

OIKOS

AUSTRALIA

WINTER 2021
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RED DIRT POP-UP CHURCH

Warren Crank

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The WORST of times, the BEST of times ...

Phil Brown

MEGA SHIFT Uncomfortable Questions

Martin Bragger

WINTER 2021



DIRECTIONS

The “worst of times, the best of times....”

Much of Australia has been or is under lockdown, currently much of NSW, parts of QLD, Melbourne again, etc. It seems to change every day! The current sudden restrictions have been a challenge to all Christians and to simple/house churches. Times have changed and it's doubtful when or if it will return to the “normal” of pre covid arrangements.

Smaller and simple gatherings of believers are fast becoming the norm. Some churches stream their services and members just watch the program. However, if there is minimal interaction, then it facilitates a passive experience and opens the door for members to watch any program online for their weekly “church experience”. It is a major challenge for church leaders - how to connect the church and to retain members from dropping out or going to other fellowships online!

These changes offer both challenges and many opportunities that come with these times. People have shared how they have been creative in getting together online or at cafes or outdoors depending on the current restrictions in their area and state. One of the positive outcomes is that more people are released into active ministry and that centralised involvement and control by professionals is no longer possible in the way it was before.

There are increased opportunities - to multiply and help other Christians experience simple gatherings. This may be in homes or, if not permitted, in other public places such as cafes or outdoors etc. It also challenges the church to be more flexible and restriction/persecution ready. I'm not a pessimist but it's difficult to foresee a future that is going to be easier. Christians around the world are experiencing varying levels of restriction, hostility, and even direct and targeted persecution. In the western world we are starting to experience shades of this, though it is small compared to what some Christians face daily in other countries. In a sense the church in Australia may be forced to go “underground” and be more informal and gather in smaller spaces and places.

It challenges us to be creative, spirit led and adaptive. It also challenges us to reexamine the core practices of New Testament Church and how they grew and multiplied despite opposition and persecution. It appears that many established churches will have a hybrid system of smaller groups in homes as well as those who attend a program in a central building. This will raise challenges as to who is seen as the regular members - will it be everyone or only those who attend worship services when they can on the weekend? Are people who join in the simple church gatherings in homes and other places considered faithful “members” or must they attend on the weekend as well?

Simple/house churches can support existing churches and share what we have experienced and learned. I recently heard a story of a pastor of a large church who had been strongly opposed to house church/simple church, changing his perspective, and seeking to understand and help their church to embrace this form of gathering. This is exciting!

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OIKOS Australia

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

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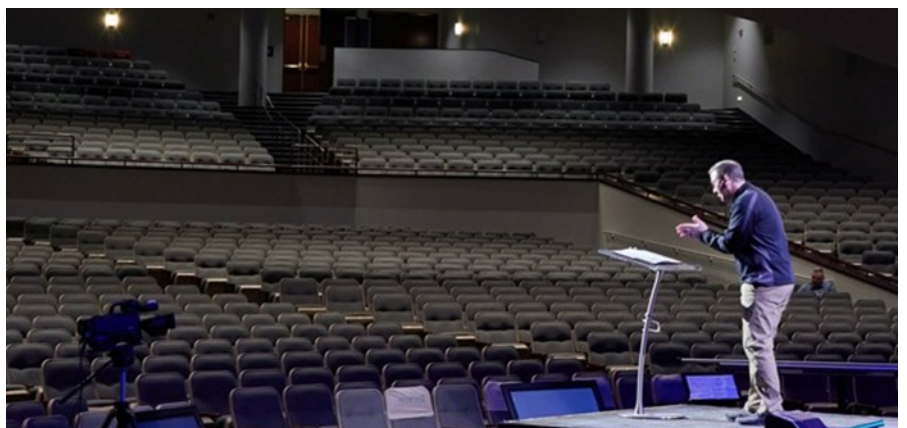
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What makes a disciple a disciple?



JOSH DAFFERN

What makes a disciple a disciple? That word itself, “disciple,” can be such a churchy word that it’s hard to get a good grip on what it means. We know as Christians we are called to be disciples. We know we are called to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19-20). But what are we talking about when we use the word “disciple”? Is it someone who has tons of Bible verses memorized? Is a disciple one who gets mad at the world and shakes their fist at society? Are disciples only those who go across the ocean as missionaries? What makes a disciple a disciple? What does a fully-devoted disciple of Jesus look like? Here’s my working definition: As a preacher, I apologize in advance because the eight characteristics of a disciple form an acronym of the word ‘disciple.’ :)

D Deeply delights in Jesus.

It’s not enough to start with how much a disciple knows about the Bible. Before we look at the head we have to focus on the heart. The heart of a disciple is one who deeply delights in Jesus.

Discipleship begins with worship. A fully-devoted disciple is not one who is primarily concerned with how much they know or how God will bless them. The focus isn’t on you, it’s on Jesus. A disciple who deeply delights in Jesus is delightful to be around because they act so much like Jesus.

I Inhales and exhales grace.

Grace is what God has done on your behalf apart from your effort. It is God’s saving grace through Jesus, His forgiveness, His goodness bestowed on you through no effort of your own. Many times we will hold our breath to try and accomplish on our own power what can only be secured through Jesus. A fully-devoted disciple inhales, accepts and absorbs the grace of God. This takes submission and humility to acknowledge that it is God’s power and not your own good works that has saved you. A fully-devoted disciple that has truly inhaled grace will exhale that same grace towards other people. Christians who do not exhale grace have not fully inhaled it themselves.

S Studiously shaped by Scripture.

Even a cursory reading of the life of Jesus will show that Jesus was studiously shaped by Scripture. Look at how often he refers to the Old Testament Scriptures. Look at how often the Gospel writers connected Jesus’ life to the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus was shaped by Scripture, and we must be as well. A fully-devoted disciple is one who leans in and drinks deeply from Scripture to shape how they view God, themselves and the world around them. It’s not enough to read the Bible for fifteen minutes a week while consuming worldly influences fifteen hours a day. We must study Scripture until it shapes who we are and how we see the world.

C Compassionately cares for every person.

Here’s a telltale sign that a disciple has been studiously shaped by Scripture: when we compassionately care for others. A damaging approach to Bible

study is to be selectively served by Scripture, meaning we have already decided what we believe and what we want and we cherry-pick Scriptures that seem to back up what we have already decided. When we allow Scripture to shape us, we will develop the same compassion towards every person (not just some) that we see all throughout Scripture. The compassion Jesus showed toward every person and the way the New Testament church broke down barriers to show compassion to all should mark the life of a fully-devoted disciple.

I Impressed upon and ignited by the Holy Spirit.

It is not enough for a fully-devoted disciple of Jesus to simply know a lot about the Bible. There has to be a living, breathing relationship and dependence on the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus within you. Many denominations shy away from any talk or interaction with the Holy Spirit. But if you look in the Gospel of Luke, you'll see Jesus' continual dependence on the Holy Spirit for guidance and power. His disciples must learn to do the same, whether it is something familiar with your religious upbringing or not.

P Pastors and prays for the flock given to them.

This characteristic is about stewardship. Every single disciple has been given a flock, a sphere of influence, within which to act righteously and make much of Jesus. It could be a circle of friends, a family, a place of work. Wherever and with whomever God has placed you, He placed you there on purpose for a purpose. A fully-devoted disciple exercises their responsibility to pastor their flock. (We're all pastors in that sense, not just the ones who stand behind a pulpit on Sundays). We're also called to pray for those we're surrounded by and intercede on their behalf before the Father.

L Locates and leads lost sheep to Jesus.

Jesus was relentless about seeking out lost sheep, lost souls, and declaring the good news of the gospel to them. He was so relentless that it made even the religious leaders uncomfortable. A Christian who is content to remain inside a holy huddle and stay safe and comfortable within a religious bubble looks more like a Pharisee than a disciple. A fully-devoted disciple of

Jesus pursues lost sheep with the same zeal and passion that Jesus did. That will mean breaking down barriers. That will mean new friendships with unlikely people. But it will also mean God moving and saving and redeeming in powerful ways.

E Equips and empowers other disciples to do the same.

The last three characteristics are all about stewarding our relationships with other humans because humans are eternal. All the other religious stuff we get caught up in (buildings, programs, denominational politics) are temporary. Jesus didn't stop at pursuing lost sheep himself. He equipped and empowered his disciples to do the same, which is why there are billions of Christians today. A fully-devoted disciple carries on that legacy and intentionally pours into other disciples, to build them up and send them out so that this gospel may be spread to the ends of the earth.



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BEST OF TIMES (Continued from page 2)

There are also opportunities to talk and share how Jesus can help us in these difficult times. People are facing pressure and anxiety levels are often heightened. In these situations, it is usually not difficult to pray for people and point them to the peace that Jesus brings.

Some movement leaders in the Philippines have even been using social media to invite people who are feeling under pressure and anxious to explore together, using Discovery Bible Study approaches, what Jesus said about peace and how we can have it.

One leader in regional Australia was noting the hunger for people to get together in his area - especially men! He has a weekly men's breakfast gathering with about 30 men, some of whom are not believers. Meeting in a cafe has been popular, but they are increasingly facing pressure over the size of group allowed in the Cafe.

Another leader in Melbourne reported on the growing passion and attraction of

prayer in Australia and with people joining the prayer times from overseas such as countries in Southeast Asia.

I think we have all discovered that while face to face connection and gatherings are the best, it is still possible to achieve much in the way of connection, training and gathering online on Zoom. This means that geography and proximity is no longer such a restrictive issue. A church in Australia may involve people from several states and even overseas. Are we able to accept this as a genuine expression of an assembly (church)?

Finally, the current unpredictability and restrictions on people's movement and association raise the challenging issue of how far and long compliance goes and where does it stop? Some Christians seem to take the line that we must always obey authorities in whatever rules they make (see Romans 13) and so, far as possible, we should obey the laws. However, it also needs to be noted that there are limits to this when "we must obey God rather than man" (Acts 5:29). What if church gatherings of any kind are outlawed most



of the time in the name of "protecting" people's health? We need to have mature discussions, much prayer and searching the Word of God for principles that can inform our decisions.

In these times especially we need to be wise, and Spirit led, and also courageous and unafraid - like "the men of Issachar who understood the times and knew what Israel should do..."

Perhaps more importantly we should not focus so much on what we can't do, but on what we can do in creative ways through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

bless you, Phil Brown
OIKOS DIRECTOR

Lessons Learned In The Fields

Neil Cole

Recently I was asked to describe what I would do differently if I were to start church planting again. Here was my response.

If I were to start over knowing what I know now, what would I do differently?

1. Begin in the Harvest and Start Small.

Don't start with a team of already saved Christians. We think that having a bigger and better team will accelerate the work, and it doesn't. In fact, it has the opposite effect. It is better to have a team of two, and the right two makes the work even better: and apostle and prophet together will lay the foundation of a movement. The churches birthed out of transformed lives are healthier, reproductive and growing faster. It is about this— a life changed, not about the model. Never forget that!

2. Allow God to Build Around Others

Don't start in your own home...find a person of peace and start in their home! Read Matt. 10/Luke 10...and do it!

3. Empower Others from the Start

Don't lead too much...let the new believers do the work of the ministry without your imposed control. Let the

excitement of a new life carry the movement rather than your intelligence and persuasiveness.

4. Let Scripture Lead Not Your Assumptions

Question all your ministry assumptions in light of Scripture with courage and faith. There is nothing sacred but God's Word and Spirit in us...let them lead rather than your own experience, teachings, and tradition.

5. Rethink Leadership

The Christian life is a process. There is not a ceiling of maturity that people need to break through to lead. Set them loose immediately and walk with them through the process for a while. Leadership recruitment is a dead end. We are all recruiting from the same pond and it is getting shallower and shallower. Leadership farming is what is needed. Any leadership development system that doesn't start with the lost is starting in the wrong place. Start at the beginning and begin with the end in mind. Mentor life on life and walk with them through their growth in being, doing and knowing. The end is not an accumulated knowledge but a life of obedience that will be willing to die for Jesus. The process isn't over

until there is a flat-line on the screen next to their bed.

6. Immediate Obedience in Baptism

Baptize quickly and publicly and let the one doing the evangelizing do the baptizing. The Bible doesn't command us to be baptized, but to be baptizers. It is absolutely foolish the way we hold the Great Commission over our people and then exclude them from obeying it at the same time! We need to let the new convert imprint upon the Lord for protection, provision, training and leading, rather than upon men.

7. Settle "Your" Ownership Issues

Stop being concerned about whether "Your" church plant will succeed or not. It isn't "yours" in the first place. Your reputation is not the one on the line...Jesus' is. He will do a good job if we let him. If we have our own identity and reputation at stake in the work we will tend to take command. Big mistake. Let Jesus get the glory and put his reputation on the line...He can take care of Himself without your help!"

NEIL COLE was born and raised in Los Angeles, CA. Neil travels around the world sowing the seeds of God's kingdom, catalysing the development of organic church networks and coaching leaders. cole-slav.blogspot.com



If Jesus Planted a Church, What Would It Look Like?



If Jesus planted a church, what would it look like?

There'd be lots of miracles and plenty of cryptic sermons, I guess.

And clergy from traditional churches would drop by to tsk-tsk about what he was doing and to ask him curly theological questions.

And you'd never run out of bread at the potluck suppers.

But, seriously, what would a church planted by Jesus look like?

Maybe one way to think about this is to ask if we only had the four canonical gospels to go by, what would the church look like? I don't ask this to reduce the importance of any part of the New Testament, only as a mental exercise in thinking about what our founder Jesus had imagined the redeemed society of his followers would look like.

Is there enough in the gospels themselves for us to distil the raw material the other New Testament writers draw upon when addressing the church?

While it's true that Jesus does talk about the church, his primary topic is the kingdom. And not just as subject material. Sure, he teaches about the ethics of the kingdom, and he tells scores of parables to reveal certain facets of the kingdom, but his whole life and ministry points to the kingdom and his kingship. He didn't just preach about it, he was the bearer and the inaugurator of the kingdom of God.

On this, Timothy George writes, "[Jesus] despoiled the reign of Satan through the exorcising of demons, he offered forgiveness to sinners and celebrated the eschatological banquet with them, and he asserted divine moral authority in many ways including the striking 'but I say unto you' sayings of the Sermon on the Mount. Thus, from the beginning, the content of early

Christian preaching was neither a new philosophical worldview nor a code of ethics to improve human behavior, but rather Jesus Christ himself: Jesus remembered in his words and deeds, Jesus crucified, buried, and risen from the dead, and Jesus yet to come again in glory—all of which is included in that earliest of Christian confessions, 'Jesus is Lord!'"

So, if we're thinking about the church that Jesus would plant, it would have to be all about the kingdom. And what exactly is the kingdom of God, as Jesus revealed it?

In their book *Kingdom Ethics*, David Gushee and Glen Stassen explore the central message of Jesus' ministry – the kingdom of God – by examining all the references to Isaiah in Synoptic Gospels. As you probably know, the Gospels refer to Isaiah *a lot*, either by direct quotes or allusions. As Gushee and Stassen say, Isaiah was the primary background of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom. So they line up all of Jesus'

references to the kingdom and all of Isaiah's prophecies about the coming Messiah and derive what they call "the seven marks of God's reign." Those seven marks are:

- Deliverance/Salvation – from being oppressed to being set free.
- Justice – whereby everyone has enough.
- Peace and Harmony – no more hatred and deception.
- Healing – no more sickness and disease.
- Restoration of community as a new family.
- Joy – people filled with life.
- The experience of God's presence.

Here's what the church that Jesus built looks like – a people who acknowledge him as their king, offering all of their lives under his authority, working on living out this constellation of values:



If we only have the four gospels to go on, this is what a Christian church should look like. Indeed, the rest of the New Testament should be understood as the working out of the implications of this truth – the Messiah has come and his kingdom is at hand and the redeemed society of his followers are a sign, instrument and foretaste of his beautiful reign. God has spoken through the rest of the New Testament

to help us see the fullness of all that a community of Jesus' followers should look like.

In the church that Jesus planted, the love feast (or Eucharist or Lord's Supper) would be central. It would be a meal that commemorated the deliverance or salvation we have in Christ. But more than that, it would be a convivial feast (joy) that revelled in our newfound family of faith (restoration) at which everyone was fed (justice) and during which differences and disagreements would be set aside (peace) while we found healing together. And as Jesus himself promised, wherever two or three gather in this way, he is very present among us. Every gathering of believers would reinforce our understanding of God's kingdom among us and propel us out into the world to find God's kingdom unfurling there as well.

Of course, we don't only have the four gospels to go by. Paul's advice to the Corinthians about how to conduct this feast emerge from the gospels' teaching about Jesus. Paul's explanation of the good news to the Romans adds contextual color for a predominantly Gentile congregation. And his pastoral epistles detail the implications for a congregation seeking to live out their salvation by committing to being just, joyful, reconciled, healed, restored family that experience the abiding presence of God.

My point is that there is no disjunction between Jesus' example and Paul's ecclesiology. One is the outworking of the other. It's all seminally there in the gospels themselves. The church is the gathered community of the kingdom.



Not that everyone has always seen it that way. Back in the 19th century, the liberal Catholic scholar Alfred Loisy was famous for drawing the distinction between church and kingdom in his well-known observation, "Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom, and what we got was the Church."

It's like the British spy novelist, John le Carré, who, when asked what it was like having his books turned into Hollywood movies, quipped, "It's like having your prize ox turned into a bouillon cube."

Is that what Loisy meant? That Jesus' grand vision for the kingdom got turned into something small and second-rate called the church? Well, yes, in fact, that is exactly what he meant, and many people have tended to agree with him. I'm not one of them, however. Sure, some churches can be mean-spirited, small-minded, and exclusive. I've never been backward in criticizing the church when it falls short of all it should be. But is the church a second-rate version of what Jesus had in mind *per se*?

No.

The church is the gathering of those who have joined together to bend their knee before Christ their king and who are being shaped into citizens of his realm.

The renewal of the church in our time is dependent on the renewal of our understanding of the gospel. And the renewal of the gospel requires the recovery of the centrality of Jesus for life and faith and thought.

We must reJesus our theology as well as our churches.

MIKE FROST is the head of the missiology department at Morling College, Sydney. His doctorate examined a mission-shaped approach to being and doing church, and he has written a bunch of books in that field, including *Keep Christianity Weird* and also *The Faith of Leap and ReJesus* (both with Alan Hirsch). He helped launch the *Small Boat Big Sea* community in Manly and co-founded the *Forge* mission training network.

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DID YOU KNOW?

Wolfgang Simson gives an overview of House Churches around the world

In total there are currently (mid 2021) at least 22.6 million house churches worldwide with a total of around 300 million members. Here my full and brand-new report:

Based on biblical, archaeological and historical evidence, house churches – and flat-structured regional networks of house churches - have been the primal, original expression of the ekklesia that Jesus Christ promised to build in the New Testament. During the emergence of sanctuary-based, hierarchical and denominational church systems from AD 100-400, house churches have often become sidelined, suppressed and even persecuted by what called itself the mainline church (see the history chapter in: The House Church Book). House churches have, in various forms and under various labels like pietistic groups, cells or base communities, always existed under the radar of both secular and religious observers. A major and historic comeback of house churches has happened in China – curiously after the expulsion of Western missionaries and their religious influence after Mao Zedong in the early 20th century. Some researchers speak of currently 160-200 million members in probably more than 10 million individual house churches in China alone.

Since the early 1990s house churches experienced a rapid renaissance outside China. In the mid-90s, Egypt and India have experienced the emergence of such highly contagious expressions of house church networks, that these two countries became modern day apostolic epicentres from where house churches have now become not only a global phenomenon, but the fastest growing expression of Christ-followers on the planet. Let one statistic speak to the significance of this: The sum total of all current believers in house churches in India alone, about 80 million, is more than all the 75.5 million members of all 149 member churches of the Lutheran World Federation.

What follows is a brief overview into the situation in mid-2021. In many nations it is possible to do empirical research. However, let us take into account that many house churches either have to or want to function undetected, under the radar of secular or religious groups. This makes them difficult to research, unless you are a trusted insider and are connected to other trustworthy insiders that provide reliable intelligence. Our overview is both the result of empirical research, insider-knowledge and, in some cases, informed “guesstimates”:

1. 10 million house churches in China, see above.
2. Since 1996, about 2 million house churches have been planted in India, Egypt and the rest of the Middle East.
3. 3 million house churches have been reportedly planted in recent years by various missions collectives like “24:14” who speak of about 1000 house church movements (HCM) with more than 1000 house churches each. Some HCMs have 100,000s of house churches, like T4T. We are assuming the average size of a HCM as 3000 house churches.
4. 2 million house churches that are not on the official radar of anyone. This includes movements like „Hoffnung Deutschland“ (founded by Marcus Rose, about 1000 house churches) or about 20,000 newly planted village/house churches in Uganda (many meet under a tree for the lack of a hut large enough), as reported by Riccardo Meusel, Germany.

5. 1.5 million “halfway houses” for church misfits in the USA. According to American sociologist Josh Packard (see his book Church Refugees) the US experiences, with 65 million (in 2015), a gigantic church exodus of people who are “church misfits”: They are following Christ but do no longer attend classical churches. Some call themselves “doners” as they are done with church – but not necessarily with God. About 20% of them – about 13 million people - organize themselves in usually small groups 6-10 people) into about 1.5 million DIY- house churches or “halfway houses.” We do not yet count the rest of the 52 million doners into this group – they currently remain “free floating” and are literally spiritually homeless.

6. 1 million “doner” – house church groups outside the US. In many countries of the cultural West outside the US like Australia or the UK, we observe very similar church-exodus movements that partly organize themselves into house churches. Similar developments occur also in South Africa, Korea, Singapore or Israel. Most have no desire to appear on anyone’s radar.

7. 1.7 million house churches inside businesses and Insider Movements. Insider movements are HCMs that do not openly identify with the religion of Christianity but remain outwardly loyal and therefore hidden inside existing religions like Islam,

8. Hinduism, Shintoism or Buddhism. Many see their religious environment as their cultural heritage within which they have become secret followers of Christ. This phenomenon also exists inside secular groups, clans or tribes. We estimate at least 1 million house churches that have emerged in insider-dispositions. An additional form of this are “business-churches,” house churches that function inside a business as their cover. Close observers in China speak of about 500,000 “business house churches” with at least 200,000 business house-churches outside China, bringing the total in this category to 1.7 million.

9. 400.000 politically incorrect groups inside house-church-phobic church systems. In many strongly hierarchical church systems like the Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox Churches or even marginal groups or cults we see a growing emergence of house churches that may not call themselves that – but basically function like one. Even in recent and strongly Roman-Catholic-influenced plans to evangelize 100 million Europeans, as proposed by Johannes Hartl (Prayerhouse Augsburg, Germany) house churches play a significant role. We calculate such “politically incorrect” groups to number about 400,000.

10. 1 million house churches in HCNs with less than 1000 house churches per network. One American businessman has planted six different HCMs with more than 1000 HCs each in the last 3 years alone in East Africa. According to our information there are about 20,000 of such “smaller” HCMs globally. In addition to this we have seen the emergence of about 10,000 so-called “Apostolic Networks” worldwide since the 1980s and 1990s. Many of them experience a movement from more controlled “cells” towards house church. If we take an average of 50 house churches per small HCN (and exclude all “apostolic movements” as not house-church significant), the worlds smaller HCNs adds a total of about 1 million house churches to our count.

SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTORS TO THE EXPANSION OF HOUSE CHURCHES

- Mission researcher Dr. Todd Johnson, in his annual “Status of Global Christianity” report 2021, lists 113 million “unaffiliated” or “Crypto-Christians” who are following Christ outside official church system – many of them in “crypto churches” – private, non-public gatherings in homes.
- An Egyptian missiologist reported that during the “Arab Spring” at least four million Muslims in Egypt alone have turned away from Islam – many in search of God – and have not joined any other religion.
- A growing number of Evangelists, like Torben Sondergaard (The Last

Reformation, formerly Denmark, now US) or Werner Nachtigall (G.O.D.: Global Outreach Day, Germany) are intentionally connecting evangelism with the immediate planting of house churches. G.O.D. has reported, as an example, the planting of 30,000 new house churches in Cuba in recent years. Bill Bright (1921 – 2003), founder of Campus Crusade, not long before his death, gave a clarion call to his mission agency to see many millions of house churches planted.

- Several Megachurches in the US have told of a call of God to be instrumental in the planting of house churches.
- Mission strategist Curtis Sergeant has created a web-based “simple church saturation” project (www.zumeproject.com) planning to plant one “simple church” for every 5000 people in the US and for every 50.000 people globally with material currently available in at least 37 languages.
- CORONA: During the COVID19 lockdown times many traditional church members have been forced to engage in “stay-at-home-church.” After 2020 and 2021 a significant percentage of traditional church-goers do not return to CAWKI (church-as-we-know-it) but re-organize themselves, many into neighbourhood-churches in homes, sometimes with online-input. These numbers are not yet fully researched but may be very significant. One thing is evident: The Post-Corona church will not be exactly the same as Pre-Corona-Church.

- A very large percentage of the children of church-goers have said their farewell to “mum’s-and-dad’s church” and are in search mode for community, values and lifestyles that are radically different from that of their church-going parents. Abraham Piper for example, the son of famous US-theologian John Piper, runs a TikTok account with more than 1.1 million followers called #exvangelical where he is trying to deconstruct fundamentalist evangelical church culture in search of a new and non-religious framework for life. The NEW YORK TIMES called this a “TikTok sensation” – but in reality

there may be at least 1.5 billion young people worldwide who would sympathize with the concept of “God yes – church no.” The one thing they all agree with is: CAWKI, church-as-we-know-it, cannot and will not be our framework. It is to be seen what forms of following Christ will emerge from this very explosive and creative global people group.

THE KINGDOM DISCOVERY

Since a number of years, a significant percentage (millions) of Christians are discovering the significance that Jesus is actually not the founder of the religion of Christianity, but the founder of The Kingdom of God. This discovery often brings about the search for a factory “reset” – how God originally meant us to be – and a spiritual migration away from classical forms of “church”. In hundreds of places we observe the emergence of “Kingdom conversations” – discovering life under the Kingship of Christ, but decidedly outside traditional religious frameworks.

In total there are currently (mid 2021) at least 22.6 million house churches worldwide with a total of around 300 million members. They are, considering all internal and contextual factors, by far the most viral, adaptable, and multipliable segment of Christ-followers globally. If their number continues to grow at a very realistic rate of 20% per year, they will reach a membership of more than 4 billion people within the next 15 years – while most traditional church systems are in overall decline. This is why the author, in his publications called Starfish Vision and Starfish Manifesto, encourages all servants of Christ worldwide to work together to see half the population of the planet discipled in our lifetime (see Mt 24:39-41) through the massive planting of house-based Kingdom Communities.



WOLFGANG SIMSON is the author of twelve books that have been translated into twenty languages. These include his classic works, *Houses That Change the World*

and *The Starfish Manifesto* (available as a free ebook). He and his wife Mercy now reside in India. simsonmedia.com



HOW THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL + HOUSE CHURCH TRANSFORMS A NATION

Consider how God goes about changing a nation and what we can learn from this for our own local contexts? The following excerpts are from a recent *Newsweek* op-ed by Daniel Pipes.



Something religiously astonishing is taking place in Iran, where an Islamist government has ruled since 1979: Christianity is flourishing. The implications are potentially profound.

David Yeghnazar of Elam Ministries stated in 2018 that "Iranians have become the most open people to the gospel." The Christian Broadcast Network found, also in 2018, that "Christianity is growing faster in the Islamic Republic of Iran than in any other country." Shay Khatiri of Johns Hopkins University wrote last year about Iran that "Islam is the fastest shrinking religion there, while Christianity is growing the fastest."

Notice the shape and focus of the church in Iran that is producing this transformation:

As a clandestine phenomenon, the practice of what are sometimes called Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) lacks clergy and church buildings, but instead consists of self-starting disciples and tiny house churches of four to five members each, with either hushed singing or none at all. Its lay leadership, in striking contrast to the mullahs who rule Iran, consists mainly of women.

Notice also that such a transformation of a nation is not taking place within an environment that is friendly to Christianity:

Iranian authorities routinely arrest and jail MBBs, often for extended periods; for example, the United Nations reported in 2013 on "more than 300 Christians" who were arrested in the prior three years, mostly for vague security-related offenses. An inquiry found that "those arrested have been subjected to intensive and often abusive interrogation."

Finally, note how extensive this ‘revolution’ might become:

*Indeed, Lela Gilbert and Arielle Del Turco argue that the [Khomeini] regime considers Christianity "an existential threat." And it should, notes Reza Safa, the Iranian-born founder of Nejat TV ("ministering to Muslims living in Farsi-speaking nations"), who titled a book *The Coming Fall of Islam in Iran*. He sees Iran's Christians as "an army of God" who are bringing Iran to "the brink of another revolution, this time orchestrated" by a Christian spirit.*

Possible lessons to be learned?

- The church and its influence is shaped by the power of the Gospel and the disciples of Jesus committed to its cause, not by governmental or political powers-that-be.
- The church can and often does flourish in environments that are not welcoming to its message.
- The church is not defined by clergy or buildings, but by ‘self-starting disciples.’
- God is still in the business of transforming nations.

His revolution continues...

ROGER THOMAN simplechurchjournal.com





HOW WE BECAME THE LARGEST CHURCH IN THE AMAZON JUNGLE

About 4 years ago I belonged to a house church that I was a part of for about 8 years. The pastor who started that church was actually groomed to be a head pastor to a mega church. One day God gave him a dream and he saw himself and his wife sitting up in the balcony of a concert hall. On the stage there was a giant gift with fireworks coming out. The stage was glamorous and spectacular. The Lord said to him, "Do you want this, or would you like something that will not have the spectacular and glamorous prestige, but you will impact far more people than you could imagine?" He woke up from that dream. It bothered him for months because he always envisioned that position. He later told the Lord he wanted the impact of many. He was then introduced to the House Church model. He liked the concept. The idea is to not have a large fellowship. If it gets bigger than 25 or 30 then you break it into 2 churches and delegate a new leader to it, with one head pastor over all the churches. They eat together, pray over each other, worship, and teach. Since there is no building and large staff, the majority of the money that comes from tithes and offerings can go to ministry, and some to the head pastor. At the end of the month all the churches come together for a celebration.

Well, eventually he got in contact with a pastor in Brazil and pitched the idea to him. He told him that the house churches in America would pay a pastor from his

church in Brazil a monthly income to start the house church model in the Amazon Jungle. They found a pastor that was willing to move into the that area with his family. We started the church in the town called Tabatinga on the border of Colombia and Peru. In one year there were 4 churches with about 50 people in them. They grew so quickly that new believers had to start pastoring the new churches. People were leaving the Catholic church in the city because they would go to the house church and would get healed. It began to explode. The next year 10 to 15 new ones started. Because of the rapid growth, we had to build a training center to train all the new pastors. The house churches spread down river to other communities, even in the neighboring countries of Colombia and Peru. I had the privilege to go down their twice. I actually wanted to live there, but the Lord told me no.

What was amazing was that the house church could do what no other church could do using the common 'building model'. It could invade the small communities along the river which had maybe 40 or 50 people in them, and there are thousands of those communities that are unreached and unchurched. The most amazing thing was when a tribal chief made the trip up river for 7 days to attend one of the meetings. In this tribe, they had not even been identified by National Geographic yet. This tribe was so primitive that they still didn't wear clothes. They came to the meeting and loved it. The chief asked if they could have a church in their tribe. They got one. It was so amazing.

There is now a total of 95 house churches in the Amazon Jungle. 95 individual fellowships, but one church. These churches are reaching people groups that are still hidden from society. It's looking like the book of Acts. The growth is just incredible. God is moving on the earth and many believers don't know it. Yes, the church is shrinking and in decline in certain areas, but it is definitely growing in others.

STEVE HARMAN

NORTH WEST INDIA

I wanted to share in regard to the need for organic church all across the world. I have been involved with a pastor in northwest India for 4 years and throughout that time I have constantly advised him to keep the concept of house church on his heart. When we met he had 50 in his congregation, through my and others assistance and support the congregation is currently 750. Had the support been directed to one church building there would be no mission as I could not have supported such. The discipleship of this pastor is profound and together with other members of the mission that have come on board, we are using online ministry training to reduce pastor workload and train up house church leaders to disciple disciples. I cannot recommend the principles of Oikos Australia enough, they have helped me personally in grasping this concept so strongly and applying it in another country as well as locally. The need for security of new converts in the region means house church is their ONLY option. To secretly meet and praise Jesus is a must. I physically visited the mission field in Feb/Mar this year, got home just before lockdown. I was so pleased to meet all the congregation and to validate the mission which, up till then, I had not "known" for sure of its legitimacy. However, the Spirit had told me all along that it was genuine and having been there, praying for people and seeing the blessings flow from God from those prayers was life changing for me. I am busting to return.

MARK PARHAM Mount Gambier SA



Hi. I'm Warren Crank, married to Ellie, with three adult sons. A Rugby League chaplain for twelve years and a Queensland Baptist pastor for twenty-five years, I recently left that denomination to devote myself to encouraging a national network of simple, non-denominational churches under the banner of 'Red Dirt Church'.



Why 'Red Dirt'? Well, its Aussie as, and we are definitely more gritty than glitzy.

Red Dirt Church is a network of pop-up churches that currently stretch from Port Augusta in South Australia to Pialba in Queensland. We meet in community spaces, a shop, a pub, parks and homes. Red Dirt Church provides scaffolding for hometown heroes who host these simple churches in their towns and natural networks. The scaffolding is provided by way of ChildSafe training, prayer connectivity through Zoom, peer mentoring, coaching, discipleship content via the Red Dirt Spirit app, and basic insurance coverage. The real heart and hands of Red Dirt Church are, nonetheless, those who do the gritty work of helping people follow Jesus and forming them into simple, faith communities.

My awareness of the need for simple churches really dawned during my time leading a large and thriving church in Townsville. Large churches are great and have their role to play. I know that. Red Dirt Churches don't see themselves as better than 'large church' or any other model. We know it takes all sorts of churches to reach all sorts of people. We see ourselves as 'churches for the gaps'. And there are so many gaps! There are so many unreached, unchurched people.

Anyway, back to the journey that God has had me on. Townsville considers itself the Capital of North Queensland (a claim which Cairns disputes 😊), and North Queensland is a vast space that's dotted with tiny towns and communities that cannot sustain the tradition Church model of building-and-stipend. God began to show me the forgotten towns and the sub-cultures not particularly suited to traditional church. Actually, it was a conversation with someone who has long been involved with OIKOS that helped propel me down this road. I am so grateful for the pioneering work of OIKOS!

So, Ellie and I started a little church that met in our home. It was made up of

footy players that I knew through chaplaincy, neighbours and friends. Some had no faith at all, some were mature followers of Jesus, and some were somewhere in between.

It was slow going at first. There were times that no one showed up. But, slowly and steadily, God fashioned this little faith community. It was during this time that our Four Values were forged.

1. Everything would be Personal (*we would meet up and share life*),
2. our discipleship would be Biblical (*we would aim to meditate daily on God's Word and learn to imitate Christ*),
3. our living would be Transformational (*we would make changes for good while being changed by God*) and
4. our lifestyle would be Missional (*we would be on mission with God as Unofficial Chaplains*).

I had recently published a little book called 'Unofficial Chaplain' which has become our handbook for mission (its available through Koorong and as an eBook).

We didn't 'promote' what we were doing, but people heard about it and some joined us on the journey, starting their own Red Dirt Churches. There are, at present, 27 Red Dirt Church leaders with more entering via our simple, application process.

Along the way, we've learned lots of lessons. Because I'd been around church a long time, it was easy to forget how difficult new Christians find it to understand the Bible and pray aloud. We had to work hard at making everything accessible and doable. The Red Dirt Spirit app became one answer to that challenge.

Again, because Ellie and I had been part of traditional church so long, we tended to be very weekly-gathering focused.



Sunday, in traditional church, is mostly what it's all about. We had to keep reminding ourselves that church is something that you belong to all week, in all sorts of ways, not just a Sunday Service you attend. We had to relearn that a coffee catch-up, helping someone move or a prayer over the phone is being the church too.

And, perhaps the biggest thing we learned is that this is slow, steady serving. No fast growth from people transferring from other churches who already knew how things were supposed to go. Instead, we were creating a community with people who were, mostly, unchurched. This requires patience and a committed love that is faithful over time and through all life's ups and downs. Not easy.

As best as I understand it, God's vision for Red Dirt Church is to scaffold a network of pop-up churches across the nation that share our Four Values; being Personal, Biblical, Transformational and Missional. My own calling is to give the rest of my life to helping hometown heroes start and sustain churches in some of the many gaps across our wide, red land. If you'd like to find out more, visit our website, reddirtchurch.org, or look us up on Facebook.

RED DIRT POP-UP CHURCHES



WHEN
WE
GATHER
WE:

WHEN
WE
SCATTER
WE'RE:

**Put out the chairs
Open up the Bible and
Pass around the food.**

**Unofficial Chaplains for
People around us.**

Four Tragic Shifts In The Visible Church 180-400 A. D.

Jon Zens



Most professing Christians do not realize that the central concepts and practices associated with what we call 'church' are not rooted in the New Testament, but in patterns established in the post-apostolic age. While there are a legion of disagreements among serious students of church history concerning various issues and details during the period of 50 A.D. to 325 A.D., they all speak as one voice in affirming the four undeniable shifts that will be examined in this article. Church historians of all theological and ecclesiastical backgrounds observe in their writings the following four shifts:

1. The church portrayed in the New Testament was a dynamic organism, a living body with many parts. The church from around 180 A.D. onwards became an increasingly hardened institution with a fixed and complex hierarchy.

2. The early church was marked by the manifestation of a polyform ministry by which edification and the meeting of needs were accomplished through the gifts of all the brethren. The post-apostolic church moved more and more toward a uniform conception of church offices which

separated ministry from the 'laity' and limited significant ministry to the 'clergy'.

3. The church of the first and most of the second centuries was characterized by cycles of intense difficulty and persecution - it was a suffering body. With the advent of Constantine the church became protected, favored and ultimately sanctioned as the state religion by the Roman state, and thus became an institution at ease.

4. In the New Testament the church, with no small measure of vulnerability, depended on the Holy Spirit to hold the brethren together and to lead them in ministry. Later, the church trusted in itself as a very powerful institution, along with its many rules, rites and offices to secure visible unity among its adherents. These four shifts are indisputable. They did not come about in a day. They were the result of many factors working together as time elapsed. There are many implications to ponder in light of these significant changes that occurred. I would like to explore each of these shifts in order to highlight certain key issues that each of us needs to face.

We claim to take Christ's revelation about the church in the New Testament seriously, yet the reality is that too often we are more attached to the 'received order' which is based on human traditions. What does it mean to be faithful to the New Testament's teaching about the church? In what sense are the examples of the church life 'binding' on us?

For instance, some assert that since the early church met primarily in homes, we are obliged to emulate this example. I think the primary theological point of the New Testament in this regard is that under the New Covenant there are no holy places. Contemporary Christianity has almost no grasp of this significant point. Taking the cue from the Old Covenant, people are still led to believe that a church building is 'the house of God'. Believers are free to meet, anywhere in which they can foster, cultivate and attain the goals set before them by Christ. The problem today is that many church structures neither promote nor accomplish Christ's desires for His body. Homes are a natural place for believers to meet, and the early church flourished well into the first and second centuries without erecting any temple-like edifices. In places around the world where persecution reigns, house-church

movements have flourished. Someday in America, if our religious infrastructure falls as a result of economic and political turmoil, true believers will be forced to meet outside of traditional church buildings. But the issue still is not what type of place believers gather, but what shape their committed life together takes as they wrestle with the many duties and privileges flowing out of the priesthood of all believers.

I believe that it is far more important to capture the spirit of church life as we see it unfolded in the New Testament, than it is to try and woodenly replicate cultural particulars of the first century. We do not live in the first century, but the concepts and principles in the New Testament endure and will come to expression in any culture. The four tragic shifts about to be examined will give us all plenty to reflect and act upon as we seek to take our discipleship earnestly. Christians must take their stand and devote their precious energies to building up the body of Christ in ways that return to the original patterns of the New Testament.

1. The Shift from the Body of Christ as a Dynamic Organism to a Settled Institution

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul goes into some detail concerning the implications of the church being a living organism, a body with many parts. In the early chapters of Acts we see a vibrant, caring, sharing and witnessing body of believers created by the power of the Spirit who was poured out by the risen Christ. This corporate 'new man' created by Jesus was not without leadership and organization, but there is no evidence of desire by the leaders to create a tightly-knit religious institution, with an elaborate hierarchy and intricate chain-of-command. The leaders above all were to be servants to feed and build up the flock; the organization that came to expression was for the purpose of meeting people's needs, not to create a religious bureaucracy.

The church Christ purposed to build is always described in terms of 'koinonia', a common sharing of life together in the bonds of Jesus Christ. However, the reality is that as time went on after the apostles' death, the church gravitated increasingly toward finding its essential definition, not in a dynamic organism, but in a visible institution with a hierarchy of officers. The church came to be no longer identified as a body of believers bonded by love as members one of another, but as a religious

organization whose officers gave it significance. Ultimately it was asserted that without the officers, there was no church. Organization usurped vital life as the hallmark of the church.

This legacy still remains with us today. The needs of people are subordinated to the maintenance of religious bureaucracy. Patterns of church government often have nothing to do with the ethos of the New Testament. Many define the 'true' church in terms of outward marks such as "the proper preaching of the Word, administration of the sacraments, and practice of discipline". But these characteristics have been outwardly present in dead churches. The New Testament defines the church dynamically in terms of functioning together as a body. If church was defined, for example, in the organic terminology of Acts 2:42-47, how many churches would you find? Why is it that even today when somebody asks "What church do you attend?", the next query after you tell them is usually, "Who is the pastor there?" We still tend to define church in terms of leadership instead of by loving relationships among the brethren.

2. The Shift From Polyform Ministry to Uniform Ministry

In the early church ministry was conceived of in terms of Ephesians 4:16, "From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." Ministry was seen as committed to the whole body by Christ its Lord. As Paul put it, "Now the body is not made up of one part but of many ... As it is, there are many parts, but one body" (1 Cor. 12:14,20). To every person in the body of Christ is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the benefit of all (1 Cor. 12:7). Universal giftedness in the church, which is secured by the resurrected Christ leading captivity captive (Eph. 4:7-8), included such important leadership gifts as apostles and administration.

The great tragedy is that from about 180 A.D. onwards the increasingly institutionalized church began to assign ministry more and more to the officers (the "clergy"), and less and less to the common people (the "laity"). George W. Forell astutely summarizes the shift from body-ministry to bishop-ministry: Ethical guidance for people recently converted to Christianity and likely to bring a pervasive pagan attitude to his new life was offered at first by a polyform ministry of grace, reflected in the New Testament. But, as

time went by, moral authority was increasingly focused on an ordered ministry of bishops and deacons ...The institution most effective in containing the threats to the unity of the nascent Christian movement was the gradually evolving office of the bishop ...Through the office of the bishop the shape of the Christian life is determined, and the masses recently brought into the Christian movement are conformed to Christ.

No emphasis on one person who occupies the office of bishop (pastor) can be found in the New Testament. While it certainly contemplates a plurality of leaders as part of life in Christ's body, the overwhelming emphasis falls upon exhortations that involve all the members of the body. At least 58 times in the New Testament believers are commanded to fulfil responsibilities relating to "one another". We have turned the tables and viewed ministry as essentially resting upon "the minister" and forgotten that ministry as unfolded in the New Testament is spread around to everyone.

If ministry is not seen as focused in one office in the New Testament, where was precedent for a separate caste found? It was found in the exclusive priesthood under the Old Covenant. William Bausch observes: Our survey has shown us that no cultic priesthood is to be found in the New Testament. Yet we wound up importing Old Testament Levitical forms and imposing them on Christian ministry. The negative implications that arose from the shift from polyform to uniform ministry are myriad. The mutual care so basic to the fabric of early church life was virtually lost. Why? Because mutuality - "you are all brethren" - was buried underneath the superstructure of institutionalized officers.

William Bausch crystallizes this point by saying: Nevertheless, in practice there is no denying that there has historically been a gathering into one person and his office what were formerly the gifts of many. ...[This practice] goes astray, of course, when it translates to mean that only ordination gives competence, authority, and the right of professional governance. It goes further astray when eventually all jurisdictional and administrative powers in the church come to be seen as an extension of the sacramental powers conferred at ordination. In short, there is a movement here away from the more pristine collaborative and mutual ministries of the New Testament.

We must face the fact that the traditions regarding church government and order which we have inherited are cast in very suspicious garb. They are clergy-centered and generally stifle and suppress the "one another" perspectives of the New Testament. Servant leadership should be a natural part of body-life by which the people of God are encouraged toward, facilitated in and equipped for various ministries. Unfortunately, however, the shift from polyform to uniform ministry has created the deplorable situation in which the church forever remains as a dependent, helpless, non-maturing infant for the sake of the officers who watch over the crib. We have inherited traditions in which the tail wags the dog. It is my conviction that because of the deep-seated nature of this awful shift in perspective, the greatest practical need facing the church today is the reincarnation of "a polyform ministry of grace".

3. The Shift from a Suffering Church to an Institution of Ease

The early church grew and prospered incredibly without having church buildings or being protected by the state. In fact, from apostolic times to the ascension of Constantine the church went through cycles of intense persecution spearheaded by the ruling powers. These times of persecution are well documented in such books as *Persecution in the Early Church* by H. B. Workman and *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* by W. H. C. Friend.

However, the advent of the emperor Constantine in 312 A.D. brought great changes, most of them for the worse. Money from state funds was used to erect Christian church buildings and support Christian clergy. Ultimately, Christianity was declared to be the state religion. From Constantine onwards the visible church became enmeshed in political intrigue, and the state mingled in the determination of church affairs. As Louis Berkhof notes regarding the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. [which Constantine convened and presided over]: A settlement forced upon the Church by the strong hand of the emperor could not satisfy and was also of uncertain duration. It made the determination of the Christian faith dependent on imperial caprice and even on court intrigues. ...The sequel clearly probed that, as it was, a change in emperor, and altered mood, or even a bribe, might alter the whole aspect of the controversy. This is exactly what happened repeatedly in subsequent history.

Constantine set in motion the ideal of a territorial state religion with Christianity at the helm. This ideal was the death knell of all that the Gospel stood for. It signalled the end of believers gathering separately from the pagan culture as a counter-culture where the way of Christ was displayed in simplicity. Now the church was conceived of as all the people in a nation who were born as citizens of the state and constituted as part of the visible church by infant baptism. Church and politics were fused together, creating immense confusion. Ron VanOverloop notes this phenomenon operation from the post-apostolic church to the Reformation: As was the case in the early church when emperors called the great ecumenical councils together, so was the progress of the Reformation to a great extent determined by the political manoeuvring taking place in each country.

In the early church the disciples banded together in homes and other places as communities "called out" from the world; but Constantinianism erased this distinction and defined "church" as all citizens in a given territory. This had the practical effect of watering down true discipleship and creating a worthless nominal Christianity. Werner Elert contrasts the early days with the rise of Constantinianism: [In the early church] the strength of their ties with one another is matched by the strength of the boundary they draw to the outside. In business dealings with one another they do not choose an unbeliever to arbitrate; they transact their business "before the saints" and between "brother and brother" (1 Cor. 6:1.5). One is to throw in one's lot with those who fear the Lord, consider their common good, and daily visit the saints face to face ...After Constantine things changed radically with the influx of the masses. This did not prosper the Christian brotherhood. If we can believe only half of what Salvian says, there was not much left of it a hundred years later in many parts of western Christendom.

The shift from a suffering church to an institution sanctioned and promoted by the state forces us to face a crucial question: Was the Constantinian change the rise or fall of the church? How you answer that question will greatly define your whole view of the church and its mission. In light of New Testament revelation about the church Christ purposed to build, I submit that Constantinianism was a wretched stone thrown into the sea of church history, the ripples of which still lap on our shores today.

We must make a choice. Are we going to cast our lot in with the New Testament vision for the body of Christ [simplicity, suffering, servanthood], or in with the Constantinian model [powerful institution, clergy dominance, rule by political manoeuvring]? Are we going to devote the energies of our short life-span to perpetuating the post-apostolic shifts that moved away from the simplicity of Christ, or to restoring the spirit of the New Testament vision?

4. The Shift from a Spirit-Dependent Church to a Letter-Dependent Institution

Twice in his epistles Paul refers to the fact that the church serves Christ "in [the] newness of the Spirit and not in [the] oldness of the letter" (Rom. 7:6; 2 Cor. 3:6). The church was a community of the Spirit from the Day of Pentecost. In light of this reality the early church did not trust in fixed forms to maintain and guard her existence. There was an openness of the body to be led by the Spirit in light of Christ's Gospel-word.

This can be seen, for example, in the glimpse of an early church service revealed in 1 Cor. 14. Edification was the goal which was to be reached by the Spirit-led participation of the body. The balance Paul desired can perhaps be summed up like this: no form of order in the service must be allowed to stifle the free expression of edifying gifts in the body; no expression of spontaneity in the body must be allowed to blossom into unprofitable disorder. William Barclay isolates these important points from 1 Cor. 14: [Paul] is determined that anyone who possesses a gift should receive every chance to exercise that gift, but he is equally determined that the services of the Church should not thereby become a kind of competitive disorder. ...There must be liberty but there must be no disorder. ...There was obviously a freedom and an informality about [this service] which is completely strange to our ideas. ...Clearly the church had no professional ministry. ...It was open to anyone who had a gift to use that gift. ...There was obviously a flexibility about the order of service in the early church which is now totally lacking. There was clearly no settled order at all. Everything was informal enough to allow any man who felt that he had a message ...to give it. ...The really notable thing about an early Church service must have been that almost everyone came feeling that he had both the privilege and the obligation of contributing something to it.

Unfortunately, as time went on this Spirit-dependence gave way to more and more fixed forms of worship, which phased out body participation and committed ministry only to an ever-growing web of ecclesiastical hierarchy. By 250 A.D. church order was set in concrete with one bishop ruling over various territories. The momentum of this church bureaucracy was accelerated when Constantine and his successors sanctioned the church and contributed moneys and resources to this increasingly powerful institution. What began as a Spirit-led organism ended up as a letter-dependent institution. The leaders no longer trusted in the Spirit to hold the body together; instead they leaned on intricate human contrivances and rules to feign outward unity.

One of the saddest features of this shift to letter-dependence, combined with the church's new collusion with the state, was the employment of coercion both to gain and maintain adherents. Simply trusting in the Spirit would have resulted in a spiritual reality too vulnerable to be controlled by human contrivances; the use of raw power backed by the weapons of the state seemed to promise greater stability. Eric Hoffer makes this tragic observation which church history, unfortunately, verifies: There is hardly an example of a mass movement achieving vast proportions and a durable organization solely by persuasion ...It was the temporal sword that made

Christianity a world religion. Conquest and conversion went hand in hand. ...Where Christianity failed to gain or retain the backing of state power, it achieved neither a wide nor permanent hold. ...It also seems that, where a mass movement can either persuade or coerce, it usually chooses the latter. Persuasion is clumsy and its results uncertain.

Again we must ask ourselves, "Are we going to be a part of perpetuating this shift to trusting in outward carnal hedges to hold the church together, or are we going to purpose to contribute to a return of child-like trust in the Spirit of Christ to build and sustain His body?"

Concluding Remarks...

We have examined four clear shifts in early church history. These shifts are acknowledged by church historians of all theological persuasions. James D. G. Dunn, one of the foremost New Testament scholars of our time, summarizes the essence of these four shifts like this: Increasing institutionalism is the clearest mark of early Catholicism - when church becomes increasingly identified with institution, when authority becomes increasingly coterminous with office, when a basic distinction between clergy and laity becomes increasingly self-evident, when grace



becomes increasingly narrowed to well-defined ritual acts. We saw above that such features were absent from first generation Christianity, though in the second generation the picture was beginning to change.

'Such features were absent from first generation Christianity,' that is, they are not found in the New Testament. Does this concern you? Is your heart burdened by the chasm between the original work of the Spirit and the hardened institution that quickly emerged in the post-apostolic days? Does it bother you that most of what we associate with 'church' has little to do with the New Testament, and more to do with patterns that reflect a drift away from it?

Further, and this is the key question, were the shifts we have studied a faithful extension of New Testament ideals, or a tacit denial of all that they stand for? If the answer is the latter, then it is incumbent upon believers to work for the recovery of Christ's ways and to stop contributing to the perpetuation of non-edifying ecclesiastical patterns.

JON ZENS is an active author and a travelling speaker, ministering in organic church conferences and best known for pioneering New Covenant Theology, which sees the entire Bible as a revelation of the gospel of grace fulfilled in Jesus Christ. searchingtogether.org

Top Ten Reasons for Planting Simple Churches

The following is taken from "The Global House Church Movement" by Rad Zdero via edgenet.org.nz

BIBLICAL – This was the normative New Testament pattern established by Jesus and the apostles and perpetuated by the early church of the first three centuries and in subsequent renewal, reform and revival movements throughout history. (Acts 2:46, 5:42, 20:20)

EXPONENTIAL – To reach a growing world, we need to multiply, not just add. Current house church movements worldwide are outstripping more traditional church planting and church growth efforts.

EFFECTIVE – The most effective method of evangelism is not growing existing churches, but planting new ones. House churches are the most easily reproducible form of church, and hence, are the most obvious choice for church planting.

NATURAL – House churches become part of the local community and easily tap into relationship connections, thereby more readily taking on an indigenous flavour.

PEOPLE FOCUSED – They focus on relationships and the development of people spiritually, not on executing programs or projects.

EFFICIENT – They are more mobile, flexible, and adaptable than conventional churches, especially in areas characterized by persecution and poverty.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY – Because of their small, intimate and participatory nature, all believers have the opportunity to exercise their spiritual gifts during church meetings, and not just professional clergy or key leaders.

UNBOUNDED – They are not limited by church buildings. Whatever use buildings

may or may not have, history shows that they are not necessary for rapid church planting movements to start; in fact, they may be a hindrance. Although church buildings are not evil by any means, nor are homes in any way magical, the practical release of time, energy and money away from building maintenance, and into evangelism and discipleship, should cause us to rethink current practices.

INEXPENSIVE – They are less expensive than traditional church, because no expensive buildings, programs, or professional clergy are required.

IMMEDIATE – It can start now, right in your living room. There is no need to wait for a gym to be rented or for a building program to be completed to begin a new church or for a full-time pastor to be hired.

RAD ZDERO



Mega-Shift

Uncomfortable Questions

Dr Martin Bragger

"Sometimes, Hem, things change, and they are never the same again. This looks like one of those times. That's life! Life moves on. And so should we." Haw – one of the 'Little People' in 'Who Moved My Cheese' by Dr Spencer Johnson

The trail of history is marked with many great turning points, both events and processes, that we might call **Mega-Shifts**. Examples of which are the Magna Carta of 1215, which became the foundation stone of constitutional and parliamentary governments around the world; the invention of the Printing Press, at least in the West, that allowed the Bible to be rapidly copied and distributed; the Reformation which restored Biblical Christianity to the European Church such that the Bible became the foundation of, and shaping instrument of, Western countries, and which further spawned a new era of mission, as Jesus commanded in Acts 8, to 'the ends earth'. My key point in citing these things is that they all brought about, or instigated, cultural shifts of Tectonic proportions.

I would suggest that we are now living through another Mega-Shift in the West? A cultural Mega-Shift that has three major causes. These are first, the invention of the Internet; second, the large people movements and immigration flows taking place into and across western countries; and third, the now catastrophic collapse of western Christianity, leading to what I call the Desalination process, that is the ongoing decline in the percentage of Christians, the SALT of Matthew 5:13, in the population with the plain-to-see corresponding reduction of Gospel influence in schools, universities, homes and schools.

This is a Shift that most of those happily turning up to 'church' on Sundays seem to be blissfully, or deliberately choose to be, ignorant of, while at the same time often bemoaning the consequences in society to which their own apathy is actually contributing. This is a Shift that the Covid 19 Pandemic has, or should have, brought into focus.

So as we slowly emerge from the Covid-enforced shutdown and disruption of the usual business-model of Church, ministry and mission, at a time that may well be a cultural Mega Shift in the West, I wonder if we can hope that finally we may get a glimpse of that endangered species called 'Critical analysis'. Such an analysis, while frequently spotted roaming through virtually every other organization, is rarely encountered in most of the western Church, but would provide a useful tool for plotting future ministry and mission.

As a vehicle for such an analysis it might be helpful to analyse what might be called the Church's Covid-Era journey in three stages. Decline; Opportunity; and Emergence, and dot that journey with mostly unasked and often uncomfortable Questions.

Decline – A Reality Check

The western Pre-Covid Church operated almost everywhere with a 'SIC' model platform for Ministry and Mission i.e. Sunday-Centric, In-Drag (into Sunday services) and Christendom Form. An honest, Big Picture analysis of the statistics relating to the Pre-Covid Church shows it declining on almost every measure, although you wouldn't hear this spoken about very much.

Such statistics show several decades of decline in weekly attendance; a 50 year National Census-measured decline in those declaring Christian affiliation; a 20 year NCLS-measured decline in the percentage of what the National Church Life Survey calls 'Newcomers' (De-churched/Unchurched) in congregations (a significant measure of missional effectiveness); an ongoing decline in youth involvement coupled with rising average age of attendees.

Very significantly, and very obviously, in schools, universities and Governments there has been an ongoing decline in Christian influence in society. This is

caused by the decades long decline in the SALT Index. That is the ratio of the number of active Christians in any societal area to the population of the same area.

A basic Question for the design of future missional strategies that should be, but I see little evidence that it has been, asked is-

1. 'What percentage increase in 'Newcomers' is required per year to just to maintain the value of the SALT Index in the face of rapid population growth?

Based on Australian population growth between 2000 (18M) and 2020 (25M), there has been a 40% population increase in 20 years. So on average, just to maintain the status quo, each congregation must have grown by 2% each year every year, and specifically the 2% MUST BE Newcomers, for Transferees do not contribute to the total pool of Christians in the nation. Total membership is not a relevant figure in this context.

Of course, in some places a congregation will claim to be bucking the trend with growth in new members. However, when such a claim is made it is rarely subject to honest Critical Analysis as to the reality of the 'growth' and it is important to ask this rarely asked 'Uncomfortable' Question-

2. 'Where did the new members come from?'

While there are rare exceptions, the answer is nearly always 'they are transferees from another congregation elsewhere', either from people moving into the area or having been 'poached' from a nearby congregation. Such 'growth' is not missional fruit, nor Kingdom growth but an example of the 'Transferee Mirage'.

Another Uncomfortable Question that every congregation should have regularly asked is-

3. 'What proportion of our resources, human and financial, are used for ministry to the congregation and how much to local mission?'

The answer to that Question will usually show that however much a congregation talks about local Mission, its use of resources is usually heavily skewed to other non-missional priorities (as much as 90%).

In terms of missional strategies, the Pre-Covid church mostly majored on reinventing the Square Wheel, that is the repeated use of strategies (often re-badged but usually invented in the 1990s) that didn't work very well when used last time, or even the time before that!

Uncomfortable Question 4 that should have been asked is-

4. 'How many Newcomers (un-churched/de-churched) did our largely Square Wheel missional activities actually produce?'

Lockdown – An Opportunity

At the height of the Covid pandemic the Church's 'Business model' was shut down, with large gatherings not possible. A number of things followed.

Firstly, Square Wheel missional activities disappeared as the 'SIC' platform went into hibernation.

Secondly, and very importantly, the Church didn't die but generally morphed into networks of small groups, Zoom groups and House churches. With this came a stunning realization- Wow! There are other ways of doing church! It also shows a vital characteristic of the Church when you strip away its buildings – An ability to change – and quickly!

This realization should not have really been that much of a shock. One only has to look at the Church over the centuries – the early Church which comprised networks of small House churches; the Missional Community plants of Celtic missionaries; John Wesley's 'Classes'; or the Network churches around the World today.

Thirdly, the Covid shutdown provided a golden opportunity to re-evaluate and critically analyse the well documented chronic missional failure.

Questions 5, 6, 7 and 8 that 'shutdown' time could have been used to ask, and brutally and honestly answer, are-

5. 'Why do our 'SIC' platform missional efforts chronically and consistently fail?'

6. 'What can we learn from how we have 'done Church' in this time of forced change? (Think small, flexible, cheap)

7. Are we really prepared to make the significant and painful changes that actually may have the prospect of being much more missionally fruitful?'

Emergence – A Fork in the Road

'If you keep on doing what you have been doing, you will keep on getting what you have been getting!'

As the Church emerges from its Covid-forced reinvention, it is faced with a choice, a fork in the road which begs Question –

8. 'Which prong of the fork should we take?'

The first option is to jump back onto the business-as-usual 'Down Escalator' the western Church has been on for decades. Tragically this appears for the most part the direction chosen, for all the evidence is that there has been a focus on getting back to 'Church', that is to the resource-devouring, low fruit 'SIC' platform.

Worst of all, resource-consuming Square Wheels now seem to be sprouting again! Various recent examples of this can be seen in the church press and on websites which laud the building of costly new 'SIC' model facilities, complete with expensive staff teams, and the resurgence of 'new' 1990s type 'church', not community-penetrating, In-Drags activities.

Slow to establish, and even slower to multiply, the still relatively expensive Classic Church Planting strategies also seem to continue unabated.

All these are the result of a complete lack of Critical Analysis of the traditional 'SIC' model which would show that, while there may be some localised 'success', it is a missional platform that is not remotely capable of reversing the decline trends.

A serious Critical Analysis of the mathematics of the decline trends shows that the sheer number of new Christian fellowships needed is simply unattainable by the 'SIC' platform model, if for no other reason than it is totally unaffordable. So another, what might be called the 'Go Figure', Question that needs to be asked is-

9. 'In the context of now generational failure of missional strategies, why



would we rush back to continuing with those same strategies?'

And, finally the last three Questions we should ask are-

10. 'Today's 'SIC' model of Church developed in and was primarily designed for the pastoral maintenance of Christian congregations in Christianised European communities. Can we seriously believe that it will be appropriate for 21st century mission to a neo-pagan society in the throes of a cultural Mega-Shift?'

11. Could it be that the Covid-enforced metamorphosis of Church is a once in many generations, God-given opportunity to go back to Biblical basics for Christian Community (i.e. Church) in order to produce more fruitful local mission?'

12. Which 'Fork in the road' will we take?'

The answer to the last Question must surely be encapsulated by the phrase 'Carpe Diem'. That is to Seize the Day of Opportunity provided by Covid 19. For at least an outline of a possibly far more missionally fruitful alternative has been sketched by the Covid-forced small group 'Church' that appeared almost overnight. Whatever the details, a 'Church' for the Mega Shift must require few paid staff and not need expensive buildings. Both of which, whether we like it or not, make the 'SIC' model unviable in the future.

To establish such a Church for the Mega-Shift will mean applying the results of what has been learned about doing 'Church' differently and taking the decision to shoulder the undoubtedly significant pain of reinvention for a creative, more missionally effective future which at least has some possibility of saving it.

In the peerless wisdom of Haw once more- "If you do not change you can become extinct"



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WHY IS IT SO HARD TO PROCLAIM GOOD NEWS LIKE JESUS DID?

Ben Sternke bensternke.com

To proclaim good news (like Jesus did) is to

1. announce, in words and actions, the truth of who God is,
2. who we are because of who God is, and
3. what's really real because of who God is and what God's done.

The fruit of proclaiming good news like Jesus

As we speak in this way to one another, in context-specific and personal ways in our everyday lives, faith grows, communion with God and each other is fostered, we love one another as Christ has loved us, we learn to actually believe the gospel of the kingdom, and the Body of Christ is built up.

As we learn to make this a regular part of our speech and behavior toward one another in the church, it can begin to spill out into other relationships: with our neighbors, extended family, co-workers, and friends. We learn to be everyday "gospellers" to everyone in our lives.

Learning to proclaim good news has been one of the most powerfully transformative experiences of my life. But for most people who go through our training, it's also one of the most unfamiliar practices. Most of us aren't very adept at proclaiming good news. We know how to give advice, explain concepts, assert opinions, offer guilt trips, deliver diatribes, and gush sentimental clichés. But proclaiming good news like Jesus did, bringing freedom and forgiveness and new life?

Most of us have hardly any real-life experience with this.

So how can we learn to proclaim good news in an authentic, winsome, natural way?

The early church learns to proclaim good news like Jesus

In Acts 4, Peter and John are arrested and questioned by the authorities for preaching about Jesus after healing a crippled man at the temple gate. After they were threatened and released, Peter and John returned to the church and told them everything that had happened.

Two things happen here that I think are helpful for those of us who want to learn how to proclaim good news in our everyday lives.

First, in response to Peter and John's report, the church "lifted their voices in unison to God" and prayed. In the face of very serious threats of violence from the authorities, they prayed that God would enable them to speak the word "with complete confidence" and that God would bring healing, signs, and wonders through their work in Jesus's name (4:24-30).

Second, after they prayed (and "the place was shaken"!), they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and "began speaking God's word with confidence" (4:31). Notice that what they were asking God to empower them to do "out there" they started to do "in here" with each other. Their prayer begins to be answered right there in the prayer meeting as they proclaim good news to each other. The



result is the flourishing and growth and social solidarity of the church (4:32-36).

Ask for power to proclaim good news, then practice

So it seems to me that one reason we aren't very good at proclaiming good news is that we don't pray to be empowered to do it. We think of it as a technique or a technology, when in fact it is a Spirit-inspired, Spirit-empowered speech act. It is inherently prophetic in that sense. It's not something you can really do without the power of God.

Another reason we're not very good at proclaiming good news is that we don't have any places to practice with each other. We try to "nail it" on our first try "out there" when we have little to no practice "in here." There isn't enough continuity between how we talk to each other in the church and how we talk "in the streets."

So if you want to get better at proclaiming good news,

- Pray that the Holy Spirit would empower you to do it, and
- Create environments where you can practice it together with others who want to learn to do it, and then
- Keep praying and keep practicing.

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