into that space. Every week he is actively equipping and training online within Australia and beyond on how to be more effective in making disciples who make other disciples.

A Melbourne man intentionally steers his business as a kingdom of God outpost, not only building homes for families with special needs children, he is also gospel sharing and discipling those around him.

Oikos friends in the Philippines have seen another 6 house churches birthed in recent months, reaching to 3rd generation. They are intentionally going into new homes who then go on to plant into new homes – they equip everyone as a disciple-maker. They bring the *Shalom* of God into communities by addressing felt needs. Whilst addressing issues of poverty, they are also educating in schools against cybercrime – OSEC 'online sexual exploitation of children'. As they go house to house, educating families against on-line predators, they look for ways to pray for and bless the families – intentionally planting gospel seed and looking for persons of peace.

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OIKOS Australia

Oikos exists to build the Kingdom of God by multiplying disciple-makers and simple church

DIRECTOR: Phil Brown

EDITOR: Phillip Walters

SUB EDITOR: Phil Brown

MAIL:

OIKOS Australia
25 Oak Street
Bentleigh VIC 3204

EMAIL:

philbrown@oikos.org.au
magazine@oikos.org.au

WEBSITE:

www.oikos.org.au

MOBILE:

0409 137 988 (Phil Brown)
0435 322 303 (Phil Walters)

SUBSCRIPTIONS:

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NEXT EDITION: The Summer edition of OIKOS Magazine will appear in January. Suggestions and news are welcome. Please send them in by December 1st.

Front page photo:
Eureka Printing Pty Ltd, Glen Waverley, Victoria

HAS THE CHURCH LEFT THE BUILDING?



■ **MIKE GORE** (*Open Doors Australia*) has seen faith spread, thanks to COVID restrictions

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on our lives and the lives of those around us. For many Christians in Australia, one of the biggest challenges has been getting used to what church looks like, how we evangelise, how we serve, and how we worship. Churches have decreased their focus on content [and] increased their focus on connection.

Through the work around the world that I am part of with Open Doors Australia, we've seen authorities restrict Christians in Asia from accessing medical treatment and supplies – based on their faith. Across the Middle East, we've seen the enforcement of quarantine laws which have forced Christians back into the homes of those who persecute them (often, their own family members). In countries such as Iran, we've heard stories of Christian doctors and nurses being forced to run COVID-19 clinics with no PPE as their governments believe that Christians are expendable.

ONE IN EIGHT CHRISTIANS WORLDWIDE FACE HIGH LEVELS OF PERSECUTION

But during this tough time for so many, we've also seen people driven into a deeper and more trust-filled relationship with God. Isolation has

served as an intense focussing tool as it strips away so many of the comforts we experience in life. It has allowed us to see that when all we have left is Jesus, Jesus is all we need. Even though this period of isolation has felt claustrophobic and oppressive, what if this isolation is actually a hand on the back from the Lord, pushing us in to a more beautiful, focused relationship with Him?

At the height of Christian persecution in China during the '50s and '60s, the church was dispersed and forced into homes. I can see some similarities with that forced move and what many regular churchgoers in Australia have experienced this year, due to coronavirus restrictions closing many church buildings. In the words of a Chinese Pastor: "Before persecution came, we practised our faith and our love for God in the church – and almost nowhere else. But when persecution came, it dispersed the church, and we practised faith in our homes and, because of that, everywhere else."


when the "church" is forced into homes, people have been waking up as pastors of their own families, learning to share the gospel in their own home

As I have watched churches respond to the pandemic, and the effect had on their congregations, I have seen actions which initially seemed to come from fear and control. People were worried as they questioned the meaning of the pandemic and how they could keep their church together.

Over the past few weeks, I have seen people become more comfortable with this current situation – and churches have decreased their focus on content as they increased their focus on connection. We've also seen the gospel reach cities, suburbs and neighbourhoods that never previously had a "church".

The persecuted church around the world has taught us valuable lessons in its response to COVID-19. Open Doors has heard from the pastor of an underground church in the epicentre of Wuhan, who reminded us that the love of Jesus cannot be quarantined.

Another underground pastor told us that when the "church" is forced into homes, people have been waking up as pastors of their own families, learning to share the gospel in their own home. We've also seen the gospel reach cities, suburbs and neighbourhoods (*Continued on page 18*)



An Ancient Way of Being God's People

I remember when one of the leaders in the Soma Family of Churches asked me if I thought missional communities would be a passing trend. He wasn't questioning the validity of them, but he did wonder if this was a time-based, culturally applicable approach to making disciples that may not be necessary sometime in the future. Is the concept of church as a missional community (or as we often ask, "Is missional community the primary structure for making disciples?") just a pragmatic solution to a cultural situation?

My answer to my colleague and my answer to many others is a resounding "no."

Why? Because I am convinced that missional communities are not a new program or methodology for the church, but an ancient way of being God's people set apart for God's mission in the world. "Sure," I told my friend, "the name 'missional community' might be trendy, but the concept is really nothing new at all." The concept is deeply biblical and culturally transferable from one time and culture to another.

What a Missional Community Is

To make my case, I first of all need to define what a missional community is. A missional community is a family of servant missionaries sent as disciples who make disciples. They are:

- children of God who love one another like family
- servants of God who show what the Kingdom of God looks like in tangible form
- missionaries sent by God to show and tell the truth of what God is like and what God has done

The goal of this family of servant missionaries is to lead others to become the people of God on the mission of God in the world.

Are Missional Communities Just a Passing Fad?

Jeff Vanderstelt

God's Ancient Way

From the beginning of time God has called a people to be His family—His image-bearers—chosen by Him to belong to Him and lovingly show God's love by how they love one another like family. It began with Adam and Eve who turned to a different father—the father of lies—and as a result the family they led looked more like the devil and less like the heavenly Father.

God then chose Abraham to be the father of a new nation: a family set apart as both beneficiaries of God's love as well as benevolent givers of His love. This family was also called to be a display people, showing the world what God as King was like through the visible display of his kingdom. His people were called to be His servants who serve others just as God had served them. One example of this is in how God called His people to be hospitable toward strangers in light of how God had treated them while they were strangers in Egypt.

Lastly, God's people were sent from place-to-place with the intent of living amongst the nations declaring what their God was like in light of what He had done for them. Israel was a family of servant missionaries, loving, serving, and proclaiming the good news of God.

But they failed. They fell short.

So Jesus came as the true and better Son who laid down His life for us so we could become children of God. He is the true and better servant who showed us what the Kingdom of God is like by how He served and gave up His life. He is the true and better missionary sent by the Spirit to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom. He didn't do this in isolation.

He did it in community—a community on mission together—a missional community. Jesus and His followers

were a missional community. When He first called them He said, "Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men." Jesus formed a community on mission that loved one another like family, served others as a way of serving their Messiah King, and eventually were sent out as missionaries to proclaim the gospel in the power of the Spirit.

Missional communities are not a new program or methodology for the church, but an ancient way of being God's people set apart for God's mission in the world.

That's exactly what they did. The early church loved, served, and proclaimed because this is who they believed they were in Christ.

Later, when Peter intends to encourage the church scattered throughout Asia Minor, he reminds them first of who God is and what God has done most specifically in and through the person of Jesus Christ. Following that, he reminds them of who they are in 1 Peter 2:9: But you are a **chosen race**, a **royal priesthood**, a **holy nation**, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Note the key identity statements he uses:

After He died on the cross and rose again, He sent His disciples out to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and establishing every disciple in their new identity as family, servants, and missionaries. What Jesus did with them first, He sent them out to do with others. Their baptism wasn't just words. **It was a statement of their new identity that informed their new way of living: loving, serving, and proclaiming together.**

chosen race (**family** of God), royal priesthood (**missionaries** anointed by the Spirit), and holy nation (**servants** of King Jesus). This is who God's people were called to be prior to Jesus. It is who our baptism says we are because of Jesus. And it informs what we do as God's people—the church—as we make disciples of Jesus.

This is who we are; therefore it's what we do.

So is missional community a new idea? No. Is it going away? Not as long as Jesus continues to build His church and not until He returns and the mission is accomplished. However, **the way we work it out is always changing.** In the early church they met from house to house. Some today meet from beach to beach, office center to office center, school to school. Some meet from house to school to office center. How we work out what it means to love like family may continue to take on different shapes and forms depending upon the culture and time we find ourselves in. Being servants of King Jesus in Tokyo might look very different than being servants of Jesus in Topeka. Proclaiming the gospel in secular New York might look very different than church-saturated Dallas. **Our identity is the same, but how it gets expressed is always changing.** The mission will not change, but the means likely will. **The gospel will not change, but how we proclaim it must.**

Yet no matter the place, the culture, or the time, the church is called to be a family of servant missionaries sent as disciples who make disciples.

We are a missional community, a gospel community on mission. Call it what you want. The name might change, but we will not.

This is who we are. This is what we do.

Jeff Vanderstelt saturatetheworld.com is the leader of Saturate, the Soma Family of Churches, and the lead teaching pastor of Doxa Church in Bellevue, Washington. He is the author of "Saturate: Being Disciples of Jesus in the Everyday Stuff of Life."





PART ONE *Alan Hirsch*

FRAMEWORK FOR MISSIONAL CHRISTIANITY

The following is the first half of an eleven-part series by Alan Hirsch - to be completed in the next issue

1. POWERFUL POTENTIAL

The current Christian church needs to reconnect, not with a trendy new movement, but with the power of the original one.

One of my deepest-held beliefs is that *all* of Jesus' people contain the potential for world transformation. Our problem is not that we don't have the potential, but rather that we have forgotten how to access this potential because we have been so deeply scripted to think of ourselves through more domesticated, non-missional manifestations of Christianity. We have been so programmed out of our callings that it is generally hard for us to think and act differently than what we have for hundreds of years and not to persecute people who try to trail-blaze alternative ways.

But we have now come (at last!) to the point where we recognize the decline of Christianity in the West—and now in America—is directly related to the way we have done things to this point. The search for alternatives has just heated up.

Aslan is on the move again; it's time to get unplugged, reframed, re-scripted, and recommissioned to be the people Jesus designed us to be.

If this was said another way, I would suggest we are *perfectly designed to achieve what we are currently achieving*. If Christianity is in decline, at least part of the issue goes to the contemporary way we live out faith in a watching world. But this is not what Jesus intended. The church that Jesus designed is made for impact—and massive, highly transformative impact at that. Wasn't it Jesus who said, "I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" ([Matt. 16:18 NKJV](#))?

Hang on! Jesus says that the gates of hell don't prevail against us! It is we as God's people who are on the advance here, not hell. Contrary to many of the images of church as a defensive fortress suffering the terrible, relentless onslaughts of hell, the movement that Jesus set in motion is designed to be an advancing, untamed, and untamable revolutionary force created to transform the world. And make no mistake: In Jesus' words is a real sense of inevitability about the eventual triumph of the gospel. If we are not somehow part of this, then there is something wrong in the prevailing designs, and they must change.

There is a need for a missional that can be lived out right here, right now, by everyone. And this, my friends, takes some re-framing, some redesigning of the way we go about being God's people. I'd like to examine together what I see to be the essential framework for missional Christianity in this blog series.

2. TWO ELEMENTS OF A MISSIONAL MOVEMENT

It's going to take both missional church plus missional disciples to make a missional movement.

Let's start this journey to what we call "missionality" with a big statement that sets the tone for all that will follow: I believe with all my heart that the future of Christianity in the West is somehow bound with the idea of becoming a *people movement* again. Somehow, and in some way, we need to loosen up and learn how to reactivate the massive potentials that lie rather dormant within Jesus' people if we are going to make a difference to our world.

It is only when the people of God as a whole are activated in a movement that real world transformation takes place. And so understanding the nature of people movements is essential. When we look at high-impact movements in the Bible and history, we can see two basic elements of a missional movement can change the world. If one is missing, then the other will not be able to sustain, let alone reach, exponential impact.

One element relates to what I call the *apostolic mission* (AM), which involves the church or communal side of the movement—the distinctly *ecclesial* wing. It is critical for the *ecclesia* (the church) to multiply and cross-cultural boundaries for a movement to take

place. This is usually spearheaded by people whose primary work is to direct and focus Jesus' people and organize groups, networks, and hubs into apostolic networks that expand exponentially (in other words, people committed to ministry with and through the church as an organized community). AM is therefore normally expressed through church planting and organized mission to the poor or cross-culturally. Most of the people reading this post will probably not fit into this category.

The other equally vital (and much harder to galvanize) element is what I call the *mission of the whole people of God* (MPOG), which involves activating the whole people of God and empowering every believer to be active agents of God's kingdom in every sphere of life. Everyone in this movement, and not just the so-called religious professionals, must be activated and thus play a vital role in extending the mission of Jesus' church. The people involved in this dimension of people movements are those committed to full-time ministry *outside* of the church community . . . but it is still full-time ministry. In fact, this false distinction in what constitutes ministry is one of the major hurdles we have to overcome if we are going to activate as Jesus' people.

And while most of my writings have focused on the apostolic mission side of the equation, it is absolutely critical that we as the whole people of God are activated. If missional church remains solely in the domain of leaders and clergy, then it is doubtful we will have any lasting missional impact in the long term. It's going to take both *missional church plus missional disciples to make a missional movement*.

3. LIVING THE MESSAGE

You are the church before you do church.

If we take Jesus at his word when he says, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" ([John 20:21](#)), then we realize that our being "sent" (Latin: *missio*) is the basis of our "doing" church and not the other way around. What is more, this applies to every disciple—not just to the so-called clergy (the *called ones*). We are all called into the kingdom and into living our lives under orders. What we normally infer by the word *church* limits what the Bible means by it.

As my good friend Jeff explains [here](#), church is not simply a building or a formal community meeting; it is who we are—a people who have been formed out of a direct encounter with God in Jesus Christ. If this is true, then general practice in church planting, which simply amounts to "service planting," actually activates only one side of the movement equation (namely, apostolic mission). It leaves the MPOG (Mission of the whole People of God) undervalued and almost totally passive and unengaged. This is a fatal error.

We are a unique people formed by the life-changing message of the gospel of Jesus Christ—in effect, a worldwide message tribe. But if we are recipients of a pay-it-forward-type message, then that makes us all messengers! **Every believer is therefore a messenger and a missionary.** And Christianity itself is an intrinsically *missional* faith. Even the newest believer seems to understand the universality of the gospel message; they rightly intuit that because it is "good news," it is *meant* to be passed on and that somehow to sit on the message is to fail in our obligations to Jesus and his cause.

This is how missional movements grow: through a group of people who have been changed by Jesus and are willing to put themselves on the line for his cause. And the cause cannot be limited to evangelism, as if simply telling someone about the saving events of Jesus' life and death fulfills our missional obligations. **Rather it is about living the gospel in such a way that people are drawn into the direct influence (lordship) of Jesus through our lives.** It is about living according to a distinct vision of a society built on God's dreams and desires, not ours. In other words, as Rick Warren wryly says, it's not all about you; rather it is about the kingdom (or rule) of God over all creation. It encompasses everything in human experience, from culture, race, economics, church, entertainment, family, to everything in between. A missional movement must apply the gospel to all spheres of life (business, family, art, education, science, politics, etc.). It cannot be limited simply to "coming to church" or participating in building-based programs.

The reality is that it doesn't take millions of admirers to start a movement that can

change the world (in fact, that might be problematic). What is needed are a few people who have been personally transformed and are committed enough to the cause to be willing to in some way or another put their lives in the service of extending it into every domain of life. **It is the personal commitment levels that make all the difference—that's why Jesus was willing to invest most of his time in "the twelve" and by extension in "the seventy."** Once he had seeded the essence of his message into his disciples, he could then focus on his upcoming death and resurrection (see [Matt. 16:13–21](#)), leaving behind a small band of people who did go on to change the world with it. And this is why being an authentic disciple is so important to his mission. As I say in [The Forgotten Ways](#), embodiment (the capacity to actually integrate and live out the teachings and message of Jesus) is critical to transmission (the capacity to transfer the message through relationships).¹

And in some ways, this is all that is still needed today: real disciples. Jesus will do the necessary transforming; the part we play is to BE WILLING to be used in that process of living the message and getting it out into our worlds. All it needed was people who were willing to be an authentic message tribe. [Seth Godin](#), pop movement guru, rightly notes that creating a highly dedicated and closely-knit tribe usually leads to much more impact than simply trying to make a tribe bigger. *"Beyond public relations and awareness related benefits, measuring the breadth of spread of an idea is not as important as looking at the depth of commitment and interaction of true fans, who end up being the people who recruit most new members."*²

In short, what is needed from us is the willingness to move with the Move of God that is the gospel. We suggest a number of movements are needed on our behalf if we are indeed going to partake of the movement Jesus started. We have to be willing to

- **move out** (into missional engagement)
- **move in** (burrowing down into the culture)
- **move alongside** (engaging in genuine friendships and relational networks)
- **move from** (challenging the dehumanizing and sinful aspects of our culture)

I will be unpacking each of these movements in the upcoming series' posts. **For now, ask yourself this question: Are you willing to move?**

4. LEARNING THE ART OF SMALL

Every Christian is a missionary, and we are called to live out our commitment to Jesus' lordship in every sphere and domain of life.

The first movement of mission required of us is the willingness to move out—simply to go to the people, wherever that might be. Movement by definition suggests some form of motion, some type of action; it might not be far, but the obligation is on us to go to them, not them to us.

We have already mentioned we are people who live under an obligation to extend the mission and meaning of Jesus into our world. The way I framed this in [The Forgotten Ways](#) was that it's not so much that the *church* has a mission but that the *mission* has a church. This means we really are the result of God's missionary activity in the world: God sends (*missio*) his Son into the world. Another way of saying this is that God is the Sending God and the Son is the Sent One. The Father and Son in turn "send" the Spirit into the world (so it turns out the Spirit is a missionary too). And what is more, Jesus says that as the Father sent him, so He sends and commissions each of us as fully empowered missional agents of the King (John 17:18; 20:21; Matt. 28:19).



Every Christian is a missionary, and we are called to live out our commitment to Jesus' lordship in every sphere and domain of life. Church life, as we normally conceive it, is only one dimension of life, and all of us inhabit many other realms that make up our lives. What marks Christianity as distinct? It is truly a people movement: Every believer (and not just some presumed religious elite) is an agent of the kingdom and is called to bring God's influence into all the realms of human existence. Just look to our New Testament for this! Because the Holy Spirit lives in us and we are all bearers of the gospel message, we are all agents of the King right here, right now, and at any time and in any place.

My wife, Deb, has this wonderfully humbling thing to say about men and missional church. She says we men tend to talk and write about it while most women just tend to do it. She follows up with a quick second blow by saying, "After all is said and done, it's all about learning to love other people as Jesus did, isn't it?" Even though I find this argument exasperating, I really have to agree.

Learning the art of the small. One person can make an impact. Concentrate your efforts on smaller and smaller areas. When your efforts are diffused over a wide area, they won't have much of an impact. So focus on smaller areas, and your efforts will be felt more fully. It could take time for change to happen, but keep that focus narrow.

Try to find an area that will cause a tipping point. You'll have the biggest impact if you can change something that will in itself cause further changes—the rock that causes the avalanche. This isn't an easy thing: to find that pressure point, that spot that will cause everything else to change. It takes practice and experience and prayer and persistence, but it can be found.

Don't try to beat an ocean. You'll lose. Instead, focus on small changes that will spread.

For most of us, what will be required to engage in missional Christianity is simply to reach out beyond our fears and ignorance of others, to overcome our middle-class penchant for safety, to take a risk and get involved in what God is already doing in our cities and neighborhoods. It's not a science really, although

as we will see, cultural elements are sometimes tricky to deal with. It is all about love. Just read 1 John again to remind yourself of this.

One of the most significant things to remember in getting missional is often the thing we most overlook. It's not all about starting grand programs and running big organizations. It is just doing what you do . . . for God. The basic elements of missional are already present in your life. It might develop into an organization (e.g., [Tom's Shoes](#), [Laundry Love](#)), but it probably should not start there.

There are many ways we can simply use the basic constituents of life and make them an act of worship to God and service to his world. Sometimes simple gestures make all the difference. Don't be overwhelmed. Certainly, prepare yourself in prayer and study of the gospel and culture, but trust that God will use you as you are—He has always done so.

You don't need a degree to be a very effective agent of the King. A saint is merely a person who makes it easier for others to believe in God. Mother Teresa (of all people!) once famously quipped, "I don't do big things. I do small things with big love."

We are not required to do a great thing in life, but many, many small things, each done with love.

5. OUR NEIGHBORHOODS HAVE CHANGED

Whether we like it or not, we live in a world that is culturally fragmented and fragmenting.

We are called to be a missional (move-out) people, and if we are willing to follow the missional Spirit, I venture to bet we will end up in some rather unusual situations and places. We don't mean just cross-cultural here: It might simply mean reaching over your fence and beyond that into the local neighborhood. But don't be surprised if this is still a bit of a challenge for you. One of the things that has happened over the last decade or so is a massive cultural shift away from the Judeo-Christian heritage into a truly subcultural, multicultural experience; our neighborhoods have gone and changed on us.

To move deep into the culture is to take the idea of incarnational mission seriously. This in turn takes its cue from the fact that God took on human form and moved into our neighborhood, assumed the full reality of our humanity, identified with us, and spoke to us from within a common experience. Following His example and in His cause, we take the same type of approach when it comes to mission.

Whether we like it or not, we live in a world that is culturally fragmented and fragmenting. The result of cultural disintegration is that people now choose to identify with various subcultural groups. **Any modern city is now made up of literally thousands of different subcultures: from sports groups, hobby clubs, interest groups, to groups that gather around sexual preference (the gay community is always a big one in major cities throughout the West), to pubs, clubs, music groups, surfers, skaters—you name it!**

Moving deep means we choose to connect with, identify with, and belong to one or a few of these urban tribes. Don't try identifying with everyone within your reach— if this does not drive you mad, it certainly will exhaust you. Rather focus your efforts on meaningful connections with certain people and people groups. Go where they go, hang out where they hang out, do what they do. I have seen churches develop this in the strangest of normal places: along riverbanks with the waterskiing community, rave clubs, amateur drama theaters, online gaming communities. I know of one young mom who, instead of attending the local church's MOPS program, chose to adopt one of the many local non-Christian mothers groups. She was soon asked to lead it, and her influence as a Christian was significantly magnified, more than if she had simply attended the local Christian version. Follow the missional Spirit, and see where He leads you, or has already led you, to connect.

6. LISTEN TO THE CULTURE'S STORIES

Don't presume you really know what's going on.

A few years ago I ran and organized a conference called St. Paul Goes to the Movies. The idea was to help Christians learn how to share faith from within

diverse cultural settings in Western contexts. My advice to all Christians is this: In order to take mission seriously, you have to take culture seriously. There is no dodging this aspect. You simply have to assume that, in Western contexts, all communication of the gospel, let alone church planting and mission, is now cross-cultural. Don't presume you really know what's going on. **The reality is that most Christians don't really know what goes on in the lives of non-Christian people.**

Research indicates that the majority of Christians have no significant relationships with people beyond their church community. To move out (get missional) and to move in (get incarnational), this must change.

If you find yourself called to a certain urban tribe, whoever they might be, then it is critical to take *their* culture—in effect, their meaning system—seriously. Go to movies with friends and talk about the themes. Read the books they are likely to read (good demographical information about lifestyle preferences and people groups abound in books). Browse magazine racks and blogs as to what people are talking about and interested in. If people see a movie more than once, make sure you see it and try to work out what they seemed to resonate with. Then you can get to see how the Good News relates to the issues.

A missionary is essentially a messenger obligated to deliver the message somehow in a way it can be

received. This means we have to be able to speak meaningfully into a culture, but to do that, we have to examine a given culture seriously for clues to what God is doing among a people. One of the best ways to start this "listening process" is to go to your tribe. Standing where they stand and having explored the dynamics of their search, simply ask yourself this question: "What is good news for this people?" What is going to make them throw a party and invite their friends? This is exactly what Matthew did (Matt. 9:9–13). This will mean trying to delve into the existential issues a people or cultural group deals with. It means searching for signs of the quest for meaning and therefore for God. Just like Paul in Athens (Acts 17), it will also mean a study of the religion, art, and literature of the group.



Watch Paul the missionary in Athens; he is very sensitive to their religion, poetry, and philosophy (Acts 17). In this context Paul exegetes the culture, allowing the biblical story to inform and guide him—but he starts with the culture and ends with the gospel. In Jerusalem it's a different story; he whips out his big black King James (or equivalent), and he begins with Scripture and proceeds to culture. **The more and more America slips into the encroaching post-Christian experience, the more and more we have to take an Athenian approach to engaging it.**

To represent Jesus meaningfully, we must also understand and adopt the language forms of the people we love and serve. Tim Keller, one of the elder statesmen of the missional church world, encourages us to enter and retell the culture's stories with the gospel rather than the other way around. (*Much of what follows is taken from an article by Keller on [Missional Church](#).)* For instance, in church circles a certain insider language exists—a common worldview that allows us simply to exhort Christianized people with little or no real engagement, listening, or persuasion. In a missional setting, communication should always assume the presence of skeptical people and should engage their stories, not simply talk the church's insider story and language. This requires sensitivity to story and language and how these inform identity and community.

The older culture's story was to be a good person, a good father/mother, son/daughter, to live a decent, merciful, good life. Now the culture's story is—(a) to be free and self-created and authentic (theme of freedom from oppression), and (b) to make the world safe for everyone else to be the same (theme of inclusion of the "other"; justice). To "re-tell" means to show how only in Christ can we have freedom without slavery and embracing of the "other" without injustice. *Tim Keller*

Once we have named the existential issues our adopted tribe faces, our task will then turn to developing communities. (That's what good mission aims at—a community of Jesus' disciples.) At this point it might simply mean asking the question, "What is church going to look like for this particular tribe of people?" To answer this will require you to examine the social patterning of the group. Follow the ant trails, and they will lead you to the "nest." Where do they meet? Why do they meet? What is the cultural dynamic of the group? Once you have done this, try to articulate what an authentic expression of church might look like within that cultural setting. If it's a tribe that meets regularly at the local pub, then it's pretty easy. If it's a group of mountain bikers, it might be a bit more difficult—but you can be sure they meet somewhere. The aim will be to incarnate the gospel in the place by first planting the gospel (Jesus) and then allowing a local and indigenous expression of community to grow out of that encounter.

For example, I know of a group of believers who simply loved bush-walking: trekking through the mountains and hills around Melbourne. Problem was, the only free day they had was Sunday, so they decided to make that their church. They would trek out into the bush, taking in the glories of God's creation and good comradeship along the way. At a certain point they would stop, have a meal and communion together, share around Scripture, take an offering, pray for people, and then continue bush-walking for the rest of the day. About forty percent of the group were non-Christians deeply interested in the mix of nature and spirituality The Earth Club provided.

The church Jesus built doesn't need all the institutional paraphernalia we have been scripted to think it does. You carry it with you everywhere you go.

To be effective at communicating the good news of Jesus, Christians must learn to behave like culturally-tuned missionaries. We must learn the culture and language of our tribe. We need to be attentive, to listen to the culture's stories. Then we can love, serve, and speak of Jesus in a way that makes sense—that is truly good news to them.

ALAN HIRSCH is the author of *The Forgotten Ways*. Known for his innovative approach to mission, Alan is considered to be a thought-leader and key mission strategist for churches across the Western world.



ISHMAEL CHURCH

ISAAC CHURCH

■ BRUCE KURTZER

There's an account in Genesis 15-18 when God makes Abram a promise that he will become the father of many nations. Yet, Sarai, his wife is barren, and they are both past the age of childbearing. God has given Abram the promise, yet practically and physically Abram can't see how this can happen. Therefore Sarai and Abram decided to help God out to see his promise come about. They decide that Abram should have sexual relations with Hagar, Sarai's servant. This resulted in Hagar giving birth to Abrams's son Ishmael and God's promise is fulfilled.

Well, so they thought, but they were wrong. Ishmael was not the result of God's promise, he was the result of man's intervention to achieve God's promise.

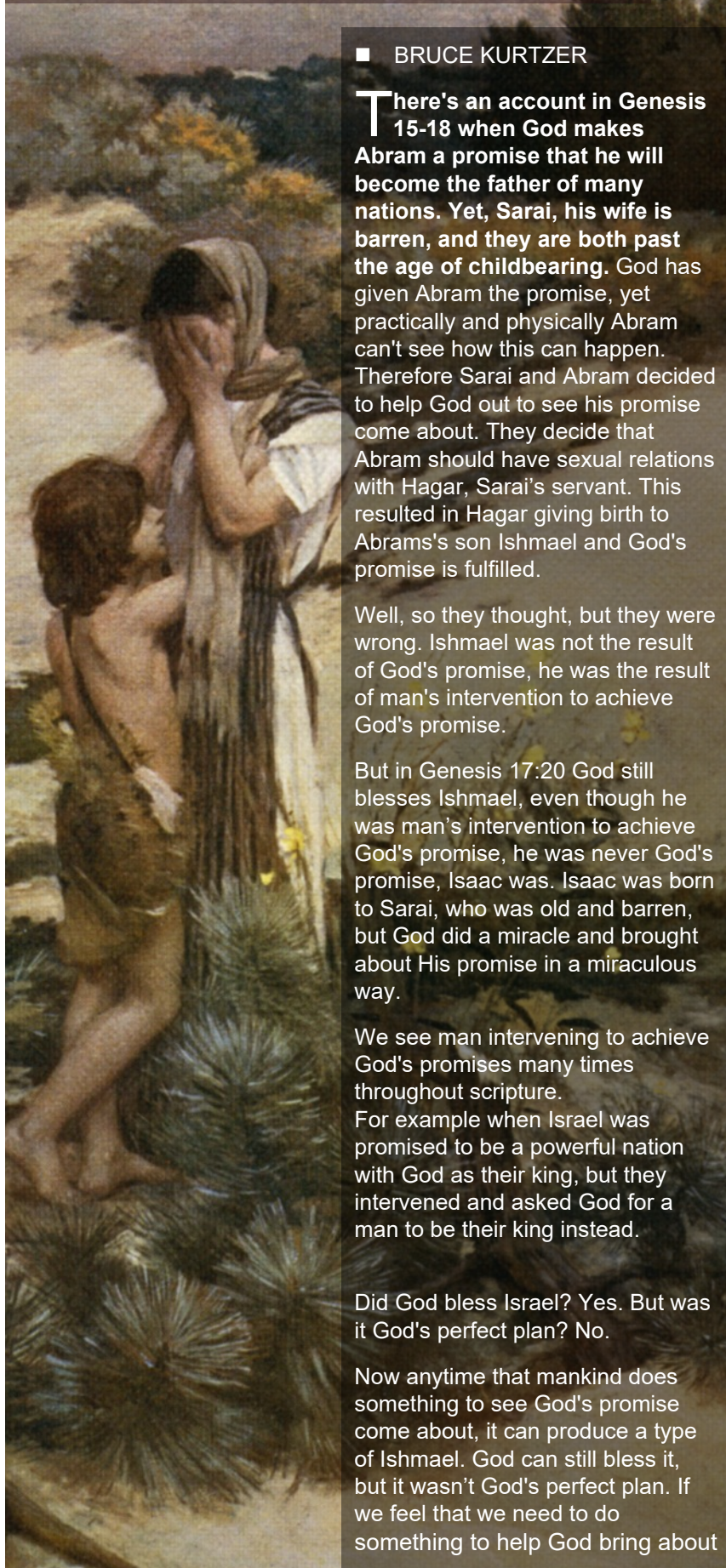
But in Genesis 17:20 God still blesses Ishmael, even though he was man's intervention to achieve God's promise, he was never God's promise, Isaac was. Isaac was born to Sarai, who was old and barren, but God did a miracle and brought about His promise in a miraculous way.

We see man intervening to achieve God's promises many times throughout scripture.

For example when Israel was promised to be a powerful nation with God as their king, but they intervened and asked God for a man to be their king instead.

Did God bless Israel? Yes. But was it God's perfect plan? No.

Now anytime that mankind does something to see God's promise come about, it can produce a type of Ishmael. God can still bless it, but it wasn't God's perfect plan. If we feel that we need to do something to help God bring about



his promise, are we then indicating that God is not able to bring it about himself? How foolish that would be.

Don't get me wrong, I know that we are Christ's body, and therefore we need to be doing things for Christ. I know that faith without works is dead. But where the problem is, is when we do things that God himself has promised to do.

Abram and Sarai's plan was to achieve what God himself had promised he would do, and it produced Ishmael. Even though Ishmael was blessed, his conception caused a whole lot of other problems that we still suffer from today. Abram and Sarai still needed to be sexually intimate with each other to produce Isaac, but their intimacy with each other was faith in action to achieve the impossible that only God could do. When Abram was intimate with Hagar it was not out of faith to achieve the impossible it was man-made intimacy to make God's promise possible.

There is a big difference between making God's promise possible and faith to see God do the impossible.

Now in Galatians, Paul uses the account of Hagar and Sarai, Ishmael and Isaac; to talk about our bondage and freedom, and our flesh and spirit.

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise. This is allegorically speaking, for these women are two covenants: one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother. For it is written, "REJOICE, BARREN WOMAN WHO DOES NOT BEAR; BREAK FORTH AND SHOUT, YOU WHO ARE NOT IN LABOR; FOR MORE NUMEROUS ARE THE CHILDREN OF THE DESOLATE THAN OF THE ONE WHO HAS A HUSBAND." And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. But as at that time he who was born

according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. But what does the Scripture say? "CAST OUT THE BOND-WOMAN AND HER SON, FOR THE SON OF THE BONDWOMAN SHALL NOT BE AN HEIR WITH THE SON OF THE FREE WOMAN." So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman. Galatians 4:22-31

Hagar (who is called the bondwoman) and Ishmael are symbolic of works of the flesh to achieve God's promises. These fleshly works create a bondage in us.

Sarai (who is called the free woman) and Isaac are symbolic of the works of the spirit that carries us to freedom. Even in the face of impossibilities, God's spirit provides the miracle to bring about His promise.

Scripturally God promises to build His church. Is it possible, that just like many other times, we have stepped in to do what God said he would do? We have put in place a man-made system to build a church. We've given the church a legal identity, we've purchased the building, we've put in our hierarchy, all in our effort to build the church. Has the "church" that we know, been born of the flesh like Ishmael through the bondwoman, or through the promise like the free woman?

Some of you may be thinking that's it's impossible to step back and just let God do it, but Isaac was an impossibility too.

God said that he would build His Church; could we be radical enough to let him do it, his way. How much more beneficial would it be for us to focus upon what God has asked us to do, making disciples, and allowing God to do what we promised he would do.

Maybe the amount of "church" leaders burning out would reduce to nothing if we didn't focus on doing what God has promised to do.

We're called to make disciples, and God said he would build his church.

The problem is, that we have had years of man intervening in building God's church. Has this resulted in an

Ishmael style church? That may be blessed but is not God's perfect plan. An Ishmael style church that requires a lot of work of the flesh to keep it growing.

Now I know in Galatians, Paul's comparison is of two covenants, the law and freedom, but it's also about the flesh and the spirit.

Let me challenge you to believe for the impossible, that God will do what our world and our culture say is impossible. That God will build his church, his way.

After serving and leading in the institutionalized church system for many years, I was surprised to discover how much freedom there is in breaking away and just believing God to build his church, organically. Focussing upon my role of making disciples instead of building his church has been a lot less stressful. Is it any wonder that Paul said; "CAST OUT THE BONDWOMAN AND HER SON, FOR THE SON OF THE BOND-WOMAN SHALL NOT BE AN HEIR WITH THE SON OF THE FREE WOMAN. So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman."

Let me encourage those that are considering joining or hosting an organic style of church. Be prepared to do your bit and let God do what he has promised. Get ready to change your thoughts and ways from "church" as our culture knows it, to seeing the church as God sees it. When you do, you'll find incredible spirit-led freedom and fruitfulness - plus a whole lot of organically growing Christians that will support and encourage you. The biggest fear is taking the first step and stepping out of the security of the institutionalized church, but don't let fear overcome your faith or conviction.

Let God bring about his promise in a miraculous way.

BRUCE KURTZER has had over 30 years' experience working in institutionalized churches and now enjoys the non-pressurized freedom of organic gatherings. He manages Faithworks Assist, a missional community in Adelaide which resources churches and welfare agencies with food.

faithworks.net.au simplechurch.com.au





The Power of a Conve

I used to love lecturing, putting together a finely-crafted talk with illustrations and Biblical insights that seemed to touch people deeply. I enjoyed the cadence of a good speech, the flows of laughter and depth of emotions the perfect illustration could elicit. How much I loved being the guy on the stage!

But somewhere, I lost my confidence in the power of a lecture. Don't get me wrong, some useful information can be shared that way, but as a steady diet, it alone lacks the power to help people make the personal discoveries that will help them grow their relationship with God. Thus, I'm less engaged by a talking head than I used to be. I see through so much of it now, the formula that may get the speaker the response they seek, but how little impact it had on the listeners in the long-run. I even grew tired of the adoring comments people would make

after, still realizing it was more about me than it was unlocking their journey.

Do you know what changed me? The power of a conversation. I've been in too many rooms with so many people and watched their eyes brighten with transformative discoveries. I've visited them later to see the fruits of transformation that rose from those discoveries and how that launched them into a greater depth of relationship with Jesus. Now I understand why so much in the Gospels didn't orbit around sermons, but conversations Jesus had with his disciples, Nicodemus, religious leaders, a woman at a well, or lunch with Zaccheus. Where people are allowed to notice what they need to notice, question what they need to question and struggle with what they need to struggle with, that's where real teaching happens where hearts change.

I am freshly discovering some things from the book of John that has clarified important realities in my own journey. I'm excited about sharing some of that as I travel, but every time I put that into a "sermon," it just doesn't fit well. When they emerge in a conversation, however, as people process their own journey, they are transformative.

As much as I love conversations, I'm often concerned that new people coming to a meeting would prefer that I "do a teaching." At least that's what I think they want. While visiting a group recently, we had a number of people join us who had never been in a meeting with me before. I always wonder after a few hours of conversation if they're disappointed I didn't "teach" more. I was grateful to get the following email after one such visit:



Conversation

Wayne Jacobsen

Thanks again for inviting me this past Sunday. I was impressed by the warm hospitality and relaxed atmosphere. I was able to share things I haven't talked about in years... and appreciated those who shared themselves as well with the group. I came away thinking of Matthew 25 where it says, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. That is the church in a nutshell. I didn't know what to expect going in. I came away with more than I ever imagined.

I am still processing the experience, but I at least wanted to contact you to let you know how much your invitation meant to me. As I mentioned to you Sunday, you definitely have a unique gift in the body of Christ. I am looking forward to where the journey takes me from here.

I love how he responded to that day and what he saw in it. To me, a good conversation is not just people in the

same room. A good conversation has some critical components:

- casual and relaxed enough for laughter and getting to know each other,
- a safe place for people to be honest and not judged or given advice,
- for God's reality to expand our hearts,
- and offering encouragement to people who are processing their spiritual journeys.

A few days after I got that email, I was reading John 1. John the Baptist was talking to two of his followers pointing to Jesus' baptism. "Behold the Lamb of God!" They followed him until he turned and asked them what they were looking for. They responded by asking where he was staying. "Come along and see for yourself."

They went with him and stayed for the day. One of those was Andrew, Peter's brother, who immediately went to tell Peter, "We've found the Messiah." That's the power of a conversation. Others who heard Jesus teach, or watched him do miracles, still had no idea who he was. I'm not anti-seminar or anti-sermon; I do both when I need to. But I would dare say that the work of the kingdom emerges far more easily in the simplicity and reality of a conversation than all our ceremonies or rituals can produce. And that goes on not just in meetings I'm in, but in conversations that happen before and after, over meals, or in the homes where I stay.

I got a fresh chance to reflect on that after spending three days with someone in Florida last fall. As he was driving me to my next connection he asked, "Do you know what you are? You're a repository for thousands and thousands of conversations about the life of Jesus with people all over the world."

I do know that. I have talked to so many people across a broad spectrum of spiritual experience—from those who've followed him for fifty or sixty years to those who haven't yet decided if they want to. All of them have enriched me, and have helped me see a Father far grander

than I would ever have known alone. One of the reasons I travel, podcast, and write is to share what I've learned with others.

It's funny, really. I went into "ministry" thinking the thing I loved most was preparing for and teaching large groups of people. What I've discovered since is that those things don't hold a candle to sitting and talking with people, helping them process their journeys and experience the life this incredible Father wants to pour into them. Those conversations are the best, and I want to help others discover how they can be a catalyst for those conversations where they are.

How can you facilitate those kinds of conversations yourself? Be careful not to put people on the spot. Avoid anything that feels forced or artificial. Don't suddenly ask people you don't know well, "What are you hearing from God these days," or "How is the Jesus journey going?" What you can do is take an interest in people—what they're thinking about or what they're going through. Jesus has a way of popping up in such moments quite naturally if the time is right. Be vulnerable first, sharing something you're learning or what challenges you. Your honesty and sincerity can open a door for others to share if they want to. If not, look to be an encouragement to them in some way. Finding your way into safe, honest, and vulnerable conversations about how Jesus is making himself known takes a lot of time and a whole lot of relationship. Relax. Have fun with it. Build friendships first instead of targeting people or making them your project. Love will allow conversations to flow naturally.

There's nothing better than the power of a conversation, whether it's with one person, two or three, or a few dozen. I've even had conversations with 800 people at once, though that does take an extra measure of grace. That way, people are learning in *their* time, not trying to incorporate something I'm learning into *their* journey.



WAYNE JACOBSEN lifestream.org is an American author of a number of books including *So You Don't Want to Go to Church Anymore*. He was a pastor for 20 years and has authored numerous articles on spiritual formation, relational community and engagement of culture.

THE POWER OF REAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AND LOVE

We have spoken much about making disciples and the outreach side of disciple making and of multiplication. The other equally important part is loving as Christ loved us. The hyper individualism of our western world creates a deep felt need for real community and connectedness.

Recently a call by a committed Christina whose cry was for genuine care, belonging and loving relationships, reminded me again of the importance of genuine Christian community.

Early Christian community was characterised by a close fellowship, love and care. The early Christian assemblies excelled at loving others and it was one of the key factors in the growth of the church. One of the early church leaders or "fathers" Tertullian described this reality amongst the Christians: "Every man contributes something once a month, or whenever he wishes to, and only if he wishes to, and if he can ; for no one is forced, but everyone gives his share free willingly... Rather they are used to feed and bury the poor, for boys and girls without means and without parents to help them... for shipwrecked sailors; and for those doing forced labour in the mines, or banished on islands, or in prison, provided they suffer for the sake of God's fellowship. That makes them beneficiaries by virtue of their confession of faith. But even such great acts of love set a stain on us in the eyes of some people. 'Look they say, 'how they love each other" (for they hate each other). 'See how ready they are to die for one another' (for they would sooner kill each other)'

Another early church leader, Aristides, describes Christian Community and love in a similar way: "They love each other. They do not neglect widows. Orphans they rescue from those who are cruel to them. Every one of them who has anything gives ungrudgingly to the one who has nothing, if they see a travelling stranger they bring him under their roof. They rejoice over him as over a real brother, for they do not call one another brothers after the flesh, but they know they are brothers in the Spirit and in God. If one of them sees that one of their poor must leave this world, he provides for his burial as well as he can. And if they hear that anyone of them is imprisoned or oppressed by their opponents for the sake of their Christ's name, all of them take care of his needs. If possible they set him free. If any one of them is poor or comes into want while they themselves have nothing to spare, they fast two or three days for him. In this way they can supply any poor man with the food he needs."

People in the first century and the 21st century are still drawn by a sense of genuine care and love - like moths to a flame or ants to honey.

The Bible has some 56-58 "one another" commands, which highlight the tremendous importance of how we care for each other in communities and sharing of love and care. This must transcend the gathering time when we have our weekly assemblies and be lived out throughout the week. Once a week contact isn't enough, but loving relationships must be a core part of our gathering time together.

When we assemble. part of the time shared together involves a sharing of our lives - the highlights, challenges, ups and downs, joys and sorrows and needs. There is something deep within every person that longs to be known and understood and still loved unconditionally. Only Jesus can perfectly love in this way, but we need to grow in learning how to do this for each other - to ask questions and learn to listen deeply - not just for surface facts and detail, but for the deeper emotions and heart feelings, emotions and yearnings.

Jesus commanded his followers to "love each other as I have loved you" and said to his disciples nearing the end of his time on earth with them, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his masters business. Instead I have called you friends for everything that I learned from my Father I have made know to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and

pointed you to go and bear fruit - fruit that will last." John 15:15,16. This shows a deepening loving relationship where there is deep level of disclosure, not just commands to do various things.

Part of Christian community is learning to genuinely communicate on a deeper level. So often communication is on the topical level that can be much less important, and even a little trivial at times. Yes, there is a time to discuss the weather and our favourite sports team but surely there is a greater need of genuine listening to peoples hear beat about family, challenges spiritual victories and struggles and dreams for the future. I remember a pastor once saying - "listen for the heart stuff".

Both talking and listening are important. Healthy Christian community should be a place where we do actually share. It is difficult to have meaningful relationships when someone will not share anything meaningful about themselves, their life or journey. We all need to be contributors and listeners.

It is also vital that we all learn and practise the skill of attentive listening to others. Some people and even Christians have so much to say - too much at times so that others hardly get a meaningful word in.

Following up in contacting people who have expressed a real need is important and that involves contact outside the time we gather. Sometimes it's a simple text - "just thinking of you or hope you are going well...." Or a phone call "You mentioned" the other day. "I've been praying for you". "How are you travelling?" "Or how is it going with the challenge you mentioned?"

It is also practical support. I remember a person who had broken a bone in their leg commenting that a certain person had been over to cut them some firewood. I felt keenly rebuked as I hadn't done anything to practically help them. Sometimes I forget but I'm trying intentionally to remember that.

I guess we all long to be remembered for something and perhaps to be remembered for being a "loving person" would be the greatest tribute to one's life! As I get older I'm reminded increasingly that life isn't just about what I do, but in how I sow into the lives of others. Their success and impact for good brings me satisfaction and joy.

But back to our home church or assemblies (the meaning of ekklesia). Time spent

together in a group ebbs and flows under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and may not be the same each time. However, it should intentionally include time to listen and genuinely care for each other. This includes our spiritual health and wellbeing.

One movement leader (see Ying Kai T4T) suggested a 3-part approach to Christians gatherings in which time was allocated to include key elements. The first part of time together is spent in "looking back" which includes caring and sharing with each other, casting vision, prayer and worship and gentle accountability. In this time, we often ask each other questions such as how we have loved our neighbour since we last met?...We want to be truly loving people not only disciple makers....

In the second part of our time together we "look up" and this takes the form of a "Discovery Bible Reading" time where we read and seek to apply the Bible to our lives. The final part of our time together involves "looking forward" - setting goals for the coming week, practising core skills such as our testimony or a gospel presentation etc. and finally praying and blessings each other. We have found this approach works well in covering the core elements to include in our time together.

When people discover a vibrant warm and loving Christian community there is something very attractive about it, and it is part of the witness to the World of the reality of the life of Jesus as it is lived out in our lives. I have sometimes heard people say to a newly baptised believer, "Look at Jesus but don't look too much at the church". I would like to think that we should look at both and the assembly (church) should be a reflection in human flesh of the love of Christ and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in today's crazy mixed up world.

We are called to be expressions of the *new humanity in Christ* where there is no longer Jew nor Greek, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, male or female." But we are all united as one In Christ. (Col 3:11, Gal 3:28).

Our oneness in Christ is to transcend other categories such as race, class, education or gender.

There is a real attraction in loving and deep Christian community that draws and attracts those outside.

I trust that our simple/home churches can be these "honey pots" everywhere - hubs full of delight and sweetness.

■ PHIL BROWN

ROUND THE CAMPFIRE

Singing in Simple Church

Tim and Linda Wilson lead a housechurch in Devenport, Tasmania. Recently, responding to an enquiry from Robert Banks regarding a new book he is working on, they wrote about their experience of worship in a simple church. Here's part of their correspondence.

Hello Robert, Phil Brown from Oikos sent us an email letting us know about your chapter on worship in house churches and asked us if we'd be able to get back to you with some information.

As a bit of background, we host a church gathering in our home here in Devonport for a group of roughly 20 adults and 10 children (not all present on any given night) on a Wednesday evening. We've been meeting like this for more than 2 years now after almost 20 years in leadership of more traditionally structured local churches and a lifetime of Christian upbringing (Linda, my wife, here in Tasmania, and I grew up as a missionary kid in the Middle East and Cyprus).

We have a Facebook page that we called "Welcome at the Table" as we felt this described what church should look and feel like; it's the reason our gathering is based around a shared meal. We keep our time together simple and conversational, with the chance for anyone to contribute and lots of time freed up for people to catch up with each other.

ROBERT: Why is singing viewed as important in such gatherings?

TIM: Being honest, part of this for us is that we have started with a group of people who have almost all been involved for some time in traditional forms of church and are therefore used to singing and like it! Beneath this though, I'd say that even though home churches are 'alternative' in the church scene, we (speaking personally) still see ourselves as rooted in the history of God's people – so from the Psalms, to the 'hymns and spiritual songs' mentioned by Paul, through the historical church, singing has been an aspect of worship and the gathered Christian experience. Being a home church doesn't disconnect us from that history. Songs are a way in which all people can participate and there is something powerful in hearing all voices saying the same thing – even if it's 'someone else's words', we sing them together and there's unity in that. Singing adds elements that aren't present in just the spoken word – whether Christian or not, music and singing can "touch" people and prompts different, and valuable, responses.

One observation, having been involved in the music scene in quite a few churches for a long time, would be that music in our setting now is perhaps a bit more like singing around a campfire (another analogy we've used for our gathering!) We tend not to 'use' music to 'build' a mood or insert a block of songs

like in a lot of mainstream churches to create a mood/atmosphere or 'engulf' everyone in worship – it's hard to explain (because I've only just come up with it now...) but it's more personal than that; rather than getting 'lost' in the worship (and sometimes a wall of sound) we often just enjoy the music and singing for it's own sake: we muddle about finding the right tune or piece of paper, we check what key we're in, we can see other people across the lounge room, every voice can be heard... there's more there, but the idea's still pretty raw at this stage!

ROBERT: How and when does this happen in your meetings?

TIM: We eat, talk, catch up and clean up over a period of about an hour from 6pm, then draw everyone together at about 7pm to share, pray, read, discuss, sing, etc. This is pretty open and flexible to change and adjustment, so while the singing happens while we're all together, it could be at the start to lead us in, or somewhere in the middle when someone asks for a song, or maybe at the end as a way of wrapping up our focused time. Our structure (well, lack of...) allows for the singing to be included at different points depending on how the time flows. Sometimes someone will just start singing out of the blue, so if others know it they'll sing along and if not we'll just listen.

ROBERT: Who is mainly responsible for music in meetings?

In our setting Linda and I are the main musicians (Linda plays piano and I play guitar – and both have done so in church since we were teenagers) as well as our son Daniel, who plays the cajon ('drum-box'). Being in our home we have our own piano and my guitar handy, so we can just start up whenever singing is requested. There isn't a 'leader' in terms of someone who picks songs out beforehand and leads them during the meeting – as above, songs are just picked on the night as people think of them. We've created a very basic 'song booklet' with a few songs (about 12?) that people know and that are familiar, so that there are some in print to choose from – these come from the mainstream church tradition ("Open the eyes of my heart", "You are my King", "Turn your eyes upon Jesus", "Blessed be Your Name", "10 000 Reasons", "Everlasting God", etc). With technology available, we have also had people suggest other songs and then find them online on a device in the moment (e.g. using Ultimate Guitar website) or just sing them acappella. People can look up lyrics on their own phones/devices if a song is asked for that isn't in our little booklet. We've also used songs on CD or from a device to either sing along to or simply to have a time of reflection while it plays. We're comfortable to say "No, we don't know that one" and stream it to a Bluetooth speaker, or just have someone read out the lyrics without music. At this stage we don't have anyone else in the group who plays an instrument, so Linda and I take that role, but it would be open to anyone else if there was someone who played.

I've done some thinking about using music in home church style meetings, because our aim isn't to "do house church until we get enough people to do 'real' church" – our ideal would be to see other groups start based on existing relationships and connections that others in the group have within their own networks. There would be no guarantee that any new groups would have musicians in them, so the role of music and how to include music in ways that are simple but still meaningful is something on my mind. No major conclusions or outcomes from that yet, but it's rolling around in my brain in the background. Access to recorded songs/music is obviously pretty easy these days, but it's more a case of how to include music in ways that make sense and join with the whole gathering. My feeling would be that if a group didn't have musicians, then music would take on a lesser role in that group (the people make the group – you don't try to 'force' music if the people aren't there to make it happen; that just creates a sense of 'tension' as you try to do something that doesn't fit).

ROBERT: How are the needs and gifts of children taken into account?

TIM: Younger kids don't necessarily join us when we draw together – up to their parents whether they get them to sit in among us, and the youngest ones tend not to. We haven't made particular adjustments for the kids – about half of them are teenagers at this point, so they join in like anyone else. The kids seem to enjoy the singing and they know they can ask for a song if they'd like one (and have done so). Having said that, one of the group only just the other Wednesday said

"I'm feeling like we should have a whole heap of shakers and maracas and things so we can all have something to shake and rattle, including the kids!"

Tim wrote further:

One thing I did think of was that some house church groups I'm aware of (not personally, but more anecdotally) move towards writing their own music/songs. If I had the skill I'd be really interested in this, as it would allow for worship in song that is personalised to the group and even responds to people or situations within the group. A group with someone with this skill (a 'psalmist' in the midst!) would be able to respond in music and singing to what the group is thinking and feeling, and to world or local events, which would be a pretty special thing.

I do like the idea of songs that are a bit more small group/campfire style, rather than ones written for big auditorium style worship that we adapt to a lounge room (there are certain songs I wouldn't even bother trying in our setting because of this disconnect). Larger churches that write music wouldn't be quite the same as this, because you can't write music that's 'personal' for a group in the hundreds (and certainly not thousands). Not sure if other groups do this within the Oikos network, but it might be something worth researching/chasing down as part of your info-gathering.

Tim and Linda Wilson
'Welcome at the Table'
Devonport, Tasmania



Devonport Church

SHALOM (Continued from page 2)

Imbedding yourself in the community is key to meeting people and speaking into their lives, bringing the *Shalom* or peace of God to them.

Shalom - a Hebrew word carry's the idea not just of the absence of war or conflict but of wellness, wholeness, completeness, soundness, health safety, and prosperity - all that is good in life.

This is the good news of the kingdom of God that Jesus offers his followers. Life is complex and made up of many parts that can be out of order and harmony with each other. *Shalom* brings completeness or restoration to our life, restoring relationships, bring completeness both in our lives and in the larger world around us.

Isaiah prophesied that *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace or Shalom.* Isa 9:6

In the face of Calvary and his coming death Jesus said to his followers: *"Peace I leave with you, My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid"* John 14:27.

Despite tumult, unrest, and trouble we can have this amazing sense of peace and *Shalom*. This the blessing of participating in the Kingdom of God - Its great news!

People are yearning for genuine good news and relief. Jesus offers this! He

provides relief from stress, anxiety, and worry.

Life isn't just about food, drink, or clothing and just as the Heavenly Father clothes the lilies of the field and cares for the needs of the birds of the sky, so he will provide for our needs. Matt 6:25-33

Be encouraged and increasingly bold as you bring the *Shalom* into your Oikos. We'd love to hear your stories. Drop me a line at philbrown@oikos.org.au

<https://bibleproject.com/videos/shalom-peace/>

Shalom

bless you, Phil Brown
OIKOS DIRECTOR

HAS THE CHURCH LEFT THE BUILDING? (Continued from page 3)

that never previously had a "church", yet now find themselves with a house church.

What we've learned from the persecuted church is that when the church is forced into homes, the battleground shouldn't be around the best deliverable content. The battleground is personal connection. Stripping back all the distractions of culture, and the things we found our identity in – whether it is church, work or socialising – we've realised that even when they are gone, we're still okay.

One of the risks is that we will look back on this time in history and see a decline in the number of regular church-attending Christians. For others, their routine will be forever interrupted by the change in church setting and they won't go back to the building as often. But we will also see a broadening of the gospel as people become used to receiving information online – from a variety of sources.

I also believe we will see a reduction of denominational lines and the patriotism and division that sometimes exists between denominations. I'm hoping we'll see a far more unified Church arise from this pandemic.

Isolation has amplified the small things in life and taught me to be more thankful for the simple things in life; clean air, a bed, the ability to go for walks each day, the beauty of nature outside my front door and the power of personal connection with my wife and kids.

When faith is brought out of our church, it enters the rest of the world. That's one the most beautiful realities of what we're experiencing now; faith has become a part of our household.

COVID-19 has not been the death knell so many believed it to be. It has been a hand on the back from the Lord stripping away all the distractions in life and allowing us to find peace, safety, assurance and comfort in the face of uncertainty. Let us use this opportunity to help grow the Church as we see God working throughout this pandemic.



I have personally learned so many lessons during the coronavirus pandemic, about my own faith and the areas in my life where I have let culture guide me more than Christ. This has included the areas of refinement and growth that have left me spiritually stronger and with a deeper sense of identity in Christ rather than my social status.

MIKE GORE is the CEO of *Open Doors Australia and New Zealand* and has been with the ministry for more 10 years. Mike lives in Sydney with his wife and two daughters. He has travelled extensively to meet persecuted Christians around the world opendoors.org.au



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OIKOS AFRICA



Recently Phil Brown received the following request from a church leader in Ghana requesting partnership with Oikos Australia.

Calvary Greetings, Phil Brown and your entire leadership of Oikos Australia.

I have been serving as a pastor and involved in planting of churches, training of leaders and raising disciples in and outside the local churches, in the communities and regions of Ghana and Africa for 26 years.

Recent years, God has been speaking to me about house churches, which I has started a few of them. In order to understand and do it well, I decided to read more materials on the subject matter and search for people who are experienced and are involved for a period of time. Fortunately, for me I connected Phil Brown, who has been a blessing to me and some of the leader's.

God has put it in my heart to establish house churches and train disciples and leaders for house churches to the growth of the kingdom of God in Ghana and Africa. I wanted us to build relationship with you and also your network with the Oikos Australia, which has similar purpose and vision. With your permission I want to start the Oikos Africa, which I believe will be a blessing for the body of Christ in Ghana and Africa.

I also want you to join us in Ghana yearly for conference, seminar or workshop with the focus on equipping believers for house or simple churches in Ghana, Africa.

I believe this humble request will be granted for sake of the kingdom of God. Thanks, Samuel Acheampong

Samuel writes the following about his journey and vision:

My name is Samuel Acheampong, Ghanaian born, from a family of five, I have a brother and a sister, my mother is alive but my father is dead.

Am married for 21 years, my wife's name is Helena Acheampong. We have five children, four girls, one boy. Names, Lilian 20 years, Christabel 18 years, Samuelar 16 years, Emmanuella 14 years and Samuel 12 years. Two senior girls are in University, one studying journalism and other accounting. Other three children one is in senior high school and two are in junior high school.

I am a trained accountant before becoming a pastor, and my wife is a trained beautician, also assist me in my pastoral work.

I was born again in September 1988 and was baptized that same month by the church of Pentecost through an elder in the church. At the time I had chronic head sickness, but after he preach and prayed for me that headick never came back. I serve as an usher, drummer, adult class teacher, interpreter, later became deacon in the church. In the year 1994 I became associate pastor in a church we planted. Head various ministries in the local church. Serve in national seminars and conferences. After Bible college I was Involved in training pastors, church leaders and believers in and outside the local church.

In 2003 by the leading of Holy Spirit, I started the church lifehouse Power Chapel in my house. Our mission is "Winning Souls, Raising Leaders, imparting our communities through the power of the word of

God". The vision is "Developing Christ-like Believers".

By grace of God we are involved winning souls and discipling them, training and equipping of believers into leadership in various churches through seminars and conferences. Am now involved in starting house churches. As am writing to you now I have 30 people I am preparing and training for the house churches.

As a church we are also helping the needy in and out the church, street children, orphans, widows, etc. My wife is involved more in these areas.

This is something brief about myself and ministry. Thanks, Samuel

Please pray for Samuel and this potential partnership with Africa.

DISTRACTED

April 5, 2020 by Michael Butler

*“Little children, stay away from idols”
1 John*

A man walked back into our lives recently. He has always been a ‘sort of follower’ of Jesus. He goes to church every week, is devoted to his business, but never had the time to really stop and spend time exploring the Gospel or working out what it meant to follow Jesus. That is until now.

This week, Chris walked into our lives a different man. I guess lung, liver and pancreatic cancer will do that to a person. The conversation was sobering. Before us stood a man who to all intents, looked well enough. But now the conversation had urgency. Those things in his life that he had all along known he shouldn't have had – an obsession with his business, toying with new age, excessive drinking and simply ignoring the call of Christ in his life, they are now gone. They have been replaced by a desire, in the final days, to prioritise all in life that is important. Jesus has moved into his rightful place as Lord, and we look forward to baptising him in the coming days. We also pray for healing.

In a parallel scenario, I am reading of great movements that are happening around the world, where many are seeing fruit even more than a hundredfold, but never without cost. I am convinced the Lord sent this man into my life to confront me.

You see, while some may consider me a slow learner, it has really dawned on me that it is simply impossible for the Lord to achieve great things through us, when we have a multitude of distractions in our life. The best we can hope for, is to “play” at Christianity, but we delude ourselves. God will do immeasurably more than we can imagine, when we remove all the distractions in our life that hinder the work. Distractions really, are idols. As we have switched the word ‘death’ with ‘passing’ today, so we prefer the word ‘distractions’ to ‘idols’. Idolatry sounds terrible, sinful even.

I have sadly had to face up to there being quite a few in my life. Even food has become an idol. I realise not a day goes by without me wondering what we can cook that evening. Our family living in Uganda however, don't have such distractions. Work is simple, food even simpler and a believer's entire energy can be devoted without hindrance to the work of the Lord. Sounds silly doesn't it, over the top.

Make not mistake though, it is deadly and our constantly distracted lifestyle in the West prevents us from being effective servants of Christ. Most will get to the end of their lives and wonder what it was all for – that includes believers too. Friends, this world is so fleeting and we indulge ourselves by thinking we are immortal. Then one day, with a snap of the fingers our lives change.



Firstly, I don't believe there has been another time in history when society has been so blinded to the consequences of what is coming. In Romans 3, we are told that the ‘wrath and fury’ of God is coming to individuals who are unrighteous, not covered by Jesus. Yet the world is arrogantly blind.

Secondly, Jesus is commanding his church to be far more effective. We have all the power in the universe available, but we are fat, complacent, even useless. Our King is Lord of the Universe, yet we ignore his call as if it were optional. You and I must take this seriously for everyone's sake – those around us who are perishing, and ourselves who risk coming under the judgement of Christ. Would a soldier in an army not be severely punished for slacking off on their duty? Do we expect anything less?

For goodness sake, let's start calling our distractions what they are – idols, the thing God hates above everything in his chosen people. We must repent, and in his mercy ask him to use us.

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OIKOS Australia Magazine,
25 Oak Street
Bentleigh VIC 3204
0435 322 303
magazine@oikos.org.au