



**What kind
of church?**

Manifesto for a future church

evangelical alliance
together making Jesus known





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Evangelical Alliance

The Evangelical Alliance joins together hundreds of organisations, thousands of churches and tens of thousands of individuals to make Jesus known.

Representing our members since 1846, the Evangelical Alliance is the oldest and largest evangelical unity movement in the UK. United in mission and voice, we exist to serve and strengthen the work of the church in our communities and throughout society.

Highlighting the significant opportunities and challenges facing the church today, we are committed to sharing fresh ideas, celebrating best practice and catalysing innovation throughout the evangelical community and beyond.

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“Jesus died for the church, He loves it, it is His bride, and He said He will build it.”



Introduction



About three years ago I was asked by some church leaders to encourage a conversation around the future shape of the church in the UK – a conversation aimed at Christians who are not necessarily theologically trained but want to see the people of God thrive in the years to come. So *What kind of church?* was born.

What kind of church? hasn't been produced to offer the answers, whatever they may be. Its purpose is to foster a discussion that allows people to express their hopes and frustrations about the UK church and share their dreams about its future. It's to facilitate a space that recognises where we find ourselves and pushes us to talk openly about what church could, and maybe should, be in the UK.

We are now on a second reprint, and the short films that were made to accompany *What kind of church?* have been watched thousands of times. It has been great, and a testament to the timely release of this resource, to get feedback from people who have been using the material in all sorts of unexpected places around the world.

A few questions to start

Reoccurring themes of community identity, values and action are core to both the possibilities and challenges we face. So, with this in mind, I want to ask some key questions as we begin this journey together.

As a church in the western world, are we being faithful to our calling?

Are we living up to our calling through our values and in our praxis?

Is it possible that we have veered from the path that God has set for us as His people?

Do we feel trapped between our changing position within society and our declining capacity?

How do we respond to the need for community amidst the busy and hurried nature of modern life?

Church - let's love it

I first encountered the transforming love of Jesus Christ before ever going to a church service. I came to the community of faith with high expectation. I was disappointed. I expected dynamic, sacrificial, loving community; I got an hour I didn't understand. Despite this underwhelming beginning, I am deeply passionate about the church and I don't think that we value it nearly enough.

Jesus died for the church, He loves it, it is His bride, and He said He will build it. The church is often an easy target to criticise and lampoon, but that is not my intention. My intention is to help start a conversation about who we are and what we are doing.

If there is to be a vibrant, impacting faith community in our nations, then we have to ask questions about who we are and how we live.

Definitely not

This isn't an opportunity to think about venues, nor what we call ourselves. This isn't about whether we meet in cafés, parks or cathedrals.

We will not be focusing on denominations, titles, structures, nor the style of our gatherings. Of course, all these factors are important, but they are for another discussion.

Instead, let's focus on what is central to us as a people of God as we live out our love for Jesus. What is God calling us to be when we are gathered together? And how do we live when we are scattered into a world that is changing rapidly?

I pray that as you read *What kind of church?* you begin to think about and discuss dreams and possibilities, and that your faith in the one who is Lord of the church will grow.

Fred Drummond
Director of Scotland



Encounter and Engagement

Moses encountered the holiness, power and compassion of God. He was a man full of doubts about himself and his own suitability for the task God had assigned him. However, he was able to face Pharaoh and Israel due to the encounter he had with God and the promise that the God he had encountered was going to be with him (Exodus 3:12).

It was Moses' encounter with God and the promise of God's presence that enabled him to engage with the powers of his day. It was Moses' encounter that led to effective engagement.

Isaiah had a really tough calling. He was to take God's word to people who won't hear, didn't understand and didn't care. He was to remain faithful and just keep doing what he had been called to do. How could he keep engaging with a community that didn't want to hear what he had to say?

How do you just keep going in the midst of a sea of negativity and disappointment? Maybe this is a question some of us face both in our workplace and church. Isaiah was able to fulfil his calling out of his encounter with God. He had seen the majesty and holiness of God and Isaiah knew the depth of sin and the wonder and hope of forgiveness. He had encountered the one who had called him and it had revolutionised his life (Isaiah 6:1).

When Peter and John headed to the Temple at the hour of prayer they came across a cripple who was sitting begging. When confronted with this man and his need, the disciples responded in the way that seemed most natural to them. I like Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of this verse:

“Peter said, ‘I don't have a nickel to my name, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth get up and walk’.”¹

The engagement of the disciples was based solely on their encounter with Jesus. They became agents of transformation out of their time in His presence and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We could look at a whole host of other examples in scripture and history where engagement with society is based on an encounter with Almighty God. I believe that all effective engagement is borne out of ever-deepening encounters with Jesus. Thus, it is a mistake to separate mission (our involvement with God in His transformative presence in and for the world) from worship, prayer and devotion.

Encounter with no engagement leads to a pious retreating from the world which denies the incarnation and ignores God's transformative purposes for the communities in which He has placed us.

Equally, to engage with the world without a deepening and consistent encounter with Jesus is simply, at best, offering a powerless, grey replica of what the world already offers. As the church, when we offer engagement without encounter, we offer only religious secularism.

We need to have a holistic vision that sees everything in the context of Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who calls us. He is the one who has lifted us and given us a hope. We are the people of Jesus. It is all about Jesus. He is both Lord and chief desire of the church, and it is at His command and in His name that we serve. I will say more on this in the section entitled Gathering Church.

However, it seems to me that the closer to the light we are, the more light we radiate. We don't get closer to Jesus because we want more power; we spend time with Him because we love Him and want to be in His presence. However, being in His presence begins to radically transform our lives and places them more fully at the disposal of our radical Lord and Saviour.

It is in this context of continually seeking to be in the place of communion with Jesus that we engage with the joys and sorrows of the world. Our life is lived in a 'Jesus context' that shapes our response to the needs around us. It is as we keep in step with Jesus that we have the capacity to become culturechangers wherever we have been called to serve. This is not a one-way street. As we engage with the cultures around us, we begin to see both darkness and light more clearly. The things we come into contact with also shape us, moving us with compassion, driving us to pray, and sometimes taking us beyond words and strategies to tears and brokenness.

Yet, in those situations we are drawn back to worship and to a reliance on the grace and help of God. It is in our weakness that we come into deeper places of intimacy with the one who loves the world and gave His life for it. We live in that fluid place of joy and sorrow, laughter and tears, encounter and engagement, with no clear boundaries or divides. There is an eternal fluidity to our lives, where we encounter the closer presence of Jesus in the most unusual places. There are surprising situations and circumstances God uses to lead us into deeper places of love and worship. God sometimes speaks to us through surprising people in unexpected ways.

Think of the story of Balaam's donkey (Numbers 22:21). In the story the prophet Balaam is heading out to act in disobedience to God. On his journey he is confronted by an angel of the Lord. However, he doesn't see it. Only the donkey he is riding sees the angel. The view of the angel makes the donkey change course and

then, eventually, stop altogether. This so infuriates the prophet that he starts to beat the donkey for its disobedience. Then God speaks through the donkey to the prophet. The Apostle Peter pointed out in one of his letters that the donkey was given the power of speech to restrain the prophet's madness (2 Peter 2:16). I have often wondered what Balaam's immediate reaction was to the donkey speaking. God sometimes delights to speak to us in amazing and absurd ways. He delights in stretching our imagination. While attending a preaching course a long time ago, one of the speakers noted that in scripture God spoke through a donkey and continues to do so.

Our life with Jesus is not easily compartmentalised. As we worship, we are drawn to a God of grace and mercy, who takes us to deeper places of awe and humility, which are then outworked in every area of our lives. As we labour in the office or workplace, eat and drink in restaurants and pubs, search for a job or volunteer for stuff, we engage with things that God uses both to challenge and shape us in ways that flow back into our worship. This love affair with Jesus should have no boundaries.

If we are the people of Jesus, and our lives are open to and shaped by Him, there has to be a constant connection between what we do when we are together and what we do when we are scattered throughout the nation.

How the church gathers and scatters shapes us into one transforming community under the lordship of Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and this process of transformation is absolutely vital to the future of the church. Our position within society is changing rapidly. Some of us have been shaken by our move from the centre of society to a declining, less influential marginalised group. Yet our calling to be radical disciples of a radical Saviour remains the same. The opportunities are before us to be culture-makers and agents of the kingdom that sees nations changed in the power of God.

To be what we are called to be it is crucial that what we do when we are gathered shapes what we do when we are scattered, and vice versa. We are both worshipping missionaries and missionary worshippers. What we do when we gather and how that shapes what we do in the world determines what kind of church we will be. I would go further and say how we live together and apart will determine the future of the church in Scotland. The time for asking radical questions is now.

Gathering Church

What does the church look like when it is gathered together as one body and when it is scattered across the nation? What was church always intended to be? And is that intentionality seen when we gather to worship and when we scatter to serve?

So, what kind of church do we need when it is gathered together?

The first church

Just after Pentecost the natural reaction was for the people who had encountered Jesus, by hearing of the good news shared by Peter and by the power of the Holy Spirit, was to come together. Luke gave a description of what happened when these peculiar people came together (Acts). I believe that they are some of the most important verses in the Bible about the church. It seems to me Luke is saying: This is it. This is the core business of the people of God when they are together. It is not all they do, and there are a lot of questions we might want to ask. But before there were too many rules and distractions; before structure and committees all set in, this is what was important, and it still is.

I believe that the church as described in Acts 2 is the kind of church we need if we are to see spiritual and social transformation take place. One of the questions we have to ask is: are our gatherings like what we find in the passage?

There are seven marks in the verses from Acts 2:42-47 that are key to the type of church that God always intended His people to be. Let's look at them in turn.

The community shaped by the Word

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.” Acts 2:42-43

It is very interesting to reflect on the fact that the first thing that was said about the church after Pentecost was that it was passionate about the story that the apostles told. The new converts were devoted to the apostles’ teaching. The church was clearly being shaped by the teaching of scripture as shared by those who were called by Jesus. They were being shown that they were not some random group of people who found themselves in a story. Rather, they were part of the wonderful redemptive story of God. From the very beginning, God had a plan and they were part of it. It was the story that gave the church both its identity and destiny. In the discipleship process there is nothing more important than the teaching of scripture. As a huge group (approximately 3,000) they were determined to learn and understand the teaching. The late Anglican priest John Stott gave a very helpful picture: “The Holy Spirit opened a school in Jerusalem that day; its teachers were the apostles whom Jesus had appointed; and there were 3,000 pupils in the kindergarten! We note that those new converts were not enjoying a mystical experience which led them to despise their mind or disdain theology.”²

We know the core of the teaching from both the sermons that are recorded in the book of Acts and the letters written by the apostles. We don't have the space to look at every reference that the apostles used in their teaching, but Christopher Wright gives a great overview of the apostles' teaching in his book *The Mission of God's People*³, where he splits the story into four sections: Creation, Fall, Redemption in History, and New Creation.

It is the whole story of God that we need to have a passion for, because it is that story that shapes us. We don't have the liberty of only picking a few key texts to justify both our lifestyle and our mission. Rather, it is as we begin to understand the wonder of God and His revealed word that we grasp both who we are and what we are called to be. We are both the called and sent people of God because we are the people who are called and shaped by Jesus and the narrative that He shared and lived. We become a sent people because we see throughout scripture a God of mission, who consistently calls and sends. Whether that be Abram, Moses, Joshua, Isaiah, Jesus, the disciples, and us as part of the people of God. As has previously been said, our identity as the redeemed people of God and our calling to be both culture and disciple-makers, are all revealed to us as we wrestle with and grasp the wonder of all God has revealed to us.

It is very sad that, at a time when there are so many stories around and so much that bombards the church, many of us have either lost confidence in, or lost a passion for, scripture. Some of us have allowed the teaching of scripture to be moved from the central place it had in the early church. To do so means that our actions are not rooted in a theological framework.

Might I suggest that some of the difficulties we find in discipling and growing in faith in our generation has been because we don't know the story well enough. We know the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and His call to follow Him. The question sometimes is why we need to live as a called people and what does following Jesus really look like? These questions only gain some clarity when we wrestle, as the community of faith, with scripture.

Wright comments: "Tragically, even among Christians with great enthusiasm for world mission, there is often not only profound ignorance of great vistas of biblical revelation, but even impatience with the prolonged effort that is needed to soak ourselves in these texts until our whole thinking and behaviour are shaped by the story they tell, the worldview that story generates, the demands it lays upon us and the hope it sets before us."⁴

I am convinced that there are three main reasons why we need to look again at the place of scripture in the life of the church. First, we live in a fragmenting world with lots of competing worldviews and narratives. From those who compete with Christianity in other world religions to those who actively oppose a religious worldview such as consumerism, humanism or fundamentalist secularism. With so many competing voices around us, it is very difficult for followers of Jesus to stay both faith-filled and faithful if they are not increasingly knowledgeable and confident in the written word of God.

Second, for new converts to Christianity, particularly in the UK, many now have little knowledge of scripture. Even basic stories so treasured by those brought up in church are totally new to many new believers. This is both a challenge and a huge opportunity.



The challenge is to help people get an overview of God's grace and goodness, His holiness, love and amazing redemptive purposes in understandable ways, that help people begin to live the life Jesus intended for them. The opportunity is to see people really fall in love with the story for the first time. People who are fresh to it, and come with questions and a vitality that sometimes those of us who have been around the story for so long have lost. However, we must find imaginative ways of sharing and we desperately need to get rid of Christian clichés when talking with new believers. It is not about making people like you. It is about helping people grasp who they have become in Christ, how God's plan has been unfolding and their place in it. It is about allowing scripture to shape a culture of discipleship that transforms lives.

Third, we need to unashamedly unleash the story in the world. The church needs to rediscover a confidence in the message. A confidence that has been eroded as much from within the church as from those outside it. We live in a time where people love story. People get up in good narrative.

Many people in the western world are new to the biblical story. I believe we are missing a huge opportunity by not simply publicly reading and sharing the stories of scripture. In this context I am mostly thinking of the gospels, but not exclusively so. I am thinking of every media possible. What about tweeting abridged versions of parables? What about Facebooking Jesus stories without any explanation or comment, just getting the biblical narrative into the marketplace and believing in the power of the story and the work of the Holy Spirit?

I have spent more time on this than I will on the other sections of the gathered church because I am convinced this is crucial to the type of church that God intended and that we require in our nation. Without creative and understandable teaching of the biblical story we are bound to create disciples unequipped for the task of following and serving Jesus in this generation.

As a church, when we gather we must allow the story to shape us. We must seek the Holy Spirit to take the Word we are sharing and use it to mould us, not in a legalistic way but with a passion and expectation. The early church had a passion for the apostles' teaching, do we?

The community of fellowship

"All the believers were together and had everything in common". Acts 2:44

The Greek word 'koinonia' is one of my favourite Bible words. It is translated as fellowship. It really means 'sharing in'. It is the things we have or do that are common to us. We share in something or someone and it is what we share in that holds us together. The early church strongly gave themselves to the fact that they shared in God together. Their salvation meant that they shared in God.

"In this context we should understand the implied object to be God. God was present, and the whole community shared in His Spirit. Despite their differences and difficulties this common bond held them together."⁵

The apostle John writes to believers that "our fellowship is with the Father and His son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). Paul writes to the church about the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit being with them (2 Corinthians 13:14). This is part of the miracle of the church, a whole bunch of disparate people. Different hopes, ambitions, intellects, physical characteristics, but they share one thing in common. They share a relationship with the triune God. No longer far off, no longer excluded, no longer fragmented isolated individuals, but held together through the saving work of Jesus into a people who have a relationship with the Triune God.

This common relationship with God meant that they also responded and shared out together. They took shared action and shared responsibility in radical ways that we will look at later in this section.

In many of our local churches we have allowed the cultures around us to shape our thinking around salvation. We think only in terms of the individual and how that person is brought from death to life and darkness to light. We highlight forgiveness of individual sins and the need for individuals to come and follow Jesus. There is nothing wrong with this. However, we must stress the corporate nature of who we now are in Christ. We are part of a global and eternal family





that has an unshakable bond. We share one thing in common: we have fellowship with God.

Christianity is radical and counter to various cultures around us in many ways, and one of them is this: Christianity is not an individualistic faith; it is a corporate faith; we belong together; we share fellowship with God. We are not saved into a vacuum; we are saved into a body. It seems to me that we need to stress our commonality as the people of God and to rejoice in it much more than we do. We need to cheer one another on, weep together, laugh together and encourage each other. This does not mean we will always agree, nor will we find everybody lovable, but we are family in that we have this fellowship with God in common.

What kind of church do we need? Perhaps a church that is slow to be critical and negative about the various parts. A church that encourages and supports and tells good news stories of grace and mercy that lifts each part to greater adoration and worship. Local congregations that don't just see themselves as full of individuals but as one body called to be together with God in their midst. A church throughout the nation that realises that what Christians have in common is greater than anything that might separate us. We have fellowship with God and therefore we belong together.

A worshipping community

“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” Acts 2:46-47

In verse 42 of Acts chapter 2 we are told that the first church after Pentecost devoted themselves to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Later, in verse 47, the church is praising God and gaining favour. It seems strange to have to highlight that the early church was, at its core, a worshipping community. However, in a time when our church in the western world is celebrity conscious, programme-driven and activist-fuelled, it is important to restate the obvious: the church wanted to worship, praise and encounter the presence of Jesus. The church was, is and always will be about Jesus. It is lost in adoration of who Jesus is and what He has done. The early church was a group of people who were filled with love for Jesus. Praise was the aroma in which they gathered.

Let me be clear, it doesn't matter how you praise, whether you prefer times of silence or prefer a big band and flashing lights. It doesn't matter whether you sing the same chorus 20 times or whether you are singing Psalms. God is interested in whether the atmosphere, language, attitude is one of praise and adoration. Is everything we do being done in ways that bring glory to God? Is there an atmosphere that when we come together as the redeemed people of God our ultimate aim is to praise Him? It seems to me that if we are not passionate about praising God we will not be passionate about anything.

Alongside praising is prayer. Spending time encountering the presence of God. Cultivating a relationship with God that both shapes us and alters our environment. There is a lot that could be said about prayer, however, what I want to emphasise is the apostles and early church knew how important prayer was, because they saw it in the life of Jesus. He taught on prayer, prayed before all key decisions, and went early into solitary places to pray. The life of Jesus is marked by his prayer life.

Is it any wonder His followers saw the significance and necessity of prayer for our lives?

There are so many ways to pray, both traditional and more creative. As the church scattered gathers together, it come with tears and smiles, with challenges in workplaces and families, with stories of miracle and thankfulness and cries too deep for words. As that gathered church we must find ways of expressing all of the fluid, messy lives we find ourselves in, and bring them into God's presence. I don't believe a couple of led prayers on a Sunday morning or even some midweek meeting is enough. We must pray for one another and for those who are not part of the community of faith. As with scripture, I believe we need to unleash prayer: praying in the streets, praying for the lost, broken and sick of our world, praying uncomfortable and challenging prayers. There are a couple of questions that stay with me a lot.

We must ask what does it look like to live in a place of praying without ceasing? How do we lift one another into the place of intimacy with God and see hope rise and healing come? How do we pray for personal, national and global walls to be torn down?

When we are spending more time and energy on our programmes and great ideas than we are on seeking God's face, I think we are departing from the practices of the first Christians. It is really interesting to note that as God brought great growth to the early church, along with several large pastoral issues, the apostles decided to "devote themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word".

David Watson sums all this up in his book on discipleship: "The first disciples knew the absolute

importance of persistence in prayer. After the ascension of Jesus into heaven when they knew they could not witness to him in their own strength, they all with one accord devoted themselves to prayer. Several times in Acts, Luke uses the word devoted in connection with their prayer life; it means a refusal to give up or get discouraged; they determinedly stuck to it, they knew it was essential."⁶

Could it be that our gatherings sometimes lack any real sense of God's presence and our engagement with the world has little impact because our deepest desire is not to be in the presence of God and we have not persevered in fervent prayer?

The last point on a worshipping community is the breaking of bread. It seems clear that the early church ate together. Perhaps various houses around the city were used for the new church to come and eat and drink together. This was an active sign of the new community: a community that spent time sharing hospitality and bonding over bread. However, something else seems to be going on in the midst of these corporate meals. In verse 42 the definite article is used. It is not the breaking of bread, it is the breaking of the bread. This has led scholars to agree with John Stott that "this clearly suggests a reference to the Lord's supper, although almost certainly at that early stage as part of the larger meal"⁷. At some point during this time of eating and sharing, building relationship, and integrating new people, the church stop, and remember, Jesus and His death.

I don't want to get into a theological debate about the theology of the Lord's supper and what actually happens when believers partake of it. What I want to stress is that even at this time in the church's life, the Lord's supper is seen as hugely significant. It is a central part of being together. It is at its most basic remembering the amazing grace that has made them the community they are. It is the rehearsing of the story that has saved them and it continually points them back to the love and sacrifice of Jesus. They are the Jesus community. Had it not been for His sacrifice, they would not exist. It is putting Jesus' death and resurrection at

“We must be praying both for one another and for those not part of the community of faith.”

the very heart of their coming together. At this point we are not told how this took place. Was the ministering of it pretty chaotic? Was it different in every house? Was there some sort of set prayers used? I am not convinced that any of these questions or their answers really matter all that much. What is significant is that this sacrament was deemed to be central to the church at its very outset.

I go to lots of leaders' meetings, retreats and services of different styles and traditions, and I am surprised at how few times people actually take time to share the Lord's supper together. Have we tied so many rules and regulations around it that we have lost the simple delight and wonder that the early church had at coming and breaking the bread with one another. There is something hugely important in this act of remembering and reflecting upon Jesus' sacrifice.

In Acts 2 the church still went to the temple and still enjoyed favour from many. However, it would not be very long before the people of God would be moved from the centre to the margins. Suspicion would fall upon the church and persecution would fall on them. For some, suffering and martyrdom would be their fate in this world. They would be under attack, feel frightened and weak. At that point of being a victimised minority, how much more important to remember what Jesus has done for them?

As church in today's society we find ourselves being moved from the centre to the margins. When we gather we need to refocus on Jesus, what He has done and the reality of His life, death and resurrection. It is as we share our joy and fear, the reality of our lives in the context of God's victory, that we fully become the community of faith.

"Jesus did not write a book but formed a community. This community has at its heart the remembering and rehearsing of His words and deeds, and the sacraments given by Him through which it is enabled both to engraft new members into its life and to renew this life again and again through sharing in His risen life through the body broken and lifeblood poured out. It exists in Him and for Him. He is the centre of its life."⁸

A sacrificial community

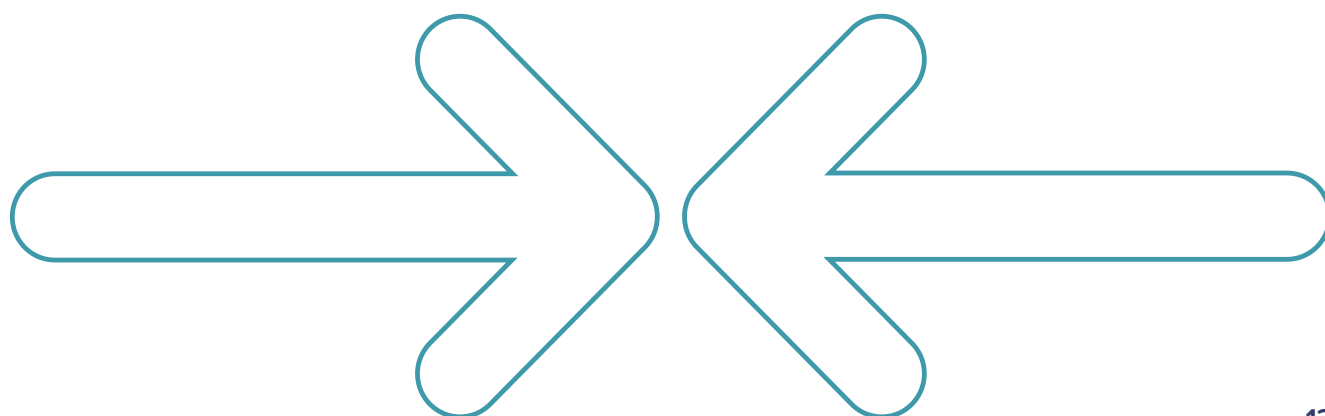
**"All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need."
Acts 2:44**

There were other groups around at the time of the early church that probably lived with an order of shared possessions. However, here we seem to have a group of people that, through their salvation encounter with Jesus, now had a radically different view of one another and of their possessions, not as an imposed rule but as a heart response to the needs of others. Could it be because they grasped what Jesus had given up for them? Or perhaps they were living as if today could be their last on earth so they held much more lightly to the material things that they had.

Personally, I think they were so overwhelmed by the love God had for them at that time that their immediate response was to care for one another despite the cost involved.

Writing about the sense of awe and love that flowed in the early church, David Williams says: "One result of this was their readiness to share their belongings with one another. They made this their practice. The verb is imperfect and could be rendered. Spirituality for these Christians was inseparable from social responsibility. The whole thing seems to have been an ad hoc arrangement, but a necessary one.

"The poverty prevailing in Palestine in the first century is almost unimaginable, but the already desperate case of most Palestinians must have been exacerbated for the church by the fact that many of its early members had abandoned their source of livelihood in Galilee and many of its subsequent converts from elsewhere had stayed in the city, held there by the intimacy and intensity of the fellowship and the hope of the Lord's return."⁹



I am not suggesting that the kind of church we need requires us all to sell everything we have, but I am challenged to think about my relationship to possessions. The dominant culture of our world is a consumerist one. We are being defined by what we own and what we want. It is all about stuff. We are seduced by the idea that happiness comes from having more and better stuff. Consumerism is as dominant in the church as it is in the rest of the world. We are blinded into believing in a cost-free discipleship where we lose nothing and gain everything. That was never on offer.

What an opportunity for the church to be radical culture-makers in the way we deal with possessions - to be known as a people who take care of one another, who hold lightly to stuff because we know that what we have materially will never define who we are. Wouldn't it be great if we were known as the generous church. A church that sees need and just meets it, a church that refuses to see parts of the body of Christ suffer if we can do anything about it. I wonder what impact the church might have if word spread that the church refused to define people on the basis of what they had and were willing to give up things for the benefit of those in need.

A dynamic community

“Everyone was filled with awe at the many miraculous signs being done by the apostles.”
Acts 2:43

“Every day they continued to meet in the temple courts.” Acts 2:46

God was doing things among the early church. I think you get a sense of the vibrancy and excitement as you read Luke's account. Things were buzzing; the atmosphere must have been electric. God was using the apostles to do miraculous things. These are not defined in the text, but we know from later in Acts that healing, confrontations and the overcoming of evil and other manifestations of God's power were evident. We also know that the miracle of salvation was happening on a regular basis.

They carried on going up to the temple to meet, maybe to go to the prayer services. Perhaps they preached there (Paul always started at the synagogue). It is hard to imagine that they were not continually talking about what Jesus had done in their lives. They were also

meeting in each other's houses. I bet there were some fantastic stories being told about conversations shared, about what Jesus was doing. And added to that was the apostles, not just teaching and praying with power and authority, but the Holy Spirit was working through them in miraculous power.

Could it be one of Luke's great understatement to say that they were all filled with a sense of awe. The atmosphere was one of respect, reverence and fear. These people were glimpsing something of the holiness, power and majesty of God. They were seeing the kingdom of God breaking out in their midst; no wonder they had glad and sincere hearts. How could they not be a people of joy and praise when their senses were being bombarded by the grace of God in Christ? There is an expectation fuelled by experience and trust that God is able to do more than they can imagine.

The level of faith must have been so high among these new believers. They knew their own story, but they were also seeing God do so much. As they worshipped, listened, shared and moved around the city, they were continually encountering the presence of the Holy Spirit. This expectation and excitement led to a dynamic body of people. There was a fluidity and movement about this people.

I was once chatting to an African pastor who was in leadership in a number of large churches. He told me that most of his time was taken before the service as people would come to him to tell him stories of what God had done that week. He would have a queue of folks who wanted to give testimony to the goodness of God. They wanted to tell the congregation about answered prayer and the little victories of their day. He told me that sometimes the hardest thing was to tell folks that there were going to be so many stories that they would have to wait until another time to tell theirs.

I know that some of us reading this will be thinking that this is just not our culture. We are introverts. We could never talk in front of the congregation. Or you are thinking that the same folks would get up every time, looking for attention.

I go to a lot of prayer meetings and services and I am stunned at how little time is spent on thanking God for answered prayers. We sometimes spend hours in intercession but then hear nothing about what God has done in response to our prayers.

In so much of what we do it appears we are almost so cluttered with religious stuff that we have no space to allow people to tell of the mighty works that God is doing. Stories of how some people are only able to



cope because of God's grace, stories of mercy and love, stories of salvation and healing, of hope and comfort. When we gather as the people of God we should have a thousand stories to tell that all point to the wonder of God. Real stories by real people in real situations.

One of the key ways to both lift faith and create a dynamic people is to talk about what God is doing.

I have been to countless gatherings where everything is led from the front: great band, good speaker, well-organised and finished on time, but with no space to hear what God is doing.

What kind of church do we need? One that has a tapestry of thousands of small, glorious threads of stories of what God is doing. He turns the ordinary into the extraordinary. In hearing and sharing the stories, we change an atmosphere from moribund to life-enhancing, and from discouragement to faith.

A community with leadership

“They devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching.” Acts 2:42

“Everyone was filled with awe at the many miraculous signs being done by the apostles.” Acts 2:43

I believe in the priesthood of all believers. Each one of us, called by God, has a part to play in the body of Christ. I believe that we are all uniquely given a ‘gift-mix’ by which to serve Christ in the world. Each of us is as important as the other. Each of us is equally valued by God. He is the head of the body. From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:16).

There should be no division in the body. The parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, the whole body suffers (1 Corinthians 12:26).

In order for the church to function properly, each one of us has to use the gifts we have been given in the service of Jesus. There are no sidelines to stand on. We all need to be involved. Each ministry, whether that be apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, teacher, must all grow and develop within their role (Ephesians 4:11), every spiritual gift and calling identified and encouraged.

The description that Luke gives us of the early church is one where unity and involvement were central ideas. Everyone was filled with awe (v42). All the believers were together (v44). They gave to anyone who had need (v45). They broke bread in their homes and ate together (v46).

Of course, there would have been issues that had to be dealt with. I am sure that it was not perfect and that there would have been a few thorny characters about (it is church after all), but there's a sense of a fluid, rapidly-growing group of people trying to live in love and unity.

They were utilising what they had and what they were becoming for the benefit of others and for the service of Jesus. It is hard to imagine a greater counter-culture



to the individualism and fragmentation we face every day than to live as a church like this.

Having highlighted the value of the whole body, what I want to underline is the place of leadership. We sometimes are very wary of leadership within the church. It can and has been greatly distorted and misused. Leaders can go on ego trips and people can suffer and be badly manipulated. Let's be clear: bad leadership equals big problems.

However, even in this first church, it is clear that the apostles are leading. They are setting the teaching programme and they are being used by God to perform supernatural acts of power and healing. Later, they determine that day-to-day pastoral issues are not what they are called to do but rather they are to preach and pray, and they gather folks together to ask for consensus about who should look after pastoral issues. This is a great example of involving the whole church in decision-making (Acts 6:17).

They spoke bravely, exercised faith, and continually pointed to Jesus. The apostles exercised leadership within the church. I am not going to debate what we mean by apostles in this study. The point that I want to make is that from the start, the church has always had leaders. I believe that for a church to grow and move forward it requires God-given leadership. That leadership follows the model of Christ, is servant-hearted, humble, and is not interested in reputation. Leadership wants the best for the whole body of believers but is not afraid to take the tough decisions required to move the body forward. Leadership understands that we never stand still; we are either moving forward or backwards in our spiritual life. Leadership recognises the value in each person but also understands the call to make disciples of all nations.

If a church is to, in some way, retake a nation, it requires bold, creative, faith-filled leadership. We require a church that is actively identifying, mentoring,

supporting and encouraging leadership. We need men and women who are not just pastoring, preaching, evangelising and prophesying; we need a generation of leaders - those who raise a kingdom banner that others can follow.

While I will go into greater detail in the section on being scattered, I do want to mention that while I am explicitly thinking about church leadership, we also need to ask how we support and mentor leaders in every area of life. How do we help people be leaders and school teachers, leaders and politicians, leaders and a business entrepreneurs, and so on? How do we make disciples of Jesus who live out their leadership in whatever ministry God has called them?

If we are, in the grace of God, going to see a church that grows and flourishes again in our nation, then we must be intentional about leadership. In every gathered community of faith are we identifying, encouraging and mentoring potential leaders? If you are a leader today, can I ask how much time you are spending mentoring the next generation of leaders?

What kind of church do we need? One that takes leadership seriously.

A growing church

“Praising God and enjoying the favour of all people and the Lord added to their numbers daily those who were being saved.” Acts 2:47

It doesn't surprise me that this church grew. Let's look at a few things that they did. They grasped their identity in the wonderful redemptive mission plan of God. They prayed and encountered the presence of God. They were walking stories, examples, small paragraphs of what grace looks like. They kept going to the temple and I guess met folks that they knew. They broke bread in their houses, not in some dark, cold building or even

new bright building. Right among their neighbours, in the community, life was breaking out. They were a positive people, both praising and joyful. They were a radical people, changing culture and giving sacrificially. They enjoyed the favour of all people. They had no political power, they weren't defined by what they were against, they had spiritual power and were defined by what they were for.

The thing I love most about all this is that they did all this stuff but they did not grow the church. "The Lord added to their numbers daily those who were being saved." It is God who gives growth. It is Jesus who builds His church. The church had no evangelistic strategy at this point, although later Paul clearly had a strategy. At this point in the church's history they had Jesus and He had them. They also had relationships. They had the Holy Spirit, testimony, love and, in that cocktail of love, grace, community connections and life, God moved and the church grew.

The cultures in which we live are in some ways different to that of the early church; although, maybe not as radically different as some of us might think. However, I think the church still grows by the same means. You may think that I am being simplistic, childlike perhaps.

The church grows when people love Jesus, know their identity in Him, love people, tell their stories, and live in a radical way. At that point God adds to their number those who are being saved.

I want to go further, maybe more controversially. I believe that every church should expect to grow. God cares more about the lost than we do. He is the one who leaves the 99 to go get the one.

At the end of that story in Luke 15 Jesus said: "I tell you the truth that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 who do not need to repent." God has a heart for the lost.

In John 15, when Jesus teaches on the vine and branches, it is clear that the pruning is so that branches can be fruitful. Fruitfulness comes in lots of ways, but I would suggest that one of them must be growth. We should never get hung up on the numbers. The kingdom of God comes to individuals. Jesus was interested in each one, and His radical love and call

was to leave the 99 for the one. However, not being fixated by numbers is not the same as not expecting growth. Are the individuals being reached by us? Are we regularly hearing the stories of God's grace impacting the lives of those who are far off?

I am not writing this to make anybody feel bad or worse about their church. I am not getting at leaders in declining churches. However, I am challenging myself and I hope others, to ask about our mindset and our prayers. Have we got into a mindset of managing decline and is that impacting everything we do as church? Do we need to rediscover an expectation that God gives growth, that He loves to save the lost? Wherever we are gathering, are we doing so with a faith that God has placed us here because He longs for His kingdom to break through and for lives to be transformed and for hope to come? It seems strange to write this, but do we need to believe again that the good news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection still has the power, in the Holy Spirit, to change lives?

If we really believe that we would be planting more churches rather than just closing them. We would be getting out into communities with greater creativity and compassion and we would be doing so unashamedly in the name of the one who has saved us. The church was born to grow, not decline.

Summary

It doesn't matter whether we are 30 people or 300, or even 3,000. It makes no difference whether we meet in a church building, school or pub. What matters is whose we are and the values we have. Are we being shaped by the cultures around us or by the biblical story? Are we set upon worshipping in such a way that allows us to be honest, and also open to the person of Jesus?

Does our gathering unveil the reality of God's kingdom, where we get a glimpse of both ourselves and the world as God sees it? We are called to sing radical songs and pray subversive prayers, to rehearse and begin to grasp the great redemptive purposes of God, and the amazing grace that has saved us. This shared experience helps us to see that no matter what the world may think, we have a knowledge the world does not have; we know how all this ends, and we know our place in the revealing story of God.

That shared worshipping community shapes and disciplines us, and it is contagious because we are so transformed by it that we are driven to be cultural transformers, those who can both critique and change society. Indeed, the way in which we will live and engage with the world will

depend on the power and reality of the gathering. Out of that place of kingdom community comes our understanding of our identity and our place in the world. It is in this that we find our primary calling which is to serve King Jesus and to be involved in His mission in the world. All our lives, our whole activity, then becomes worship.

“The proper end of worship is to reorient our lives and give us a vision of God’s reality. If our worship is ordered by this end, then we will not merely feel better, we will be blessed and our perception of the world, not just our perception of ourselves, will be changed; properly engaged worship will engage the whole of our lives. That is, it integrates all of life into a coherent whole so that what we confess and enact in communal worship extends over the rest of our lives.”¹⁰

As we look at what was at the heart of the early church and compare it to what we do, I wonder how close the two are. For some of us, we may say that we do all of these things well and we have nothing to work on. However, for others we look and think this bears no resemblance to what we do or even attempt to do. Are we missing some key elements when we gather locally? Would it take a lot of work, and I dare I say it, radical change to move our gathering to those that better reflect God’s desire. It may cause pain to give up some things in order to pick up other things.

However, to reach out in power across nations requires us to be in a place where the words ‘timidity’ and ‘pain-free’ won’t appear in our vocabulary. It is a time for courage and honesty.

Are we actively striving with every fibre to do in our cultural settings what the early church did? What kind of church changes a nation? A church that is willing to be changed. It is as we allow the Holy Spirit to change us and shape us that we become agents of change in our missionary calling. I believe it is possible in God to see nations changed, but it starts with us. The transformation of the nation begins with the transformation of Christians. Everything will flow from that transformational time when brothers and sisters in Christ come together and encounter His presence. It is in this place that we discover our identity as God’s people, saved and called to follow Him wherever He leads.

It is as we discover the sweep of the story that we see our place in it and understand the radical call to be part of God’s plan for the world, to be in partnership with God, a united and sent people. It is in our gathering that we recognise we are missionary worshippers. We become a missional community by being a Jesus community. It is when we come in our weakness, tears and need, and wait upon God, that we find, as a people, what our destiny is and always has been to be the community. In the power of God, called to be instruments, we gather and will scatter, we scatter and then we will gather, until we eventually gather forever.

Darrell Guder, writing about missional communities, sums up this connection between being transformed and transforming in this way. “The distinctive characteristic of such communities is that the Holy Spirit creates and sustains them. Their identity (who they are) their character (how they are), their motivation (why they are) and their vocation (what they do) are theological, thus missional. That is, they are not formed solely by human intentions and efforts, individual or collective, but instead by God’s empowering presence. The Spirit of God is the dynamic, life-giving power of the church, the unseen Lord, Master, Guide and inspirer of the Christian community. Through this power, a people sent are cultivated through the practices, by which they are formed, equipped and motivated.”¹¹

It will not be easy, but the situation calls for drastic action. As we journey together with Jesus we must make the tough calls in answer to His call. We need to wait upon Him, asking for fresh courage and wisdom, and follow Him.

No one said the journey would be plain sailing, but we are looking to the one who calms the storms and He is able.

The church scattered: a community of sent saints



I remember the first meeting I attended when I became an elder in a church over 20 years ago. There were a lot of items on the agenda and mission was one of them. There was a mission team and its report outlined a series of upcoming outreach events. It fell in the agenda between finance and buildings. The other two items took a lot of discussion and debate. The mission report went through pretty much on the nod. Those who were interested in mission were encouraged to get involved. I am not trying to be critical of that team of passionate people, nor for the need to do outreach events. However, we must grasp that we are missional by spiritual birth. We are born out of God's mission of redemption and we are called to be part of God's purposes for the world.

God is the God who sends, the missional God who has called us in grace, to be part of His amazing plans

for all of creation. How are we part of these plans? By following Jesus wherever He leads. We are called by the sent one to be sent and to send others. If our gathering is not leading to an evergrowing desire to go and to follow, then we are missing something in our gathering.

The mission of God's people has to start and finish with commitment to the God whose mission we are called to share. But, that in turn depends on knowing our God, knowing God personally, from experience of His revelation and His salvation. So, what exactly is it that we are to know and to which we are to remain loyal? In both testaments, God's people are called to non-negotiable, uncompromising loyalty to the uniqueness of God revealed as YHWH in the Old Testament, and walking among us in the incarnate life of Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament.



The mission of God's people flows from the uniqueness of the God of the Bible, supremely revealed to us in Christ.

That is both the source of our mission (for this is the one who sends us into the world in His name) and also the content of our mission. (All that we say and do is to bear witness to the truth that the Lord is God and there is no other, that Jesus has been given the name that is above all names, and there is "no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved".¹²)

When we have heard the life-changing and transforming call of God in Christ, our lives are all about Jesus. They become radical lives, oozing the love of God. We become salt and light, taking and living good news in places of barrenness and hopelessness. We are never those who conform to the cultures of this world, whatever they may be. We never seek acceptance from other powers and dominions. We are not those who domesticate the gospel nor live in a pale religiosity that ultimately adds to the pain and disillusionment of the world. Why are we never to be any of those things? Because Jesus never was. By our words and actions we are to create new culture, the culture of Jesus, the kingdom culture, so that all glory goes to Him.

We never claim to know all the answers, nor will we always get things right. However, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we can point to the greater reality of the lordship of Jesus Christ. The knowledge of His rule and reign, a knowledge that the church has and the world doesn't, shapes us and makes us people living in a different way. The knowledge we discovered when we responded to the call of Jesus is the transcendent knowledge that stands both against and above all other cultures and claims Jesus is Lord.

Our lives are radically altered because we follow Jesus, and we follow Him wherever He calls us. Wherever we find ourselves we are there to be a people of prophetic critique, challenging the accepted cultures with the kingdom culture we know to be true. Our lives are shining a light on the prevailing cultures, but go beyond that in pointing to a different way, a way of hope and peace. We are not just reflecting on what is around us, we are demonstrating a different way of living.

It is not easy to follow, nor is it always popular to point people beyond what they have always experienced. To follow can sometimes be marked by tears and

exasperation. But, it is the life we accepted when we followed Jesus.

"We are invited to commit ourselves and to learn as we go what our role in the whole enterprise is to be. Our commitment is an act of personal faith... There is no insurance against risk. We are invited to make a personal commitment to a personal lord and to entrust our lives to His service. We are promised that as we so commit ourselves we shall be led step by step into fuller understanding of the truth."¹³

This is our discipleship. It is responding daily to the call to follow. It is worked out both corporately and individually in the unknown places where Jesus leads us and is always with us. Missional discipleship is the only kind there is. It is as we scatter into the world that we see the kingdom advance and lives and communities are touched by a power than cannot be replicated anywhere.

In this section I want to talk briefly about the environment we are scattered into. Then look at a few areas that all of us are likely to follow Jesus into. Lastly I will give a brief comment on the scattered church shaping the areas highlighted in our original document, What Kind of Nation?

What kind of church? One that understands the call to follow and is ready to go for it. A church not afraid to challenge and offer and make an alternative culture of hope and love in Jesus' name. A church that follows Jesus into all the unexpected places because they know He is already there. A church that rejects the bland greyness that so often marks much of what we have done.

Who changed the landscape?

You may be delighted to know that I am not going to spend time going through the changes from an old modernist mindset to where we are today. Nor am I going to go into the detail about the prevailing philosophies that dominate in the UK today.

There are certain facts known to every member of every church in Scotland, and in large part across the western world. The landscape has changed. The strong historical links between state and church are rapidly declining. Christendom is dead in some places and terminally ill in others. Our place of influence with the State, for good or bad, has gone or is going.

Author Mike Frost writes passionately that: "We acknowledge that the epoch of history that shaped

the contemporary church has crashed like a wave on a shore and left the church high and dry. That epoch is known as the era of Christendom. Christendom has moulded our churches into their current form and abandoned them to a world that is completely over it all. Christendom is over and we need to need to get over it.”¹⁴

We are being moved from the centre to the margins. We live in a rapidly secularising culture where the ideas of one complete story that shapes life, a clear moral code that applies to all people and sin, and the need for forgiveness are all treated with huge scepticism. At best, people will acknowledge the good churches do in their communities in terms of alleviating need.

However, that is held almost in contradiction to any sense of a radical group of people who are talking about and living the Jesus lifestyle. So the state can still put up with the church, and occasionally wheel out its representatives, but does not like the idea of the church claiming the exclusivity of Jesus, the call to repentance, or the making of new believers. Essentially, the state can just about accept a domesticated, non-subversive church - a group of nice, mostly older people, who will do its bidding at the opening of buildings or state funerals. I think it is going to be in for a shock.

Alongside our change of position within society, there is also the rapid declining numbers within the church. Several recent surveys, both in England and Scotland, have shown what we all know.

There are some growing congregations but, overall, church membership continues to fall. At the same time, in wider society, there is a declining understanding of who Jesus is and what His story is all about.

Clearly, these two things are linked: the changes in society have contributed to the decline in membership of the church. Or, perhaps, more correctly, our failure to recognise our new position in society, the cultural shifts all around us, and what to do about them, has led us to inaction and timidity. As church we were, and perhaps still are, on the threshold of a new era and we were paralysed by grief and fear. As church we had lived so long in one position we got stuck and lacked either the will or flexibility to move to a new place.

Like Corporal Fraser in Dad’s Army or Rev I.M. Jolly on Scottish TV (why are Scots often portrayed as grumpy depressives? I don’t get it), our first response could be: “WE’RE ALL DOOMED.”



However, I believe that this threshold time can be one of great opportunity for those courageous enough to take risks and seek the kingdom of God.

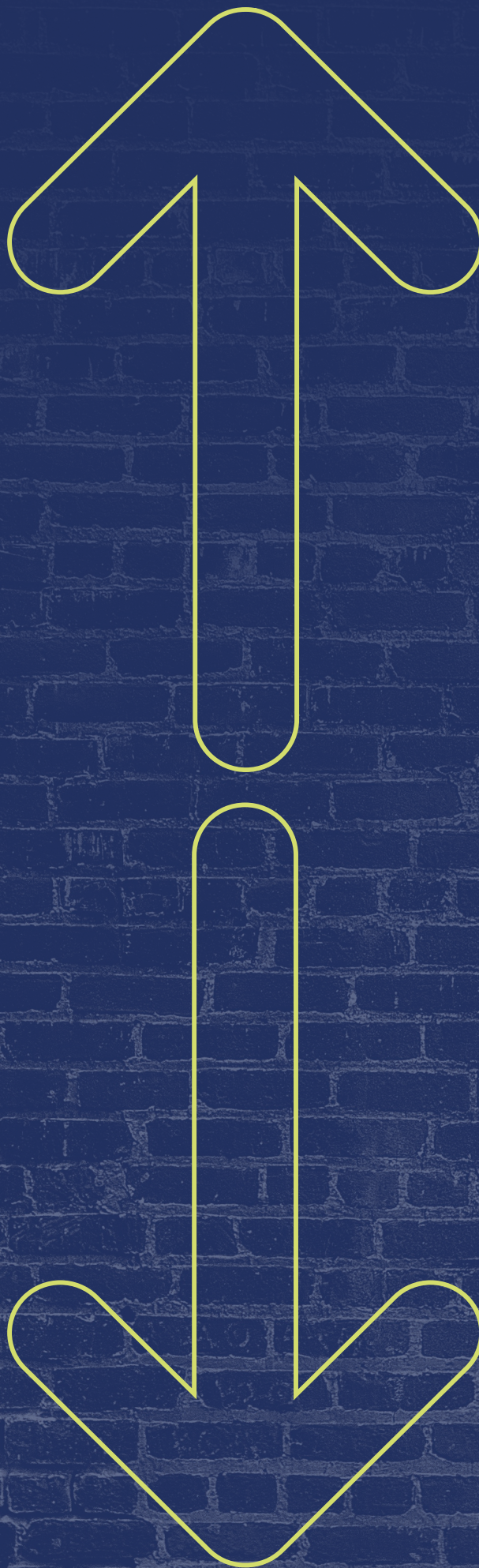
There are a whole lot of people who have never heard the gospel. These people are right on our doorsteps, in our workplaces, at our gyms, and in our schools. Many are not acquainted with anything Jesus said or why He lived and died. What an opportunity for us to creatively engage, in ways people can understand, the power of what Jesus has done in our lives. I believe that as people become more disillusioned with the gods of our time and the cynicism and hopelessness of their prophets, they will thirst for a story of hope and a life of meaning. If we find the ways to engage and share the story of God's goodness in culturally understandable ways, then we will be addressing people for whom this is all new.

Second, if we accept that our position in society has changed and our influence is declining, if we see ourselves as moving to the margins, as minority group, then we are become free to imagine and act in new ways. As we grieve over the death of our position and even our old ways of doing things, we can also find new ways of living out faith. As we scatter out into the world with eyes of faith and disciplined hearts we can, in the words of Star Trek, "boldly go where no man has gone before".

The shape of the things to come will not be as they were, but the scope for creative engagement and prophetic imagination are endless. It is with hope and courage that we go into this changing landscape as a scattered people on a godly mission.

Words of life

The key to defining any culture are the words that shape it. We have been given words that are life-changing. They are the story of God's plan for the world, and at its centre are the good news of Jesus Christ and the salvation that flows from Him. While I believe it is absurd to set word and deed against one another, both flow from a life that chooses to follow Jesus. I want to focus on the word first, because I believe that some of us have lost confidence in the gospel. By that I mean that we have become increasingly reticent about sharing our story in understandable and creative ways, believing that Jesus may use what we say to radically alter another person's life. Yet scripture tells us that there is no other name under heaven by which we can be saved (Acts 4:12). Therefore, we need to let our nation know who Jesus is and what He has done.





Part of sharing in Jesus' mission to the world is to talk about Him.

I am not suggesting that the methods or language used 50 years ago are what we should use today. What I am suggesting is that we need to rediscover the power of our story and have a confidence both in our identity and the presence of God. We have to believe that this is God's mission and He is involving us - that He goes before us, and is with us and that His passion and compassion is greater than ours.

Surveys about the church in England suggest that many people still talk to others about their faith, although what is being shared is not very clear. If that is true, it is great, but it is not my experience. When chatting to folks at seminars and in church services about how often they talk about Jesus in the workplace or the pub, the answer is not often. It is not easy. As we have already said, the cultures around us are very suspicious of people who claim either a universal truth or challenge lifestyles. Yet we must not shy away from speaking words of life into the barrenness of our society. The church exists because of the gospel, and the most radical, life-changing thing we can do is talk about Jesus to others. Jesus did lots of radical things in His life and ministry, and we will look at some in the next section when we think about living out the gospel. However, I believe that outside of His death and resurrection, the most radical thing about Jesus was His words. It was what Jesus said that pointed people most clearly to the new reality that had come.

"If anything, His (Jesus') teachings were more radical than His actions. For His teaching played out the implications of the harsh challenge and radical transformation at which His actions hinted. It was one thing to eat with outcasts, but it is far more radical to announce that the distinctions between insiders

and outsiders were null and void. It was one thing to heal/forgive but quite another to announce that the conditions which had made one sick/guilty were now irrelevant. Of course the teachings cannot be separated from the actions that give concreteness and reality to the teachings. The teachings, like the actions, are shattering, opening and inviting."¹⁵

I believe the same things happen as Christians talk to others about Jesus. The very conversations can be shattering of emptiness, opening of unlimited possibilities, and inviting to all who want to journey with Jesus. It is Jesus who changes both lives. We just need to let others know who He is and what He has done. This is not just a job for a few evangelists or evangelistic courses.

This is about thousands of people sharing who and what they love. Of course we will do it with actions, but let's not shy away from doing it with words. It is what we say as well as what we do that makes the difference. The radical call to discipleship is one that has to be issued so that all may hear. All begins with the folks we know.

A church that brings hope to a nation is one where every disciple knows they have a story to tell and is confident in that story. Not an arrogant or legalistic confidence, but an attitude of grace and love which points people towards the good news of Jesus.



It is not a sharing in a vacuum but a sharing in relationship and in the power of the Holy Spirit. All of us can tell of the God who we are encountering daily and walking with into every area of our lives. It is time to share again; there are people desperate to hear.

Scattered in different places

All of us find ourselves as the scattered church sent into different places. Each one as an individual place of service and each a place where God has put us. I want to briefly mention four that I think are common to many of us.

Family

Each of us has been placed in a family. The vast majority of us have a connection with parents, spouse or brothers and sisters, children and grandchildren. Sometimes, being honest and living out our faith in the presence of those closest to us is the most difficult. It is often really hard if we are new to faith and are the only Christian in the family. I don't want to underplay how difficult it can be to be the only Christian in a family. It

can be hurtful and stressful, and how we move forward can require lots of thought and prayer.

We might get into the habit of not discussing anything that might cause upset or tension, so we may steer clear of issues of faith and life. Yet, this is the family God has placed us in and He loves each member of it. We need to live out who we are and what we are becoming in Christ in a gracious and caring way. I have heard of lots of people 'loved' into the kingdom but not any shouted in. Sometimes, I think that it is when we are with our families that we try too hard to be what we are not. We either want to push our faith at every opportunity (strategically leave Christian books around the house open at the appropriate pages), or we keep our heads down and our mouths shut, refusing to share our own story even when given the opportunity. I think we need to be a bit more relaxed in who we are. God's not finished with us yet; we need to be who we are in Him. We need to pray and allow the Holy Spirit to do what He wants to do. It is probably family members who see us both at our best and worst, and it's okay that we are not perfect. We mess up but God can still do amazing things.

I want to highlight the role of parents and grandparents. As parents, the temptation is to leave the discipling of

our children to church workers and summer camps. There is nothing wrong with these things, but what about praying with your children? Do we believe that God may speak through our children into our lives and do we make space for them to grow and develop into disciples? What do we read to our kids and what are we discussing with them? In our society many grandparents are spending more time looking after children. What do we read to them? There are some brilliant resources out there produced by organisations such as Scripture Union to help us be creative with younger children. I guess my question is how do we serve our families in Jesus' name? And what does it look like to spend time discipling and being disciplined in our families?

Community

It is so easy to drive by people and places, not giving them a second thought. With my worship music on loud, singing along to songs about the God who blesses the whole earth, driving to the service then home again. In all of that, I may have missed it. Have I missed the God who walks the streets round our gathering? The God who weeps at the corner over the people in the houses I drive past? Have I missed a faith-enhancing moment with Jesus because I have been blinkered to His call within my community? I am a huge fan of prayer walking around areas of communities. I seek to hear from God, to listen for what the Spirit is saying, to begin to understand the needs, challenges and blessings of any community. Without that listening and learning, we are consistently in danger of deciding what a community needs and seeking to impose our will like some empire that sits separate but exercises influence.

We are people who are sent to bear witness to the lordship of Jesus and the extension of the culture of the kingdom of God. We are to do that by what we say, but what we say is utterly meaningless if it is not balanced by our actions. We are called to be a sent people motivated by love. The Jesus who sent us is the one who died, has risen and is ascended. He is also the one who was incarnate. He walked dusty roads, stopped to engage with both rich and poor. This is the Jesus who touched lepers, blessed children, and gave hope to the Samaritan woman. This is the Jesus who wept over cities.

We cannot lose sight of the compassion of Jesus for the outsider. There is hope for all people. We must not lose sight of the incarnation in our sacredness and structure. We don't follow one who stayed in heaven and shouted through a cosmic megaphone some clichéd platitudes. We follow one who came among us: touchable,

knowable and moved with compassion. If we are not moving among our communities, allowing the love of Jesus to flow, then our words lack any integrity.

“Within this unjust world, we are called to be a community of those committed to the values of God's reign, concern ourselves with the victims of society and proclaim God's judgment on those who continue to worship the gods of power and self love... The principle of self-sacrificing love is enthroned at the very centre of the reality of the universe. And this principle has to be transparent.”¹⁶

We have to grasp that Jesus was a radical. He was continually breaking down barriers that held people back from experiencing the love of God. Wherever He went He allowed people the possibility of experiencing the kingdom. There was in Jesus' ministry a freeing boldness that challenged the accepted order.

“Jesus spoke parables honouring despised such ethnic groups as the Samaritans, thereby ignoring racial boundaries. He taught women and conversed with them in public, trespassing sexual borders. He included among His disciples Simon the zealot and spoke words of life to Nicodemus the Pharisee, thereby opening Himself to an array of people who were strangers to one another by virtue of their politics. He called the adulteress from the estrangement of the stoning circle back to the circle of community, crossing moral boundaries. And He invited the ritually unclean to His table, breaking religious taboos.”¹⁷

Part of our role as we are scattered into communities is to partner with the radical Jesus to see the excluded included and to prophesy by our actions the dawning of a radical new kingdom in the name of our radical Saviour.

Do we believe no one is beyond the scope of grace? If the answer is yes, then how is that shaping our engagement within our wider communities? We are not called to be a nice group, courting plaudits from the powers that be. We are called to take risks, challenging the status quo by breaking chains of helplessness and hostility.

Our call to living a radical life in Christ in our communities means that we go to the marginalised, the disenfranchised and the voiceless. It may be giving people a new start or debt counselling. It could be combating addiction or giving away food. It is offering hope to the widow and offering a place to the outsider. It is challenging the empty gods of consumerism and pointing to someone better. What kind of church transforms a nation? An uncomfortably bold one.

Public Leadership

For some, the call to follow Jesus should lead us into positions of influence in public life. It may be in politics, the arts, education or business. Public leadership means taking on positions leadership. It means bringing integrity and honesty, and creating a new culture right in the public square. To live as a follower of Jesus in the occasional spotlight is not easy, and those who will get to the top in their chosen profession need both encouragement and support. For example, the Christian organisation CARE has ran a very helpful intern programme for those who feel called to move into politics for many years, helping potential young politicians check out their calling and get a feel for the life and work of politicians, as well as getting prayer and discipleship support.

However, I believe that in God all of us can become leaders where we have been sent. Each of us can become an advocate for the greater good of wherever God has placed us. We can get involved in a school board, start a community magazine or go on a children's panel. Perhaps we can stand in local council elections or join a political party and attend meetings.

We all have the capacity to step forward and create a different culture of leadership; we cannot simply walk away. Imagine thousands of Christians stepping forward, getting involved in areas that shape public life. When we don't take responsibility, a vacuum is created into which others will come.

There is no use complaining about what is happening if we are not prepared to get involved. It is inconceivable that those who see the ship sinking and have the capacity to help it change course don't.

"When we look at the bigger issues of society, issues of government, the issues of world health, education and medicine, then it would seem to me that it would be ridiculous to say that God doesn't want Christians in all of those areas, because He does. God wants people who are faithful, prayerful, who are informed by the life teaching, and above all the death and resurrection of Jesus. God wants such people to be humble, wise stewards of His love. Generosity may become a place that even though we won't build the kingdom by our own efforts, we will nevertheless be building the kingdom which God Himself will one day bring."¹⁸

I love the public leadership work that the Evangelical Alliance is doing throughout the UK, because it is trying to create a climate where we recognise that we all have the potential in God to make a difference. (Check out thepublicleader.com for great ideas and stories.) Perhaps few of us have the capacity to be a Wilberforce, but we can act and speak in ways that bless our communities and see us taking positions of influence which lead to transformation for our communities and the country. What sort of church transforms a nation? One that intentionally produces godly leaders at every level of society.

Our workplaces

Your workplace is your ministry. It is where God has placed you to make a difference. It is not going to be easy. You may be the only person of faith in the staffroom, on the factory floor or in the office. Those in the workplace are on the cutting edge in ways that those paid by the church to work never are. It is in the workplace that the tsunami of all the cultures that exist in our society crash upon faith on a daily basis. It will sometimes be a hard gig, and there will be times when we make a total mess of it.

Those who ignore have contact with more unchurched people than most church leaders. However, because of the artificial separation of secular and spiritual,

those who go out into the workplace may feel that what they do either doesn't matter or is not spiritual. We need to strongly repudiate the underlying notion that all true calling and leadership is expressed within the church alone. This is totally misguided. Much is made of the need and support for those involved in church leadership, but it should not be at the expense of the support for everyone else. The church scattered involves all the people of God placed by God in all the places He wants them, and each one is equally valuable and what they do is of as much interest to Jesus as the next.

All of us are to use the gifts we are given faithfully, wherever God has called us. He is there in the

workplace with you. His Holy Spirit is calling you through your life to create an alternative culture right in the midst of your office, to be a culture-maker, demonstrating what love and grace and blessing look like. Valuing, equipping, praying for and cheering on those who go out day by day and seek to live their faith in the workplace changes nations. As the whole church we have to help each of us to understand that we are prophetic signposts to a life that can be different. By our acts of love in the workplace, our listening, integrity, faithfulness and so on, we are letting people come close to something they might not experience anywhere else. It is in the workplace that most of us live out of discipleship. It is also in the 'ordinariness' of conversations in the workplace that seeds of hope and signs of grace are seen. We need to hear the stories from the frontline and encourage Christians to see what they do as being done with, by and for Jesus. I have found the work of Mark Greene and The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity extremely helpful on the whole subject of Christians in the workplace.

Our life among those with whom we work is the prophetic sign of hope in competing cultures of ultimate disillusionment. It is a huge challenge to choose to be different every day and to do so in a winsome, compassionate way that leads to blessing. It can be a painful and risky business, with much questioning and perhaps some tears. It is faith on the frontline. However, if you are not being an agent of change in your workplace then who is?

The world

I am not sure we make enough of the fact that we are part of a global church; people of every tribe tongue and nation will be our brothers and sisters. How cool is that? We are also part of an eternal church, saints of every generation: martyrs and theologians, visionaries, prophets, and evangelists from every generation - a part of the one family. This church is an amazing miracle of grace. When I think about us as being scattered in the world, I am drawn to three things.

First, I struggle with the term missionary; the church has used the term of those called to different people groups and different languages, sometimes at huge cost. I have no problem with those who are called to go to different countries. Many have had a huge impact on my own life.

However, it is the way we lift up those who go to other nations, sometimes in an unhealthy way. It seems to me that we are all called witnesses and we go into different cultures and people groups every time we

step out the door. I believe that at the heart of God's means of mission is His sending of disciples to every place to share the glory of the gospel, challenging all people with the Lordship of Jesus. That, of course, does mean that there will be people from lots of cultures and churches that will be sent to us. There will be those who carry something significant to us as we carry significant things to others. How are we learning from places in the world where the church is growing? How are we being challenged by the vibrancy and courage of the persecuted church? What about the theological and missional insights of the church in India or Africa? The church is all scattered into the world, not just the western church scattered to faraway lands, but all of us in partnership, learning, listening and blessing one another. Second, the church must be vocal in its defence of the weak and the poor wherever they may be.

Of course we must speak out to governments and authorities about the persecution of our brothers and sisters. I believe we need to be praying and petitioning much more passionately for the persecuted church than we do. However, we cannot pick and choose which injustices we care about. We must speak up for all voiceless, weak and broken people, whoever they are.

If our hearts are overwhelmed by the love of God, it must lead us to compassion for those in our world who never experience compassion anywhere else.

We speak out about all persecution. We champion all who need a champion. We must be aware of our global neighbours. We need to be informed and respond in a thoughtful, educated and engaging way. We must listen to those who are scattered into the places of greatest hardship, so that we can channel our prayer and action in a God-honouring manner. While we are looking at what kind of church changes a nation, we cannot totally divorce that from the mission plan of God that leads to a transformed and redeemed world. As we look inwards and upwards, we must never stop glancing outwards.

Lastly, as a church scattered throughout the world, we must have both a care and responsibility for the world we are scattered in. The whole earth is full of the glory of God, which should mean that Christians should be



passionate about the environment. More was said on the subject of the environment in our previous booklet *What Kind Of Nation?* In the six or seven meetings that we had around that booklet, the issue that was dealt with least was the state of the planet. There seemed to be a huge interest in both the independence debate (no surprise), poverty and justice, a wee bit about sexual ethics but next to nothing from the crowds of Christians who turned up about environment. How you can be passionate about issues around poverty and not think that global environmental issues may have some bearing on the arguments is astounding? As we are scattered in the world we are lost in wonder at the beauty of creation and are struck again that the earth and everything in it are the Lord's. I believe that we need to have a radical view of stewardship and also how many of our global environmental issues are really issues of justice.

“Christian environmentalism will include valuing the intrinsic worth of creation by virtue of the worth conferred by its owner. But Christian environmentalism will also acknowledge the fallen condition of the earth and look forward to its final redemption in Christ, when it is brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”¹⁹

I believe that as we are scattered we begin to grasp that holistic mission of God to create new creation that doesn't stop with people. We must care about the things God cares for, and God cares about creation and has a plan for it.

Summary

Some of you may be thinking that this has not been radical enough. Perhaps others are sitting shocked wondering where to start. Both responses would be right. My aim is to start a conversation which leads to radical action. We don't need more talking shops, but we do need mutual respect and understanding. We require the honest conversation because we need one another. We need to cheer on every small victory and stand shoulder to shoulder against every attack. Love needs to be the tangible mark of our dealing with one another.

The tired fragmentation, backbiting and fingerpointing that has often marked our engagement with one another needs to come to an end. I try (though don't always succeed) to live with the view that if you have to leave, leave well. If you have something critical to say, then say it face to face, and if you can't say something positive in public, then just keep quiet. The church that changes a nation and breathes renewing life into decaying society must be fuelled by unity, encouragement and hope.

Of course I could have written more about why some church buildings will close and why some Christendom-informed cultures are no longer relevant, and why we need lots of new communities of faith. Whether we call them fresh expressions, new congregations, campuses, plants, that is unimportant; this is a time to go for it. There is a nation to be reached. In whatever we are doing, let's ensure we carry an understanding of who we are and what we are called to do.

We are a worshipful, missional people, a generation of culture-changers going wherever Jesus leads us. We are born through the mission of God, sustained by it and called to it. We cannot remain the same, doing what we have been doing, no matter how worthy that may be.

“The church as it currently exists will continue on its current trajectory, for better or worse, until we begin to intentionally act upon it with new paradigms. So, unless leaders move to fundamentally change things, we will continue to see declines in influence in the coming years, just as we’ve seen over past decades.”²⁰

It will take more than just a change of mindset among leaders. It will take enough of us across the country to rise up in a fresh and new way. Let’s be a people set apart for God, who spend time on their knees, both worshipping and serving, knowing that we are all valuable and that wherever God has called us to serve, He is there already.

Let’s strive to be a gathered community lost in love with Jesus and see that love burn people’s heart and change their lifestyle. Let’s strive to be a scattered community, instruments of grace, not just reflecting on cultures but people who create a kingdom culture wherever we go. It’s okay if we’re weak, sometimes

messed up, as long as we trust in our God of power and mercy, whose strength is revealed in our weakness. So, let’s be passionate about Jesus, confident in His kingdom, and open to the prompting, challenging and empowering of the Holy Spirit.

Is that the kind of church that reaches a nation? Let’s give it a go and find out.

“The confidence proper to a Christian is not the confidence of one who claims possession of demonstrable and indubitable knowledge. It is the confidence of one who has heard and answered the call that comes from the God through whom and for whom all things were made.”²¹

Discussion Questions



- What are the key components of your gathered community life?
- Are there aspects of your gathering that we would like to develop or reshape?
- How do we help people find their place in God’s redemptive plan?
- Can we think of creative ways of sharing scripture?
- When we gather, in what ways are we helping everyone reimagine the world in the light in the kingdom of God?
- What does a sacrificial community look like in our context?
- Would people describe us as a community that confidently shares our faith in word and action?
- What are the barriers to confidently sharing Jesus in word and action?
- How are we encouraging everyone to see the workplace/place of study/family as ministries to which we are called?
- How are we helping people in all those areas?
- What does it mean for Christians to care for the planet? How is that being expressed in our gathered congregations?
- What is your dream for the church and the UK?
- Is there one thing that we feel we will need to go and change?



GOD OF GRACE AND MERCY



You are great and worthy to be praised. We pray for our church. Fill us again with hope and love. Give us a desire for your presence.

- **Grant us courage to change what needs to be changed and boldness to step forward into the unknown when necessary.**

Give us understanding for those who find change difficult and love for one another.

Make us a missionary community that lives to serve you wherever you send us. A people called to be culture-makers, living in the power of your Holy Spirit.



WE PRAY FOR OUR COUNTRY

- May you have mercy.
- Renew your church, heal our land, and start with us.

LORD HAVE MERCY, CHRIST HAVE MERCY.

AMEN

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