

# MISSIONAL INITIATIVES

## Monthly Newsletter

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I was asked to comment on whether pastors/leaders will ever rebound and get back to full capacity post COVID. I started to think it through – Is that even the goal?

Ministry has changed in the past 3+ years. Many have commented that COVID did not create the problems we are facing but rather highlighted that which was already present and accelerated the changes that had already begun.

I lead pastor/leader clusters in North America, Europe, and Australia. Over and over, I hear stories of fatigue and exhaustion. During COVID, we began to hear of “The Great Resignation” as many pastors found a way to exit. Those who have stayed are said to be functioning at 75% capacity. Many in the church are also weary, which makes leading even more difficult.

Loads of leaders left. Those who stayed are at 75% of their previous energy and dealing with people who themselves are at 75%. Seems like a daunting task. It is, if we keep trying to do the same things, or worse, just work harder to try and run at the same pace to keep the engine running.

I am not pointing the finger at anyone – except me. I know this story well. But the Lord has brought things across my path that cause me to stop and ask questions of how I will lead in the final 10 years of “paid ministry.”

Here are a few things I have been learning - perhaps they may be a help to you also.

1. **Who I Am Becoming** – I have always been a Dallas Willard fan and know of his quote “the greatest gift you can give to your congregation is the person you are becoming.” Recently, I was reminded of a Newbigin quote that pushed me to ask if this was true in my life. “The minister’s leadership of the congregation in its mission to the world will be first and foremost in the area of his or her own discipleship, in that life of prayer and daily consecration... which is where the essential battles are either won or lost.” I best not get sucked into the lie that I

should be spending more time on the running of the church than I do on the nurturing of my soul. To do so is a detriment to both my own soul and the souls of these people I say that I love.

2. **The Right Story** – I've become increasingly aware of the influence of culture on the church. I am astounded at how I am / we are seduced by the culture without even knowing it. One of the best books I have read during the past 3+ years is *Pastoral Song* by James Rebanks. This best seller points out that since World War II we have been living in a technocratic story that has told us that bigger is better and more is preferred. Efficiency is the hero of this story, which has permeated almost every area of our lives. The church is to live in an alternate story – the Kingdom of God. Living in God's story changes our ends and objectives, among other things.

3. **God's Agency** – I have been challenged in the area of agency. Am I living in God's agency, or in my own? Through reading, webinars, and a short cohort I have been helping to lead, I am discovering that far more than I thought possible, I drift into the reality of making my own plans and asking God to bless them (if I remember) instead of discerning where God is at work and then joining him. We must pay attention to this most crucial aspect.

4. **Practices** – Finally, I have been living into a set of practices that have been life giving. I am learning to **Dwell**, both in scripture (*lectio divina*) and in my neighbourhood – paying attention to God's presence in both. I am learning to **Discern** where God is at work. We must wait on the Spirit to reveal what God is doing in that place. And after **Dwelling and Discerning**, I **Experiment**, meaning I take a risk and join with what I think God has revealed.

I am convinced that these and possibly a few other things will not bring pastors back to full capacity the way we were before COVID but rather into a new way of walking and working with Jesus in the places where he has sent us. I know, because it is happening to me.

## NEIGHBOURHOOD STORY

A couple of weeks ago at our annual church retreat, the speaker, Anthony Brown, encouraged us with the idea that evidence of a mature church can be seen in how we talk about Jesus daily, in everyday conversations. Evangelism is not always a "targeted approach" but can happen naturally in the midst of the rhythms of our days. So we have put it into practice.

One woman went to visit neighbours across the back fence. There were two extra people there who entered into the conversation. The lady from our church risked speaking normally about Jesus throughout the conversation. This sparked differing comments from the three neighbours, but none were negative. It brought a level of joy at this new experience.

Another man and his family started hosting a watch party for *The Chosen* every Tuesday. The number of people crammed in to watch an episode and then discuss what they have seen is growing. On one recent occasion, a teenage girl asked an important question post watch. As my friend started in on a “theological answer,” her father, new to the faith, jumped in and answered his own daughter. There was joy in the room as people recognized that talking about Jesus was not as strange as they might have thought.

This past week, two Sikh men wandered into one of our buildings late in the evening. A leader who was still present went to see what they wanted. He noticed that one of the men had taken off his shoes to enter the building – it was a holy place. They went into the sanctuary and began to ask all kinds of questions about what it means to be a Christian. The first question was, “Where is the statue of your God?” Then they spotted a cross and said that they recognized that. “What is it for?” Finally they asked what kinds of rituals we did as part of our worship. The leader took them to the centre of the room and showed them where the communion table was put every Sunday. Then he got to talk about Jesus in explaining how God invites all of us to his table when we gather together.

On Sunday in another congregation of our church, we were 15 minutes into our opening worship set (songs, scripture, prayers, stories...) when a Chinese woman walked in off the street. She did not look familiar, and it appeared to be her first time there. She poked her head around the wall to see what was happening. Someone greeted her and offered her a seat, where she sat for the rest of the gathering. At the end, I approached her and introduced myself. I asked where she was from and what brought her to our gathering that morning. She wiped away tears and explained that she had never been in a church before. She had been walking by on the street and heard the music. She felt compelled to go in and see what was happening. She told me (and then four others who spoke Mandarin) that she had no idea what Christianity was about but could not stop crying through the gathering. There was something special happening. She asked if it would be okay if she would come again.

## RESOURCES

I love it when authors take a six-volume series that is likely too heady for me and condense it to a one-book, dumbed-down version so that I can tackle it and appreciate it. This is what has happened with Andrew Root’s latest, entitled *When Church Stops Working*. Root suggests that the problem we are facing as the church is not what we think. It is not that we have too little influence, too few people, or too fragile belief. These are the symptoms of a deeper problem. That problem, he says, is that we have an affection for innovation, which is deeply rooted in the secular age. For more on this topic, I highly recommend:

*When Church Stops Working* by Andrew Root    *Once You See* by Jeff Christopherson  
*Pastoral Song* by James Rebanks