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WHERE DO YOU GO TO CHURCH?

Well, it's complicated. David Tensen

Brian Anderson

Discovering Participatory Church

SENT BY JESUS AND AS JESUS Rickard Cruz

Three Church Planting Lessons from **IKEA**

Clint Clifton



OIKOS Australia

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

DIRECTOR: Phil Brown

EDITOR: Phillip Walters

SUB EDITOR: Phil Brown

MAIL:

OIKOS Australia
90 Jones Road
Eagle Point VIC 3878

EMAIL:

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

WEBSITE:

www.oikos.org.au

MOBILE:

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

SUBSCRIPTIONS:

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DIRECTIONS

Aussie simple churches faithfully serving...

I want to share a few stories of everyday Aussies faithfully serving their communities and building simple/home churches that I have recently been in contact with or visited. Of course, there are many others that could be mentioned, but here are a few...

On my recent visit to SA, I visited the food kitchen complex with **Bruce Kurtzer** that was blessing their community. I was amazed to see the scope of the ministry as Bruce and his team receive significant amounts of food donated from businesses and restaurants etc. which they then provide to larger group of people. Some packages that include food from their shop for very minimal prices - other food they give away. This enables them to have contact with significant groups of people from many backgrounds. They also run a simple church group in the premises they hire. It is well known. Surprisingly when they offered the food to other churches to help distribute - especially during the covid lockdowns the churches did not choose to be involved.

Bruce and his team also do street work, BBQs and other activities. Loving people, helping to provide basic needs and friendship seem to be core to what is happening. This was a real "kingdom hub" that blessed the wider community, was well regarded and is impacting many people's lives and provides good opportunities for the Gospel to be shared.



Paul Duffy is a friend I met who has a unique job! He draws caricatures or cartoons of people, and they invariably ask where he learned to do this which provides the golden opportunity to share his testimony of how God gifted him with this ability. Many people including school kids hear a Christian testimony this way. It reminded me that each of us have interests, hobbies etc. that can be used in the kingdom of God to reach people if we think broader than just "church"

I also visited with **Dave Hamilton** who has a network of 3 home churches. David runs 3 op shops and community pantries which provide income and also serve as a contact for both Christian and community people. Growth in these home churches has come from a mix of people with denominational church backgrounds, including some who have had significant church involvement and leadership roles. Others are people with no church home and also new people. More and more people are turning to home church often from significant church involvement. Dave and the op shops are finding that providing a safe place for people and a "sit down area" is a need that many people have. Interestingly they are also finding that Op shops can be a great connection to home church!

The Star Fish Network. As founding leader, **Peter Steiche**, discussed the work, he mentioned that some groups were growing too large and the need to birth new ones. He described it as a family with young adults, who branch out to establish their own home and family, but still have close relational connection to their parents and family of origin. I felt this was (Continued on page 19)



LIFE
BEGINS
after
COFFEE

'Because We Were There'

John's Story

MARTIN BRAGGER

The central thesis of the missional strategy of what we call the Unbounded Church, is that in order to reach the Lost in Australian society, Christians must move away from the standard decades old, low and declining fruit, generally Sunday-Centric meeting within private walls. This in order to go into the community and set up small Christian fellowships where the Lost regularly meet already.

The slogan that demonstrates that way of thinking is - 'Their place, Their time, Their language, Their style'

Which is pretty much the opposite of most contemporary missional strategies which generally operate from a base within four walls, whether these be a traditional church building, a house church, or a rented property. Such physical walls (bounds), as well as the cultural, spiritual and psychological 'walls' that usually accompany them, are the barriers to reaching the Lost that the Unbounded Church mindset seeks to dismantle.

As a result of this strategy, and with thanks to God, we see encounters in public places that bear real spiritual fruit in the lives of people who would never be reached by 'In-Drag' into 'four walls' approaches to mission.

Another slogan that is often spoken after such an encounter is that it happened – "Because we were there!"

This brings me to John's story . . .

A few years ago when I had moved to a new area, I commenced the habit of going

to the local Community Centre every week at around lunch time with the express intention of getting to know the 'regulars'. Each week I took some work and my computer, ordered a coffee and sat at one of the tables in the Café.

Over many weeks I noticed a couple of men who seemed to be there every time having their lunch. Later I found out that they were brothers, John and Alan. We didn't have any conversation until one day they came up to me and, pointing to the bible I usually had open on the table, said that they were intrigued as to what I was doing. What exactly I said I can't remember but it would have been something about a Bible study or Christian course I was working on at the time.

Over time we got to chatting quite regularly, during which conversations they occasionally raised some, often difficult, questions on spiritual issues they had. After a while, I said that if they were interested in such issues, perhaps they would like to meet regularly to discuss them. This is how a weekly Christian discussion group started in that Community Centre, a group that over time grew to 11 or 12 people (mostly de-churched or unchurched) before we had to split it into two (now there are five).

As we got to know John it was evident that he had travelled through a spiritual journey that had consisted of three phases. The first, which sadly many do not move beyond, was that of being what might be called a 'Churchian'. This is someone who

has some involvement in the life and rituals of a local church, often attending with their parents (as in John's case) but do not have a lively Christian faith. The second seems to have been when he attended university, studying Philosophy and Psychology, when he left behind the 'Churchianity' of his younger days and became an Atheist. The third phase was the few years he spent in the group in the Community Centre.

About three years ago John was diagnosed with a serious cancer, being given about two years to live, although he lived about three. Over this time as we met week by week John continued to ask his questions, but I and others could see him changing and actually maturing into a believer.

Several weeks ago now John died. I had the privilege of spending time with him over his last two months on earth, initially in the home he shared with Alan but then in his hospital ward. Much of this was spent in talking about faith issues and reading the bible. He particularly liked Revelation 21:3-5.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death" or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said,

'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.'

On the lunch time before he died, I was with him in his room, it would be the last time I would see him this side of heaven. Just as I was leaving his doctor came in and she asked him a question. "Are you worried about anything?"

John's reply was one of the most beautiful things I have heard. With a loud

voice so the whole Ward could hear he said, 'Worried! Why would I be worried? I'm a Christian and I know Jesus will be waiting to welcome me.'

By the Grace of God, John's journey had taken him from Churchian, to Atheist, to Child of God.

That is John's story. The angels in heaven rejoice, and so should we!



MARTIN BRAGGER lives with his wife Sandie in Thirroul, on the south coast of NSW, where 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

SENT BY JESUS AND AS JESUS

Rickard Cruz



Yesterday I was at Hyllie Park Folkhögskola and recorded a teaching for Bible School Nära. The teaching is a course in Johanneslitteraturen in NT and my teaching would be about the mission perspective. At the end of the Gospel of John, Jesus says something that teaches us so much about how He wants to send us in His mission to this world.

Jesus said to them, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I will send you." After he said this, he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit! (John 20:21-22)

This is something that Jesus said to his disciples then and there that also applies to all his disciples at all times. First, we can understand that all who follow Jesus are sent by Him into this world. But we are not only sent by Jesus—we are also sent AS Jesus. When Jesus sends his disciples, he takes himself as an example and model for what that transmission is meant to look like. This means that all that Jesus says and does is not only meant to create gratitude and adoration in us, but also serve as an example to follow.

There is a lot to be said about this, but here are some things that I think we can learn from how the Son of God was sent to this world.

Incarnation. At the beginning of the Gospel of John, Jesus is spoken of as the Word of God who became flesh and lived among us. This is often called the incarnation. That God became human. The incarnation says a lot about how God works. God does not save from a distance. He became one of us. He took the step all the way straight

into his creation, our reality. Jesus ate our food, lived with human conditions and conditions, and became part of the humanity he was sent to save. Jesus wants to send us too. The mission is not about telling people from a distance to come to us to learn our language and our cultural codes. The mission is to be sent out like missionaries to all the people and communities who need to partake of the gospel of the kingdom of God. The mission of conveying the gospel and making disciples is meant to be carried out there—on their home turf.

Identity as sent. Jesus was always aware of the purpose that God the Father had when he sent him into this world. He said, among other things, "My food is to do his will that has sent me" (John 4:34) When people and circumstances tried to distract him, he always focused on the purpose of the broadcast. The same strong identity as sent we can see in Paul: "From Paul, apostle, sent not by men or by any man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father who has raised him from the dead." An ambassador in this world needs to be constantly aware of his homeland, his mission and his purpose. Otherwise, the ambassador will be like anyone else in the foreign country. Similarly, we need to realize that we are missionaries where we are, sent by Jesus Himself with a mission to accomplish. That identity needs to shape our whole lives, our everyday lives, our economy, our choices, relationships, and so on.

Cross-border transmission. Jesus repeatedly crosses human boundaries to convey the gospel. In the encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4, he challenges both the boundary between Jews and Samaritans and between men and women. Jesus also spends much of his time with the most marginalized in society. Poor, prostitutes, sinners and criminals. That kind of people loved Jesus. He was at a party with them, gave hope and imparted restitution. In the same way, Jesus wants to send us even to those who are not like us and to those

who have the greatest need in their lives.

Send with force. Jesus walked in the power of the Holy Spirit. He did what was impossible for people. He spoke words from God. He healed the sick. He raised dead. He freed people from evil spirits. At one point Jesus said, "The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I do, they testify that the Father has sent me." The miracles Jesus performed in the power of the Holy Spirit were not party tricks to create a fair show. They were signs that Jesus was sent from God. On another occasion he said, "I tell you the truth: Whoever believes in me will do the deeds that I do. And greater than that he will do, for I go to the Father." The same power of the Holy Spirit that worked through Jesus he sends with all those who follow Him.

When Jesus sends his disciples, he takes himself as an example and model for what that transmission is meant to look like.

Send a message. When one reads the Gospel of John, or the other Gospels for that matter, it is clear that Jesus has a message to convey; The Gospel: The Good News. Jesus demonstrated his message in how he met people, through wonders and signs, but also through

spoken words. The same message that Jesus was sent with, he sends us. Sometimes the old quote is used: "Go out and preach the gospel, use words if necessary." I understand the point. We need to convey the message in a credible way through our lives and actions. At the same time, it can lead to errors. When we preach gospel messages, words are needed, too.

It's about the harvest. Jesus always had the harvest in his eyes. Thus, all those people who needed to hear the gospel and have the opportunity to become His disciples and citizens of the kingdom of God. When we think that there are four months until the harvest, Jesus says, "Lift your eyes and see how the fields have whitened to harvest." He sends us to harvest. For Jesus, it was clear that this

could only be done through multiplication. He could not personally speak to the whole world during his limited time on earth. Therefore he sent out his inexperienced disciples to bring in the harvest, therefore he sent the woman at the well back into the city to testify of him, even before she was a believer, therefore he invites us to ask for workers for the harvest, therefore he sends us to make disciples who make disciples who make disciples. The final vision can be read in the Book of Revelation:

Then I saw, and behold: a great multitude that no one could count, of all the peoples and tribes, and countries and languages. They stood before the throne and before the Lamb, dressed in white robes and with palm leaves in their hands, and they cried out in a strong voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and the Lamb!" (Rev. 7:9-10)

Sending in self-sacrificing love. There is no telling how Jesus was sent to this world without speaking of the ultimate price he paid for the salvation of the world by suffering and dying on a cross. When God saves the world, He does not do so from above by force and force. He does so by coming from below as a servant and giving his own life as a ransom for the freedom of humanity.

None of us can do what Jesus did and die a vicarious death yet the cross is an example for us to follow in our dispatch. Like Jesus, his disciples are called to come as suffering servants— not colonizers. We are just as Jesus called to sacrifice ourselves so that the gospel may be spread in this world.

Keep reading the stories about Jesus in the Bible but remember one thing. Try not to just identify with the different people that Jesus meets in the stories. Identify with Jesus! Jesus is not just the object of our worship. He is also our master who calls us to become like Him and follow Him in God's great mission in this world. We are not just sent by Jesus; we are sent like Jesus!

RICKARD CRUZ lives in Helsingborg Sweden
Rickardcruz.se





Brian Anderson

Discovering Participatory Church Meetings

The traditional Protestant worship service today strongly resembles a show business performance. In both we find ushers, programs, music, costumes, lighting, a chorus, a stage, a script, an audience, and a master of ceremonies. (Christian Smith, Going To The Root, Herald Press, p.88.) The congregation sits passively as the audience while the pastor performs. When the congregation is permitted to participate in the meeting, they are restricted to singing in unison, antiphonal readings, dropping money into the offering plate, and taking notes during the sermon. The ordained clergy are expected to perform all significant ministry. Meanwhile, ninety-nine percent of God's people attend worship services Sunday after Sunday for years on end, without ever contributing any true spiritual ministry to the body of gathered believers.

Is this the way God intended for His church to meet? Can the traditional model of church meetings be found in the pages of Scripture? It is my conviction that our tradition which expects the laity to remain spectators while the clergy conduct the "show" cannot be found in the pages of our New Testament, but is instead a serious aberration from the model revealed in the word of God. Rather, the New Testament describes the body of Christ as meeting in a manner in which every believer has the potential of contributing to the building up of the congregation in some significant way.

Historical Background of Church Meetings

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In order for us to grasp the flavor of New Testament church meetings, we must first understand the nature of Jewish synagogue meetings, because they provide the necessary historical context. The apostles of Christ who planted the earliest Christian churches were Jews who had participated in synagogue meetings all their lives. No doubt, these meetings influenced the way early Christians gathered.

Synagogue worship allowed great freedom and participation. Philip Schaff has aptly noted, "As there was no proper priesthood outside of Jerusalem, any Jew of age might get up to read the lessons, offer prayer, and address the congregation." (*Philip Schaff, History Of The Christian Church, Hendrickson, 1:459.*) Indeed, we find Jesus constantly teaching in the synagogues on the Sabbath, (Lu.4:18-30; Mt.4:23; 13:54-58; Mk.1:21; Jn.18:20) even though he was neither a Levitical priest nor the ruler of a synagogue. Moreover, those who spoke in the synagogue meetings were not "pre-screened" as to what they were going to say, for Paul, directly upon his conversion, preached in the synagogues that Jesus was the Son of God to a group of hostile Jews (Acts 9:20).

Furthermore, Paul used the synagogue as his strategic starting point when evangelizing new cities because of this freedom to participate. On the Sabbath, he would enter a synagogue, and when opportunities for teaching and exhortation were given, would preach Jesus as the Christ. It was in the synagogue that Paul spoke in such a way that many of the

residents of Iconium believed (Acts 14:1), that the Bereans received the word with great eagerness (Acts 17:10-12), and where he reasoned every Sabbath day in Corinth, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks (Acts 18:4). Indeed, the format of synagogue worship was so free that even strangers were permitted to bring a word of exhortation (Acts 13:14-41). Synagogue worship encouraged open participation. It is no accident that the meetings of the early Christians followed suit.

Kevin Giles in his book *Patterns of Ministry Among the First Christians* writes insightfully about the relationship between the synagogue and early house church meetings:

In the larger and more institutionalised synagogues we know that the main function of the ruler of the synagogue was to preside over services and to encourage the participation of those present. This is likely to have been the way the first leaders of house-churches functioned. The early Christians avoided the title used by Jews (ruler of the synagogue) and chose instead the neutral, but equally appropriate term *episkopos* [overseer]; yet they continued to hold that the chief duty of those who presided over assemblies was to facilitate widespread participation and not do everything themselves. If so, then it could be that in the new house-churches, where the Holy Spirit gave new life and dynamism, such persons found it was more their lot to limit participation than to encourage it! (*Ken Giles, Patterns of Ministry Among the First Christians, Collins Dove, p.37.*)

Spiritual Gifts in Church Meetings

(In a previous chapter), we saw that the biblical purpose for which the church gathers is to edify one another. So, exactly how should we accomplish this? In most churches, the pastor bears almost the entire responsibility for edifying the saints, because he is the one who speaks most (or even exclusively) when the church assembles. Indeed, John Owen, probably the greatest of the Puritan theologians of the 17th century wrote, "*on this office [the pastor] and the discharge of it he [Christ] hath laid the whole weight of the order, rule, and edification of his church . . .*" (author's emphasis). The Reformers of the 16th century, the Puritans of the 17th century, as well as most Christians of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries also embraced this view. But we must ask the question: Does the word of God establish this approach? On the contrary, 1 Corinthians 12-14 (the most lengthy section in the New Testament detailing principles underlying early church meetings) says a great deal about the ministry of the many, but says nothing about the ministry of only one man when the church meets!

In 1 Corinthians 12 we find an abundance of teaching about the ministry of all believers. For example, in verses 4-6 Paul states that there are varieties of gifts, ministries and effects. Furthermore, he states in verse 6 that "God works all things in all persons." In verse 7 He informs us, "But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Again in verse 11 we read, "But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills." In verse 14 Paul emphatically states that "the body is not one member, but many." (The way most churches meet, one would have thought the passage reads, "the body is not many members, but one!")

Furthermore, in verses 15-25 the apostle goes on to explain that every person has a vital function within the church. All members are needed; none is unimportant. In light of this biblical teaching, how can we justify the idea that when we assemble, only the pastor may use his gifts while the rest of the body remains passive and silent?

In 1 Corinthians 14 the same truth emerges. In verse 1 Paul urges the entire church earnestly to desire spiritual gifts, but especially the gift of prophecy, because one who prophesies edifies the

whole church (vs.5). In verse 26 he describes the church meeting as one in which each one has a psalm, teaching, revelation, tongue or interpretation. At the very least, this passage indicates that when the early church assembled, every believer had the opportunity to contribute to the edification of the whole body. Some bible scholars believe that in this verse Paul is rebuking the participatory manner in which the Corinthians held their church meetings. On the contrary, Paul does not command the Corinthians to stop meeting in a participatory manner. Rather, in verses 27-31 he gives guidelines for meetings which, though they establish order, still require participation by many! Paul's only corrective in verse 26, is his statement, "Let all things be done for edification." In other words, whenever anyone in the church contributes, he must do so with the intent that what he contributes will edify the rest. In verse 27 Paul allows two or three persons to bring a message in tongues, as long as these messages are interpreted. In verse 29 he informs the church that they should "let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment." In verse 31 Paul teaches, "for you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted." In view of this, and the fact that Paul has been emphasizing the superiority of prophecy over tongues in church meetings all the way through the chapter, and that he does not repeat "at the most" after "let two or three prophets speak," as he does in the case of tongues (vs. 27), Paul's reference to two or three prophets speaking should probably be understood as two or three at a minimum. His teaching in 1 Corinthians 14 describes a church meeting in which all have the opportunity of participating, either through a song, a teaching, or some other spiritual gift. This practice may seem impossible in light of the fact that many churches today have anywhere from 200 to 10,000 members. Truly, in a church of that size, it would be impossible to provide an opportunity in which all could participate. We must remember, however, that the early church met almost exclusively in homes (Rom.16:5; Col.4:15). In that setting, where the number of believers could not easily exceed forty or fifty people, the apostle Paul's remarks are much more intelligible. Jon Zens has insightfully written, "It seems to me that we have made normative that for which there is no Scriptural warrant (emphasis

on one man's ministry), and we have omitted that for which there is ample Scriptural support (emphasis on one another)." (*Jon Zens, Baptist Reformation Review, "Building Up The Body: One Man or One Another?" Vol.10, No.2, p.117.*)

William Barclay, though unreliable as a theologian, has written insightfully on the spirit of a church meeting as pictured in 1 Corinthians 14:

*There is no more interesting section in the whole letter than this, for it sheds a flood of light on what an early church service was like. There was obviously great freedom and an informality about it. . . it must remain true that if a man has a message to give his fellow men no ecclesiastical rules and regulations should be able to stop him giving it. It is a mistake to think that only the professional ministry can ever bring God's truth to men. There was obviously a flexibility about the order of service in the early Church. Everything was informal enough to allow any man who felt that he had a message to give to give it. It may well be that we set far too much store on dignity and order nowadays, and have become the slaves of orders of service. The really notable thing about an early Church service must have been that almost everyone came feeling that he had both the privilege and the obligation of contributing something to it. A man did not come with the sole intention of being a passive listener; he came not only to receive but to give. (William Barclay, *The Letters To The Corinthians*, Westminster Press, p.134-135.)*

Many Christians today ignore the teaching in 1 Corinthians 12-14 because they believe that the gifts of prophecy and tongues have ceased with the closing of the New Testament canon. While a wide diversity of opinion exists in the church today about these gifts, all Christians believe that the singing of psalms and teaching should still occur in the meetings of the church (1Cor.14:26). Thus, even if a large segment of the church believes that tongues and prophecy have ceased, they must still grapple with the participatory spirit in the early church in which any could contribute a song or teaching, among other spiritual gifts.

Other Christians believe that though 1 Corinthians 14 does suggest that the church at Corinth met in a participatory manner, it does not serve as a model for us today, because it was spiritually

immature and in need of correction from the apostle in many respects. When Paul writes to them, however, he first describes their church meetings as "each one having a psalm, a teaching, etc.," and then goes on to give them the overarching guideline for everything that takes place in their meetings - "let all things be done for edification" (1Cor.14:26). If the Corinthians were in error in conducting their meetings in a participatory manner, surely Paul would have taken the opportunity in this letter to set them straight. But this is the very thing that he does not do. Although Paul does establish judicious guidelines so that their meetings are conducted in a proper and orderly manner (vs. 40), he does not prohibit mutual participation, but instead encourages it ("let two or three prophets speak," "let the others pass judgment;" and "you can all prophesy one by one"). Others point out that in Paul's later pastoral epistles in which he gives instructions concerning church order, teaching concerning open participation is notably absent. We must remember, however, that Paul writes the pastoral epistles to apostolic representatives (Timothy and Titus) regarding their particular responsibilities to the churches they served. We would expect Paul's emphasis in the pastoral epistles to be different from his letters to entire churches. In his letters to churches, Paul directs the whole body as to their mutual responsibilities to one another; in his letters to particular individuals (Timothy and Titus) he directs them as to their particular responsibilities to the church. Thus, nothing in the pastoral epistles contradicts the full ministry of elders and the full ministry of the entire body.

Still others argue that Paul directs the Corinthian church to minister to one another because it didn't have elders yet. They say that when the church had appointed elders, Paul's instructions on mutual body ministry in the church gatherings would become obsolete as the elders took upon themselves the duty of edifying the church. This, however, is an argument from silence, the least convincing kind of all. Scripture never states that there were no elders in Corinth. On the contrary, in 1 Corinthians 16:15-16, Paul mentions the household of Stephanas as those who have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints, and the ones to whom the church should

subject themselves. Though these individuals are not specifically identified as elders, Paul's instructions indicate that they functioned as such. Furthermore, we have every reason to believe that the church at Corinth had elders, as this was the uniform practice of the churches that Paul planted (Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5).

If 1 Corinthians was the only New Testament book in which all believers were taught to utilize their spiritual gifts for the benefit of the whole, the above-mentioned objections might carry greater weight. The apostle Paul, however, teaches this same practice in other letters as well. For example, in Ephesians 4:15-16 he exhorts, "but speaking the truth in love we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love." In this passage Paul directs the entire church to speak the truth in love. Additionally, every individual Christian (each individual part) must work properly in order for the whole body to grow and build up itself in love. In other words, the edification of the whole body is not the responsibility of one man or a few men. Rather, it is the responsibility of all.

Again, in Romans 12:3-8, the apostle makes this point crystal clear. *"For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness."*

Notice several things about this passage. First, God allots each Christian a measure of faith by which he exercises one or more spiritual gifts. Second, God gives different Christians various functions to perform within the body. Third, each Christian is

responsible to exercise his gift. Fourth, the gifts Paul lists are those we would expect to see when the church meets: prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, mercy. Thus, the biblical pattern is uniform - all God's people have the privilege and responsibility of employing their respective spiritual gifts in order to build up the whole church in Christ.

The apostle Peter echoes the sentiments of Paul as well. *"As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God; whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever"* (1 Pet.4:10-11). Notice that Peter emphasizes that each believer has gifts, and that he is to employ them, or put them to work. Furthermore, these gifts are comprised of two basic kinds - speaking and serving gifts. Although believers can and should serve one another throughout the week in all kinds of situations, a natural place for believers to put speaking and serving gifts to work is in the meetings of the church. Would not a recipient of Peter's letter have immediately thought of the church meetings as the logical starting place in fulfilling this command? Is it not natural to assume that believers should employ their gifts when they assemble? Is that not what Paul is urging in 1 Corinthians 14 (especially verses 26-31)? Is there any reason to assume that Peter is not describing the church as gathered in 1 Peter 4:11-12? It is unlikely that someone would conclude that Peter wanted his readers to use their spiritual gifts exclusively at times other than church meetings unless he held a previous bias against mutual participation in church meetings.

Mutual Exhortation in Church Meetings

Not only is the body responsible to edify one another through the exercise of spiritual gifts when they gather, they are also to edify one another through mutual exhortation and encouragement.

In Hebrews 10:23-25, the Scriptures declare, *"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and*

all the more, as you see the day drawing near." Notice that this text describes the saints as assembling together. But exactly what are the saints supposed to do when they assemble together? The text does not leave us in doubt; the whole body is to stimulate one another to love and good deeds and encourage one another. Furthermore, no mention is made of the pastor performing this stimulating and encouraging ministry. Rather, Scripture says, let us stimulate and encourage. The author of Hebrews is urging the whole body to take up these duties. Often these verses are used to rebuke church members who miss an occasional meeting. However the intent of the passage is to warn professing Christians of "forsaking" (a strong word which means to desert once and for all) the gatherings of the saints and returning to the Old Covenant law, priesthood, and sacrifices. It is a shame that this passage is used so often to browbeat church members into faithful attendance at the stated meetings of the church (which is not the original intent of the passage) but is not used to give direction to the functioning of the church when it has assembled (which is the intent of the passage). The text clearly links mutual exhortation and encouragement with the assembling of the saints. Our church traditions have misconstrued this text to mean, "let the pastor consider how he may stimulate the church to love and good deeds and encourage the rest of the body as he sees the day drawing near." The author of Hebrews goes on to explain why it is so important for the church to exhort and encourage one another when they assemble. *"For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries"* (Heb.10:26-27). The meaning of the passage is clear. The fire of hell awaits those who apostatize from the truth. Mutual encouragement and exhortation are the means the people of God must use to avoid apostasy. We neglect these means at our own peril. A dozen systematic theologies line the shelves of my personal library; I have consulted each and every one, and have yet to find one which mentions mutual exhortation as a primary means of the perseverance of the saints. Though mutual exhortation is a biblical means of perseverance, it is one which the church has neglected far too long. Mutual encouragement and exhortation then, according to God's Word, should occupy a



central place in the activities of the gathered church. Surely, when one man (the pastor) performs all the exhorting and encouraging, the clear pattern of New Testament church meetings has been violated.

One Anothering in Church Meetings

Not only do we see participatory church meetings emphasized by the stress laid upon each believer to utilize his spiritual gift, and exhort one another when the church gathers, but we also find it in the more than fifty "one another" commands of the New Testament. Scripture enjoins believers to:

1. Love one another (John 13:34-35; 15:12,17; Rom.13:8; 1Thess.3:12; 1Thess.4:9; 2Thess.1:3; 1Pet.1:22; 1Pet.4:8; 1John 3:11; 1John 3:23; 1John 4:7,11,12; 2John 1:5)
2. Be devoted to one another (Rom.12:10)
3. Give preference to one another (Rom.12:10)
4. Be of the same mind toward one another (Rom.12:16; 15:5)
5. Not judge one another (Rom.14:13)
6. Pursue the things which make for the building up of one another (Rom.14:19)
7. Pursue the things which make for peace with one another (Rom.14:19)
8. Accept one another (Rom.15:7)
9. Admonish one another (Rom.15:14; Col.3:16)
10. Greet one another (Rom.16:16; 1Cor.16:20; 2Cor.13:12; 1Pet.5:14)
11. Wait for one another (1Cor.11:33)
12. Have the same care for one another (1Cor.12:25)
13. Serve one another (Gal.5:13)
14. Not challenge one another (Gal.5:26)
15. Not envy one another (Gal.5:26)
16. Show forbearance to one another (Eph.4:2)
17. Be kind to one another (Eph.4:32)
18. Forgive one other (Eph.4:32; Col.3:13)
19. Speak to one another (Eph.5:19)
20. Be subject to one another (Eph.5:21)
21. Regard one another as more important than yourself (Phil.2:3)
22. Not lie to one another (Col.3:9)
23. Bear with one another (Col.3:13)
24. Teach one another (Col.3:16)
25. Comfort one another (1Thess.4:18)
26. Encourage one another (1Thess.5:11; Heb.3:13; Heb.10:25)
27. Build up one another (1Thess.5:11)

28. Live in peace with one another (1Thess.5:13)
29. Seek after that which is good for one another (1Thess.5:15)
30. Stimulate one another to love and good deeds (Heb.10:24)
31. Not speak against one another (James 4:11)
32. Not complain against one another (James 5:9)
33. Confess your sins to one another (James 5:16)
34. Be hospitable to one another (1Pet.4:9)
35. Employ your spiritual gift in serving one another (1Pet.4:10)
36. Clothe yourself with humility toward one another (1Pet.5:5)
37. Have fellowship with one another (1John 1:7)

of God assemble week after week, month after month, year in and year out, as silent spectators in clergy-dominated meetings, it is unlikely that they will consistently obey these commands.

Joint Sharing in Church Meetings

The New Testament Scriptures affirm that joint sharing should form another important activity in our church meetings. In 1 Peter 3:8, all are exhorted to be sympathetic toward one another. The Greek word translated "sympathetic" literally means "suffering or feeling the like with one another." (The New Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon, Hendrickson, p.596.) It should come as no surprise, then, that Paul commands believers to *"rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep"* (Rom.12:15). Furthermore, he notes, *"if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it"* (1Cor.12:26).

In order for us to obey Paul's clear teaching, we must open up our meetings so that people can share their burdens, or rejoice together in God's blessings. In many churches, if a brother comes to a meeting with a wonderful blessing from God he wants to share, he must scurry around after the meeting, in order to communicate it to five or six others before they drive home. Similarly, in most churches, if someone's heart is breaking with sorrow, there is no place in the meeting for them to unburden their hearts and receive the prayer and ministry of the body. Why not open our meetings so that the whole church can rejoice with us in our blessings, and minister to us in our sufferings? In this way, all may be encouraged by the joyful, and minister to the sufferer.

Historical Decline of Church Meetings

As we have seen, New Testament church meetings abounded with openness and mutual participation. In this respect, they were very different from our one-man

performances today. How have our churches drifted so far off track? What happened to cause the church to go from open participation to passive spectating?

Like any new movement, the church began to gradually become more and more institutionalized shortly after its inception. In the second century, because of a fear of heresy from within and persecution from without, the authority of the bishop rose dramatically in the church. (Each local church was previously shepherded by a plurality of gifted servants called elders - Acts 20:28; 1 Pet.5:1-4). At the same time, these bishops began to retain an increased amount of the ministry which had previously belonged to the whole body. Slowly but surely, clergy-dominated meetings replaced the exciting and invigorating participatory meetings of the New Testament church.

The final blow came early in the fourth century, when Emperor Constantine in 313 issued the Edict of Milan which granted Christians freedom from persecution by making Christianity a legal religion of the State. After Constantine professed the Christian faith, he not only legalized Christianity, but paved the way for it to become Rome's favored religion.

During the years that followed, Constantine ordered many large church buildings built at public expense, began paying salaries to the bishops and presbyters of most congregations, and promoted many Christians to positions of prominence and prosperity. The small and simple church meetings held in homes gave way to large and complex meetings in state-funded "sanctuaries." Prominent orators preaching long and eloquent sermons took the place of ordinary believers sharing their heart-felt exhortations. Body participation gave way to professional eloquence; spontaneity to rigid structure. Eventually, the only way ordinary church members could participate in church meetings was to sing or chant in unison together.

Early in the 16th century Martin Luther recovered several key biblical doctrines which served to spearhead the Protestant Reformation. One of these was the "priesthood of all believers." Luther held this doctrine, however, primarily in a private sense, rather than within the corporate body of Christ. For centuries the Roman Catholic church had taught that God's people were dependent on the officially set apart clergy (priests) in order

I have personally counted fifty-nine New Testament references to "one another" responsibilities. The critical question then becomes: when should the church obey these commands? Some may argue that we should obey these commands outside of the regular meetings of the church. However, how would a first century Christian have understood these commands? What better opportunity would he have to love, serve, admonish, exhort, fellowship, accept, greet, forbear, build up, encourage, comfort and teach other believers, than in the gatherings of the church? I readily admit that these one-another commands should be obeyed throughout the week, whenever believers are with each other. But obedience to them should certainly characterize the meetings of the church, which comprise our primary opportunities to meet with one another. I submit to you, that if we are to obey these New Testament "one-another" commands, it is important that interaction and open participation characterize our meetings. If the people



to receive God's grace. Luther, on the other hand, taught that every believer could go directly to God through Christ to receive God's grace for himself. In that respect, all believers had immediate access to God through the Spirit, and were all priests. Luther and the other reformers, however, did not implement the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers in the meetings of the local church. They replaced the communion altar with the pulpit and the priest with the pastor, but clergy dominance and member passivity continued to dominate the meetings of the church. Such continues to be the case in most Protestant churches to this day.

Our Journey in Implementing Participatory Meetings

When I arrived at Milpitas Bible Fellowship in 1990, our meetings were fairly typical of most other churches. After thirty to forty minutes of worship, I would give the announcements, preach my sermon, and pronounce the closing benediction. We experienced little if any real interaction and mutual body ministry during our meetings. The whole church looked to me as its source of edification. When God began opening my eyes to the importance of participatory church meetings, my first reaction was one of fear. I was terrified at what might happen if I truly opened up the meetings for all of God's people to minister. I feared our meetings would turn into bedlam if I gave all an opportunity to speak. I wrestled with these principles for some time until the strength of conviction overcame my fears.

In the Summer of 1996, we began implementing these principles. Our first step was to open up various homes during the week for "house church" meetings. These "house churches" functioned as small group meetings for believers where each could learn to interact, pray, encourage, exhort, and minister to one another. Almost everyone was enthused about these home meetings, although at first we were a bit unsure how to function in them.

After a few months, as we became more comfortable with these informal home meetings, we began introducing more participation into our Sunday gatherings. I informed the congregation that anyone could participate by reading Scripture, praying during a lull in our praise singing, or starting a song that was on their heart. I brought the podium down from the platform to the lower level so that I could be closer to the people, thereby

encouraging mutual interaction. We rearranged the chairs into concentric semi-circles so that we could look into one another's faces when speaking, instead of the back of someone's head. We bought a wireless microphone and began passing it around to those desiring to share what God had been doing in their lives or to encourage us by declaring what God had been teaching them from His Word. Sometimes these sessions included exhortations, admonitions, teachings, or the sharing of blessings or burdens. One woman revealed that she had recently been diagnosed with cancer. This allowed the whole church the opportunity to tangibly express their love and commitment by gathering around, laying hands on her, and praying. These changes felt a bit awkward at first. We had no previous model to guide us, and thus, felt a bit uncomfortable with them. Before long, however, many began contributing some very edifying insights and exhortations.

Furthermore we began opening up our meetings directly after the sermon for questions, comments, and insights from others. I was very hesitant about this new move, fearing that all doctrinal purity might be lost if everyone was permitted to comment from the Scriptures. On the contrary, this new aspect of our meetings proved especially enriching. Often someone would bring an insight that I had missed in my sermon preparation that would open up the text in an important way. At other times, people shared insights as to how they could personally apply the text under consideration. On still other occasions, someone would ask a question that many others had on their mind, but would not have voiced. Instead of producing doctrinal confusion, I found that the questions and comments enabled me to allay confusion by addressing the real issues which were perplexing the church. On those rare occasions when someone stated something unbiblical, I was able to gently refocus the church by bringing them back to Scripture. Instead of producing chaos, I discovered that it fostered spiritual maturity, intimacy, and love for the brethren. In fact, by adding the time of questions and comments, the church was easily able to concentrate on the Word of God for well over an hour. Often this segment proved to be the most invigorating and helpful of the entire meeting. Whereas

our previous meetings lasted about ninety minutes, the new participatory meetings usually took a minimum of two hours to complete. The consensus of the church, though, was that the quality of the meetings was well worth the additional time spent together. The new meetings began to spawn additional interaction among the people. Many began going out to eat after the meeting to spend more time together. Sometimes up to half of the church could be seen piling into a Taco Bell, Burger King, or McDonald's after a Sunday morning meeting to continue their discussion of the things of God.

I cannot overstate the importance of creating an atmosphere of freedom for body participation in the meetings of the church. When church members do nothing but sit, listen, and take notes week after week for years on end, they tend to stagnate spiritually. Spiritual growth requires us to flex our spiritual muscles and apply the truths we are learning. What good is it for our people to learn that God wants them to use their spiritual gifts, exhort one another, bear each other's burdens, and rejoice with those who rejoice if we make no provision for them to do that when the church meets?

Having been involved in participatory church meetings now for almost two years. I know that I would find the traditional model stifling and unsatisfying. God has proven over and over that as we step out in obedience to apply the patterns we see in His Word, His blessings are sure to follow.

Conclusion

In most churches today church meetings look more like a professional performance than the family of God meeting under the headship of Christ to edify one another. It is time for the church of Jesus Christ to return to its New Testament roots. One of the slogans of the Protestant reformers was "always reforming." One area in which the contemporary church desperately needs ongoing reform is that of providing mutual ministry and participation in its meetings. Will you take up the challenge in so far as you have influence in your local church to seek reformation in its practices in order to conform to Scripture?



BRIAN ANDERSON leads *The Bridge*, a network of home churches in Sonora, California. solidrock.net



David Tensen

WHERE DO YOU GO TO CHURCH? Well, it's complicated.

A few months ago, Natalie and I came home from a day at our respective workplaces and we'd each been asked the same question, "Where do you guys go to church?" I've asked it of others many times. Depending on their answer, you make assumptions. There should be no shame or harm in asking it of Christians. But our awkward answer is, 'Nowhere, at the moment.' And as we reflected on the coincidental questioning, we both couldn't help go through the reasons and options before us... again.

We live in a part of the world where lockdowns have eased and attending a service on Sunday is open and easy. We don't have logistical reasons for going nowhere. There are about ten church services we could attend within ten minutes' drive from our home. We know people in most of those congregations. We don't work Sundays. We have deep love and respect for many of the pastors of these congregations – some are friends. Yet, most Sundays we find ourselves anywhere but at a church service. Like many who find themselves unable to answer the opening question with ease, our reasons are complex.

As I list some of the reasons behind why we don't attend a local church, I have to acknowledge that part of me is still living with a combination of guilt and shame because we don't take our family somewhere on the weekend. My kids don't attend a youth group. We don't attend a small group of sorts. We don't give or tithe to a church. Yes, I still

advocate for the support of pastoral workers (and their families) whose wellbeing lays heavy on my heart. But as a guy who served on stage two services-per-Sunday for decades plus spent nearly 7 years travelling to help churches, it has taken me a couple of years to shake off the habit and feeling that I 'need to' or 'should be' attending somewhere on the weekend. But I just can't...

If you know my background, you'll know the life Natalie and I poured into The Church, both voluntarily and in career/jobs. It has shaped me. From the little AOG Church on Bribie Island, Queensland, where I came to learn about Jesus in my teens, a missions stint in Tokyo in my twenties, through to deep involvement in inner healing and pastoral support in my thirties, my life has been anything but dull or uncommitted. As much as I gave, I have also been a receiver of much... and still am. But now, in my early 40s, my relationship with the church looks different. At this point of life, I face unique challenges. By no means have I written-off the value of attending and being involved in a local church. Nat and I often talk about getting back to it later in life. But I'd like to share with you some of the reasons we don't attend a church anymore.

Before I list my reasons, I am aware that there are some who have come to a place in their life where they are done with church altogether. They may or may not still hold a level of faith in Christ. They may have been hurt by a church and absolutely hate it. I get that. I really

do. But that is not us. Yes, I am still recovering from a degree of C-PTSD as a result of the work I was involved in and exposed too. But I don't hate The Church, nor am I done with it. I list these reasons knowing that very few people will relate to all of them, but you or someone you know may resonate with a few of them and I want you to know that you're not alone. Let's face it, recent events and restrictions have disrupted the reasons and habits of gathering on Sundays. Lots of people are wrestling in their relationship with The Church.

KIDS AND DIVERSITY

We have three children. 17,13,11. Two of them live with diagnosed sensory disorders and neurodiversity. All of them spent years of their childhood in church. They also spent years of their childhood with their dad travelling to distant churches half of the year. They simply don't want to go anymore. And they are not alone according to this research. We don't want to go without them. And we don't want to force them. We pray with them. We talk about being Christ followers but getting them in a car on Sunday morning and taking them to a church service now is just too stressful for us all. (I clearly remember the last time we attempted it involved lots of bribing and swearing.) We don't want their memory of church to be negative or traumatic. So we have learnt to let it go for a season. If you or someone you know are sensory or neuro diverse, whether HSP, ADHD, HSP or otherwise, you'll know that many modern church services are overwhelming. The lights,

sounds, music, crowd, preaching, cheering etc are a LOT to take in. As a highly sensitive person (HSP – it's a nervous system trait), having not attended regular services for a few years now, I have come to realise how much overwhelm and stress I held in my body on Sundays. I was never able to sit through a sermon without going to the toilet to pee. I could never relax. I would always come home and need a nap because my nervous system was shot. As I've aged, my ability to push through, coax the kids and 'just turn up' has waned. Nat is the same. Sundays have become true Sabbaths for us; Restful, restorative, reflective. Maybe you can relate.

THEOLOGY

I've always had an interest in theology. I know many Christians don't nerd out on it like I do, but my curiosity finds itself at home in the research, books and podcasts that dig deeper into scriptures and history than Sunday sermons or pop-preaching allow. I've always tended to shy away from anything mainstream – preferring to read and ask questions at the fringes and origins of things. The core tenants of my faith don't differ from most but, at the moment, I do hold differing and suspended views on topics of eternity, atonement, salvation, sexuality, gender roles, spirituality and end-times that many protestants do (incl. evangelical / pentecostals). Don't get me wrong, I'm happy to hold space for a variety of sermons and views but if I'm honest, I don't know if I could actively commit and invest in a local church family where sermons, prayers and actions are based on the same theological views I once held and lived by. Is that pride or rigidity in me? Perhaps. I hope not. I can see the importance and appeal of many of the theological views I once held too. But I'm not the kind to attend church, only to be untangling the sermon from myself and my family on the way home. Let's face it, Sunday messages are not meaningful conversations. They are monologues. I'm also at a stage of life where I can't just turn up and participate with a large part of me silenced and shut down? I'm a pretty diplomatic guy but I made a decision a few years ago as I was travelling and preaching that if a church wasn't prepared to hold a space for all of me, they wouldn't have any of me. My invites decreased, but the sense of being

true to myself skyrocketed. Still today, there are a small number of congregations I feel very much at home and honoured in (but none of them are local, unfortunately). In short, image-management and peacekeeping through silence requires more energy than I have right now. Maybe this is you too.

WORKPLACES

Natalie works as a social worker in a low socio-economic community. Every day, she's at the coal-face of service to the underprivileged and under-resourced. Like many social workers, she's practically a community pastor (with fair pay and better training). By the weekend, she doesn't want to be around needy people who find her after the service for advice. She doesn't want to be serving another charity. She needs a break. We need to shop, clean the house, prep the kids for school etc. She's had her faith and community fix at work, chats with friends and in our home.

Until this week I have worked at a Christian charity two days per week. I mainly work with Christians. I work as a chaplain and trainer of sorts. I attend/facilitate the workplace devotions most days. On other days I catch up with friends for coffee and chat. Most of them are Christians. I connect with pastors often. I run my Poetry Chapel group. I have plenty of fellowship. I know many people who don't have work weeks like I do, and Sunday is where they connect with other Christians and are encouraged in their faith. I've been there. It's super important and I get the desire to be part of services and communities on the weekends. But that's not us.

STAGE OF FAITH

I have been a follower of Christ for 25 years. I have no intention in stopping. I love God too much. I'm loved with an everlasting love. I've been in church leadership positions for decades. I founded a ministry. Managed others. Written books. Seen miracles. Travelled nations. I'm parenting young adults. I've been through bankruptcy and countless personal and familial challenges. God knows my heart and the long hellish roads we've journeyed through. As far as my faith goes, I'm not a kid anymore. Nor am I a teen. I hope, if there is anything I've achieved in my faith journey, it's not accolades or attendance stickers – it's maturity. And maturity comes to us over

time, by God's grace, on the narrow road of obedience, suffering and healing. Maturity even comes via deconstruction and reconstruction – AKA sanctification. If you knew our full story, you'd know we've helped countless others through their fair share of challenges too. One of the books that describes the stages of faith very well is called the Critical Journey. I've taught on their model quite/a bit. It's given me the language and permission to be OK with where life finds us now. Maybe you're OK too.

AGE & MATURITY

If I may, I'd like to add some final and developing thoughts regarding maturity and age. This may come back to bite me, but... withstanding reasonable excuses, if you have been in The Church for 20+ years, sat through thousands of sermons and taken your faith seriously, I personally think you should be able to successfully lead your own faith journey and have something significant to offer those in earlier stages on their faith and life journey (AKA discipleship). Is that often preached? Are people who've attended church for decades told to grow up and go out? Sadly, no. I tend to think many modern Western models of church prefer to retain attendees and want a return from their members in volunteer service and funding instead of doing the brave, hard, healing work of releasing them.

Let me put it another way:

- * Healthy families invest in their children to release them into the world. Right?
- * Profitable companies invest in their customers for a return. Right?
- * Perhaps churches desiring to be apostolic should invest in their people to release them, not retain them (Eph 4). And maybe this should look more like a family than a company or empire. Yeah? Church models interested in keeping people in immaturity and dependency trouble me. Don't get me wrong, there are always dysfunctional sheep who like to push away personal responsibility and prefer to hand agency and authority over to willing and possibly narcissistic or co-dependent shepherds – but that's not the point I'm trying to make. Here's the thing: I meet so many smart, capable mature Christian men and women, 35yrs+, who are waiting on some kind of permission, invitation, qualification or carved out ministry plan to start

something of their own. Man, if my daughter, at 25 is still calling me to see if she is allowed to change jobs or date someone, I have failed as a parent! Does this resonate with anyone?

In summary, the reasons we don't attend a local church are complicated. Some may think we are forsaking 'the gathering together with others' (Heb 10:25) – but that would imply we believe it's unimportant. No way! If our daughter

finds a church somewhere she wants to drive to and attend, we'll support and encourage it. Our son often attends a local youth group with a mate, and we'll gladly take him! But for us right now, it's not as simple as clocking in at a Sunday service anymore. We're capable, responsible, skilled adults who are in a season and stage of life where things look different than the ingrained or expected norm for many. Did it take me a few years to stop feeling guilty? Yep.

Did I see a therapist about it? Yep. The inner tug that I should be attending a single church we feed and learn from was very real – particularly because the Pentecostal denomination I spent years in and was ordained by (ACC) holds service attendance in high regard. But right now we're happy, healthy and at peace with where we are at. Perhaps, you are too.



Davidtensen.com

Three Church Planting Lessons from

IKEA

I've been fascinated with IKEA since first visiting the home furnishing superstore more than 20 years ago. Over the years I've formed a set of IKEA-inspired church-planting lessons.

IKEA was founded by a Swedish teenager named Ingvar Kamprad and has grown into one of the world's most recognized companies. Ingvar's dream was to create a better life for as many people as possible – whatever the size of their wallet.

Personally, I've been fascinated with IKEA since first visiting the home furnishing superstore more than 20 years ago. Maybe it's the fact that the shopping carts don't have any fixed wheels and move freely in all directions. Perhaps it's the "as-is" room where the already cheap furniture is discounted even more. Who knows, maybe it's the meatballs!

Whatever the reason, over the years I've formed a set of IKEA-inspired church-planting lessons. I hope you are inspired as well.

Lesson 1 – Instruction manuals: IKEA instruction manuals are fascinating. No words, only pictures.

Simple, black and white drawings communicate everything you need to know about assembling your new bunk

beds without saying a word. IKEA took a big problem, language barriers, and instead of doing what 100% of other companies do and translating their instructions into a variety of languages, they simply drew the assembly instructions.

Church planting lesson: As a church planter, you're going to look at the problems of your community and the solutions other churches have come up with and hopefully you'll say, with IKEA, "There has to be a better way!" If you put your mind to it, you can find new ways to communicate the gospel to those who don't get it.

Lesson 2 – Flat boxes: IKEA pioneered flat-pack boxing in 1956. Ingvar created furniture that consumers assemble themselves with simple tools, and it all fits into a flat box that can slide inside your car trunk or under the seat of your van with ease. Flat packing saves on packing materials and transportation costs. Unlike most furniture stores, flat packing means you can take your furniture home immediately without a delivery service.

Church planting lesson: As a church planter, you will have to pay close attention to the reasons people in your community aren't engaged in church life. Some of them have emotional baggage, some of them lack spiritual interest, but

some just can't fit it practically into their lives. IKEA found a way to package the same product in a more-accessible form and as a church planter, if you hope to reach those far from God, you'll have to find creative ways to deliver eternal truth.

Lesson 3 – Map over menu: Most stores have a menu but IKEA has a map. When you go into IKEA, there are arrows on the floor pointing you in the direction you are intended to go. Deviating from the suggested path is possible but not encouraged. IKEA knows that if you come in to get only a light bulb, you are going to miss the incredible new sofa beds. If you come in for a sofa bed, you are going to miss the kitchen appliances. So, they make you walk a very intentional pathway – through the furniture forest, into the land of lighting, past the community of chairs by the meatball metropolis and straight into warehouse world.

Church planting lesson: In your church, people need a map, not a menu. Menus give people what they want, but maps take people to destinations. Plant a church that has a clear destination in mind for those who make up the congregation. Design pathways that help them reach spiritual and missional maturity.

CLINT CLIFTON



DO WE HAVE STRUCTURE *Or not?*

ANDREW STIRLING

Do we have structure or not?

I have discussed this question with many people over the years. I even asked this question on a Facebook group called 'Organic Church Movements' recently. Here are the results:



Option	Count
<input type="checkbox"/> Leave everything to the Holy Spirit	+24
<input type="checkbox"/> Have something prepared and always plan to use it unless God intervenes	+12
<input type="checkbox"/> Let Holy Spirit lead but have something prepared in case nothing happens.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Stick to a prepared order of service regardless of what happens	

More than half of the respondents answered by saying we should not have any structure. They obviously want to allow God the freedom to move as he sees fit during gatherings. The rest are uncomfortable with that. They believe there must be some sort of structure, otherwise people attend a gathering but may leave without growing in their faith.

My Journey

Seven years ago, I left the regular church and started my journey in home church. I had many reasons for leaving. One of the main ones was that church services were too rigid. I was also frustrated because after seven years, I hadn't become more mature in Christ. Others in church had been attending longer than I had and weren't mature either. I knew there had to be a better way. It was at this time that I started meeting with other

believers in homes.

We had no idea what to do when we met. We knew we wanted the flexibility to grow in our faith as God led us so we were faced with this question: Do we have structure in house church or not?

In my first year of being out of regular church, I equated rigidity with structure so I didn't want any format at all. I'd had enough of that in the traditional church. I agreed with those people who said that we should have no structure and allow God the freedom to move within our meetings.

No preparation was done whatsoever.

The first year was good because all the people we met with were spirit-filled. We had plenty of testimonies to share about what God had been doing in our lives.

We enjoyed the freedom to practice spiritual gifts such as prophesying, healing and interpreting tongues. We prayed together, fasted together and shared the gospel on the streets together. During this year, we grew in amazing ways and traditional church was a distant memory.

Then it became mundane.

After a while, we realised we had no direction. We had run out of things to say and do. Now, when we gathered together, we had great intentions of advancing the kingdom but ended up talking about things like flowers, cars and curtains.

I became frustrated again. I left the regular church because people weren't growing. I thought home church was the answer. Now that I was doing home church,

people were only growing a small amount. I knew there must be a better way!

I began to ask myself whether we had done the right thing by having no structure. I was still completely opposed to any form of rigidity, but I was forced to admit that we needed some sort of direction.

I started researching what the Bible says about whether structure is important when meeting together. Then I came across this startling realisation. Even Jesus gave his disciples a plan when he sent them out!

When he sent out his disciples in Luke 9:1-6 and 10:1-12, he gave them specific instructions on what to do.

He told them to preach the kingdom of God and heal the sick. He told them to take nothing for the journey and to find a person of peace. Once they found that person, they were instructed to stay there eating and drinking whatever they served.

Having a plan is not against God's will.

Jesus didn't say, "Just let the Spirit lead you." Or "God will give you the words to say."

Formulating a list of things to do and topics to cover before meeting up can lead to huge growth in people. It doesn't always have to be spontaneous.

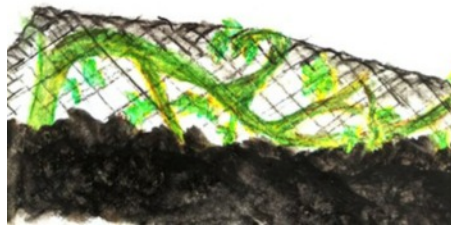
How we run a house church is similar to how we care for our tomato plants. In the following illustrations, the stakes that hold the tomato plants refers to having structure or a plan when gathering with other believers. The net that covers the tomato plants refers to oversight by a mature believer.



Tomato Plant #1. No stakes (no structure), no cover (no oversight) Church with no structure and no oversight

In this painting, the tomato plant has no structure and no net covering it. It is lying on the ground because it has nothing to keep it up. Birds and insects can easily come and eat any fruit which forms.

This was us during our first year in home church. We had great intentions of producing much fruit but we ended up accomplishing very little. We had no structure for our meetings and no mature oversight to guide us.



Tomato Plant #2. No structure and tight control. Church with no structure and tight control

This tomato plant has no structure so it stays on the ground where it doesn't produce much fruit. An attempt has been made to prevent any fruit from being eaten by birds by putting a net over it. Unfortunately, it won't achieve much as the net is too tight.

This plant represents house churches who are led by the Spirit when they gather and have a controlling leader who doesn't allow any of the participants to contribute anything meaningful.



Tomato Plant #3. Tight structure and tight control. Church with tight structure and tight control.

This tomato plant has been staked tightly. The plant is growing vertical but the ties that bind it to the stake are too tight and is choking the plant. The plant also has a tight net over it. This helps the birds to stop eating the fruit, but it is so tight that it is stifling the growth of the plant.

This represents house churches that are simply having church in their homes. They have a rigid structure and a controlling pastor who is in charge of everything. Again, there is little to no fruit.



Tomato Plant #4. Loose structure and loose control. Church with loose structure and loose control.

This tomato plant is tied loosely to a stake. As it grows more ties are added to keep it growing vertically. The ties are also loosened and re-tied as the plant grows to stop the plant from being choked. There is a loose net over it to prevent birds from eating the fruit. As a result, there is much fruit.

This represents a house church with a loose structure that allows freedom for everyone to contribute and caring oversight from a humble elder.

Conclusion

Structure and oversight are both important but they shouldn't be rigid. With everything in life, we need the right balance. It is easy to go to one extreme or another based on our experiences. If you have come out of a rigid regular church, please don't throw out structure and oversight altogether! They are great tools if used correctly.

We have had loose structure and oversight for approximately one year now. Since doing it this way we have noticed there has been increased participation from all members. The awkward silences and idle chatter have decreased dramatically. And the great thing is Holy Spirit is still active throughout our meetings!



ANDREW STIRLING stirlingfamily.nz



The Disciples Toolbox

Looking for some good, short resource videos to use in your group to help develop outreach? **The Disciples Toolbox** is a 13 part series created by **Phil Brown** to give an overview of the processes and tools that can be used in making disciples who make disciples. Oikos.org.au



1. Introduction Getting your head around being effective in Jesus great commission to 'Make Disciples' can be a challenge. Many people ask, "so what does that actually mean? What does it look like?"



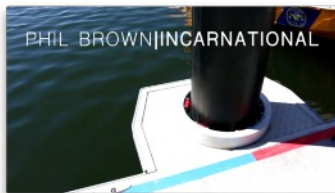
2. Vision What Jesus started was a movement that has multiplied throughout the world. Are we seeing this multiplication where we are now?



3. Listening As we learn to listen to God, to find quiet time, we will hear His voice. He says, 'my sheep hear my voice'.



4. Being Missional The story of the elephants and the rabbits is powerful illustration of the impact of small groups and their ability to multiply rapidly into movements.



5. Incarnational Ministry Like Jesus we are to enter into the world of different people and groups and share the Gospel in their context.



6. Person of Peace Finding a person of peace and their natural oikos is a key to starting new missional communities.



7. Sharing Faith part. 1 Listen and understand their story. Share a little of your own. Include God in your story and his impact in our life



8. Sharing Faith part. 2 The God and Man Story. Many people have little idea of Jesus story, and Gods great plan for humanity



9. Sharing Faith part. 3: Who do we share faith with? Creating an Oikos map, a focused list of our family and friends and people from our relational network and then identifying who is far from God and how to draw them in.



10. Come and Follow Me A decision to follow Jesus involves changing our mind and direction and being baptized. It also involves sharing your faith.



11. Discovery Bible Study An increasingly popular self discovery approach to the Bible. Anyone can do this - you don't have to be an expert!



12. When disciples Gather: Missional Communities/Simple church There are no fixed formulas in gathering together but some important elements are suggested In this video.



13. Prayer Walking A powerful tool which involves walking, interceding, binding the enemy and open peoples hearts. Also to look for people of peace.



PAUL'S FOURFOLD PATTERN (OR STRATEGY)

1. Paul was intentional about bringing the gospel of the kingdom to populated cities in the Roman Empire. The reason appears to be so that the gospel would spread throughout those cities and also to nearby areas. For this reason, if the gospel had penetrated a city enough for a kingdom community to be born, Paul considered the entire city to be evangelized. (He makes this plain in the epistles.)

2. Paul would preach the gospel to the Jew first then to the Gentile. While Paul's specific commission was to the Gentiles, his heart was with his own people, the Jews. The gospel, therefore, was to first be preached to the Jew first, just as Jesus did. Consequently, Paul would seek to preach in cities that had a decent-sized Jewish population, beginning with the synagogue. If a synagogue wasn't present (a city needed ten men to create a synagogue), he would seek out a clean place (like a river) where Jews and God-fearers would worship. This is what happened in Philippi.

3. Paul would seek to convert a well-to-do person who owned a home. That person, once receiving the gospel, would serve as the host for Paul's operations. From that home, Paul would raise up a new kingdom community in the city. The house would be the place where the ekklesia would gather together. This strategy maps to what Jesus told His disciples about finding a man of peace (Luke 10:5ff.).

4. Paul continually moved west as he preached the gospel of the kingdom. If you examine all of Paul's apostolic journeys, you'll note that he traveled from Antioch to South Galatia to Greece to Asia Minor to Rome to Spain. As I argued in *Insurgence*, this was because he was seeking to reclaim the nations for God. He was tracing the Gentile nations that rebelled against the Creator in Genesis 10 until he came to "the end of the earth" in his day. His goal was to bring in what he called "the fullness of the Gentiles."

Why did Paul and the other apostles risk their lives and suffer untold horrors to bring the gospel to world? The common evangelical answer is to save individuals from hell.

There's no question that the gospel brings life to individual souls, eternal life both in the present age and in the age to come. However, as I argued in *From Eternity to Here*, the mission of God goes far beyond the salvation of individual souls from eternal judgment.

God has an eternal purpose that reaches before humans fell, before they were ever in need of salvation. God's timeless purpose is to secure a body for the Son, a house for the Father, a bride for the Son, and a family for the Father. All through the Holy Spirit.

Put another way, the ageless purpose of God is to expand the fellowship and communion of the triune God.

This epic idea is wrapped up in the phrase the kingdom of God, which was the central message of Jesus Christ. The kingdom of God is the joining together of heaven and earth just as it was in the beginning (and as it will be in

the end).[1] That God's perfect will be done on heaven as it is in earth.

Paul and the other apostles sought to bring the gospel message to all who never heard it. That gospel wasn't just about salvation from eternal judgment. It was primarily about fulfilling God's eternal purpose, which in a fallen world, begins (and not ends) with salvation. The apostolic mission, therefore, was to establish kingdom communities throughout the Roman Empire which would express God's eternal purpose.

Those kingdom communities – ekklesias, as the New Testament calls them – were a colony of heaven on earth. Through them, God was reclaiming the nation that had fallen under the grip of evil powers. God's intention, as it was in the beginning, was and is to recover the earth from the power of His enemy and establish His reign throughout the world, so that His good creation will reflect Him perfectly in the world and that God and humans may joined together in perfect union.[2]

As one philosopher famously said, "He who has a why to live can bear almost any how." (Nietzsche said that, a man who I don't often agree with, so calm down. The quote is fitting.)

[1] *Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 21-22. The Garden of Eden was the overlap between the divine realm (heaven) and the human realm (earth). And it reappears again at the end of Revelation, only it become a city. Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 21-22 are the only chapters in the entire Bible where there is no sin, corruption, or marks of the Fall. For this reason, they give a clear window into God's eternal purpose.*

[2] *I explain, expand, and develop all of these themes in From Eternity to Here: Rediscovering the Ageless Purpose of God and Insurgence: Reclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom.*

FRANK VIOLA frankviola.com



PHIL BROWN (Continued from page 2)

helpful language to discuss growth, rather than talking of groups “dividing” which most people don’t want to do - and it often fails.

In Melbourne, regional leader **Karitas** has just added a fourth simple church group. His network of simple churches is found in central Melbourne, Geelong and the northern Melbourne suburbs and they connect with many people, especially from Asian backgrounds. Prayer is an important part of the churches life as is the reading and applying the scripture to everyday life. Reaching the many ethnic groups that make up the multicultural diversity of our nation is an important focus. Many of these people groups are often more open to the gospel than many of the Caucasian Australian population ...



We recently met up with **Martin and Cher Spratt** (see their story in the previous Oikos magazine) who offer a great example of loving on people they meet in their Cafe and youth training working in the outer Eastern Melbourne suburbs. They love to “just do life” and spend time with the people they are connecting with. It was evident that they really enjoyed doing life together with people, listening, visiting, supporting them in the ups and downs of life, and this forms the backdrop to the group that

is forming along simple church/home church lines.

I’ve noticed some common threads running through these and other stories

Firstly, they grow out of deep love for Jesus and sense that there was more to the picture of New Testament Christianity than just doing conventional church programs each week. It is really about a growing and deepening intimacy with Jesus each day and helping others find that connection with Jesus in their lives

Loving people and listening to their needs.

People want to belong and be understood and valued. They do not usually feel guilt in their life but there is a real sense of brokenness that they are struggling with. Some of these issues may be health issues or loneliness or issues with children/family. Offering support and care is important to people. Many deal with their brokenness first and their “lostness” and need for God as their journey, often at a later time

Is it working?

As mentioned, doing life with people with their ups and downs is important, and people are drawn to positive joyful people, whose lives and vitality demonstrate that their faith is working in their everyday lives

Prayer is a key element to reach new people. I was recently praying with some movement leaders and was impacted by the prayer requests for so many specific names who are being reached, often in Discovery Bible Reading groups.

Martin shared how they prayed for a man who was bedridden, and he felt healed and got up at home and went about his daily life. It was a supernatural thing, which really impacts people, especially non-believers! The miraculous power of God is important in demonstrating the reality of his kingdom!

Not giving up. Sometimes running a simple church may be difficult and it’s tempting to feel that we are small and

insignificant, but if there are simple churches and kingdom hubs all across that nation, collectively they can impact many people! At times, with the ebb and flow of groups of people coming and going, it is necessary to “hold the line” when people leave or groups cease to meet. Invariably more people will connect.

Understanding the disciple making is a process.

The use of simple tools such as the reading and discussing of the Bible and its application for today (DBR) is important. There is power in God’s Word!

Challenges

Some of the challenges I frequently hear are the need to build teams so that all the work does not fall on one couple. Helping people to use their gifts and to take responsibility are important if we are to see growth - and avoid fatigue amongst leaders. There is the constant challenge and opportunity to birth and nurture new groups and to see more harvesters raised up, as Jesus said we are to pray for (Luke 10)

One simple facet that can be a weakness is recognising the need for simple organisation.

Many have experienced the issues relating to hierarchical and controlling leadership and consuming programs and are hypersensitive to being part of anything that suggests any organisation. However, the truth is that laissez-faire leadership doesn’t work either. This becomes evident after a while when people sense nothing is happening! The need is for a minimal biblical leadership that is relational and not controlling but empowering and building... Perhaps that’s a topic to be explored in another article!

Every simple church/home church and kingdom hub us different, but I found listening to their stories inspiring and encouraging. Hope you found the same.

bless you, Phil Brown
OIKOS DIRECTOR

Keep up to date with great articles, events and comments. And also checkout our new website

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Prayer is way more than just talking to God! It's more of hearing from God and responding to God! (Rom 8:26)

When you pray try not to pray only about the things you prepared, listen in your spirit for inspiration from God on what to ask for and on what to do! ([John 10:27](#)).

God speaks to us in different ways so look out for His instructions! Many times you will get an idea, a thought or a scripture from deep within your heart! Pray about those topics and continue to let God lead you!

A story about listening to God and obeying Him.

Here is a story I read in a book by a pastor called A. B. Simpson titled "walking in the spirit". This happened in the early 1900s so bear with the way they spoke then!

It's the story of a woman who got God's instructions to go to a train station and get on the train but did not know why! But she knew God! Be inspired!

A saintly spirit whom God has greatly used in personal messages, tells how once she was distinctly sent by the Lord on a certain train; but when she arrived at the station the train was crowded and the guard told her she could not go. Still she waited, having learned that a point-blank refusal is often the best evidence of God's working; but just as the train was about to leave, suddenly the guard came to her and hurried her into a carriage which had just been put on.

There she found herself sitting beside a young gentleman, and



immediately the thought came, "This is the service the Lord has sent me to do."

After a little she introduced the subject of personal religion, but he haughtily replied, "My family object to my being talked to on such subjects." "My dear sir," she replied, "I had supposed that this was not a question for your family, but for yourself." "Then," he answered, still more stiffly, "I object to be talked to on such questions." It seemed as though the way of service was blocked, and yet the unerring Spirit had led her there.

Then the thought came that she should give him a tract, and that God would bless the silent messenger even after they had parted. But as she searched through all her pockets she found she had forgotten all her tracts. Suddenly, amid her movements, her valise fell on the floor, and all its contents were poured in disorder at their feet.

With the instincts of a gentleman he helped her to pick up the wreck, when suddenly her eye fell upon a single tract that had fallen out with the other articles; but as she picked it up she felt, why, this will never do, for it was a tract

especially addressed to a young man that had just been saved from shipwreck. But the same unerring Guide whispered to her to put it in his hands and ask him to read it.

He took it, having grown a little freer, through their better acquaintance, and as he read the title his face became deadly pale.

Before he had read the second page the tears were pouring down his cheeks. "Madam," he cried, turning to her, "who told you about me?" "Why, no one," she answered, "what do you mean?" "Why," said he, "Some one must have told you; did you not know that only last week I was rescued from shipwreck?"

It was the arrow of the **Infinite One whose wisdom never fails, and the humble worker, waiting His bidding**, had not been suffered to err. The message reached his heart, and ere they parted he was saved.

This is the true secret of effectual service, and when He becomes to us the Wonderful Counselor, we shall always find Him also the Mighty God.

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OIKOS Australia Magazine,
14 Yeppoon Crescent
Yeppoon QLD 4703
0435 322 303
magazine@oikos.org.au