

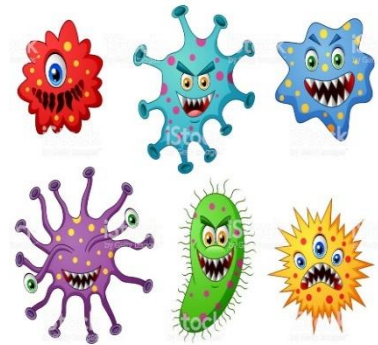


The Corona Chronicles

Reviewing the Church through a time of crisis

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Bishop Michael



Church where you don't have to believe in God

How's this for an understanding of Church. I gathered this information from the Wall Street Journal. There is a movement in in the US churches where you can be a member of the parish even if you do not believe in God. These people are called "associate" parishioners. It is an attempt to find a way through a world where more and more people are claiming to be "religious" but do not want to be a part of any formal, institutional organisation. These religious people are being tempted into the faith communities through what some might consider to be gimmicks. They have craft beer, movie nights and even a promise that if they do come to their church God will make them slimmer!

Here is an example of how churches are beginning to understand their challenges and difficulties when it comes to filling the pews. *The Rutgers Presbyterian Church in New York* is a faith community where you do not have to believe in God...*We are not giving up our Christianity but at the same time we are not dogmatic about it* (the Rev Andrew

Stehlik). To accommodate a broader range of worshippers he introduced a new category of parishioner.

The pastor: I would not necessarily push God everywhere. He believes that mainline churches such as his have struggled in the shadow of America's evangelical mega-churches, whose teachings have put many people off religion.

"It is actually liberating for people when they recognise that they don't need to believe in virginal birth or any of the so-called fundamentals and still be a spiritual person."

There was one Jewish lady who came and wanted to be part of the community," he said. "Then it came time for confirmation. She said, 'But pastor, I simply can't do this. My ancestors will be turning in their graves, but at the same time I so want to.' I said, 'We will not baptise you, we will find some way of having a structure within the church where you can still be welcomed.'"

That lady ended up becoming an "associate member" of the congregation. But there are not

just Jews attending worship as an associate. Other associates include atheists, agnostics and people who just like popping in on a Sunday

Clare Hogenauer, 71, a retired lawyer who attends, does not necessarily think of herself as a follower of Christ. "I believe he was a good guy," she told The New York Times. "I'm more into the social aspect."

morning. According to the Journal, they make up about a tenth of the overall parish community.

Any difficulties with this? *“We are not giving up our Christianity but at the same time we are not dogmatic about it”*

Fresh Expressions of Church

One of the realities faced squarely by the Church of England early in this new millennium was the way the Church carries out its ministry today in what is a very different culture and society to the one that existed thirty years ago. The world has changed around us. One of the major contributing factors for this transformation is the change to the relationship between Church and society. No longer does the wider society operate with the Church at the centre of things.

The wider social culture too has changed in that it is no longer an homogenous community with a shared understanding of the world and humanity. It no longer operates within what we might have called “Christendom”. This in turn led the Church in England to contemplate the need for what they called a *mixed economy* Church. Stephen

Croft...we need fresh expressions of church alongside existing and traditional churches.

Presbyterian and other “mainline” moderate churches have declined for 40 years. “These churches have to be entrepreneurial now,” he said, adding: “If you don’t have any core belief system, then what do you have? You have a social club.”

One of the other realities with which we need to come to terms is the way our once uniform church communities have become more diverse. Any changes we might ponder need to consider this reality. We are diverse within our unity.

Croft: *This means it is no longer enough to imagine that the Christian Church can change in one particular direction (such as introducing guitars or informality into its worship) and so*

*move with the times. This may appeal to some but alienate others. Different parts of our culture are actually moving in different directions. **How is the Church to respond?***

The phrase *Fresh Expressions* was used in the report *Mission Shaped Church* (2004) and the wording itself comes from the Preface to the **Declaration of Assent** to which all ministers pledge themselves when being licensed...*The Church of England...professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation.*

This report speaks too of the possibility of something new emerging in the contemporary Church, with the new and emerging reality firmly connected to the *developing story of God's work in the Church* (the “traditional” Church). The new here does not mean a new Church. It is the same Church but is the Church seeking to shape itself in order to bring the traditional Good News alive in the cotemporary world. Thus, there are two sides of the one local church community:

- a) The existing church striving to renew and refresh what they have and
- b) Others who are intentionally sending out planting groups to discover what will emerge when the gospel is immersed in the mission context.

For Reflection: *If God's intention for the human race is that difference and oneness should be combined, should this not have implications for our understanding of church? We will hold to a vision of one transcendent united church, but positively welcome a rich variety of expressions of church locally, nationally and across the world. Francis and Richter call for a 'multiplex' church. This would allow followers of Christ to celebrate their participation in the kingdom of God in many different ways. The idea of the mixed economy seeks to make this vision real. Very diverse expressions of church would exist alongside each other in mutual fellowship. Old and new would be a blessing to one another with the old and new being a blessing to one another*

What might this mean in my own parish?

The mixed economy expresses the eucharistic heart of the church

The expression “mixed economy” comes from the writings of Archbishop Rowan Williams as he argued for the importance of having the proper understanding of what Fresh Expressions must mean...

the establishing of Fresh Expressions of church must not be done at the expense of or in competition with existing or traditional congregations.

The connection with the Eucharist is put in this way: In the breaking of the bread at Holy Communion, we are invited to behold the Christ who died for us. Just as the pieces of broken bread - in their different shapes and sizes - belong to the one loaf, we see that in all our diversity we belong to each other because we each belong to the one body of Christ (Stephen Croft).

The biblical stress on unity is powerfully spelled out in John's Gospel...*that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me (17:21)*. When applied to the local parish it insists that any *Fresh Expression* must remain a part of the parish and not seek to operate independently of the traditional parish community. As soon as it moves away from a collaborative relationship, it ceases to be Church. The parish is one in its physical union and one in the unity of the Trinity. Jesus' prayer for unity, so close to the last supper, brings out one of the meanings of Holy Communion. It is to be a celebration of our oneness in Christ amid all our individual differences. **Is this the Eucharist for us?**

In the mixed economy, relationships of generosity between different expressions of church will enable us to draw together and celebrate communion with integrity.

It can be incredibly challenging for diverse expressions of Church to collaborate in ministry in the one parish. It can be even tougher for each expression to accept, support, encourage and love the other. The only way it can succeed is through a shared spirituality, a life together in Christ. In the end it is the Spirit alone who enables differences to be sources of growth rather than division... *The Holy Spirit is present in self-emptying and in patience - in self-forgetting - by being there alongside our fallibility, not overcoming it, not taking it over and ironing it out*. The Spirit teaches, warns and urges believers to follow a path of Christ-likeness. The importance of this point cannot be over-stressed.

For this "mixed economy" to mean something positive in the everyday life of the parish, Christians must learn to live with and grow together in their differences, though this will include a fair amount of self-sacrifice. Sometimes these differences cannot be bridged, and the danger then is that these differences will split the faith community. In such circumstances, the parishioners have only one way to proceed. All will need to entrust their differences to God in prayer. If we are unable to support and love these diverse groups (at a minimum) then we fail as Church and are closed to Christ.

Incarnational Mission and Ministry

Incarnational mission is mission shaping itself in accord with the ministry style and missionary focus of Jesus. People beginning fresh expressions of church are not going with their hands full of what they have to offer. Nor do they have in mind a particular, set pattern of what a fresh expression will look like. It is more like a journey that begins with listening to the context and the wider community. It continues with loving service. As people listen and serve, new communities where people come to faith are formed. Only later does worship begin.

Mission is about making connections

Churches connect with local people in different ways:

The *invitational* approach is perhaps the most familiar. This is where churchgoers invite their friends, family and neighbours to come to church. There is a belief that the friends, family and neighbours will accept what is on offer and fit-in with the way that it is done. The flow is from outside-in: from the local community into the congregation.

The *engaged* approach goes a step further: the church members might go out into the community, perhaps helping with a community event – maybe a street party, or a charity coffee morning – and then, when opportune, they offer an invitation to

Fresh Expressions of Church are an extension of parish mission and not a radical departure from it.

people to come to church. In this case, the church may be making a considerable effort to engage with the community, yet the people who show an interest in faith are still expected to come to church and accept what is on offer. There is no

pressure on change the way Church is carried out.

The third approach is quite different. This is when a new church begins to **emerge** from prayers, community engagement and understanding, and is where fresh expressions of church begin.

These new forms of church occur when Christians intentionally set out to immerse themselves in local culture, becoming part of the society, building up a meaningful understanding of the needs and way of life and developing genuine friendships and relationships.

We can call this the ‘listening’ phase. As the Christians become more deeply involved, serving and helping as part of the neighbourhood, a community of faith can begin to develop, and new disciples can be brought to Jesus. **Note:** It can take months or (more likely) years before a fledgling group might be described as a new expression of church.

Fresh expressions of church are about

- meeting people in their own locations (not expecting them to come to us)
- and making meaningful connections with local communities.

- They can be for people who are just beginning to explore faith but generally start among people who have no faith.
- They can be at different times – not necessarily on Sundays – for different ages, different interests, in locations other than church buildings, such as people’s lounges, community halls, outdoors, and they are relevant to different cultures.

Mission-shaped Questions

What makes it church? - Can we relate to this biblical model?

It is worth looking at one of Luke’s description of an early manifestation of church. While this reflects a Church expecting the immanent return of Christ and could therefore go so far as to sell everything and share their worldly possessions, the overall picture is one that should offer assistance as we ponder our ministry today.

- *They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship,*
- *to the breaking of bread*
- *and the prayers.*
- *All who believed were together and had all things in common;*
- *they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all*
- *Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple,*
- *they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts,*
- *praising God*
- *and having the goodwill of all the people.*

Given Luke’s additional comments here, it is worth asking how this summary might form an opening for our own mission processes... *And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved’ (Acts 2).* What might this look like at the local level – include how we might translate the “sharing in common” and “selling all they had” into the contemporary reality of parish life.

The four marks of the Church

When speaking of the Church, theologians have put forward four essential marks for any community wishing to be Church. These four characteristics or marks are found in all mature churches. These are – it is **one, holy, catholic** and **apostolic**. There are alternative lists of marks. The United Methodist Church in the US, for example, speaks of three marks -*the maintenance of worship, edification of believers, and sending out in mission.*

There is an alternative list of three marks - the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and church discipline. Mark Dever and the Baptist Church Capitol Hill in Washington pose nine marks...

1. Expository preaching
2. Biblical theology
3. Biblical understanding of the Gospel
4. Biblical understanding of conversion
5. Biblical understanding of evangelism
6. Biblical understanding of membership
7. Biblical church discipline
8. Promotion of Christian discipleship and growth
9. Biblical understanding of church leadership

It does not really matter how many marks we propose, establishing the essential marks of Church is a vital first step. Every aspect of our parish community must exhibit these marks or be contributing to their overall development in the parish.

When it comes to a *fresh expression*, this is unlikely to be the reality when the new community starts up. It is more reasonable to focus on a single mark and then gradually add the other marks as it grows and develops. This is why it is essential to have already established the marks defining our own community. They help shape the end goal while not trying to force the new group into preconceived shapes at the beginning. We need to know where we are heading, the end for which we are aiming.

Two essential starting points:

The pastoral theology that guided my work in ministry has always proved to be useful and helpful when beginning any new ministry in our mission outreach.

In the first year don't do anything except love them. Spend the first year getting connected, being with them, knowing your community and listening.

What does that look like? Have dinners and coffees, visit homes, attend sports activities and community events. Anything and everything that brings us into contact with the widest possible number of people. It is essential in that first year to be patient, flexible, tolerant and trying to striving to understand. Be seen. Be involved.

Remember: The church *must be* fully engaged with outreach and service. But these are things we do *for* and *to* people in meeting various needs they may have.

Fresh Expressions is different in that it is very much about being *with* people in relationship and doing things *with* them. We learn this when we look at the Incarnation.

Have a look around our local community. What is important for this community? What is of greatest concern? Are there things there in which we can be seen to be “with them” in these things? E.g. – schooling, transport, health care, domestic violence, housing, refugees, ESL, etc.

Incarnational Ministry

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth

Here we have St John’s explanation of the incarnation: Christ Jesus took on human flesh and became fully and completely human. The Nicene Creed expresses it as... *For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.*

After the coming of Christ, his life, death, resurrection and eventual ascension do not mean God’s saving work is now complete. Now God manifests His divine presence through his people, in and through the Church. Incarnation is not just a miracle that happened two thousand years ago, something we commemorate every 25th of December. It is a continuing reality; a reality flavouring everything the community of believers undertakes in Christ’s name. The impact of this incarnation continues everyday as Jesus, in a very real manner now clothes himself with his body, the Church. The Church is to be the visible evidence of divine activity in human history.

The Word is becoming flesh over and over again in us – and this is manifested in simple yet intentional acts of love, generosity, kindness and mercy. We take up and use this heavenly grace through the power of the Holy Spirit living for him.

This is why it is imperative that we strive to be *with* people, for it is *within* the human community, the incarnated Son of God is already at work, awaiting our collaboration. I read this line somewhere and use it as a grounding point before I am tempted to preach to others: *People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.* This is not new. St Paul said it long ago in **1 Corinthians**

A loving presence is the first thing we need, the first arrow we pull from our quiver, the first thing we open from our bag of tricks. We need to have a divine empathy of being with the people we are called to serve. To know them and be known among them. That is what the incarnation is all about; *Emmanuel*, God is **WITH** us. In fact, God is already *out there* awaiting us, inviting us to collaborate in a mission that is His.

13:2: *If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.”*

With Fresh Expressions of church, as with any ministry, it is not about beginning with **What** or **How** we begin with **Who!**

Out of those formed and crafted relationships, mission and ministry will flow, the Gospel will be shared, people will come to faith, people will be served, we will celebrate and give thanks as a community.

Pray, Pray again, then Pray some more...

As we are out being with our community, we also need to prioritise a ministry of praying... *Almighty God, order our steps, give us eyes to see and ears to hear, show us the way forward...* Keep the focus on what it is God wants us to be doing, hearing, seeing and how we are responding. It is not about telling God but about hearing God.

Doing what we should be doing rather than what we want to do

Here is a great line from Hollywood, from the producers of Jurassic Park: *Yeah, yeah, but your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could that they didn't stop to think if they should.* This can so easily become a comment on much of what we explore as we ponder renewal.

We get caught up with our latest good idea or insight, a programme we work out on paper or adopt from some book; ministry concepts, a popular new piece of technology that we rush in with trying to make it happen without taking the time to ask, *should we?*

The biblical techniques *eisegesis* and *exegesis* are part of the language of those who explore the sacred scriptures. They have been expanded by some renewal theologians to comment on the way we interpret a variety of things including culture.

Eisegesis is the process of interpreting the Bible in such a way as to introduce our own presuppositions, agendas or biases. We come with assumptions and act on them as though they are true. Proof texts are a good example of this. They can be used out of context to support just about any position. The church has long practiced this. We start a ministry, spend money and resources, even build a building for something that may not even be needed. We do so, thinking we know best.

Prayer is foundational to all exegesis. Without prayer we are unable to discern the movement of the Holy Spirit speaking to us in the text. In our mission setting, we look and listen prayerfully to our surroundings, to the people among whom we minister and then, by the Holy Spirit we perceive the next step (which often is more prayer).

Exegesis when applied to a community means to examine, discern, understand *what is here*. What are the contexts, values, dreams of the people in this place? We don't bring our conjectures, preferences or guesses as to what we think is the cultural content. We see what is here, take note and respond in the light of what we find.

In the Fresh Expressions movement we teach about the process of forming a Fresh Expression of church with 5 Circles. Really, five steps to starting. The first step is **Listen**, which is a

posture of prayer. But the truth is, *every* step in the fresh expressions journey is **undergirded by continual, ongoing prayer**.



These two things (listening and praying) are foundational to the start of any Christian mission or activity. We see this constantly in Jesus. He was engaged fully with the people, wandering around mixing with them and relating to them in their life situation. He was fully engaged with life at the time. He made sure he was connected and he fully interacted with and participated with all people – Jews and Gentiles. He also had an amazing prayer life that is worth imitating, pulling away to pray and listen to the Father. ***If this is how Jesus did ministry, if this was the norm for the early church shouldn't it be ours as well? What can we establish across our parish?***

Five crucial steps in renewing our Church

All missionary initiatives begin with listening, whether it is here in Australia or in a mission area like PNG. This requires that we prepare to discern a variety of different voices. ***The first of these is:*** what is God saying? All mission begins with God. We join in with what God is already doing. Hence, we need to spend time in prayer striving to discern what it is God is doing in our area. What do we observe going on around us?

What groups of people might need to find the love of God? This prayerful listening for God and to God is vital but one we often undervalue.

Listening also happens with our pastoral team, parish community and local people. What do people want when they think about church? What are the areas in which we might serve them? We might want to conduct a survey, consult census results and listen to local people over a cup of tea. Listening takes many forms but being willing to listen changes our perspective of mission and makes sense of all that comes afterwards.

Once we've listened, we may feel it's right to get started with a service or event. But our next step is to *serve*. This can form part of the listening process too as we meet a local need or show loving service to others. Who can we help? What act of service could bring about a change in your local community?

The *next step* is about building community. It's impossible to start a renewal process without first of all gathering a group of committed people (even if it is just one other person or a single family). Gather people for food. Connect over an issue or need that's important, about which some are passionate. Throw a party or hold a festival. ***Relational community is the seedbed*** for everything that comes next. Be known. Make friends and build a loving community around you.

Experience shows how conversations usually begin to develop within these groups. They are opportunities for exploring discipleship (in its fullest sense). People may ask about faith or they may want to have their questions answered. Maybe as a group we begin to discuss what it means to be a Christian. Let conversation, questions, doubt and latent faith express themselves.

It is at this point church is beginning to take shape. We may now choose to create a regular pattern of gathering, create collective prayer or worship together and invite others. **There is no need to rush. It is better to take time over this phase** and don't feel pressured to deliver something that looks like other churches. If we have been true to each of these steps what we see developing may look very different. And then, we begin to do this all over again....

The most asked questions: How and where do we begin?

It is easier than we think it will be. The most difficult part is the way the “answer” is out there, unfolding all around us, inviting us to respond. What we need to do is begin. Decide we will do something and get moving. The place to begin is listening to what the Spirit is saying to the Church. Listening...

To God directly in prayer, study and in Bible groups

Times of prayer and Bible study may help to focus what God is saying as you listen to the people described below.

To the people we are called to serve

Listening will involve many of these

- **experimentation** (trying something and seeing what you learn);
- **participation** (joining in with what people in your mission context are doing);
- **conversation** (with some of those you are hoping to serve);
- **observation** (Where do people gather? What do they do? What do they value?);
- **investigation** (researching particular issues in some depth);
- **imagination** (asking 'what-would-happen-if...' questions).

The reality is that much of this is being done one way or another in our parishes. What we are generally not doing is linking these things to our evangelism ministry and rarely do we organise them and celebrate them as a part of our ministry.

As we prepare for a post Covid 19 Church and world now is the time to begin our preparations and planning...***And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved' (Acts 2).***

We have been given this mission opportunity and the Spirit is urging us to use it. As evangelical-catholics we are well placed to use the sacrament, the scriptures, our engagement with the needy and our teaching ministry to collaborate with the mission of God in our community.