

OIKOS

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Obey Jesus' Standing Orders:
Heal the Sick!

Alex Absalom

BLOOMIN' GLORIOUS! Meryl Gemo

A REMNANT *yet pretending not to be* Martin Bragger

JESUS Take the Wheel Michael Frost

FEBRUARY 2022



DIRECTIONS

REFLECTIONS ON A NEW YEAR 2022

Christmas and New Year have been, as usual, a very busy time for our family and myself, both with work and with having family come to stay - something that's always enjoyable.

Some have already planned out their whole year. I have found myself still reflecting on priorities for the year and praying further about the Lord's direction. I usually ask the Lord for a word or words to focus on for the year. I thought I would share some of what I felt the Lord impressed on me. You may find some relevance for your ministry as well...

Firstly, I was reading scripture in Philippians and was struck by Paul's mention that while he was in chains *"most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of the Lord more courageously and fearlessly"* Phil 1:14. Again he urges the believers to *"stand firm in one spirit contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you"* Phil 1:27.

I pray for the same **courage and boldness** this year, to take every opportunity to share the Gospel with people. I had been praying for opportunity to share with a couple and their son who had been staying in our cottage, so on the afternoon before Christmas day, following some work they had been doing for me, I was able to sit down with them over a hot drink and share my testimony, and the three-circle gospel presentation. I feel the seeds were planted though I am looking for more time with them to follow up. I want to be bolder and unafraid of people who may oppose the Gospel. In the turbulent and rapidly changing times we live in there is a fresh urgency to speak boldly for Jesus as the Spirit leads us.

Secondly, developing fellow **workers and mentoring new leaders**. I feel it's important to encourage and support others in disciple making and forming and multiply simple church or faith communities. Someone once asked, "Who are your Timothies"? and it made me think about the challenge of equipping and supporting new leaders. Paul often spoke of his "fellow workers" (see Phil 2:25 etc). While this is a challenge to me, I feel each of us involved in disciple making and simple church should be asking the same question for this year....

Thirdly, the Lord impressed me to **persevere in prayer**. Prayer for connecting with persons of peace, prayer for boldness in sharing, and listening to the Holy Spirit's promptings, prayer for more harvesters, prayer for our nation, prayer for the protection of people's health and well-being. Prayer and action are essentials for each of us to engage in. Jesus is building his kingdom and has plans for this world, despite the enemy's intent to destroy everyone... Jesus prayed "may your kingdom come and may your will be done here on earth as in heaven!"

Fourthly, on a practical level, a number of people are reconsidering where their faith communities should be and what is the way forward. Some need to taste and experience home church so they can then start their own. We need some **online home churches** that people could join for say 8 weeks of so to get a good grounding in how it can be done. Yesterday I had a call from a man on the North NSW coast who lives by the beach and is planning on opening up his unit for people to connect in home church. I made some suggestions of principles that we have found to be important including Discovery Bible Study. He says many people come from all around to walk their dogs along the beach close to his house and it's a good place to connect with many of them.

Fifthly, I am praying for hubs or pioneering outposts to be raised up across Australia. It's amazing how a home or a few families can be a base for a region for people to be attracted to and then trained and sent out. As a priority Jesus challenged me with the need to maintain a daily relationship with him - to abide in him and listen to his promptings each day. Without him we can do nothing, and all our efforts are futile.

Oh, and one more final thought. I like the adage "hope for the best, prepare for the worst". We do not know what is in store for us this year. I long and hope for a good year without further restrictions and a return to normality, but will it come? The enemy is like 'a roaring lion seeing whom he can destroy' and we know he isn't about to quit this year. It's hard not to see events shaping up along the lines of those predicted in the book of Revelation. The enemy's plans are to kill and destroy, so we need to be discerning and to support each other as best we can in encouragement, prayer, and practical help where possible. Let's not forget others as we face this year together.

bless you, Phil Brown
OIKOS DIRECTOR

OIKOS Australia

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

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Michael Frost

Jesus Take the Wheel

My Uber driver pulled up outside my house for my ride to the airport. He was a young guy with a big smile and from his cheery disposition I knew immediately he was going to chat to me the whole way. After the pleasantries about the weather and where I was flying to, he got down to business.

"I've been with Uber for a while now, and I reckon I've driven about 3000 customers in that time, and I've asked every one of them the same question," he started. "Would you mind if I ask you too?"

Intrigued, I agreed.

"Okay," he smiled, "according to my GPS, this trip will take around 40 minutes. If you could have anyone in the world, alive or dead, be your Uber driver for this 40-minute journey, who would you choose?"

He's asked three-thousand people who they would most like to spend some quality one-on-one time with. That's quite a bit of social research. I was itching to ask him who the most popular answers were, but I knew I should give him my response first, so I said, "I'd want Jesus to take the wheel."

I don't think my Uber driver got the reference, neither to the expression nor the Carrie Underwood country song, but he seized upon my answer.

"Jesus? That's a pretty rare one," he said. "I reckon I've only had around a dozen customers pick Jesus before."

He asked me why I'd selected Jesus and I told him it was because I loved Jesus. I explained that it was a beautiful thing to love someone you've met through the written word and in your spirit, but it still left you with a yearning to encounter that

person face to face. We talked for a while about Jesus. I opened up about his wisdom and his compassion, and about the way he faced down the religious elite of his day and lifted up the downtrodden and the overlooked. I explained that I loved his creativity, his parables, his quips, his jokes, and puns. I also shared about Jesus' miraculous power to heal and control nature. And finally, I landed on his identity as God's Son, the one who died for our sins and rose again defeating sin and death and the devil.

My Uber driver seemed genuinely intrigued. He said he didn't know Jesus did all that and he said he was especially impressed that Jesus used puns.

That might not have been the thing about Jesus I most wanted to convey, but it kept us talking. I got a bit nerdy and explained that Jesus slapped the Pharisees down by saying, "You strain out a gnat (Aramaic: *galma*) but swallow a camel (Aramaic: *gamla*)," and my driver groaned. I guess puns are bad whichever century they're from.

I reiterated that Jesus did and said all that cool stuff to show us he was God and because he was inviting us to enter into the world he was recreating, a world of deliverance and justice, a world of joy and peace and healing, and the restoration of all things.

"Who wouldn't want to spend 40 minutes in a car with that guy, eh?" I concluded.

My Uber driver conceded Jesus sounded pretty cool. He told me he thought it was a bit sad that so few of his customers chose Jesus as their driver. Or Muhammad. Or the Buddha. Or any of the "classic gurus," as he called them.

So, I asked him, after surveying nearly 3000 customers, who the most popular answers were.

"Do you know who Helen Keller is?" he asked.

"They don't choose *Helen Keller*, do they?" I gasped.

"Yeah, a lot of people say either Helen Keller or Stevie Wonder," he laughed. I guess some customers just don't want to get into anything real heavy with their Uber driver. But I pressed him on it, asking who the more serious answers were.

"The most common answers are pop culture icons like Oprah and Kanye and Taylor Swift. Or world leaders like Barack Obama or the Queen. I get Bob Dylan a lot. And Lady Gaga."

I had to admit that 40 minutes with Bob Dylan would be pretty good.

"Yeah, but you made Jesus sound pretty good," the driver replied.

Maybe making Jesus sound pretty good is the first step. I regularly hear Christians saying that Jesus still has great currency in society today. Apparently, everyone really likes Jesus, or that's what I'm told. But in my interactions with people outside the church they appear to know *nothing* about Jesus. In my limited experience, people appear to be completely *neutral* about him. He's just one of those "classic gurus" who are lost in the mists of time. We need help in how to even introduce him in winsome and intriguing ways.

That whole Uber experience got me thinking about who our society considers heroic. We crack jokes about Stevie Wonder driving (Continued on page 19)

A photograph of a man with dark hair, wearing a grey t-shirt, sitting at a table in what appears to be a cafe or restaurant. He is looking towards the right of the frame with a slight smile. In the foreground, the hands of another person are visible, resting on the table. On the table, there are two white coffee cups with saucers, a small basket of bread, and some condiment bottles. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people and the interior of the establishment.

The Powerful Simplicity of Friendship Evangelism

Abigail Armstrong

The first thing that comes to mind when I think of the word 'evangelism' is Jesus sending His followers out to be fishers of men in Matthew 4:19. We could conclude that when Jesus says this it means Christians should go out and convert people. But this analogy means so much more than that; a bringing of people from one community into another, from one realm into another realm. Fishers of men does not mean 'get people to meetings', or 'get

people to sign here.' It means bringing people into a new relationship - to taste what heaven will be like here on earth. This is ultimately not about numbers, but about people.

One of the ways we can evangelise our cities is through the long, hard and yet intimate friendships we have with those who do not yet know God. It is through friendships that we will see people set free and brought into the truth.

Friendships are a powerful yet simple way to evangelise, and if ever the world has needed true and honest friendships it's now.

What must be made clear of course is what I mean when I say friendship, we're in an era that has largely forgotten what depth and significance friendships can hold – and would even roll their eyes at the thought. What I don't mean is mere friendliness or politeness, turning a blind

eye to problems or issues in each other's lives. Proverbs 27:6 establishes this point well, which explains that the friend who rebukes in love is more faithful than a flatterer. Friends do not dodge areas of difference, they seek to understand one another facing misunderstanding and grief on the way. But it's this kind of weathering that proves how strong companionship can be, and what a doorway it is for evangelism.

Whereas many in the world would use friends for their own means, Christians are called to lay their life down for them. The friendship we are called to offer this world is radically life changing, so how do we go about using our friendships to evangelise?

Listen to Them

Why would it be important in the journey of evangelism to listen to friends? Surely what

we want to do is just talk about Jesus to them. I think a key aspect of opening doors of discussion with friends about God is through listening to how they understand the world, how they make sense of reality, and their personal experiences. Gradually, as we listen more and seek to understand our friends we will begin to know the words that will be truly beneficial to say to them. We will speak in a way that gets to their heart, because our words will be answering their own situation and reasoning.

To listen is a humbling discipline. Proverbs 11:12 discusses how a friend who aims to belittle lacks sense, but a friend who is wise in understanding remains silent. This is extremely important to remember in the journey of evangelism, because there will be many times in discussion where disagreements or heated debates arise. It is easy in those moments to say things that hurt rather than heal, divide rather than unite or confuse rather than bring clarity.

A true friend seeks wisdom in their words, and that means knowing how to listen and be silent. Our aim in doing so is to see the world from their eyes, to search and understand them from a place of peace and love rather than agitation or frustration. This does not mean, of course, to remain silent in discussions

that need an answer or response. What I'm trying to get at is that we put our friend at the forefront of our respect, rather than our pride.

Fast for Them

Fasting leads to spiritual breakthrough. That statement cannot be overstated.

How we care for and give to our friends in time and energy is daily testimony to the care and blessing we've received in our friendship with Christ.

Fasting is crucial and integral to our walk with God and evangelism for others. Matthew 6:17-18 says that the Father, who is unseen and sees what is done in secret, will reward you in your times of fast. This is not about performance and merit, this is always about relationship – God hears and loves to give. Fasting is a sacrifice that leads to much more steadfast and powerful prayer, and what a privilege it is to be able to come to the Father and pray in such a powerful way for something other than ourselves – our friend's salvation.

I have fasted for friends in order to pray for opportunities to tell them more about Jesus. One time, within an hour after breaking that fast the friend who I was fasting for rang me up to ask me questions about my faith, something totally out of the blue. During that day of fasting I was saying to God how much this person means to me, and therefore how abundantly more that person means to Him. Through fasting I was making it clear to God, but more importantly clearer to myself, how serious I was about this person's salvation and how much I longed to see them worship their true Creator and Father.

I am convinced that a major chunk of our life evangelising must involve prayer and fasting – in fact it's the spine to evangelistic work. To avoid this assumes we can evangelise without the major involvement and power of God. We must have the mentality that the sacrifice made on our behalf is worth our friend's gain of finding Jesus.

Reveal the Ultimate Friend

It is unavoidable – if your soul is pursuing Jesus then your friends are going to notice. Your friendship with non-believers will constantly be giving them insights into your friendship with God, our true and ultimate Friend. How we care for and give to our friends in time and energy is

daily testimony to the care and blessing we've received in our friendship with Christ.

So what kind of friendship has Christ shown us? Indescribable sacrifice and unconditional love. John 15:13 declares just that: 'There is no greater love than to lay one's life down for one's friends.' Jesus made the unspeakable effort to make His friendship with creation possible. That is how we are to evangelise to our friends, to continuously lay ourselves down for them.

Evangelism in our friendships partly consists of them looking into your relationship with God and seeing as an outsider what it means to be in relationship with the Creator. When a friend who trusts you peers into the way you commune unashamedly with God, conversations are inevitably sparked.

By saying this I don't want to push aside the importance of what we say in love, not just what we do in love, that reveals more of the ultimate Friend. Let's go back to Proverbs 27:5-6. It says that the wounds caused by a true friend can be trusted, but the kisses and flattery of an enemy are deceitful. Sometimes it hurts to hear the gospel when you don't understand it, it requires you to admit you're wrong and that God had to come to you in order to save you. This is why many people cannot fathom accepting Christ into their lives, it would mean they would no longer be on the throne of their heart.

But the words of the gospel are pangs of pain in order to heal. It can be very easy throughout our friendships to not bring up Christ, who He is and what He did, because it is offensive to their pride and comfort. But Proverbs says that a true friend's words will inevitably feel like wounds in certain situations. A true friend doesn't want to flatter in order to maintain peace, but rather sees the possibility of conflict worth the risk if it may cause the enlightenment of the heart.

Our words must always be pointing to our Friend in Jesus, and thus should only ever come from a place of love. That is the filter through which we speak when we evangelise.

ABIGAIL ARMSTRONG





The Holy Spirit and the Church

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The Holy Spirit is the one who ushers in the Kingdom of God. That Kingdom is present, although often hidden, in the church. The Holy Spirit is the one through whom God actively loves us in time. The Spirit is the way that the Trinity is revealed to us, pointing us always to the truth embodied in the Crucified, and leading us to the Father. By God's love, we live in the Age of the Spirit, that new time in which the church exists and testifies to the world that our time is not our own. God has taken time for us and the sign of that divine intrusion is the Holy Spirit at work in the church that lives and works in the world. God through the Spirit draws us into the life of the Trinity, forming the people of God. The Spirit chooses to have a body on which the Spirit can rest. That body turns out to be called "church." [1]

In recent years, it has become common to talk about the church as both 'gathered' and 'scattered.' It's helpful language in many ways as most will concur that church should be both a gathered community and a scattered dispersion of Jesus followers in their local communities. Often though this language becomes fashionable, impressive coffee-shop conversation focused more on how to 'program' both gathered and scattered expressions, but lacking the creative leading of the Holy Spirit. I've also heard

it said you need to choose what kind of model you want to be—a city on a hill (emphasis on gathered expression of church, implying a well-oiled machine of great Sundays and a ministry program menu to back it up) or the salt of the earth (emphasis on scattered church expressions—'church-whenever-we-are' types and the dispersion of everyday missionaries into the spheres of influence).

I have always thought, Why not both? Is this not the biblical mandate? And I wonder if our pre-Covid church categories and cultural Christianity of 21st Century forced us too rigidly into one model, or often motivated us to establish one in reaction to the other? Is this season of deconstruction allowing us to reframe our understanding of church and re-centre our ecclesiology on something more akin to the normative patterns of the New Testament.

Our theology / ecclesiology is so important here. First of all, we are primarily the redeemed people of God, sinners rescued from darkness to form a new 'covenant' community based on the sacrificial love of Jesus. We are an alternative community, the 'one new humanity' living in this world as a counter-cultural vision of kingdom family, a signpost of how people will live together forever in the new heaven and

earth. Sacrificial Love is therefore the axis for everything this community does and is. As Jesus taught us 'people will know we are His if we love one another' as he loves us. We are not just a random set of individuals scattered all over the place colliding once a week for some fellowship and pep-talk. The church is a people, a one-minded, one-hearted family baptised into one Spirit.

I am coming to realise that many streams of the church have focused on individual conversion and individual spiritual formation and even individual evangelism at the expense of building an actual community of the Holy Spirit. Remember the desert fathers who taught us the importance of solitude (monk, comes from 'monos' which means 'alone') and counter cultural spiritual formation in an empire-compromised church reached the point where they realised a life spent completely 'solitary' could only take them so far in their spiritual journey! Basically, they realised they needed other people to truly grow and thus the inspiring individual spiritual lives of St Anthony and others soon developed into inspiring spiritual communities. As John Finny put it – "the cells [of the Egyptian desert] became clumps (groups of monks meeting for fellowship) and the clumps became communities (the birthplace of communal monasticism as we know now it)."[2] In this context Jesus-followers

became committed to a healthier form of spiritual formation. The raw elements of these communities intrigued the masses, from the poor and destitute to kings and queens and the DNA of these communities was exported into the soil of many nations all around Europe resulting in a meta-change in the cultural landscape.

My point is that as much as we, in the charismatic church, want to see a dispersion of scattered servants, carrying kingdom authority into every sphere of influence, gossiping the ‘good news’, healing the sick and confronting the powers and as much as we want to break the over-emphasised institutionalised form of the church (I get it!), we should not allow our reaction to this to pay less attention to the gathered church and its corporeal reality. The early church never assumed that ‘kingdom work’ could be done as isolated individuals, who simply ‘checked-in’ with one another for church on Sunday or worse simply watched an ‘online’ service. Rather the corollary to the spontaneous expansion of the early church was small communities of believers learning how to become one in Christ so they could reflect the life of Christ in the world.

Contrary to what many of us may think, it’s hard to deny Jesus spent as much time forming a community as he did proclaiming good news! This of course is not a dichotomy we need to force but rather a recognition that the proclamation of the kingdom flows from the formation of a Christlike community—Family on Mission. We can only accurately display the kingdom of God when we are committed to the community of the King because the community gives credibility to verbal proclamation. The one new humanity is what God is establishing on the earth to give glory to Himself. Of course, we are not talking about an insular-looking cozy community serving its own needs – rather a family loving one another into Christ-likeness, empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the good news of the kingdom and to push back the kingdom of darkness. We must encourage everyone to do the work of the evangelist – but we must not forget the church as community is an evangelist—the body of Christ on earth, witnessing to his saving grace. Further the church is more than God’s agent of evangelism of social

justice in the world, it is the agent of God’s entire cosmic purpose (Eph 3:10). The church’s pattern of life and commitment to loving one another serves as a countercultural structure to the political and social structures of the day. As Karl Barth describes, the church is ‘the provisional representation of the sanctification of all humanity.’ [3] Therefore in its very ‘being’ the church should be prophetic and evangelistic. Yes, we must absolutely equip the church to scatter into society and leaven the lump of the world, not ‘demanding’ or ‘imposing’ change but scattering the seeds of truth in the way (sacrificial love) of Jesus Christ—a love more powerful than any of the sin-systems of this world, even death itself! These seeds will plant roots in society and bring forth the fruit of change in the world. But where community is lacking and where there are no environments to nourish, the leaven can often become inactive and loses its flavour. In this season of lockdown and restrictions, with a lack of gathered environments, we are in danger of the church ‘losing its flavour’ as, in my experience ‘online church’ is not able to ‘salt’ God’s people as much as actual ‘sacramental’ community.

Practically, therefore, we need to adapt and think about how we establish our churches in these days which are built around family and where spiritual formation in the way of Jesus continues to happen in community, where it was also supposed to! This of course is more challenging in days of lockdown and restrictions, but what if we have an opportunity to make these environments better than what they were pre-Covid. While there are a host of advantages to how we pivot our technology in this season there is also the danger that church becomes even more a ‘spectator sport’ than it was pre-Covid! I really believe if we work hard, reform our patterns and gathered environments to engage more people in smaller, participatory groups built around Word and Spirit dynamics and establish these groups on the principles of discipleship and mission (the Great Commission), this could be an incredible moment for the church. What if we can maximise the opportunities to build these type of environments in this season, even if it is online, so at least the principles and practices are in place for once we get out of restrictions? If the last reformation put

the word of God into people’s hands what if this is an opportunity to put it into people’s hearts?

If you are unsure how to do this, ask the Holy Spirit and give yourself to more rigorous Biblical reflection on the New Testament with your leadership team. The Holy Spirit specialises in granting wisdom for how the church is established and as we submit ourselves to the scriptures, He will guide you in these uncertain but full-of-opportunity days! Ephesians 3:8-10 reminds us God grants those who are called to lead and serve His church a ‘mysterious’ wisdom in the administration (or planning/‘architecting’) of the ‘household of faith.’ Look to Him. He’s been waiting for a chance for us to put down the church growth books, break the clergy-laity divide, surrender whole-heartedly to His leading and pick up the New Testament again – it’s all in there! Also be aware of who God has placed in your church body; doubtless there are many mature people who haven’t yet been empowered, equipped, and challenged to lead and disciple others. Maybe now is the chance to deploy them into service – take a risk, call them into action alongside you and go for it! A new wineskin built on the reality of the priesthood of all believers, the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the radical servanthood of the Spirit of Jesus.

Maybe this is our reformation?

[1] Stanley Hauerwas and William H Willimon, *The Holy Spirit* (Abingdon, 2015).

[2] John Finny, *Recovering the Past* (Celtic and Roman Mission), (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2013)

[3] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics v. 4: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*. eds. Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas Forsyth Torrance (Edinburgh T. & T. Clark, 1958-1962), 614.

ALAIN EMERSON *lives in Northern Ireland where he helps lead Emmanuel Church and also provide leadership for 24-7 Prayer in Ireland. He writes, “I have a passion to see the body of Christ become all it was destined to be. I am fascinated by the many shapes of the church which have emerged throughout the centuries and the current conversation. This has informed and inspired my own practice as a church leader, church planter and overseer over a network of churches. During these unique Covid days, I am convinced the Spirit is giving us an opportunity to reform many of our structures and patterns and yet the theological framework upon which we establish this is of utmost importance. This is a small contribution to the on-going conversation.”*



What Organic Church Is All About

Joshua Lawson



Before anyone gets over-zealous for a particular church model, let's be clear about one thing. The whole issue of "organic" v.s. "institutional" is not

primarily a matter of outward form. There can be organic elements in an "institutional" church, just like there can be institutional elements in an "organic"

church. The heart of the matter is not the way we do things so much as it is the *source* of our doing. Allow me to explain.

THE SOURCE OF THE NEW CREATION

Paul declared in 2 Corinthians 5:18 that in the new creation “all things come out of God.” In other words, He is the source of life.

In terms of the church, Christ is Head and the Spirit is Lord. Organic church results when that Headship and Lordship is honored and the church takes its cue from the Spirit’s leading. Certain brothers and sisters may stand in as agencies of His leadership, but if at any point they usurp the Headship of Christ, organic church is lost and an institution must invariably take its place.

But this may happen, for better or for worse, in a variety of settings. So please, please, please, don’t waste your breath trying to convince people of the supremacy of a certain form. Just get them into Christ, under His headship, and spiritual life will result.

Until then, there’s no reason to bother talking about church structure. It’s like building a riverbed with no water.

MY BURDEN

I want to speak from my heart about this matter of the church. The thing is, I have a growing concern for those who have ventured “outside the camp” of western institutional Christianity. I fear there are many, having gone out on a second-hand basis, who are not really gripped by the revelation of Christ. The result is that they now champion a certain form of church rather than the experience of a living Person.

Perhaps an analogy would be helpful to explain what I mean. The relationship of Christ to the church, and the church to the world, is like the relationship between the sun and the moon on a dark night. The light of life is in the sun, while the moon is nothing but a lifeless, terrestrial ball. But as the moon stands in full view of the sun, it reflects the light of life to a world in darkness.

This is the mystery of Christ and the church. “I am the light of the world,” Jesus said to his disciples, and, “You (also) are the light of the world” (John 8:12, Matthew 5:14). It is the sun-moon relationship. In Him is life, and as we abide in Him as the Vine we are filled with His life and in turn we radiate His

light to the world. But the life is in Him, not in us. Anyone who abides in Christ knows this to be true. Even the Lord Jesus, as a man, said: “The Son can do nothing by himself, only what he sees the Father doing” (John 5:19).

But there is a phenomenon where the moon blocks the light of the sun instead of reflecting it; this is called a lunar eclipse. It occurs when the moon is standing directly between the earth and the sun. For a brief moment, the lights go out and all you can see is the outline of a dark form. Spiritually speaking, this occurs when we lose sight of the Head for the Body, when modality and ecclesiology take the place of Christ Himself as the church’s focal point.

Even though Christ and the church are one, just as bride and groom become one in a mysterious union of life and purpose, they also remain distinct. And it is Christ, not the church, who is pre-eminent in God’s universe.

HAS THE CHURCH ECLIPSED YOUR VIEW OF CHRIST?

I fear there are many who don’t apprehend this, and you can tell by the way they talk about “organic” church vs “institutional” church as if it’s all a matter of meeting in homes, not having a pastor, or some other such thing. In effect, they see only the outline of a dark form and not the light of life which has been momentarily eclipsed from their view.

How do I know? I know because it has happened to me on many occasions. I’ll get all taken up with my view of the church—how a meeting should function, what it appears to me they did (or did not do) in the first century, or whether a community should look like this or that. And again, it’s not that there aren’t important elements to consider in the practice of the church, but is this our message—the “organic church”—or is it Christ and Him crucified?

When the church loses her Christ-focus and turns inward upon herself, tinkering with forms and championing couches over pews, the light of life will quickly fade from view. Sure, there is something to be said for church polity and every-member functioning and a slew of other particulars, but only as an afterthought

to the supremacy and centrality of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Consider this quote from T. Austin Sparks: “The Body, the church, was never meant to be something in itself, but from eternity was always intended to be ‘the fullness of Him who fills all in all.’ Therefore it has no existence apart from Him, nor has it existence apart from God’s purpose in Him. These facts, simple as they are in statement, are very profound and very searching in their meaning. They govern and determine what the church is. Nothing which bears the name ‘church’ (in the New Testament acceptance of the term) and is not the continuation of His Son in this universe exists in the thought of God.” (*The Stewardship of the Mystery*, v.1)

This quote, you probably realize, is equally applicable to both “institutional” and “organic” church proponents.

SO WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE?

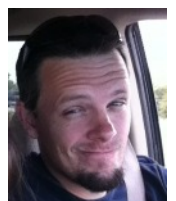
The only fundamental difference, then, between true, organic church life and any other kind is the place it gives to the Lord Jesus Christ. Is He supreme? Is He the functional Head of the gathering through His Spirit in every member? If so, then the church is organic regardless of where it meets.

If that statement disappoints you for lack of anti-institutional fodder, you may want to check your motives and read it again tomorrow.

Here’s the long and the short of it, brothers and sisters: The world we’re living in is teetering on the brink of revolution. The religious and political systems of man are being shaken on every front, and people everywhere are floundering in a sea of existentialism, grasping for a rock to stand on. As atheists, philosophers, preachers, and politicians of every sort rush in to fill the vacuum, what will our message be? A certain form of meeting, or a Christ who is alive and lives in power—the answer to man’s every need?

The latter, not the former, is what organic church is all about.

JOSHUA LAWSON
insearchofacity.com



AUSTRALIA

PORT KEMBLA, MAREEBA

A LITTLE UPDATE FROM CRIS AND AILSA MATESIC, presently in Port Kembla on the South Coast of NSW.

Our three kids moved out last year. Our new season has begun!

For quite a while now, Cris and I have pondered and prayed about traveling Australia, praying in towns and their neighbourhoods, encouraging believers we know (and ones we don't yet know) and sharing the Gospel. We are now in the process of upgrading and renovating a Nissan Civilian bus we bought late November 2021, staying local to work casually and save to do this. House sitting as well.

Whosoever's home we look after we encourage them to write a list of people, streets, businesses in their neighbourhood who they are believing for, be that for salvation, healing, connection or whatever. We pray daily for these and believe for people of peace, people to bless and share Jesus and His Gospel with. We pray for the believers in that town, expecting opportunities to encourage and strengthen them. We also hope to be encouraged ourselves.

A Word God gave Cris many years ago was Romans 1:9-13. This Word has revisited us. *"God knows how often I pray for you. Day and night I bring you and your needs in prayer to God, whom I serve with all my heart by spreading the Good News about his Son. One of the things I always pray for is the opportunity, God willing, to come at last to see you. For I long to visit you so I can bring you some spiritual gift that will help you grow strong in the Lord. When we get together, I want to encourage you in your faith, but I also want to be encouraged by yours."*

We have noticed a movement of people hitting the road. We believe this is His Spirit stirring His people to GO! It's not THE way, as we are all His sent ones! These days the love of many is growing cold. We need daily encouragement, spurring each other

on to SIMPLY focus on JESUS and His Words, thus finishing this race well.

Cris and I would love more than anything for you to pray for us if Holy Spirit prompts you, convinced that mutual prayer partnerships are vital. Never know, might see you one day!

CARL MUSCH REPORTS FROM MAREEBA

I am constantly blessed by the effectiveness of the principles of simple church to represent Jesus in this world. This past year it has been impossible to plan and work strategically and consistently around the indigenous communities with which we are connected. However I am seeing people step up into a more apostolic sort of a role where they are seizing opportunities to visit other believers and to encourage them and to strengthen churches.

Covid-19 and all the madness associated with it continues to expand its impact in the Northern Territory remote Aboriginal communities. What this means is it is even harder for me or for any of our non-indigenous team to visit and yet we have seen more people come to the Lord and more growth as local people have caught the significance and the power of The Gospel and of walking with Jesus.

For a number of reasons we are working towards building accommodation on our property in Mareeba that will facilitate training and ministry for remote community people. Many of our Aboriginal Christian leaders, many of whom have been working with us for more than 20 years, are asking for help

to go deeper into the word of God. Some of that is really help with English literacy. It is our hope to be able to provide short ministry training "intensives" where we can teach and train at a level that our current circuit ministry strategy has not been able to facilitate. At the moment the door to consistently do the circuits seems to be closed and this could be a challenge for some time. After 34 years of mostly going to them there may be a bigger place for bring them to us for short stints.

This year I spent 3 months largely bedridden with bronchitis. After I had largely pulled through, I ask the doctor why it had continued, and I had been reinfected so many times. His reply was that we have destroyed your immune system with so many antibiotics. I had bronchitis and a potentially infected broken toe which as a diabetic they were very concerned about. The long and the short of it is that a lifestyle of driving flying and talking has not produced a very healthy body. I am looking forward to a year of mostly physical construction work to significantly turn my health around and have already made some dietary and lifestyle changes. (Thanks for everybody's advice I am now a paleo keto vegan carnivore)

Having been doing what I am doing for 30 odd years (and most of them have been pretty odd) I have become aware that there are fewer people within the Body of Christ seemingly committed to long-term intensive cross-cultural ministry. We, God's people, will be stuck in this current "phase" until we finish "The Job" of making disciples of All

Nations (Mat 24:14), and just simply because Jesus died for the whole world to have real life. It is my hope to be transitioning from being primarily in the field and remote indigenous communities to multiplying workers for that field by an





stories

what's happening around the nation

MELBOURNE, QLD CORRECTIVES

increasing involvement in mission mobilisation and training ministry.

Despite my disdain for the academic educational process this year I have completed a Graduate Certificate in Leadership (ministry) basically for the singular purpose of infiltrating the academic ministry education world in order to liberate people into a life of fruitful service. I am told that this is the minimum level of nonsense that I need, along with a cert 4 in TEA to teach in modern, accredited Bible Colleges, where thousands of believers have gone hoping to be equipped for the work of the ministry and yet, so few ever progress fruitfully in to it.

I have been invited on to the "Simply Mobilizing" Oceania, Missions Mobilisation Think Tank. This is consistent with the vision that God gave me in 1998 of seeing indigenous peoples from Australia to Native Americans working together across the Pacific. As many of you know I had intended to base in the US, having been invited to do missions training among Native Americans. However the worldwide health and political dynamic has made that impossible. It would appear that this Oceania development roll, though it is on an entirely voluntary basis, is consistent with my participation in this revealed plan of God's, to link indigenous Christian ministry across that broad region.

I am very much committed to injecting the concept of "Simple Church" as not just being a cultural thing or something that reflects a lack of development or education but a Biblical and strategic strength of indigenous Christian expression. Yours in Christ, Carl Musch Indigenous Ministry Links

KARITAS PAHOE WRITES FROM MELBOURNE RE SOME COVID19 IMPACTS

In every circumstance give thanks was our theme throughout 2021, where practically all our church gatherings became virtual most of the calendar

year. There has been increase in terms of number of people coming to Zoom meetings though (weekly sum can reach as many as 30 people across Melbourne and Geelong), but we really miss in-person meeting.

Here are some of the high and low lights from our groups in Melbourne (Western suburbs and Geelong):

Over the past year we have continued the meeting rhythms already established with our Melbourne and Geelong groups however, due to the government Covid restrictions many have lost their jobs, businesses shut down and our kids (teenage years) excluded from the activities they loved doing such as ballet, singing concert, and tennis. Also we are seeing health issues including mental depression faced by many in our group because of accumulated stress, but we have learnt to obey to rest in Him and exhort one another daily thru prayers and phone calls/messages.

With virtual meetings commonly experienced by the international community, we still maintained connection to fellowship once a month with students that used to study in Melbourne but had returned home to Malaysia and Indonesia. With the body of Christ in Singapore and Indonesia we also have been part of a regular corporate prayer meeting on a weekly basis.

Only recently, we started a radio ministry led by Jason, the pastor of the church in Geelong. There has been good feedbacks coming thru from listeners which include international audience. Check out ministryofpsalms.com/radio We continue to endure patiently until the coming of our Lord.....

GAVIN REPORTS FROM A QLD PRISON

"I've been in prison in central Queensland for the last 19 years. I became a born-again Christian at the very beginning of my time here. Perhaps you associate prisons with things that increase your heart rate. There's a lot of

unpleasantness in prison, but I want to tell you about a light and a person you might not associate with jail. The light is the light of the Gospel and the person is the Lord Jesus Christ. I have seen the wonderful grace of God in prison for nearly two decades!

The gospel of Jesus is being preached in here, by inmates, in all its fullness. We share about repentance from dead works and then faith towards God. I find that when men respond from their hearts in this way, Jesus enters them, heals them physically, emotionally and mentally. He delivers them from demonic oppression and then the Holy Spirit fills them and begins the transformation process. I've seen men completely laid out on the floor under the power of the Holy Spirit as they're being healed. I've seen hardened men weep freely as the Spirit of God moves upon their hearts. I've seen Jesus turn brutality and hatred into passion and zeal for the kingdom of God, and righteousness. These men who were so broken have become some of the most loving, generous and joyful people in the place.

The entire time I've been here, there has always been a core group of committed believers who love Jesus and each other sincerely. Jesus is planting and building his church in prison and God has always supplied what is needed. If a brother goes home or moves to a different part of the centre, then God will send another brother, or he will convert an unbeliever, to provide what is needed for the body of Christ to grow and function.

The church here experiences unity and love for each other in unique ways. One reason is we can't run from the uncomfortable parts of organic church



life and fellowship. If there's conflict between brothers, there's no option to go down the street and find a new church, because there isn't one. We're forced to face the hard truth about ourselves and allow the Holy Spirit to change us and conform us into the image of Christ. We also have to die daily to our pride and forgive each other often ... but what we find on the other side of the tough stuff is real unity, real love and God commanding a blessing upon it, like it says in Psalm 133, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!" (v1)

The church here is also highly visible because of the context we're in. The people we minister to around the compound are also the people who see the reality of our lives 24/7. Our confession must line up with our conduct or we experience zero

credibility in our Christian walk. God has taught me to pray so much. Sometimes there are up to five men praying in my cell at night. We pray as the Holy Spirit leads us, and as we do, we see the whole atmosphere of the prison change. The incredible peace and presence of God descends in thickness and richness. Afterwards, many conversations about God happen, and I know that these moments have been created by God and released through our prayers.

We've been taught to stand on God's word in simple faith through life's storms. We're so thankful for the Bibles that have been given to us. Every inmate has an opportunity to read the most important book on the planet – the Bible. We believe it, as little children, and we desire to obey it. Thank you for praying for us – in, at times, a forgotten place. Inside a seed is a potential forest. We pray that every Bible in here would result in a forest of believers ... and then a great revival! May the Lord set the spiritual captives free!"

I've seen men completely laid out on the floor under the power of the Holy Spirit as they're being healed. I've seen hardened men weep freely as the Spirit of God moves upon their hearts.

Gavin's story is part of Eternity News Faith Stories series, compiled by Naomi Reed.

www.eternitynews.com.au/faith-stories/

AND ACROSS THE DITCH - FROM SOUTH ISLAND, NEW ZEALAND

THE INVITATION OF HOSPITALITY

Hi folks, my husband (Paul) and I (Tina) are new to the community and would love to meet you. I suspect many are curious about the red housebus parked up at the old Sawmill site on Breakneck Road? That's us and anyone and everyone is welcome to pop in whenever for a cuppa. Come and introduce yourselves.

In 2019, we came across the house church movement for the first time when we attended the conference they had organised in Auckland, eager to find out more. We were both retiring at the end of the year, and would be living permanently on the road.

We had decided to housesit our way around the country as a way of meeting people, getting to know a community and finding out where God was leading us to eventually settle. Every home we look after, we pray through the house, we chat to the neighbours, and find the local community foodbank or lunch venue where we can offer our help.

As we said an enthusiastic goodbye to Auckland in December 2019, little could we have known that Covid would hit the country three months later. We had to find a place fast to park up and through a contact met a couple who allowed us to park on their farm for two months. During this time we were able to pray with the neighbours, share Christ, and minister at a personal level to the folk we were staying with. This was our introduction to house church.

We crossed Cook Strait when the lockdown ended and spent three months looking after a place on the West Coast that is totally isolated (in the wop-wops). This was a very special time of solitude, connecting with God, talking to Him, seeking guidance, and Him preparing



us for the 'work' He had for us.

Crossing the Southern Alps bought us back into contact with 'normal' life. His command to 'Go and make disciples' (Mt 28:19 and Mk 16:15) brought with it a deeper understanding of what it means to be an organic church. The word 'Go' actually means 'in your going' or 'as you journey along in your everyday life'. Our clear call was to practice the invitation of hospitality wherever we found ourselves. Coming from an Italian background, we naturally have a deep sense of community and an 'open door' policy for whoever and whenever.

While our situation is not directly a house church situation, our Father has richly blessed us with folk constantly popping in and wanting to chat, Christians visiting us asking for prayer or sharing their own testimony, meeting people on the street in the neighbourhood and chatting to find out where they are at in their spiritual lives, helping someone who lives close by in need with food or transport or fixing something perhaps. Each situation is one for sharing the deep joy and peace we have in the Holy Spirit despite any circumstance.

In two of the towns we stayed in, we came across house churches there and joined them. We enjoyed wonderful times of friendship, encouragement, prayer, etc., and could practice all the 'One Anothers' of the Bible.

With this latest Covid traffic light system instituted at the beginning of December in NZ, however, we have chosen to remain unvaccinated. As a result, we are no longer welcome at these house churches. There is a very clear divide now amongst Christian believers, yet we know where our hope and our calling is. God continues to lead us to people who are longing for company, wanting some hospitality, and eager to share. We have been richly blessed to be a blessing (Gen 12:2) and every morning we expectantly start our day asking the Holy Spirit to guide us. To us, that is being an organic church.

TINA & PAUL TOSCHI Otago, NZ

BLOOMIN' GLORIOUS!

MERYL GEMO

On my daily walk, I pass hundreds of roses. I enjoy the changing seasons, share with God whatever is on my mind, and listen for what he has to say to me. One day, through a rose bush, he started pointing out some dos and don'ts of disciple-making.

Jesus told us to go and make disciples (*Matt. 28:19*). The word 'disciple' comes from the Latin word to learn. A disciple of Jesus is someone who learns from Jesus and allows his words to transform their life. To make a disciple is to help a person learn from, follow and become more like Jesus.

GLORIOUS!

Most of the roses I pass are in gardens open to the public. They are pruned by professional gardeners and the result is a glorious display of blooms of many colours. Living in a different context to me, Jesus talked about the pruning of grape vines rather than roses (*John 15:1-8*), but the principles are the same. Once a person has started to learn from Jesus and let his words become part of them (v. 7), their life starts to show some of the beauty of Christ. Then the Father, the Expert Gardener, prunes them to reveal even more of his glory in them.

The point is that it is actually God who makes disciples, not us. Our part is to look for what God is doing in others' lives and then say or do what he tells us to. This is how Jesus made disciples (*John 5:19; 12:49-50; 14:10*) and we are sent just like him (*John 20:21*). This means being alert to the Spirit of God in every human interaction, rather than planning a mission project or discipleship course.

Expert pruners know that each rose bush is unique and that different varieties of rose need to be treated differently. They must decide which stem to cut and which to leave.

Although God does speak through preachers, books and courses, he loves to find ordinary followers of Jesus who are ready and able to bring the unique message, in word or action, that he has for a particular person in a particular life situation. A love-filled one-to-one conversation can be powerful.

It may take many of us, at different times and in different ways, to make one

disciple. But imagine how many lives would be changed if every follower was ready to do this at any time with any person in their life.

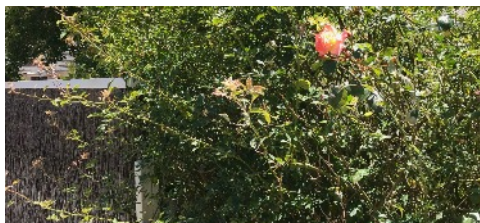
HACKED!



The bush that first caught my attention was a sorry-looking specimen in a private garden. It had been roughly hacked, rather than pruned, by someone who didn't have the appropriate know-how. They hadn't studied the plant to see what to cut and what to leave, and they had cut it at the wrong time.

In our attempts to share the truth that we believe, we may have made mistakes like this. We may have learnt a gospel summary and tried to squeeze it into conversations, rather than listening to others and the Spirit to discover what specifically is good news to them at the time. Sadly, some people have turned away from following Jesus because of the way someone has spoken to them about him. Thankfully, God is not limited by our mistakes and can help us learn from them.

ATTENTION NEEDED!



Another rose bush I passed hadn't been pruned at all. One stem carried a beautiful orange bloom, but it was overwhelmed by a mass of stems with tiny pale pink flowers. Without attention, the root stock to which the rose was grafted had run riot.

This made me think of a new believer, given new life in Christ, but struggling with all the habits of their old way of life (*Col. 3:9-10*). It's one thing to believe, but quite another to become a disciple, living with

and becoming more and more like the Teacher. Perhaps no one has told them that the Spirit of Jesus within them will teach them everything (*John 14:26*).

Or perhaps no one has encouraged them at a moment of choice in daily life to trust and follow the Spirit's guidance. The vigorous growth of the root stock spread over the fence, where its thorns were a danger to passing pedestrians. It had been cut back but needed to be cut back again. This cutting wasn't like the Father's pruning but like the clumsiness of law, which tries to limit the damage caused to others by bad behaviour.

Sometimes Christians think that people would live better if the government would pass the right laws. But disciples can't be made by legislation. Religious rules work no better than secular ones, because real transformation must come from within (*Matt. 15:19-20; Col. 2:23*). A disciple grows not by following rules but through a close personal relationship with Jesus. We must let our Father, the Expert Gardener, do the pruning. How many times in the history of Christianity have human religious efforts produced abused victims rather than disciples blooming with the beauty of Christ? How often has the focus of mission been on making people like the missionary rather than letting them discover their own unique way to be like Jesus?

Jesus told each of us to make disciples. And he showed us that the way to do it is by living in intimacy with him, listening and doing what he says. Yes, we will make mistakes because the only way to learn is by going and doing it, but the Expert Gardener will prune us – and he will prune those we help, as they listen and respond to Jesus too. And what a beautiful, diverse display of blooms he will create.

MERYL GEMO spent 60 years creating relationship and Gospel programs with people of different cultural backgrounds in Australia and PNG. Learning about rapid church growth in the world, she set out, with a small group of new believers in Adelaide, to explore unfamiliar and even radical ways of being followers of Jesus. Meryl lives in St Marys, South Australia

A 'REMNANT'

Yet pretending not to be

Martin Bragger

Photo:rodlong-unsplash

It is the first Sunday of the new year; Christmas 21 is now a fading image in the rear-view mirror of time's flow. Churches *'were packed'* according to a Channel Nine news report. Except that while some were, many were not, as a little enquiry will reveal. In any case, it has been my experience that Christmas attendance bears very little relationship to weekly attendance in the following year.

One thing that is true however, is that at this time of year the normal busyness of life, including 'Church' life, slows down and gives the opportunity for reflection on where we have been, where we are, and where we are going. I wonder whether the 'Church' and its networks of congregations will use this time for such reflection? Previous years' opportunities for Reflection do not inspire confidence. Such news headlines as *'Worshippers pack Christmas church services'* give false hope given the decades-long attendance decline, where weekly attenders, many (although not all) of whom it is reasonable to assume are likely to be the most committed, number only about 2% of the population.

This brings me to a very important, yet regrettably little discussed, Reality which should be seriously reflected upon by those who are truly committed to Christ and His mission rather than 'Church', the Reality that- **we are now a 'Remnant'** and we shouldn't pretend otherwise.

Why is this so important? The reason is that this Reality should reshape our understanding and practice of Church and Mission to our society.

There is a theme running through the biblical narrative (also in the history of the Church) that particularly becomes evident in God's actions at key points in the history of His plan of salvation. The theme is that of 'The 'Remnant'. The dictionary meaning of the word 'Remnant' is *'a part or quantity that is left after the greater part has been . . . removed, or destroyed.'*

In the biblical story the concept of the 'Remnant' appears at a number of times of great ungodliness when God's people have mixed the worship of Yahweh with that of other pagan 'gods', and where society has become characterized by injustice and unrighteousness, particularly by the elites. God's response is often to remove and or destroy most of the people who had corrupted their faith, just keeping and setting aside a "Remnant"; that is an often relatively small group of people to continue His work.

Arguably, the first group of people who can be described as a 'Remnant' are Noah and his family in Genesis 6:5. In a time when - *'The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.'*

In response to that, God extracted from the midst of a sea of unrighteousness just Noah and his family as a righteous 'Remnant', whom He protected in the Ark while destroying the rest of the society.

A second example of 'The 'Remnant'' is in the time of Elijah, when the society of the northern Kingdom of Israel had been seduced into mixing the worship of God with the pagan 'gods' introduced by the Queen Jezebel, the great proponent of the Baal cult. Again, it was a time of great ungodliness, abuse of the poor by the Elites and corrupted worship.

The faithful prophet Elijah flees from Jezebel, who has put a Contract out on his life, and hides in a cave in the desert to escape the pursuing army of the Queen. There, in utter despair, he complains bitterly to God that only he, Elijah, was left, and now his life too was under threat, and so he asked God to just let him die.

However, the fact was that Elijah was not the 'only one left' for God had reserved a "Remnant" of 7000 faithful people that had not bowed the knee to the Baal 'gods' (1 Kings 19:18). Here is encouragement for those who grieve the state of the Church today, that even when things look blackest, the Big Picture is that God always keeps a "Remnant", those whom He sets aside to continue his work.

A further example of 'The 'Remnant'' is that of the Babylonian exile. In the early 6th century BC after years of ignoring the warnings of the prophets regarding the worship of the 'gods' of the age and the apostasy of His people, the breaching of the Law and the disregard of His expectation of righteousness and justice, God allowed the Babylonian army to occupy and destroy Jerusalem and the Temple, the centre of the Israelite Faith. Most of the inhabitants of Jerusalem were killed or dispersed to other nations, but one particular group were taken into captivity in Babylon itself. It was this group that, as the "Remnant", God intended to use to restore Jerusalem. Seventy years after the captivity a group of the Babylonian "Remnant" led by Nehemiah returned to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple.

More recent examples of the 'Remnant' occur in several former Soviet Union countries as well as in Iran and Afghanistan where Christians have been greatly persecuted and their numbers reduced to a very few. In particular, the 'Remnant' in Afghanistan live under the constant threat of 'Convert to Islam, leave, or be killed'.

'Remnant' is Us

Modern Australia was founded as a basically, if loosely, Christianized nation, a fact that governed it's laws, its Constitution, and the world view of its population (96% of Australians that signed up for the armed forces in World War One stated their religion as Christian). However, Australia in 2022 is now fractured into a pluralistic nation of neo-pagan tribes (many of which worship the Unholy Trinity i.e. Materialism, Consumerism and Hedonism), in which the committed faithful are reduced to a very few, indeed a 'Remnant'.

Some of the characteristics of a 'Remnant' environment are that the Church - is small minority; experiences varying degrees of hostility, sometimes violent (fortunately not so far in Australia); is pushed to the periphery of society; and lacks political power and influence. It should be noted that all these characteristics are the very opposite of those which applied to the Church in the previously Christendom, or at least Christianized, countries of the West up to the last century.

Sadly, this fact is one that seems for the most part to escape church leaderships across the country, whether wilfully or through a failure of critical thinking. The lack of such critical thinking allows the continuing delusion (or even pretence) that we still live in a Christianized society where people just need a little encouragement, through 'Square Wheel Activities' (i.e. the ones that didn't work that well last we tried them), and then they will come along to 'Church'. However, decades-worth of statistics exposes this to be a delusion.

Why is the acceptance of the Reality that 'We are a Remnant' so important? It is because that such a Reality must shape how we do 'Church' and 'mission'. This requires certain things to be taken into account.

Firstly, to state what should be quite obvious, the 'Remnant' and its leaderships must embrace the fact that 'We are a Remnant' in a society that has rejected its Christian origins.

Secondly, a highly relevant fact for consideration is that there are few if any examples of a 'Remnant' Church that has ever used a model that involved expensive buildings and expensively paid staff. Such a model is simply unaffordable and impracticable in a 'Remnant' context.

Thirdly, is the contemporary Missional landscape. This is one where faithful Christians are a shrinking minority set in the midst of a former Christianized society that has (since the 1960's) been swamped by waves of neo-paganism; in which a Diabolical battle is being waged (Indeed now effectively won) in Universities, Schools and Parliaments to control the levers of power, a battle with which the institutional Church has failed to engage in any serious way. Indeed, as Melvin Tinkler has put it- '*As the Judeo-Christian foundations of the West are being eroded, the Church sleeps*'

Fourthly, in the Australian context, the reality of the previous point should drive the search for the development of creative and visionary 'Remnant'-mission models, ones that will

clearly be 'Something Completely Different' from the centuries old, Sunday-Centric Christendom model. This also, despite the usual denial of proponents, includes most Church Plants that only meet on Sunday (or indeed any other single day of the week for that matter).

Fifthly, The 'Remnant' Church of the future will have few resources and so missional strategies must be very low cost. This something the current paid staff, funded building model is most certainly not.

One of the most important factors in any reflection of missional strategy, one which the Church desperately needs, but consistently fails, to grasp, is that we live at a Unique time in western society- a Uniqueness marked by one single characteristic -'Rapid Cultural Change'. It is a time in which we are seeing the slow-motion collapse of western civilization, a civilization founded on and shaped by a Christendom that is now but a distant echo; yet a time in which, as Tinkler says, "*the Church sleeps*".

So as we step onto the bare as yet untraversed stage that is 2022 it is a time for deep reflection. The question is, on that stage what drama will the Christian body play out? Will it continue to be more like a perpetual re-run of the Dying Swan Ballet? Or will it acknowledge and confess Reality; the Reality that it is now a 'Remnant' in a God-rejecting, hostile sea of neo-paganism (in which it has little to no influence in human terms); seek to allow that Reality to reshape how it views itself and its missional challenge in a neo-pagan society and, in the power of the Holy Spirit, rise Phoenix-like from the ashes of decades long missional failure.

For, as we step over the threshold of year's beginning, for the sake of the destiny of the vast majority of our compatriots, and the health of the nation, there is no more urgent question to not only be asked, but answered.



DR MARTIN BRAGGER lives with his wife Sandie in Thirroul, on the south coast of NSW. He is the founder of Unbounded Church. A former atheist, painfully dragged kicking and screaming into the kingdom of God, he is working with others in trying to write a map for the missional journey down the road we have not yet travelled.
unboundedchurch.com



Alex Absalom

Obey Jesus' Standing Orders: Heal the Sick!

Photo: Priscilla-du-preez-unsplash

Military standing orders from May 1791: In a disciplined yet hugely scattered organization such as the army, it is vital for troops to have clarity of direction.

In the midst of the confusion and chaos of battle, the Commander-in-Chief needs to have all their soldiers operating with discipline and common purpose, so that the greater strategic plan can be achieved as effectively as possible. In order to do this, standing orders are given.

Standing orders provide individual soldiers with default commands, so that they can be operational at all times. In the absence of other specific instructions, standing orders enable the army to keep fighting the enemy, even when lines of communication back to HQ seem to be blocked.

When it comes to facing down ill health, all disciples of Jesus are likewise given standing orders from our Commander-in-Chief Jesus. As we read from the Gospels, He repeatedly and unambiguously instructs us to go and heal the sick.

In fact, we can summarize our standing orders like this: unless we hear a clear direction not to heal, our permanent instruction from Jesus is to heal the sick, cast out demons, and proclaim the Kingdom.

Sometimes Christians wonder whether they can pray for healing, as if somehow we need special permission to attempt such an exceptional move, whereas Jesus makes it abundantly clear that to minister healing should be our default posture. As we go through life and walk with others

as they face sickness, almost always we are to look for the opportunity to bring the healing power of Jesus into that situation.

So, the essence of our standing orders when facing sickness is, 'Heal the sick'!

Of course, once we understand and commit wholeheartedly to our standing orders, then Jesus can paint a little more nuance into the command.

The instruction to heal the sick does not give us license to operate in ways that are pastorally crass. Don't forget, success in prayer for healing is that the one we pray for experiences the love of the Father.

Likewise, people are not projects, and sometimes it will take a while in a relationship or situation for us first to model love and build bonds of connection, which will then create a bridge for us to offer prayer for healing.

There is no standard rule for how long this will take – it could be seconds, it could be months. But we should always operate out of a heart of love and compassion, which is emotionally intelligent about the relational context.

There are also times when God seems not to bring healing. We discuss some of those situations (for example, when preparing someone for death). However, in spite of these exceptions to the rule, it is vital that we approach healing the sick with a knowledge that our standing orders from Jesus are to heal and deliver.

Put another way:
Healing the sick should be normal and normative for a disciple of Jesus.

If He wanted us to be cautious about dispensing healing, then wouldn't Jesus have mentioned it at some point while healing people or teaching on it? Instead, He simply tells us to heal the sick (including four out of the five times when He commissions us to declare the message of the Kingdom).

Our default setting should be to find out what is wrong, and out of a heart of love for the one who is sick, lay hands on them and invite the Holy Spirit to come with power and glorify the name of Jesus through His healing touch. We are to do that unless we sense another clear direction from the Lord.

2 WAYS TO RESPOND WHEN THE HEALING DOESN'T COME

The more you pray for the sick, the more you will see healings take place, which is an incredible joy and privilege! Yet, simultaneously, the more you pray for people, the more you will see some not being healed (at that time, at least). Tragically, there will be a few people that you pray for who end up dying of that illness or injury.

At some point, someone will ask you, "Why wasn't I (or my dad/ child/ friend) healed?" If you're anything like us, you will feel a sudden weight press on you as you recognize the seriousness of what they're saying, and the importance of what comes out of your mouth over the next minute.

In these moments it is vital to identify what sort of question is being asked, in order to determine whether the response they're looking for is more pastoral or theological in nature.

The Pastoral Response

If the conversation comes in the midst of heartache, hospitals, and hopelessness, you must understand that what that person most needs to hear is the loving heart of a shepherd. They are facing up to loss, disappointment, frustration, and heartache. Even if they don't realize it, they're not actually asking you for a theological explanation. Instead, their greatest need is to experience the compassion, kindness, and love of God, ministered through you.

Sometimes this means looking past the actual words that are coming out of their mouth. "Why would God allow this?" is not always an invitation into a detailed debate about the nature of suffering in a fallen world. Instead, recognize that their question might instead be more of an expression of pain and a cry for help. Your response should be dictated by that deeper reality.

There are occasions when the most biblical thing to do is to wrap someone in a compassionate hug, and simply repeat, "I'm so very sorry."

At that point in time, the most important thing this person needs to know is that they're loved and not forgotten. Through your words and actions of kindness and care, you will also bring the love of Jesus into that situation, even if in that moment the person is furious with God.

If appropriate – and use great sensitivity here – it can be good to ask some open questions that might help the person identify where God is present with them. Examples might be, "Were you aware of God's presence? How did Jesus meet you in the pain? What did you sense in your spirit? Has your perspective changed on your situation?" Sometimes it's in the darkest moments that God seems extra present.

As an aside, where there is a lot of pain, someone might speak out some tough, even awful, things about God and how they feel about Him. If that's the case, don't feel the need to become Jesus' defense attorney – He's more than capable of fulfilling that role Himself! If you're offering a pastoral response, simply shepherd and love them well, and resist the urge to correct every piece of angry theology they vent. The wisest thing Job's friends did was to listen for a

long time. It was only once they started talking that they messed up! Instead of debating, you can simply pray with and for them, and ask for God's loving care to flood around them. His character is still true and dependable, and we've seen Him answer many such prayers with His loving presence.

As time progresses, your presence and care in the crisis might open up the way for more substantive theological conversation, but never neglect or underestimate the importance of the pastoral response.

One way to spot the difference is by sensing whether this is wartime or peacetime for the person asking. In wartime, where the spiritual battle is fiercest and lives can literally be on the line, the pastoral response is what's needed. A pastoral response builds up the individual emotionally and spiritually, strengthening and encouraging them to keep in the fight. Peacetime, by contrast, is usually well away from the sick bed and emergency room. Instead, it's a time when a more reflective and nuanced conversation can be had and abstract principles processed without causing emotional distress.

The Theological Response

Separate from the intense crisis moment where the pastoral response is what's required, there will be other occasions when you'll rightly enter into a discussion about why sickness happens, especially in light of our claim that Jesus is a God of love.

Very rarely is this what is required at the hospital bedside or with a grieving relative. However, there will be plenty of other, more appropriate contexts for this conversation to take place.

We have already discussed the nature of healing earlier in this book*, but by way of summary, we find our conversations tend to go back to a few main points:

God is good and full of love. This means that He does not operate in a capricious, unkind, or cruel manner. Therefore we can confidently ask Him, our loving Father, for good gifts such as healing, because He loves to give us such things. Sickness is not part of God's eternal heavenly Kingdom.

This is the same Kingdom that we're commanded to pray will come daily around us here on earth. While He can use anything for our good, this does not mean sickness comes from God. Therefore we boldly seek to attack sickness by ministering supernatural healing.

The Kingdom is both now and not-yet. Jesus' ministry was built upon His bringing the loving kingly rule of God into people's lives. His death on the cross and resurrection sealed that great victory, and so God's dynamic activity on earth is now permanently present and visible. But we still have a wicked and cruel enemy, who still has some influence in this world until Jesus returns. Specifically, sometimes this means that we'll see amazing supernatural healing occur (the Kingdom is now), while other times we'll be left frustrated, even heart-broken, when there isn't healing (the Kingdom is not-yet).

Candidly, we rarely know why the not-yet has come to the fore. However, recognizing that both realities (the now and the not-yet) can simultaneously be true provides a helpful framework for theological understanding. We can honor the greater truth that Jesus is at work, His Kingdom is advancing, and His followers are called to join Him in that endeavor, which includes operating in the gift of healing. At the same time, we have a way of understanding why our prayers aren't always answered and the enemy can seem to gain a victory, without turning God into some sort of moral monster who dwells high up on Mount Olympus.

We always have an eternal hope. Even when the healing doesn't come, we maintain our longing for our reunion with God and our entering into the fullness of Jesus' Kingdom rule. We look forward to either our joining Him in heaven, or His return to earth and the making of all things new, including the final destruction of sickness, sin, and death. This doesn't mean we don't mourn those who die, or pretend there's no struggle with unanswered prayer, but those things are simultaneously paired with this greater hope.



ALEX ABSALOM *The above content is an excerpt from the book, *Healing the Sick: Biblical and Practical Wisdom for Healing the Sick in Naturally Supernatural Ways*. By Alex Absalom dandelionresourcing.com



How to Shift Small Groups to Missional Communities

Mac McCarthy

When I started my first full time job as a Pastor of Community Life, I couldn't have been more excited.

I was thrilled to land a job where my primary focus would be the multiplication of small groups. I channeled all of my energy toward studying biblical community, small group theory, and leading groups myself.

The first couple years in my new position could be considered a success: I visited groups, trained new leaders, developed coaching structures, and grew the number of groups from 40 to over 80.

But looking back, I'm realizing that something about small groups just wasn't working.

Small groups got hijacked

Sure, some great stuff was happening in some of our groups, but the vast majority did not reflect biblical community. Countless speed bumps along the way suggested that something was off. Instead of ordinary people doing life together and joining God's work in the world, I noticed that:

We talked more about politics than following Jesus.

We preferred studying popular books more than the Bible.

We prayed more for other people's problems than our own.

We remained closed to outsiders rather than open and inclusive.

We were defined by affinity and shared interests more than diversity.

We consisted of people coming to get rather than to give.

Now, let me be clear, I'm not against small groups. The problem isn't with small groups. The problem is that small groups have been hijacked by the subtle power of consumerism.

Instead of using their collective time and energy to engage their communities, small groups focused on consuming the latest small group curriculums, often jumping from one 40-day study to the next. "Studies" became the point with videos of celebrity pastors replacing actual local leadership.

Of course, the elephant in the room for most small groups is not only a lack of mission, but also a lack of discipleship. "Studies" don't produce disciples.

Disciples produce disciples.

The format of socializing around appetizers, working through some study guide questions, and praying for other people effectively left discipleship out.

But again, I'm not down on small groups! The original passion I felt in seminary to catalyze biblical community still drives me today, and my conviction is that true biblical community has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.

But when it has been tried it almost always turns into a movement that revitalizes the church, mobilizes ordinary people to join God's mission, and turns the world upside down.

Putting missional discipleship at the centre

If small groups have historically been a catalyst for church revival, what are we missing? How can small groups be

reclaimed as effective vehicles for the equipping and mobilization of the church?

The short answer is that we must find ways to put missional discipleship at the center of our shared life together.

The matrix below provides some helpful categories for us to consider what this shift requires:

Community Mission Matrix

Notice that missional communities are different from a Holy Huddle (i.e. most small groups), which often focus exclusively on growing in relationship with Jesus, and investing in each other, without any outward mission.

Missional communities are also different from a Stale Sunday School class, which typically focuses on studying God's Word with only a limited sense of community, and clearly no engagement in the local community.

Finally, missional communities are also different from an Isolated Evangelist, who may be growing spiritually and actively sharing his or her faith, but is doing so alone without community.

Within missional communities, people are committed to growing closer to Jesus, doing life together, and joining God's work in the world. In other words, missional communities embrace worship, community, and mission as a holistic life of discipleship.

Making mission a priority

The key shift for the majority of small groups will be identifying a missional element for their community. A missional focus that they can engage in alongside

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one another on a regular and consistent basis.

(Please note that this is not the same thing as being a small group while tacking on an occasional service project. Service projects are NOT mission! Rather, this is a group of people who have discerned what God is up to in their neighborhood or community and have organized their life together around participating in God's activity.)

Here's what I've noticed: when groups make mission a priority, amazing things start to happen.

Recently, we had a group of high school students decide to be consistently present at a group home for individuals with disabilities. On a regular basis they committed themselves to being present, befriending, and loving residents with special needs in the way of Jesus.

About three months in, our church was approached by those leading the group home asking if we would be willing to host A Night to Shine, a prom night experience centered on God's love for people with various special needs. Needless to say, this was an incredible

opportunity to show God's love in a tangible way.

As this group of high school students exercised the courage to join in God's work, their faithful participation led to an even greater opportunity for our entire church. And it was largely the result of our students shifting from the typical Wednesday night small group format to a community living on mission alongside one another.

What I love most about this story is that it started with high school students. I couldn't be more proud of this group and others in our church community that are making similar shifts to break out of the small group mold and join God in both surprising and risky ways.

Next steps to shifting small groups toward mission:

Start a conversation with your existing small group about joining God's work in your community. If you are not currently part of a small group, prayerfully make a list of people you can invite in on the conversation.

Discern mission as a group by making a list of areas in the community that God might be inviting you to step into. This could be a place like your neighborhood, a partnership like the group home story above, or a people group that you feel especially called to serve and love. Develop some rhythms to support your life together that includes regularly seeking God, connecting in community with one another, and engaging your shared mission together.

As you step into mission as a community, think presence more than projects. How can you be intentional and consistent in being present among a group of people as a community? Then simply keep noticing where God is at work and join him there!



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JESUS AT THE WHEEL Cont. from page 3

for Uber, and we'd rather while away our time blathering with a queen (Elizabeth, Tay or Gaga) than getting serious with Jesus. But Jesus and his kingdom is serious business, isn't it? I mean, Jesus was thoroughly concerned with heavy stuff like the defeat of evil, the salvation of human souls and the rebuilding of human society. He ushered in the restorative sovereign rule of the Triune God, and taught that it must be accepted by us in faithful, grateful obedience. He told us that when we enter into it he will shape us into a redeemed society of persons who trust in God's present rule but hope for its final revelation, and who are used by God to fashion foretastes of that rule right now. You can't explain all that in a brief conversation, but you can *introduce* people to the Jesus who sits at the centre of it all.

Introduce Jesus as your friend, your hero, your teacher, your saviour, your king. Tell people about his exploits, his confrontations with evil, his kindheartedness. Heck, tell people he used *puns*, if that's what it takes. But most of all, let people know you *love him*. This semester I've been teaching a subject at Morling College called "Jesus and the Gospels", guiding students through the ways and means by which Jesus reveals his

identity and purpose to us. It's a great class, and I can't help but think every Christian should take a unit like this. Every year. These days, we need to become more familiar with what Jesus taught and how he demonstrated the establishment of his kingdom here on earth. Churches need to be workshoping how to tell Jesus' story better. Congregations should be incubators for missional storytelling. Because we need the help. We need a new vocabulary, grounded in truth and love, but energised by the common vernacular, to describe Jesus' story as a challenging, sacrificial adventure that invites all people to join the single greatest mission in human history.

But you can't convincingly tell a story until you've made it your own. Until we allow the story of Jesus to shape our own, to make us more and more into his likeness, we just sound like Pharisees, bleating about religious freedom, insisting on our rights, and demanding the world conform to our esoteric form of holiness. And that's what people like my Uber driver see. They might be neutral about Jesus, but their views about the church are anything but impartial. Indeed, the reputation of church has never been lower.



As we neared Sydney airport, my driver got around to asking me what I did for work. I told him I was a Baptist minister and that I taught at a theological school. He laughed and I asked him what was so funny.

"Well, doesn't that make you one of the religious elite Jesus was so down on?"

"Gee, I hope not," I replied. "I really hope not."

We pulled up to the curbside at the domestic departures level and my driver shook my hand and told me he enjoyed our conversation. He apologised for his crack about me being in the religious elite. I said he should think nothing of it. It's not my business to defend myself or the church. I suggested he look more into Jesus.

Because at its heart, the gospel is news about God's action and his reign, not his institution.

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EVERY BELIEVER IS CHURCH PLANTING

Roger Thoman simplechurchjournal.com

Several years ago, at a Verge conference, Alan Hirsch said: "Every believer is a church planter; and every church is a church planting church."

Now, let me say, that this makes absolutely no sense whatsoever... unless you have a Biblical understanding of the organic nature of church.

As long as we think of church as a meeting, a place, or an organized something, we will continually discount ourselves and others from being 'church planters.' But when we see that the church is a natural, organic expression of believers, who are connected to Jesus, expressing Him with others in a wide variety of ways, then we can begin to understand that Alan does speak the truth.

The church (we-folk) initiates new sprouts (planting) every time we initiate anything spiritual among any group of people, friends, or colleagues whether reached or lost or anything in between. In fact, isn't this what the church does? We plant seeds of life into the lives of others. This may be informal or formal. It may start informal and become more formal. It may start formal and become informal. Whatever it looks like, the church (God's people) continually plants seeds of Kingdom word and actions into the lives of others. That is, simply, who we are.

Keys to being a church planting believer

I believe, to see this in our lives more clearly, we can do five things:

1. Keep Jesus as our Source and Guide. Sure, we can learn from others and need to, but organic life, by definition, flows out of our organic connection with Jesus Himself.
2. Recognize that each of us plants seeds differently. We need to honor who we are and the spiritual gifts God has given to each of us. Some evangelize with their words, others show much compassion with their actions and by their love as well as words. Some initiate things among larger groups of people, others with just one other individual. Some of us are comfortable among youth, others among immigrants, etc. Some of us are passionate about sowing among the least reached, others feel drawn to heal and mature existing believers. I could go on and on. The point is that the organic expression of 'church' is meant to take many different forms and have many different looks as each believer and group of believers takes the initiative to be seed planters in his/her own way.
3. Get better at it. Whichever way God uses us to plant seeds into the lives of others, we can grow into better farmers. Learn from others, hone your skills and tools, and improve your work. This does not mean that the goal is, necessarily, bigger and more impressive. It may be just the one that we are called to at this time. Great! Plant well and seek fruitfulness!
4. Build relationships around living out a divine connection with Jesus. It's not a formula, it's a lifestyle you have developed that keeps you connected to



Photo:marcus-spiske-unsplash

Him, to His voice, and to His power. You share this with others and help them experience this same connection. This is called discipleship. And when you gather together, in whatever setting, to experience God, this is called a church gathering.

5. Finally, organic life reproduces itself. However it is we are called to plant into the lives of friends, family, neighbors, other groups in other places—whatever it is we are doing—always invite those we touch to do the same. In other words, whatever you do, reproduce yourself. Thus 'organic' remains 'alive.'

In short, plant Jesus as He leads you, and help those you plant seeds in to do the same.

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