

Can 'church' in Aotearoa be a disciple-making movement?

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I just wanted to sit and enjoy a quiet moment but a fly is buzzing madly as it tries to get through a window. With great effort, complete focus, and relentless attitude the fly collides with the glass again and again until its life burns out. The fly is doomed to die on the window-sill, no matter how hard it tries to escape through the glass. Why doesn't the fly try a new direction? Just a few metres away is an open door. If the fly changed direction it would achieve its goal in a few seconds, and expend less energy. The breakthrough possibility is there, and it's not hard; it just requires a new direction. Listen little fly, to escape you need to go in a direction you've never considered before. You need to see that trying harder is your problem. Take a moment, look around, and try a new direction. (<http://chasingtruth.nz/2018/07/31/what-you-are-looking-for-is-the-new-thing/>)

As Christians we often wonder why it seems so hard to get through the glass and achieve success with God. Like the fly I've discovered many Christians want new results from their faith and for their church, they just don't want change and try a new direction. We pray the same prayers with more energy, diligently follow the same pattern of faith and church life, while desiring different results. We adjust our approach angles and a few details while clinging to the same plan of flying through the window. Consequently, we are not much different to the fly, diligently flying into the window over and over again until exhausted. Ironically we resist change while reading the bible which includes statements like.

"No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved." Matthew 9:16-17

I'm beginning to see a new wineskin for being church and I'm finding it hard to keep investing in the old one. I've recently begun a new ministry position, it's part-time and I'm the minister. And all my time can easily be consumed doing what it takes to keep that local church idling along week by week. While I know the Spirit led me there, I'm perplexed but not in despair. I'm internally resisting being drawn into my ministry being about maintaining the institution, but I feel the pull. And almost none of this ministry energy is directly focused on what Jesus did, making disciple. I'm a bit like the fly.

So if you're like me and desiring and hungry for something new I'm sharing the journey that has got me into the state I'm in.

In October 2019 I read the following statement in Paul Windsor's blog.

The churches outside the majority world (like in my home of New Zealand) are pragmatic. The context is tough. I am full of admiration for biblically-faithful pastors. 'No religion' statistics are raining down on them. The church is in decline. Understandably, they are on the look-out for ideas that work and bring success. But here is the irony. They tend to keep looking for these ideas from other places where the church is in decline! Why? I don't understand it. I am old enough now. I've seen it again and again over the decades. These ideas build like waves out to sea, and as they rise, churches ride them - until they crash into the sand and disappear. The next big thing, yet again, has become the most recent little thing, at great cost and with little influence. Why not turn to places where churches are on the rise and people are coming to faith in Christ in huge numbers - like in so many places in the

majority-world? Is there not something we can learn from them? Paul Windsor -
<https://paulwindsor.blogspot.com/2019/10/sixty-gifts.html>

This struck a chord in me and I began looking for where the church was growing fast within a nation, and Google led me to Iran. In Iran the church is a disciple making movement. I want to see a move of God like this in New Zealand. I've been pursuing Jesus and his kingdom for over 40 years and cannot ease off, put my feet up and take it easy while people in New Zealand go to hell. But I cannot keep doing the same old things for the same old results.

I've seen some good results, but for me the human effort and cost compared to the results is too high. And much of the effort and cost is in maintaining the institutions of the church with its systems, structures, services, staff and buildings. I know we need some of this stuff, but my heart is to streamline, or minimise our stuff and maximise God's stuff; so we're not worn out running our institutions.

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I want more fruit for eternity than I've seen to this point. And I can't do more of the same expecting to get a different result. For me 'more' begins with more abiding in Jesus and more pruning from the Father, which leads to more obedience to his word, and more fruit to our Fathers glory.

A disciple making movement

My question to God is: Can we have a disciple making movement in New Zealand similar to the one in Iran? Which is similar to China's.

Do we need more persecution? And, for the existing church in New Zealand to be more marginalised? Have we woken to the truth that lethargy and indifference are a greater threat than persecution and political marginalisation?

So I'm praying and asking God. Can a dynamic disciple-making movement flow through our existing church institutions in New Zealand?

The answer is Yes we can; when we realise the Sunday service model is not the measure of the church, because it's usually not effective at making disciples. At least not anywhere I've seen. It makes some disciples but many just attend and contribute only to the institution not to discipling. It seems to me that sometimes we're more invested in our expression of church than in making disciples and bringing his kingdom. For clarification, being a disciple is being an apprentice of, and practicing the way of Jesus. Therefore our Sunday service usually only caters for one portion of what is needed, the gathering together and information. It doesn't mentor, measure character growth in Christ, doesn't have any accountability on our hearing and obeying the word of God in a trusting context, it struggles to enable everyone's participation in the gifts, it's more task focused than relational; and assumes many things that Jesus mandated.

A year or so ago I couldn't imagine making some of these comments. God is putting his plough through my heart with pruning and discipline. This has been more thorough, harder and gone on for longer than I anticipated; and it's all good.

As I asked the Holy Spirit about a dynamic disciple making movement within our existing church institutions, He said to me:

*"A big blockage in the current wineskin of church is ownership. Who owns the people? You always want to attach my people, my living stones, to your institutions. To count them, control them, own them and their gifts. Too often they are disciplined to your church cultures not to my church, as the body of Christ
This must change, it(ownership) must not be in the heart of my church. This frustrates my making disciples, and confuses who is leading, who is arranging the body, and who is to be obeyed. They belong to one church, my body, not to you or your churches.*

Don't take my place. Don't arrange. And don't lead people to follow you. You lead them to me. If I'm leading you and people are following, I'm leading them to follow you. They are my followers not yours.

Don't demand obedience to yourself or your church institution. People are confused and torn apart from trying to obey two masters; me and my leaders. I lead people to gather and work with a leader, not to follow and obey a leader; know the difference. Nb. Honour is not worship, and obedience is worship.

The lost human spirit looks for flesh to obey, don't give in to it; always lead people to follow and obey me.

*My word creates the faith to obey. Your word does not. That's why people get worn down in your churches. They're obeying you not me, and your word doesn't ignite their Spirit with faith. My word does ignite the spirit creating the inner faith, love and power to obey. **I want my church back.**"*

So, there we are. If we want to make disciples, we've got to be relentless about leading people to follow and obey Jesus. There is nothing on earth more important than this.

Will we give our church back to Jesus?

I mean really give it back to Jesus, every person, tradition, our precious brand and culture, and every asset and dollar. He may have different plans and priorities than us. And he may scatter where we want to gather. He may raise into leadership the one we missed. He may give our money to a part of his church we don't usually associate with. It's his church. Remember, no institution we call church inherits his kingdom. His church, the holy body of Christ, inherits the kingdom.

A desire has grown within my heart to be part of a dynamic disciple-making movement in New Zealand, one that sounds and looks like what we read in Acts, as the church got out of Jerusalem and ran ahead of its leaders and structures.

As I explored the internet looking for disciple making movements in New Zealand and similar nations I came across We Are Church (www.wearechurch.com). A disciple-making church begun by Francis Chan. This along with his book, Letters to the Church; have given new input to how we can be church in these days. I've chosen the words, effective, efficient, essential, enduring and engagement to make my case for a new model of local church.

Effective Church

I am seeking to be more effective as church than I have previously seen. Yes we have some great outlier churches, but we can't build on outliers, many of us leaders have tried and very few have any results similar to the outlier for all our effort and expenditure.

Effective church for me is growing in presence and subsequently in influence within its setting. I'm not talking about one local church in a community, but the church through a nation. My pain, at the lack of effectiveness of my recent experience, is more than the pain of significant change. The cry of lost hearts throughout our nation are a constant groan within me. Read more here: <http://chasingtruth.nz/2019/09/04/revival-ride-prayer-13-will-we-groan-with-heavens-intercession/>

Efficient Church

As already mentioned the cost in volunteer commitment and finance to put on our Sunday services as events led by specialists/experts in specialised buildings is high. For many local churches it's an unsustainable model, with recent increases in things like health safety requirements adding another layer of complexity and cost. And significant growth is expensive. I'm after a more efficient model, that isn't wearing people out and needing constant financial injection. What if we could grow church without needing to consider where the dollars were coming from? If you don't get my point look at your budget and ask how much is for infrastructure, buildings, staff, resources, technology etc. And how much is discipleship, of growing in and practicing the way of Jesus? So our new direction, or wineskin needs to be efficient. Recently I heard the terms lightweight and low maintenance used to evaluate new ventures. Is our church wineskin/structure, lightweight and low maintenance? If it is, it's probably efficient and sustainable. And for me lightweight and low maintenance is not being on continual look out for people to fill our task focused Sunday teams.

Is our church structure, lightweight and low maintenance?

Essential Church

This is big. I now see that I have been assuming some things that Jesus mandates; and therefore are essential. I've preached them, desired them, and hoped for them; but I haven't made them a priority in my intentional leadership. (My intentional leadership has needed to be consumed with 'vision, culture, staff, strategies, structure, systems etc.) Here's one essential: 'love one another as I have loved you'; maybe we should put off getting buildings and gathering volunteers to serve our service, until we've fully engaged with this text and seen it bearing fruit in our local church. What if we looked first at Jesus mandates for his church, his essentials; and then set a model to intentionally devote ourselves to grow in these essentials? Rather than running our existing model while hoping these essentials happen.

Are we the fly head-banging the window? I have often assumed what should be intentional, while being intentional about what is optional. And so has most of the planning I've been involved in. I've spent multi-days of planning how to get our institution of church to gather and hold people better without a mention of the commands of Jesus, or the gospel; they're assumed not intentional. So a new model of church should be a

relentless focus on disciples, people as individuals and kingdom, on loving God, one another, and others. We could call this practicing the way of Jesus.

If you don't get my point, do this exercise: consider everything you are and do as a local church and put it under one of these headings; (1) Optional (2) Essential i.e. commanded by Jesus. Here's an example, a building is optional; gathering together is essential.

Enduring Church

Our current church institutions are vulnerable to shifts in society. This vulnerability is evident in New Zealand with the change in marriage. As a marriage celebrant I serve two masters and they are not in agreement with each other, Jesus said something about serving two masters. Then with covid-19 lock downs, the larger our local church the more vulnerable we are. Something in me is suggesting we need a model for local church that can endure significant social change, even persecution.

Engagement

As I look to our future and a discipleship model for local church, I am looking for high engagement over attendance. And I'm referring to high engagement with Jesus, scripture, prayer, and fellowship. I believe this new model will be high on relationship and personal responsibility and low on structure and system. Someone not personally engaged in practicing the ways of Jesus Christ is not a disciple. So we need a model of intentional personal engagement. We could call this devotion. A high challenge, high trust, high accountability, high engagement culture and gathering.

Something along the lines of what Ted Bolsinger suggests in "Canoeing the Mountains: Christians leadership in uncharted territory."

The answer is to re-personalise the organisational and to learn ways of organic organisational pasturing, to recover again the rich biblical concepts of the church as a body that expresses a larger systemic reality of members, parts and ligaments that make up a larger interconnected, interrelated whole, to reconsider our organisational models around the actual descriptions of health and fruitfulness that the Scriptures teach and humans need.¹

I'm stirred by the book of Acts, the simplicity of the devotion we see in Acts 2:42-47. The organic growth. The programming which came to sustain not to create something new. There was something distinctive about these early believers that made it obvious in their world that they were different. That they had a different spirit. And it wasn't their natural appearance it was their devotion to Jesus, to prayer, to scripture and to one another; it was the Spirit in them.

Can we recover being known for devotion to Jesus, to prayer, to scripture, and to one another?

¹ Canoeing the Mountains, p.59

Will we be relentless in giving our church back to Jesus and intentional in being and making disciples?

Following is an outline of what a new model of scaffolding for what a local church could be: I've called it simple church.

Simple Church Scaffolding

Loving God – Devoted Worshipers

Loving one another – a texture of Family

Loving our neighbour – Mission

In a locality

Vision – Who we aspire to be

1. To be known for our love – freely we receive freely we give.
 - a. We practice love, beginning with loving one another. Following Jesus in laying down our lives and taking up the cross of Christ. This our faith. (Galatians 5:6)
2. To be known for the Holy Spirit moving among us – Spirit led, gifted and powered. This is our hope.
3. To be sanctified by truth – washed by God's word. We are growing distinct from our world so we can be a brighter light in darkness. In the world while not of the world.
4. To live sent from heaven to earth as testimony of Jesus Christ
5. To be disciplined disciplers
6. To be one with all believers in Christ. Deepening relationships
7. To be longing for and ready for Jesus return (Maranatha)

Compass – What we ask

1. Are we devoted to worshipping Jesus, like Mary of Bethany?
 - a. Have we entered his rest?
 - b. Is how we do church pleasing to Jesus?
2. Is our faith and love shown in our obedience?
3. Have we humbly forgiven all who have offended us?
4. Can we see evidence of sanctification by truth, of Holy Spirit moving amongst us? (John 17:17)
 - a. Are we hearing God's voice and responding?
5. Are we each involved in discipling another?
 - a. How am I gifted to add to God's mission through his body?
 - b. How am I accountable for my obedience to others?
6. Do we regularly share the gospel and grieve for unreached?
7. Do we endure for Jesus with joy? Do we exhibit a peaceful patience?

Practices – what we do

1. We devote ourselves to reading scripture and prayer. We engage with truth.
2. We meet in homes with pastors leading while keeping it simple (simple church)
 - a. We worship, sing praise, pray, share our journey and engagement with scripture, give, and fellowship. We seek a family-like atmosphere.
 - b. There is no sermon or teaching, the pastor is not the prime giver of truth but the clarifier of truth. The Holy Spirit is prime teacher.
3. Everyone is a disciplined discipler, exercising their gifts; helping each other grow in practicing the way of Christ.

4. Our 'elders board' lead and oversee all aspects of Church. Their primary focus is on pastoring pastors, apprenticing future pastors and clarifying truth.
5. We focus on leaders character over their talents, strengths and gifts
6. We regularly multiply simple churches.

The Future

The Spirit continually reminds me of 1 Samuel 16:7 For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.

The goal is not a new structure. The goal is new discipleship that disciples as a movement that is sustainable. The simplifying of our gatherings is to take our attention off ourselves and make space for devotion to Jesus and one another. The critique is our ineffective disciple making and embracing the essential of Jesus more than a style. If you're content with the effectiveness of your journey, I'm not trying to get you to change. But if you're not, maybe some of what I said can help.

I leave you with these words from Philippians 3:13-14 "But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."