

# WE MUST GO FORWARD

Part 2



Going forward takes effort. Going uphill takes even more effort. Moving a church from its past 'normal' will take as much discipline and energy as it takes to march up an arduous hill. At times the incline can seem steep and with no end in sight it would be easy to give up. But the Bible urges us to 'press on towards the goal' (Phil. 3:15). Encouragingly, God's Word spurs us on with words like, 'Go and make disciples' (Matt. 28:19), 'be *diligent* in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your *progress*' (1 Tim. 4:15), 'fight the *good fight*' (1 Tim. 6:12), 'run the race' (Heb. 12:1),

Stagnation for the Christian and the church is not an option. We have to keep moving forward by being actively involved in the mission of God. When a church only looks within and does not see that people beyond its walls need the love of Christ, it is in a precarious, exclusive danger zone. Every church in the past that has seen the blessings of God upon them had a mission focus. Churches who lost the love of the Gospel and became inwardly selfish eventually fragmented, dissolved or became a pseudo church. This was famously illustrated by the great Cricketer and Missionary C. T. Studd when he wrote the *Lifeboat Station* illustration. His observation was that when people in the church create a popular and comfortable setting with their building, they will eventually become so preoccupied with their facility they will forget their original purpose – to save souls.<sup>1</sup>

I'm not suggesting your church has lifted its anchor and is now drifting with the social and political tide. What I do know is the last two years have been a big challenge for many churches and although they long to return to their 'normal' church life, the position of going back to the same old ways of working, could be detrimental to their future. Most people don't want to invest time, money, emotions and energy into things that no longer work. Bringing the best of what they have done in the past is a good idea especially if they can improve their effectiveness. As our churches begin to open up and resume ministries, we have a moment in time to move beyond the biannual raincheck, to do a mission check.

So how do you correctly discern the mission of God for your church family?

## Look back to go forward

Identifying the mission of God means you look at every activity your church is involved in through the binoculars of faith. Binoculars have two lenses aligned to point in the same direction, allowing the viewer to look into the distance with greater clarity. Faith binoculars have a Gospel lens and a pastoral lens. Every church activity should be Gospel and pastorally focused. It's that simple. The mission of the church is to go and make disciples. You do that by bringing the Gospel to people and as they respond in faith to the Saviour, you pastorally care for and grow them to be followers of Jesus.

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Over the last 2,000 years, the church has creatively developed a myriad of ways to present the Gospel and to pastorally care for people. I am in awe of initiatives that bring the Gospel to people and to the prevalent culture, and I'm grateful for the people who disciple those who come to Christ. It is not easy work, but it is eternal work. The powerful message that comes out of John 14-16 is, when the Gospel is preached and people respond and become disciples, the Spirit of God will always turn up. '*...he will convict the world*' (John 16:8), and '*when he, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth*' (John 16:13). In this new season before us, I pray new initiatives will arise that the Spirit of God will bless.

The best way for a church to move forward is to have a look back. Starting questions can be:

- *What has the Lord blessed in our past history?*
- *In our immediate church and community efforts, what is the Lord blessing?*
- *What are we doing that has no spiritual life in it?*
- *Are we resistant to change?*
- *How can we reach this generation in a way that God will be declared and honoured?*
- *What activities do not promote the Gospel or involve pastoral care?*

To move forward these questions need to be addressed. It takes courageous and honest leadership to address dysfunctions from past church practices. The key to moving forward is knowing what to let go. Identifying what isn't working anymore will relieve you of traditions that may have been inherited into your church culture. Give praise that some ideas once worked but move on with what will work in today's world. Remember, the benchmark is to be Gospel and pastorally focused.

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## Good leadership is critical

In the opening chapter of his book *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, author Peter Scazzerro observes, 'As Go The Leaders, So Goes The Church'.<sup>ii</sup> His premise is, whatever condition the leaders of a church are in, that will be reflected in church life. If leaders don't want to change or don't know how to change, the result will be a church that can't change. If leaders choose not to move forward, the church itself will not be able to move forward. The last thing any church wants to hear is, 'I know your deeds; you have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead' (Rev. 3:1). Church leaders must press on and intentionally lead the church with Gospel and pastoral sincerity.

Things have changed; the Christian community looks quite different than it did two years ago. A recent post-Covid survey in the USA reveals that one third of people who once attended church have not returned.<sup>iii</sup>

Here in New Zealand some people haven't come back to church. How do we encourage them to return?

Home Groups are finding small-scale meetings work best. Is there an opportunity to reach their neighbours with the Gospel here? How do we pastorally care for them?

Children are bouncing in and out of school time and attendance. They face uncertainties and there are growing concerns about their mental health. How do we bring truth and hope into the homes and hearts of these precious children?

Many seniors are feeling vulnerable and avoiding crowds in the fear their health will be compromised. How do we pastorally care for them, loving them as family so they know we value them?

Ages, cultures and ideas are more diverse in our communities than at any other time. Engaging them with the Gospel and discipling these people is essential to give them the fulfilment of belonging.

In these uncertain days, evidence is telling us that people of all ages are searching the internet for answers. Many of these seekers are looking at church websites. One of the leading approaches presented to a post-COVID world is that Gospel and pastoral work can be done as a hybrid church (i.e., online and in person). These times demand that we be like the men of Issachar 'who understood the times and knew what Israel should do' (1 Chron. 12:32).

Leaders in our churches today have much to do. Being subjective to a Gospel and pastoral focus will help them understand their mission. The positive example of our church leaders is vital to moving forward. As John Quincy Adams, the sixth President of the United States put it, "If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader." If leaders value the Gospel and are diligently servant like in their pastoral care, their example will influence others.

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Leaders must strive to move forward together. Unity is essential to seeing Gospel and pastoral success. You will barely be taking turtle steps if you do not have unity. Unity happens when everyone, church leaders and church members all agree on the same values. The agreed values of evangelism, missions, biblical fidelity, prayer and worship, to name a few, are essential to solidarity.

Author Aubrey Malphurs in his must-read book *Ministry Nuts And Bolts*, makes the astute observation that there is a huge difference between 'assumed' values and 'agreed' values.<sup>iv</sup> Agreed values creates unity, cohesion and direction. For example, - when everyone agrees the church is to be evangelically engaged in reaching the unchurched and those who have left the church, you will discover your purpose and mission. What follows is vision and after that action. This is a church on the move, willing and wanting to see God at work in their efforts. Good leaders have 'agreed' belief values and in unity move the church into the mission of God.

## Changes that could be developed

One strategic development has been the use of technology. Technology is not an easy thing to grasp, yet undeniably the internet and digital implementation has been one of the biggest developments of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Cultural commentators are saying that we are living in the greatest communication shift of the last 500 years.<sup>v</sup> The digital platform has revolutionised global communication, music, education, science, travel, business and much more. Using innovation churches migrated from using the flannelgraph, to the overhead projector, data projector and now online resources are available in an instant. Embracing this technology, some churches record their messages as audio podcasts while others film an entire service to be viewed online. With technology the Bible is now in pockets on phones, tablets and the internet 24/7. Bible lessons and studies are accessible to all ages who can use a computer. This is a remarkable leap for the church as Gospel and pastoral messages are beamed into millions of homes and devices around the world.

Innovation is one of the great strategies for our future. Paul, the greatest missionary ever, used letters when his itinerant ministry ceased. He adapted and we have benefitted from his contribution to the New Testament. 'Martin Luther embraced the printing press and created publishing history as we know it by becoming one of the bestselling authors of his time and in the process changed the world.'<sup>vi</sup>

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For hybrid churches, technology was more than a contingency plan. They saw the digital world as a way of broadening their message further than they could have imagined even during a world-wide crisis. Technology has been powerfully used to promote the Gospel and pastoral work. If someone says, 'We can't do that', we need to tell them they make a good point, BUT 'with God all things are possible' (Matt. 19:26). Churches that used digital formats have been at the forefront of Gospel and pastoral work through this pandemic. I salute them and thank them for their valuable contribution to the Body of Christ during a difficult juncture.

## Summary

2022 gives us all an opportunity to identify the good and the not so good of what we have done in the past. Once these are acknowledged and addressed, we can be intentional about the future. To move forward in unity, both leaders and church members must agree on what God and their church values. With agreed core values and an aspirational commitment to the Gospel and pastoral accountability, new Spirit blessed initiatives will arise among us. We must upskill, innovate and invest in technology because it is an acceptable way to spread God's Word and minister to people. We believe that God is with us (Matt. 28:20) and He will honour all initiatives that are involved in the progression of the Good News of Jesus Christ. We can't change our past, but we can change our present and our future.

We can't go back; **we must go forward.**



## QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- *What time have we given to the 'Gospel lens' and the 'pastoral lens' of our church?*
- *What can we identify and celebrate as a success in God's mission?*
- *What are some of the 'traditions' that need to cease?*
- *How can we encourage our leaders to lead us with God's mission?*
- *What are our agreed values?*
- *How can we improve our unity?*
- *What are the needs of our community going forward?*
- *Who could I/we talk to about investing in technology and online opportunities?*

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<sup>i</sup> Read *Lifeboat Station* here - <http://authenticmission.blogspot.com/2007/08/lifesaving-station.html>

<sup>ii</sup> *The Emotionally Healthy Church* by Peter Scazzerro, p.20.

<sup>iii</sup> [They're Not Coming Back: In-Person Attendance in a Post-COVID World \(churchleaders.com\)](http://churchleaders.com)

<sup>iv</sup> *Ministry Nuts and Bolts* by Aubrey Malphurs, p.31

<sup>v</sup> <https://prochurchtools.com/biggest-communication-shift-last-500-years-ep-005/>

<sup>vi</sup> [Digital Change is More Significant Than You Think \(churchleaders.com\)](http://churchleaders.com)