

Ground Level Digital Gathering seminar 15/16.04.2020

Pete Atkins

What will look different after COVID 19?

Seminar in 3 parts...

- **A prophetic context** - Unknowable to some extent other than God reveals
- **Some changes already happening in society** and church which may be a guide
- **How will we cross this unfamiliar landscape and build beyond?** The future is to some extent in our hands..

1. Prophetic context – GL National Leaders Forum December 2019 – day before general election – Stuart’s request for contributions from:

Dave Jones “A new ERA” – long term significant change in the church

PFA – “Leaving Babylon” – developing since Sept 2019. Stu and Richard et al

Isaiah and Revelation – leave Babylon

Church in exile: time to return to a new future – commanded to leave (alongside lessons to be learned about living in a strange culture). We are to move away from cultural compromises which have invaded the church: what do we leave behind?

The following are questions not judgements (developed early 2020)

1. **Disbelief. Growing secularism** – increasing antichristian undertones. The glorification of man and his thinking/discoveries.
2. **Controlling structures.** Is Church about rules and hierarchical authority structures or life giving relationships? – are we trapped into focussing on how to keep an outdated and flawed system/structures going rather than pursuing life?
3. **Over regulation:** driven by fear and needing to shed responsibility – and blame. Micro management and control of behaviour, relationships, investment etc.
4. **Ethical compromises/shifting morals.** Danger of universalism – no need for a saviour. Muddle of sexual ethics, compromise in sanctity of life.
5. **Money shaped agenda.** Are finances and deadlines driving and shaping mission? Are we really trying to serve both God and Mammon? Do we act in generosity and sacrifice or fear and financial insecurity?
6. **Idolatry.** Whatever gets our attention before God – including our version of church? Is celebrity culture invading the church? Are we about production or authenticity?
7. **Instant culture.** EBay. Amazon Prime etc. Short term gratification and vision. “I want it now” Are short term targets/fixes replacing perseverance and faith?

8. **Relativism**; truth is what's true for you, pick and mix spirituality. Hedonism – find a theology for what feels right to you?
9. **Leadership models**. Populism? Power or humility? Service or domination? Enabling or acquiring others? Authority invested in the “man of power for the hour” or the community of leaders?
10. **Complexity and busyness of life**. Do we have space to be still in the presence of God? Part time Christianity? Compartmentalisation?
11. **Consumerism**

The way home is across the desert – an unfamiliar landscape – in which God will provide for us and protect us (Isaiah 48:20, 52: 11, 12)

How?

1. Repentance – identifying the compromises and idols. Called to a season of waiting on God, personal repentance. **We need to wait on God for the signal to move** – then move out across the desert together in different places and connections.

“The future will arise from the ruins of the past and the arrival of outside resources”

2. Obedience – being led by His Spirit through the desert and seeing the new arise as we go “we are called to a new future guided by word and Spirit and the values He has given us”

3. Apostolic and prophetic building. Including our values

Word and Spirit – let Him lead – hearing God becomes paramount as we navigate a way through the desert step by step..

Build cairns in the wilderness – a description of where we are now so that we can understand better the way ahead and others can follow.

“Let us not miss the moment – we need to be mobile, adaptable, willing to move spontaneously or stay as we move across the desert”

So the picture is of a city/culture/captivity behind us that we are leaving, a desert, an unfamiliar landscape ahead that we are to cross, following the Spirit, a cairn beside us that helps us understand how to move ahead and helps others to follow. The way we cross will change the landscape and shape us for the new future.

2. The societal/cultural changes that we can maybe begin to see in this unfamiliar landscape

1. Economic shock - Financial restriction – less employment, salaries low, taxation rise, pensions hit
2. The poor worse off. Welfare and benefits demand high - more dependence on them.
3. High street changes – many retail franchises/outlets gone, online shopping with delivery high, fewer companies, less choice, simpler lifestyles?
4. Employment patterns changing. Less travel – more digital meetings. More self-employed? Move further towards multiple employments.
5. Travel reduced generally – leisure and business. Nervousness for some time after epidemic over, environmental consciousness. Effect on transport services generally.
6. Environmental care acceleration? Passion and arguments strengthened. More pressure to be sustainable and reduce carbon emissions.
7. Focus on health care provision, including research and science. International cooperation – not caught again?
8. Mental health services in great demand. Grief, PTSD, anxiety. Counselling and retreat at a premium.
9. Digital communication – huge rise for individuals and groups. Implications for church.
10. Sports – gradual reinstatement of big crowds but a lot less money in the system despite the increased emphasis on fitness. Probable rise in home based exercise.
11. Political division. This will probably worsen as the handling of the crisis is reviewed and the competing needs of a divided society get starker.
12. International relationships – strange tension between national loyalties and the need to work together and help each other. Remember BREXIT?
13. Entertainment. Lower budgets. More home based? Gatherings will pick up slowly.
14. Education. A swing to the arts? Will help us process the trauma.

15. Creativity being released in the many: painting, drawing, songs, poetry, videos etc

NB the effect of **the second world war on church attendance – an acceleration of “exile”**. Critical that Christians give a lead in this transition/vacuum. Politicians, media, business, education, health, sports and arts leaders. Every Christian counts.

3. So how do we navigate this landscape?

To “leave Babylon” – and to form a post Babylon church we need the apostolic and prophetic to help us live in the following ways:

1. Relationship and presence. We’re called away to an immanent, immediate relationship with God where His presence is valued above all things, where He is heard and responded to. This needs each and all to know Him, hear Him, follow Him and be filled with His Spirit. This needs the prophetic, a life-giving life of worship, a prayer rhythm that is not legalistic, a living in His word. It means developing a creative panoply of worship and prayer. It means a discipline of waiting on God, hearing and following His Spirit – letting Him lead. It means a devotion to the apostles teaching, prayer, the breaking of bread and fellowship – where we continue to encounter the risen Jesus in all of these ways of doing life together.

2. The Bible. We’re called away from the effects of the enlightenment and the secularising pressure of this age back to belief in the living word of God, the bible. We are called away from a culture that explains away the miraculous, compromises the ethics God has given us (whether to do with relationships, sex or the sanctity of life), denies the existence of our creator, denies the death and resurrection of Jesus and denies the need for a saviour in a world where sin is never mentioned. We are called away to belief in His word, to let our lives and church be founded on the truth of scripture, to challenge the aspects of this culture shaped by idolatry, hedonism, relativism and secularism.

3. Community. We’re called away to a way of being together that is about life not ritual, community not just attendance at events, it should be “heart, home and hospitality” (Roy Searle) not just “going to church”. It’s about belonging to each other in God, a place to be with others and do life with them centred around Jesus. It’s not primarily about ritual, hierarchy, structures, regulations or policies. These things in proper measure are there to **serve** the purpose of being together – the coming of God’s Kingdom. In this season I think

we are to be shaped more by the monastic than the congregational. Our life together will be both domestic and public and includes all ages.

4. Journey and movement. We are called away to flexibility and movement together not a static existence which centres on buildings and fixes us geographically. There does need to be commitment to particular localities, following the call of God, but also a willingness to be sent/to go/to be apostolic to new places, creating flow and dispersion, following the Spirit as He leads across a region and beyond. Allowing Him to bring up springs and life in the way He knows each context needs.

We're called to be centrifugal not centripetal, to move not be static. We are called away to see the Kingdom of God extend across regions and into particular cultural contexts, not build one local congregation.

5. Mission. We're called to share in the mission of God as a primary way of doing life together and with those in our communities. Incarnation is key. We have learnt to encourage each to hear God and to move in mission as He leads – encouraging and supporting each other's vision. In different places then this will involve engaging incarnationally with this alien culture and offering something better, visible and lived out in community. Mission isn't about growing the church as a primary focus but is on extending the knowledge of the love of God for all. In the loving economy of God it is in cooperating with God in His mission that we mature as individuals and grow as church.

6. The Kingdom of God. We look to see all the dimensions of the Kingdom in any one place – salvation, healing, deliverance, maturing disciples, social action, creativity, engaging with education, business, sport, politics, other cultural drivers etc. It also means caring for the sick, poor, isolated, addicted, broken and oppressed.

The Kingdom includes all Christians and churches

The Kingdom includes traditional and fresh

The Kingdom includes all God's people – no clergy/lay divide

As we apply these elements on our journey across this strange landscape, God will shape us to be the church His future calls for. As we live these elements out in our different ways and contexts God will create in us the "new normal" for the future church.

PFA 15.04.2020