

IN ONE SPIRIT

The Christian Church is no longer in the majority. How could we become an effectively activated minority?

BY DAVE MANN

*When we change our thinking,
we change our possibilities!*

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While I get the credit for this book, there is no question that every-page was shaped by relationship and conversation with others from the past 25 years of inter-church engagement. I am aware that I am but a mouth-piece for the conversations of a multitude. Thank you all!

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the 1000 or more church leaders with whom I, and our team, have been privileged to connect in recent years throughout New Zealand.

Your faith and wisdom have shaped our team's thinking on the various matters this book discusses. Your vision, passion, dedication and perseverance have inspired us. I feel privileged to call you friends.
Thank you!

Please keep doing what you do, and I pray this book somehow encourages fresh hope for things that might yet be achieved together.

ENDORSEMENTS

Through *In One Spirit* Dave Mann has given us a lot to think about and pray over concerning our past, present and where we are headed both as a nation and as the Body of Christ. This much needed, 'big picture' book is both thought-provoking and timely, particularly for leaders seeking to discern the way forward in their respective cities and towns. Well done Dave.

Colin Shaw, *City By City, NZ*

Dave Mann is prophetically speaking into this nation like few others that I know. He is accurately discerning the times that we live in and giving a clear call in how to respond. This book should be read by all church leaders, elders and teams. But be warned; it will radically challenge your thinking, your priorities and your practise. You will be tempted to dismiss it as too hard and too difficult. But doing the same thing as we have always done is no longer an option. I passionately believe this is God's word for the church today.

Keith Harrington, *lead Pastor, Invercargill Central Baptist Church; Convenor, Invercargill City Pastors' Group*

It has been said listening to Dave Mann is like drinking from a fire hydrant! Reading material from Dave Mann is also insightful, strategic, contextual and prophetic, but can be consumed at one's own pace. In his latest book he introduces and builds ideas around Church profile and partnership. This is an important conversation for regional and national churches and a must for every leader. I highly recommended this book.

Tony Collis, *Pastor, Hope Centre Levin and initiator, One Million Children*

This book is a must read. Why? David Mann in the first half of the book captures the current Christian story in Aotearoa through articulating cultural trends that are a challenge to the hopes of the Christian community, and how they might play out in the future, and lands his conclusions sensibly, practically and positively.

New Zealand needs changes; *In One Spirit* is a good place to start...allow this book to ignite your imagination regarding what our commitment to a united effort might look like and be capable of achieving. Your thinking will be challenged. May I encourage you to allow conversations and discussions to begin!

Nick Klinkenberg, *Vision Churches International; church planter & author.*

In One Spirit is a gift to the Christian Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand, and quite likely further afield. Dave brings his striking clarity of thought and deep Gospel understanding to an easy-reading, thought-provoking, Kingdom-inspiring book that needs to be read by all church leaders. As Dave helps us to interpret culture and apply Gospel truth, we are introduced to a sharper way of thinking and given a vital lens through which to view the role of the church generally, and the one Church of each city and town specifically. I cannot recommend *In One Spirit* highly enough as a significant and necessary provocation to the Church — to prioritise unity-on-purpose for the sake of the Kingdom's advance in our nation and beyond. I personally thank Dave for putting pen to paper — the end-product is a triumph."

Nigel Irwin, *Director, City by City; Convenor, Wanganui Christian Leaders Association; Snr Pastor Wanganui Central Baptist*

I'm pleased to see a significant discussion of the Churches participation in New Zealand society taking place, which asks where we might go from here. The material Dave presents is both insightful and all-encompassing, and lays a good foundation for some discussion, and then a great deal of action. As a step on a broader journey — which we are all a part of in our nation, these words issue a challenge to those in local church leadership as to how we could better infuse the Kingdom into our culture again. They could also help to be better positioned to hear and respond to promptings and moves of the Holy Spirit in the future. "You're still challenging us Dave — good on you!"

Ps John Omundsen,
Pastor of 30 years and Christian educator,
Hawera.

This book is a timely one in helping to raise awareness, ask needed questions, and could perhaps be a catalyst for ongoing dialogue about the importance of our unity together — in view of what God is doing all over the world, uniting His Church in answer to the Lord's prayer for his followers to be one. I pray that God will use this book in Aotearoa New Zealand to do just that!

Ps David Dishroon, *Changepoint Church,*
Tauranga; Facilitator; City pastors' prayer.

"In One Spirit" will challenge your paradigms and priorities concerning the shared mission of the Church in our cities and nation. Dave challenges us to actively pursue the kind of unity that is necessary for the Church to be agents of cultural change. He provides insight and supporting stories from across the nation coupled with insightful biblical lessons to demonstrate what is possible when we unite with one purpose.

He suggests that in the climate of a post-Christian society, it is necessary to look beyond focusing primarily on the activities of our individual congregations, to engage in missional efforts that only a united Church can achieve.

"In One Spirit" takes the concept of unity beyond that of an idealistic notion. It presents strategy on how to bring application. This is a timely, compelling, and empowering resource for the Body of Christ.

Stephen Hanson, *Director, Kairos Company;*
Initiator, 'One Voice' united city prayer
gatherings, Tauranga.

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The second half is concerned with Church leadership, and how we might better position ourselves to be a voice within our cities, and in the nation as a whole, in view of current cultural trends.

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PREFACE

Heather and I returned to New Zealand in December of 2010 with a sense that God was calling us to encourage the outreaching focus of the New Zealand Church. The work therefore began with a lot of listening. I met with a wide range of key church leaders, and it didn't take long to identify that there were gaps between the various outreaching efforts that existed. Two books on outreach, and a range of innovations have resulted. The Hope Project (a national media effort) is the most well-known of these.

To get some of these innovations off the ground we quickly realised that we'd need relationship with church leaders at the grass roots around our nation. Since that time our team have travelled the nation six times in six years, meeting with pastors' groups in 60 to 75 cities and towns each time. One of the results of this annual face-to-face connection with 500 to 1000 pastors is this book.

What we noticed were declining opportunities available to local churches to be a voice in their communities. While we heard and were encouraged by many positive stories, we also discovered a pattern of closed doors. Working out how we could address these culture-wide trends is a part of the context of this book.

The way we think affects what we do. What we do determines our results. In this sense, if we are to see the Church achieving its mission to a higher level nationally, some changes in thinking will be necessary.

The Greek word translated 'Church' in the New Testament is *ecclesia* — which simply means the assembly, or gathering. The Church is the people. In all 114 occurrences of the word '*ecclesia*' in the New Testament, the reference is always to the people. Even when the word is used in the context of a building or meeting place, it continues to be in reference to the people there (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:9; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1:2). In this sense, there is only one Church in our nation, and one Church in each city or town. The Church is those who know, love and serve God.

Additionally, because we have the Holy Spirit, Jesus' prayer for our unity in John 17 really must be viewed as a plausible reality, not just an idealism. I have often got the impression that many church leaders consider the functional unity of their city pastors' groups (through vision, organisation, activity and results) to be an unrealistic ideal. However, the theological argument is simple. It is the application of this 'ideal' that is our challenge.

How could it work? How could a different era in united Church leadership and effort come about in our cities — and nation?

May we hear what God is saying to his Church!

INTRODUCTION

UNITED WE STAND — DIVIDED WE FALL.

Early in the 2000s I believe New Zealand crossed a tipping point in its religious viewpoint. We went from being a secular nation in which something of our Christian heritage was still valued, to being one in which a majority had concluded that we might be better off removing all remnants of our Christian past. This changed the landscape for our outreaching efforts at the city and national levels.

AN ILLUSTRATION

Imagine a nation with 40 brands of cars, and one wealthy person decides to purchase all 40 companies or franchises. They would be the owner of considerable inefficiencies as a result — including 40 head offices, distribution networks, and competing car yards and marketing budgets. However, for argument's sake, let's assume that the great variety of cars that results justifies these inefficiencies. I suggest this is a little like the Christian Church and its various denominations. There are inefficiencies, and yet also possible strengths through the variety of church 'personalities' that result, and God is the owner of them all.

Let's then imagine that a cultural change takes place in public transportation. The public begin to use electric scooters, bicycles and public trains and buses. The motor-vehicle industry drops from representing 80% of the market to only 40%. What would the owner of these 40 car companies do? There are many possibilities. However, one of the first suggestions would likely be to take the marketing budgets of the 40 companies and combine them. They could then

The Christian Church has gone from the position of being a majority, to being a minority. However, activated minorities can still be very effective!

promote one united message: “Motor-vehicles are awesome — and you need one!”

This kind of change is what I believe the New Zealand Church now needs to grapple with. The Christian Church has gone from the position of being a

An improved situation is possible, and it begins with a very simple decision: We decide together that, from this day on, we will esteem our united function more, and will help to enable it!

majority, to being a minority. However, activated minorities can still be very effective!¹ While solutions may not seem simple, I am convinced that an improved situation is possible, and it begins with a very simple decision: *We decide together that, from this day on, we will esteem our united function more, and will help to enable it!* There is no question we are capable of such a decision, and that it could produce results.

Regarding the character flaws that might inhibit our united effort, I suggest that our great hope is that we have been given the Holy Spirit. Because of his presence in us, our flaws can be overcome (Galatians 5:22-23)! It is with this hope and belief that I write.

What might result if we paid more attention to the intersection of denomination, Church, mission and culture?

SOME CONTEXT OR BACKGROUND

Based on the findings of a 2002 study in Australia by CLS², 6 out of 10 non-Church Australians were not aware of having any church-going friends. If we assume the approximate same statistics here in New Zealand this means that, even if every believer known to their friends as a church-goer were actively witnessing, 6 out of 10 people would still have no one seeking to connect the Christian message of hope with them.

¹ This sentence is a recent quote from a friend of mine who used it in description of the greater vision our work served. It was so apt that I recall being surprised it wasn't already part of my vocabulary — which it very clearly now is. Thank you friend!

² The study was published as a book titled “Why People Don't Go to Church” by John Bellamy, Allan Black, Keith Castle, Philip Hughes, and Peter Kaldor. Published 2002. <http://ncis.org.au>

Most Christians are not proactive in their personal gospel witness, so let's imagine 25% are. Statistically this would mean that Christian witness is connecting with 10% of the non-Church population. Additionally, imagine that the various community ministries of our churches were somehow gospel-focused (which we know is often not the case). Let's very generously imagine that this connects the Christian messages with another 10% of the non-Church population.

80% of the non-Church population in our nation has no one seeking to connect Christ with them.

The conclusion is that 80% of the non-Church population in our nation has no one seeking to connect Christ with them.

How does that make you feel? To me, this is not acceptable, and I pray that you see it the same way. We are all a part of God's Church, and so we are all somewhat responsible to see this addressed. Awareness of this kind of challenge is the primary context of this book.

SOME QUICK 'QUALIFIERS'

Firstly it is not my intent to challenge the existence of denominations. Denominations are servant bodies to the Church in the areas of training, accountability and support. There is no need to view them as being in conflict with the wider missional focus and efforts of the united Church. Both local congregational efforts and united Church efforts are needed. I will elaborate more — but it is important that we are clear on this from the outset.

Secondly, I am not proposing the establishing of a single 'structured' Church leadership team for all God's people in a city, or the nation. While city pastors' groups have a vital role to play in their cities and towns, and while God can raise up individuals to play key roles in cities and the nation at different times, this isn't about a power structure. No one group or person will ever have a monopoly on Church 'power'. Jesus alone is our King, and Lord of the harvest. This is therefore about discerning how God's Spirit might work — so we might better identify what is possible, and then do it!

Thirdly, my first two books on Christian outreach focused on conversational outreach approaches for individuals, and then on habit-based leadership approaches for pastors and small group leaders. Put together, those areas of learning can help local churches to get their members *sustainably* mobilised as ‘every day conversational witnesses.’ Therefore these important and foundational areas are not covered in this book.³ Instead we focus here on wider cultural trends, and the difficult matter of united application by our many churches together at the city and national levels.

Fourthly, to put a limit on how important this book is or isn’t, while I think this book carries some important messages, it remains that it is still but a small contribution to a much wider conversation. I therefore encourage that if you disagree on some matter, you don’t get too ‘hot under the collar’ about it. No one is in charge here — except Jesus. These things need working out within our relationships amongst each other in our cities, and concurrently between us all within our nation as a whole. What is important is that we are somehow encouraged to be on a forward journey, and together.

Finally, I will use the word church with a small ‘c’, to refer to local congregations, and the word Church with capital ‘C’, to refer to all of God’s united people in a city, or nation. Regarding why this is important, for years we have been encouraged to view the local church as the hope of the world. I intend to suggest that, in contrast to this, the Church (capital C) is the hope of the world — and that there is an important difference between these two visions.

May God’s people function as one, **in one Spirit**, for the faith of the gospel; and may we see an even mightier outpouring of God’s Spirit being released as a result!

*Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm **in the one Spirit**, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.* Philippians 1:27-28a

3 See ‘Because We Care’ and ‘Elephant In The Room’ by Dave Mann — BigBookPublishing.co.nz

CHAPTER ONE

Culture doesn't just change — it is changed

The point at which a culture changes its views on a matter is commonly called a 'tipping point'. It's a little like walking up a see-saw in a children's playground. Nothing much seems to change until you cross the top — and then it tips over.

Some mistakenly think that culture changes as the result of random forces. In reality, culture does not simply change. It is changed. There is a cause, an agent or a visionary influencer. If this is true then any of us could potentially engage the cultural conversation and become the change-agent!

An example of a tipping point is water, which freezes at zero degrees Celsius, or boils at 100 degrees. As it cools or warms there is no observable change except perhaps to the touch — then apparently all of the sudden, it changes form.

In 2002 Malcolm Gladwell wrote an excellent book titled ‘The Tipping Point’. He wrote how when the number of African Americans in a neighbourhood reached about 20%, sociologists observed that the community would ‘tip’. While some white people had left up to that time, from that point onwards most of the remaining white families would leave in a short space of time. He went on to discuss the following three points and — in every case demonstrated how something catalysed the change.

Firstly, he talked about the ‘stickiness factor’. For example, yawning is highly contagious (‘sticky’). The mere mention of yawning has already caused many readers to feel like they needed to yawn. If you did yawn — and someone who was walking past now saw you yawn, they might also yawn. The contagion would then spread to all who saw them also. Intriguingly, Gladwell notes that this is also an emotionally contagious thing, because many will wonder whether they might be tired.

Cultural epidemics take off because something has become contagious within the culture. The AIDs virus is believed to have been around for a couple of decades before it spiked. Something changed in the virus, making it more ‘sticky’. This is what company ‘jingles’ are about. Many New Zealanders can finish this sentence: “*The Warehouse. The Warehouse, where...*” This 20-year old jingle has imprinted a message in our minds (“...*where everyone gets a bargain*”).

Things exert extraordinary influence upon culture when they are ‘sticky’. They connect in a special way. They make sense. They appeal to felt needs — and so they take off, *spreading as if all by themselves* from person to person, community to community.

Secondly Gladwell talked about the ‘law of the few’, reflecting upon how cultural changes were often catalysed by a remarkably small number of extra-

ordinary individuals. For example, in the spread of sexually transmitted diseases one study found that an epidemic of Gonorrhoea in Colorado Springs was catalysed by just 168 people living in 4 small neighbourhoods, who frequented the same 6 bars. Their extraordinary sexual and drug-taking habits had a disproportional effect.

When 10% of the population holds an unshakable belief, their belief will always be adopted by the majority of society.

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institution released a study on cultural change in 2012. They found that when 10% of the population holds an unshakable belief, their belief will always be adopted by the majority of society⁴. In contrast, if only 9% were fundamentally convinced on a point, the majority would not follow suit.

This is the kind of change I believed happened in our own nation's thinking regarding Christianity early in the 2000s. The percentage of New Zealanders who were convinced that our Christian heritage and values needed to be treasured and protected dropped below 10%, while at the other end of the spectrum the percentage that believe we need a nation with no public remnants of that Christian faith went above 10%. As a result, certain things are accelerating. However, this reflection also speaks to the solution. To change a culture-wide perspective we need to somehow get 10% convinced about a few things!

The previous two paragraphs suggest important understanding regarding how the thinking of a culture can be changed.

The process by which cultural changes take place, often (i) begins with a few academics or key thinkers. These thoughts are then picked up by (ii) visionary creatives who disseminate them to (iii) a wider body of leaders and people. As the number of those adopting this new thinking grows, it is (iv) shared with a much larger group — and as those adopting the new thinking

4 <https://news.rpi.edu/luwakkey/2902>

crosses the 10% threshold, (v) a dynamic within the entire cultural body changes.

REVIVAL — TWO HANDS REQUIRED

Revival is in some ways like a cultural tipping point. Through consistent prayer, faith and effort, a community and spiritual environment is slowly changed to become a place the Holy Spirit chooses to come and to inhabit in a special way for a season. Like in the seesaw illustration, through consistent efforts little change is observed until the midpoint is reached. The seesaw then ‘suddenly tips’, and an increased freedom in the things of the Spirit is experienced, with much fruit.

Revival is something that God does. Being consistent in faith — as expressed in both our earnest prayer and the very-best in our efforts, is what we do. Like the two hands that clap, both our prayer and best efforts are needed.

New Zealand has about 500,000 regular church-attending ‘evangelical’ and ‘orthodox’ Christians, plus about 200,000 regular church-attending Catholic Christians. With the 10% tipping point in view, and a population of around 4.5 million, there is technically enough ‘critical mass’ here for significant influence already.

With the 10% tipping point in view, and a population of around 4.5 million, there is technically enough ‘critical mass’ here for significant influence already.

The third factor that Gladwell noted as leading to cultural epidemics was ‘the power of context’. For example, while we might not feel like spending money on new heaters during the warmth of

summer, we might be open to all manner of heating solutions by the middle of winter. Or imagine that it's late winter, and you've had no vitamin D from the sun for a while. Because your immunity is low the flu bug that didn't affect you in summer now puts you in bed for a week. This is the power of context.

In summary, Gladwell suggests that tipping points occur because, through a process of consistent yet gradual change, a thing somehow becomes more contagious or desirable than it was, combined with the efforts of some remarkable individuals (the law of the few), who work at the right time, or within the right circumstances (the power of context), to bring about a disproportional end-result.

The role of the marketing industry is to work out how to read, ride and choreograph these kinds of changes.

The exact same dynamics are at play when it comes to the shared religious viewpoints of a nation — which is why this is a relevant starting point for us.

BECOMING AGENTS OF CULTURAL CHANGE

There is a public conversation going on through media and other means about religion. This conversation is considering the relevance of Christianity to national identity, and how much of our historic Christian identity should therefore be preserved into our future as a nation. This conversation is taking place in the midst of our everyday conversations and media messages.

What then of our involvement? Overall, I feel that the New Zealand Church is struggling to engage meaningfully. Our engagement is typically a response to the various issues that arise at the end of the conversation, when the public have reached a decision point. As such, our engagement is more a protest when something happens that we do not like, rather than a meaningful engagement in the dialogue preceding.

However, participation in public dialogue is not simple! It requires strategy, including manpower and intentional media engagement. It is difficult for one person or local church to achieve this on behalf of the Christian community within a city — or nationally. This kind of effort or voice (in a city, or nation)

is logically the product of our unity, and what results from the prayers and conversation that follow. My suggestion is that this 'functional' unity is one of our weaknesses as the Church in Aotearoa, and with continuing cultural changes in view, we are paying an increased price for it!

CHAPTER TWO

How to change culture when truth no longer exists

The idea of activism is imbedded within our culture. Activism refers to efforts to stand for a particular issue or matter. The idea of activism, at its core, assumes that there is a 'right' and a 'wrong,' and a concept of justice to protect.

'Activism' primarily became a feature of our society through the efforts of evangelical Christians in the late 1700s. William Wilberforce and his friends at Clapham, in England, took on the slave trade, and succeeded in abolishing it in 1807. Successes like these gave them confidence to believe that they could apply their Christian ideals around the globe. More than 230 different

humanitarian societies quickly came into existence, and with a global impact. CMS (Church Missionary Society) was one of the first of these — beginning in 1799. Many will be aware that CMS had significant influence here in Aotearoa-New Zealand during those early years. Indeed, without them, or their counterparts in England, there would have been insufficient bicultural trust to have formed a Treaty like the one we have, nor any comparative suggestion of it.

Christianity has brought more good to our society than we can comprehend. Its gifts are only hard to see because they have become the very air we breathe.

Christianity has brought more good to our society than we can comprehend. Its gifts are only hard to see because they have become the very air we breathe. Whether we're thinking about our freedoms of speech and religion, the equality of the races, or even the equality of the genders — Christian faith is at the core of these movements. The way we educate the poor, and give health-care to all, comes from the same heritage. Modern medicine and the existence of a science age (as contrasted with 'some science') have similar roots, as well as our laws, accounting systems, concepts of charity and more.

THE IRONY OF MODERN LIBERAL ACTIVISM (OUR CURRENT CONTEXT)

The irony of modern liberal activism is that it likewise presumes that right and wrong and justice do exist — whilst also asserting that there is no objective foundation for right and wrong to exist. Through asserting that 'morals are relative,' modern activism becomes fundamentally flawed (at an idea-level). A stand for tolerance is actually an act of tyranny, because it is nothing more than the forcing of one subjectively discerned opinion upon a person who has another.

But all this is irrelevant. Much of the media and public dialogue are ideologically driven — not rationally. If we question the rational foundations of a matter, emotional arguments are used to 'white-wash' the discussion.

This questioning of foundations may be judged by them as being prejudicial, or narrow-minded. Because perception is almost everything, this approach works in defending a status-quo that is considerably without foundation. Tipping points have been crossed, and this is now the nature of the conversation with which we must engage.

DEFINING NEW ‘TRUTHS’

In recent decades we have witnessed some significant changes in the way our nation views sexuality. The biggest change in my view was that sex outside of marriage became normalised. Being a solo mother was once a shocking thing. Today, half of all children in our schools do not have their biological father in the home, and we think little of it.

A more recent change has been how our society views and relates to homosexuality, which is now considered acceptable by the majority of our society. The way in which these new ‘truths’ became accepted by the majority is worth thinking about.

When the homosexual community wanted to promote their lifestyle in New Zealand they didn’t buy a building on a major intersection. Instead, they did things like starting the Hero Parade on our most famous street. As a very positive branding exercise, the word ‘gay’ (meaning happy) had been chosen as a description for the homosexual and lesbian community. Then in New Zealand they labelled those advocating for this lifestyle as ‘heroes’. The Hero Parade existed throughout the 1990s and then was revived as the Auckland Pride Festival in 2013. People would dress up with colour and flamboyance, to create a spectacle people could come to enjoy. This was only one subset of many similar efforts — including the strategic placement of gay couples in movies and TV shows. Persistence in these kinds of creative efforts had the desired effect.

What they understood was this: *Profile efforts affect perspectives; those perspective defines our future ‘truths’!*

The word ‘profile’ here refers to efforts that exist to give deliberate visibility to a thing in the public view, with the intent of changing the public’s

Cultural changes are led by motivated people who have the money, power or will to influence or overrule public opinion.

perspective on it. For example, all commercial advertising is a ‘profile’ effort, designed to change perspectives, so you feel a need to buy something. Activism is nothing other than an ‘advertising campaign’ — but with an idea as the ‘product’.

To be clear, I am not saying that public perspective defines what is actually true. I’m simply reflecting that this is the process by which what is ‘true’ within our culture is being defined.

Our society has become sceptical of the idea of objective truth. As a result, when it comes to defining what is true, majority rules! This is a key point for our understanding, because it informs the way we engage with the public conversation if we want to be effective in our efforts.

Cultural changes are led by motivated people who have the money, power or will to influence or overrule public opinion. With this in view, how might we as the Church more meaningfully engage this public conversation?

THE CURRENT NATURE OF CHURCH ENGAGEMENT

As the Church, we often only seek to engage with public opinion ‘after the fact’. Something happens — and then the Church, or believers seeking to represent the Church, respond. What do we respond with? What we believe to be true! The problem is that ‘everyone has their own truth, right?’

As a recent example in New Zealand, a politician who was appointed ‘Speaker of the House’ decided to remove Jesus’ name from the prayer that opens Parliament each day. Because the church community has learnt that protesting doesn’t really work anymore, a positive prayer and worship gathering outside Parliament was organised. A few months later there was another large march upon Parliament including speeches. Māori were in a

central place in the leadership of the march, and leaders from some other religions were in support also.

I applaud this effort. However, my question relates to the idea that prevention is better than cure! How could we better engage with the public conversation prior to a decision like this? Because it is that conversation that led to the majority of the public seemingly being in approval of this decision.

Consider also how the wider public may sometimes never hear what is actually being said at a gathering like this, because messages are first filtered through the lenses of secular-minded media reporters. This isn't to say we shouldn't support these efforts — but rather that a lot more is needed. We have been 'out-played' for quite some time now too. This is difficult territory, and a necessary conversation!

The wider public may sometimes never hear what is actually being said at a gathering like this, because messages are first filtered through the lenses of secular-minded media reporters.

If our delayed response is one issue, another is how we present ourselves when making our stands. In the age of 'entertainment news' journalists are looking for something 'sensational' to report on — more than an argument that is compelling. For example, there is nothing special about a march, in and of itself — even if it is large. A photo of a crowd protesting something from this year, last year, or thirty years ago all looks the same. It's all about the 'story' we create that goes with that crowd — and how it is visualised or acted out for the camera. If we want free media time, we need to create a media spectacle. Truly, we live in an age of 'entertainment news'!

Destiny Church did a march on Parliament recently. A large crowd gathered — nothing new there. However, they also had prepared specific banners all along the front, which showed they were there with real intent, and that this crowd were organised. These were also useful for the media's photos, to try to find something unique or interesting. The crowd then parted as the leaders arrived in full leather on their Harley Davidsons, while ex-gangsters with tattoos made themselves available to the cameras to tell

their story. My point? *More than a protest, it was a planned performance!* The approach represented an understanding of how the media works, and was successful in gaining significant airtime on the national 6 o'clock news. That affects national perspectives!

Currently in the USA and Australia today, public conversations are considerably polarised. The middle ground is being lost, and the opportunity for a rational conversation goes with it. Here in New Zealand we're not yet in the same place. If we can engage wisely, we might yet achieve a more rational conversation than is now possible in America or Australia.

This is why gentleness, humility and respect in our tone are essential. This is why we must move away from the use of words like 'fight' or 'battle'

The challenge is therefore one of approach and methodology. How might we best present our arguments so they might be heard and received? Furthermore, all content is not of equal strategic importance.

because of the pictures they evoke and the walls they build. For example, instead of saying 'this is a cultural war', we refer to it as 'a simple discussion about who we are as a nation.' The words we use within these conversations are important!

The final component is the content of our 'arguments.' While the so-called 'truths' of our society are really just 'subjective opinions', the reality is that the public genuinely feels these things are true. The challenge is therefore firstly one of approach and methodology. How might we best present our arguments so they might be heard and received? Furthermore, there are many things we could potentially say. All content is not of equal strategic importance. We need to decide which topics or points might be the most useful, or catalytic, for the achieving of our desired outcomes. Do we even know what our top desired outcomes are?

AN ELEPHANT IN THIS ROOM: SPIRIT-LED OR HUMAN EFFORT?

In the following chapters we consider how we might best engage with our society as a united Church. This journey will require humility, a commitment to unity, and an unreserved commitment to both prayer and action. These flow from the faith within us that God is with us, and desires to act!

However, there is sometimes a misunderstanding on the necessary balance that exists between our efforts and our prayers. I mean, how much does this advancing of God's Kingdom depend upon our efforts — as compared to depending upon God? I believe the answer is this: It is 100% of both! We are to be fully dependent upon God — while also working with all our might.

To put that differently, the reason we work with all our might is actually because we are fully dependent upon God! Christ has given us the keys of the Kingdom. He has commissioned us to go and tell, and to bring his Kingdom on earth. Hard work, strategy and planning, when in service to our mission are therefore a matter of obedience, as well as of faith — because these are only done because of our belief that God is with us to bring change! To state it in a way that will sound awkward to some: A Spirit-filled and led Church still needs strategy!

A Spirit-filled and
led Church still needs
strategy!

It is from within this perspective that I attempt to live. It is likewise from within this perspective that the following pages are written.

IN SUMMARY

'Profile affects perspective, and perspective defines truth.' This summarises how truth is now defined in our nation. There is therefore a public conversation in which the New Zealand Church needs to engage.

The freedoms of speech and religion are often a matter of ‘use it or lose it’. We are maybe struggling because we’re still only thinking in terms of what is true in an age where declarations of someone’s so-called ‘truth’ tend to get negative reactions.

A timely and multi-faceted approach to engaging these conversations at both the city and national levels is therefore needed. The word ‘multi-faceted’ is important. Leadership within the (united) Church within the city — and nationally, is needed, because these kinds of strategic approaches will not come about by mistake!

The freedoms of speech and religion are often a matter of ‘use it or lose it’. A timely and multi-faceted approach to engaging these conversations at both the city and national levels is needed.

We need to work out what we’re going to say.

For example, if we could say only one thing to influence public perspective, what would it be, and why?

Toward that end, let’s consider the changing religious dynamics of our cultural context a little more.

CHAPTER THREE

Cultural challenges

Negative realities for our plans and innovations to consider

In this chapter we are going to consider five cultural trends that are currently working against the wider hopes of the Christian community. In the next chapter we will consider three cultural trends that are currently working in favour of this group's hopes and desires.

TREND #1: POST-CHRISTIAN AND POSTMODERN

Post-Christian refers to the general rejection at a societal level of personal Christian faith and identification. Post-modern refers to a rejection of the idea that fixed truths exist, or that the idea of them is valid. I wrote of this in my book 'Because we care', with reference to writings by Dr David Geisler.

In short, postmodernism and its implications to faith could be summarised as:

1. A scepticism of truth
2. A rejection of moral absolutes
3. A resulting indifference toward religion.

The sexual revolution of the 1960s was a significant influencer in this cultural revolution. Our society wanted sex without moral guilt. The problem

Society now bundles the religions together as if they were somehow all the same. The Christian Church suffers from a declining cultural interest in its beliefs because it is assumed that religious truth doesn't exist.

was that 80% of all children in the 1960s went to Sunday School. As a result, they suffered from feelings of guilt for their 'sexual sins' in the decades that followed. Who was to blame for this guilt? How were they to get it out of their consciences? Well — the Church was to blame!

What followed was three to four decades of cynicism and criticism toward the Church. In the 1990s it was not uncommon for a debate on a public issue to involve a liberal academic in a suit, arguing against a more shabbily dressed non-academic local church pastor

from somewhere around the corner. It was a tool of mockery.

However, we are now in a different era. The idea of sex outside of marriage has been normalised. The younger generations are no longer 'post-Christian'. To give their status a new academic term — they are 'not-Christian'!

These cultural changes have been further fed by wider changes on our planet — certainly including globalisation. We now live in societies that are highly aware of other ethnicities and religions, because we see them when we look over the fence at our neighbours. To avoid conflict, our cultural has wanted to accommodate these differences. This has fed the desire to down-play any idea of truth in religion. Society therefore now bundles the religions together as if they were somehow all the same. The Christian Church suffers

from a declining cultural interest in its beliefs as a result because it is assumed that religious truth doesn't exist (which is ironically a truth claim also).

TREND #2: SECULARISM

While Western civilisation is arguably the most benevolent, kind, wealthy and healthy civilisation in history, the Christian origins of the values and thinking that caused this has been lost. Our children are denied any real knowledge of their cultural heritage, which sits significantly within the Judeo-Christian ethic. Our wider global past, as well as our own nation's early missionary and bicultural history, contribute to this picture.

Our children are denied any real knowledge of their cultural heritage, which sits significantly within the Judeo-Christian ethic.

Our nation was established as a 'Christian-secular' nation. There was freedom of religion — as established at the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. This came about at the request of the Catholic Bishop Pompellier. It is likely he was aware of Catholics' killings of Protestants in other parts of the world in the recent past. Hobson, Williams and Colenso quickly agreed because Christians believe in the freedom of the will. The rights of people to make their own religious decisions must be respected.

The original idea that we were 'secular' was not a suggestion that the public square should be absent of religion.

At that time the idea of 'secular' was more about the separation of Church and State. New Zealand wanted to be a nation that was not dominated by one Christian denomination. This stood in contrast to the 'marriage' of Church and state in England (to the Church of England/Anglican Church) and also wider Europe (to the Catholic Church). These 'marriages' invariably led to abuses of pure Christian religion, so lessons had been learnt. The original idea that we were 'secular' was not therefore a suggestion that the public square should be absent of religion. For example, when it came to the first sitting of Parliament, the question was who would

open in prayer, because they didn't want to give any particular Christian denomination a place of pre-eminence. To keep things neutral, a man was sent to the streets with the instruction to bring back the first clergy-man he found. The fact that a Christian prayer would open Parliament was never in question!

As an interesting side-note, I was told that the name of Jesus was removed from the Parliamentary Prayer in 2017 only because this prayer was not protected by law in the same way other governmental laws and processes are. This lack of protection for the prayer was likely because no one ever imagined a day when the prayer might be removed. We fully identified as a Christian nation!⁵

The word secular now infers atheistic-secular or 'non-religious-secular' — in contrast to its decidedly 'Christian-secular' connotations in our early bicultural days.

To have some idea of where this 'secularisation' trend is heading, consider the following reports on the instinctively spiritual nature of children — and the intentional secularising of their thinking that is being proposed.⁶

A report by Dartmouth Medical School (USA) concluded that “Human beings are biologically primed to seek moral and spiritual meaning” and children’s “capacity and desire for spiritual experience are, to some degree, hard-wired.” According to Dr Justin Barrett, a senior researcher at Oxford University’s Centre for Anthropology and Mind, young children have faith even when they have not been taught about God by the family or at school. Even those who grew up alone on a desert island would come to believe in God, he suggests.

To continue the quote,

5 A notable challenge in the present day is the perception that Christianity and colonisation go together. A challenging dynamic is that many Christians were complicit with it, having come for a better life here at the promise of the New Zealand company. Little is known in our nation these days of the pre-Treaty era in which Christianity was spreading, prior to colonisation. If the public continue to be left ignorant of the pre-Treaty story, we will not be able to detach Christianity from colonisation. In 'decolonising' our nation we will therefore also 'de-Christianise.' We have work to do!

6 <http://creation.com/evolutionising-children>

Psychologist Dr Olivera Petrovich noted that Japanese children spontaneously attribute the natural world to the work of a creator God, even when this is contrary to the beliefs of their parents and teachers.

Gjersoe believes that the solution to the ‘problem’ of children naturally believing in a Creator is to teach evolutionary concepts at an earlier age.

A recent article in The Guardian, authored by Nathalia Gjersoe, reported some new research into the beliefs of young children. Scientists noted two very specific views, held instinctively, which help explain why children have a natural tendency to believe in creation. The first is that different kinds of plants and animals are distinct from one another and that one kind will not change into another. The second is that everything in nature has been designed for a purpose. Significantly, these views are equally common in children from religious and non-religious backgrounds.

Yet these very encouraging findings are not being celebrated by Western culture. Instead they are viewed as a real problem! Furthermore...

Gjersoe believes that the solution to the ‘problem’ of children naturally believing in a Creator is to teach evolutionary concepts at an earlier age. Until recently, evolution was not taught in UK schools until around year 9 (age 13–14); however, following lobbying by the British Humanist Association, it is now covered in year 6 (age 10–11).

For an example closer to home, Zoos often offer programmes for school children of all ages — and our family has seen one from the Hamilton Zoo for 5 and 6 year-old children that was explicitly about evolution as standard assumed theory for the creation of beautiful, diverse and complex things.

Secularists are determined to ‘protect’ (steal?) the minds and hearts of children through a progressive education (indoctrination?) in support of the idea that intelligence and design can come about by themselves. This claim stands in contrast to the more logical suggestion that intelligence only comes

about as the result of intelligence, as is indeed affirmed by all existing observational science.

There are people in politics who I am told, are quite specifically advocating for the removal of all Christian icons and beliefs from our society. Change does not just happen. It is caused! This secularising trend has further to go yet!

Nearly every single area of pain and brokenness in society can be traced to family-of-origin dynamics.

TREND #3: FAMILY BREAKDOWN IN A WORLD OF SEXUAL AND FAMILY POLITICS

Nearly every single area of pain and brokenness in society can be traced to family-of-origin dynamics. In a growing myriad of studies, family breakdown is directly linked to:

- Higher truancy rates
- Lesser educational achievements
- Lesser pay
- Higher inclination toward crime
- Higher chance of drug, alcohol and tobacco addictions
- Higher chance of all the various mental illnesses
- Lesser chance of developing stable family relationships
- Increased health issues
- Shorter life expectancy.

If you feel depressed by this — know that some good news is coming. However, we'll consider more of the problem first.

We are in the midst of a disastrous social experiment. We have removed the idea of 'commitment' from sex, because we have placed rights so far above responsibilities. This stands in contrast to a view that might prioritise a

community's rights, and then consider the individual's subsidiary rights and responsibilities within that picture.

To share some statistics — summarised by Bob McCoskrie and his team at Family First in 2017:

Police stats show there has been a 136% increase in physical abuse, 43% increase in sexual abuse, 45% increase in neglect or ill-treatment of children, and 71 child abuse deaths since 2007, when the anti-smacking law was passed.

...health data reveals a 132% increase in children diagnosed with emotional and/or behavioural problems and a 71% increase in children hospitalised with mental and behavioural disorders since 2007.

Some recent government statistics reflect upon the known connection between family structure and detrimental outcomes:

"... over three quarters of children born in 2010 who had a substantiated finding of abuse by age two were born into single-parent families. The likelihood of abuse in this family type is almost nine times greater than in a non-single parent family."

Other recent news articles on mental illness have stood out to me.

"The work is very busy on the front line," the Tawa College counsellor says. That's an understatement. Health Ministry statistics show demand for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) has soared by 30 per cent in just five years.

In many areas, new referrals have spiked more than 50 per cent and in the Lakes DHB region, twice as many young people are seeking help today compared with five years ago.⁷

Consider a report on the TV1 news in May 2017, which told of the inability of Mental Health Services to keep up with the increased demand for mental health services throughout NZ.

⁷ NZ asks: Why are more children seeking help for serious mental health problems? By Nikki McDonald, Stuff.co.nz, April 2nd, 2016. <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/77974796/why-are-more-children-and-young-people-seeking-help-for-serious-mental-health-problems>

I recently attended a social services conference where a government spokesperson was speaking. Someone asked what we were to tell young people who were thinking of committing suicide, and she replied that ‘we are

It is staggering that, while the connection between beliefs and behaviour is very clear, that the connection between these two things is so often overlooked by our society.

to tell them they are important.’ Within the context of all that was being said, I was incensed. On what basis did she suggest they are important when she had already clarified that she is not religious, that doing yoga was her closest connection to spiritual things, and that humans are mere accidents of chance in an evolutionary framework? I wanted to gently ask a question to reveal the explicit and life-threatening contradiction this is to those who are losing hope — but because I was speaking at the conference later on, I restrained myself.

Suicide is no light issue. Like many, I’m connected with people who have been lost to it. At its core it reflects an eventual loss of hope. It is staggering that, while the connection between beliefs and behaviour is very clear, that the connection between these two things is so often overlooked by our society. While various factors are involved — certainly including things like increased screen time (which has resulted in many having a lesser connection with a community, and weaker relationships, which would otherwise serve as a buffer in difficult times), the continuing disregard for religion is amazing.

It has been demonstrated that those who attend church are four times less likely to commit suicide.⁸ In contrast, if we are accidents of chance, our lives — and our very existence, is ultimately without meaning or significance. There is no avoiding the fact that ‘nihilistic’ evolutionary thinking reduces resilience when times get tough! Yet the trend continues.

We are now 2 to 4 generations on from those children who went to Sunday School in the 1960s. As each generation goes by, the strength of the remaining Christian values and hope is further diluted. I suspect we’ve crossing a tipping

8 How Now Shall We Live? Charles Colson (Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), P312)

point in the thinking of our young people, beyond which the Christian idea that all life has value is unsustainable. Might suicide be increasing in-part because our young people actually *do* know how to think?

An equal and opposite force to family breakdown was found — and it wasn't Christian conversion. It was mere church attendance!

I did say I'd share some good news before moving on from this topic. For the benefit of those coming from broken families, a landmark study by Richard Freeman of Harvard found that young people who are active in church are more likely to finish school, avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancies, keep a job, and stay out of trouble with the law.⁹

In another study on preventing crime, church attendance was found to rate even higher than family structure.¹⁰ This is highly significant, because it says that an equal and opposite force to family breakdown has been found — and it isn't Christian conversion. It is mere church attendance!

Chuck Colson cites some studies, like one that revealed how regular attendance at a Prison Fellowship Bible study cut recidivism by two thirds, or others that revealed how high levels of religious commitment correlate with lower levels of depression and stress.¹¹ A number of studies have found a strong inverse correlation between church attendance and divorce, with one study finding that church attendance is the most important predictor of marital stability. Very religious women enjoy a higher level of sexual satisfaction in their marriage than do non-religious women, and those who are very religious have a higher chance of survival after a heart attack...¹²

Christian testimony is a powerful validation of the efficacy of the Christian worldview and faith.

⁹ Ibid, Colson, P368

¹⁰ Ibid P368

¹¹ Ibid P311

¹² Ibid P312

Something of particular note here is that ‘religious’ here typically means ‘Christian.’ I have admittedly never seen comparisons made to programmes based in other religions. However, over the years, the continuing absence of them has become conspicuous, while the connection between beliefs and behaviour is clear! Christian testimony is a powerful validation of the efficacy of the Christian worldview and faith. A study of recidivism rates from prisoner-rehabilitation programmes in America showed about 70% generally went back to crime afterwards, but only 20% from a Christian programme within the study and only 9% from a Prison Fellowship ‘TOP’ programme.

The most encouraging report I’ve heard was in a study of Afro-American young people from broken homes in poorer city suburbs. When studying the negative effects of family breakdown, they discovered an equal-and-opposite force. Surprisingly — for those of us who are Christians and who have personal experience in the power of God and his love to change us, it was not Christian conversion. It was — yet again, mere church attendance.

Christianity has a unique power within it. Those of us who have experienced this know it to be true. We also know that it isn’t just a power. It is a person!

We have a story to tell as Christians, and can do so confidently because it delivers results at both personal and societal levels.

This trend highlights the importance of equipping church members to engage everyday conversations — spiritual and otherwise.

TREND #4: THE DEMISE OF THE FREEDOMS OF RELIGION AND SPEECH IN THE WEST

This trend is particularly concerning. We will only protect the freedom of speech and religion in our society if enough people stand together, because it is facing some powerful challenges, especially from public media. It really is a case of ‘use it or lose it.’ This highlights the importance of

equipping church members to engage everyday conversations — spiritual and otherwise.¹³

The Australian Herald Sun newspaper ran an article in 2017 written by Andrew Bolt, who is not a Christian believer. Its title was, ‘Enemies of Christianity declaring new war on religion.’¹⁴

Andrew wrote about his amazement at the societal changes in the area of religion, and the level of attack coming upon a Church that was ill-equipped to respond. He cited recent examples:

The Queensland’s Education Department can now warn schools against letting students praise Jesus in the playground. The department has put out reports telling state schools “to take appropriate action if aware that students participating in (religious instruction) are evangelising to students who do not participate”. Some examples of the kinds of things students must not say in the playground including things like, “knowing about Jesus is a very important thing”, or “God, please help us to use our knowledge to help others”. Additionally, students were no longer to hand out Christmas cards or decorations.

Andrew commented, “What do these bureaucrats fear from children inspired by Christ?”

In the same period, two Christian preachers were summoned to Tasmania’s Anti-Discrimination Tribunal for preaching their faith’s stand on traditional marriage. Hobart pastor Campbell Markham and street preacher David Gee, from Hobart’s Cornerstone Church, were denounced by an atheist offended by, among other things, Markham quoting a verse from the Bible.

At that same time of a street preacher who was then in the High Court in Australia, defending himself against discrimination charges because he had sought to share his Christian faith on the streets.

Here in New Zealand discussions on our freedom of speech have become an increasingly hot topic. In December 2017 a ‘right to life’ group was

¹³ See ‘Because We Care’ and ‘Elephant In The Room’ by Dave Mann — BigBookPublishing.co.nz

¹⁴ This article is no longer available — except by subscription. With subscription search the above title at <http://www.heraldsun.com.au>

disaffiliated from Auckland University. Then in July 2018 Auckland Council Mayor Phil Goff made a unanimous decision banning two controversial “alt media” speakers from using city-owned venues. The group involved are said to have ‘far right views on immigration, feminism and Islam.’ Thankfully there was a public outcry — but the speakers ended up cancelling their trip. While their views were extreme, the issue here is the censorship.

Professor Paul Moon wrote insightfully in a recent article on free speech, “History shows that it is fear and intolerance that drives suppression of free speech, rather than free speech causing fear and intolerance”¹⁵

TREND #5: THE IDEOLOGICAL AND MORAL BIAS OF PUBLIC MEDIA

The suppression of free speech is found nowhere more clearly than in our public media. Public media hold a clear bias on a range of issues, and shamelessly report from a place of bias. We also live in an age of dirty media strategies because there is no longer a fixed ‘moral compass’ to guide or constrain media practice.¹⁶

There is no longer a fixed ‘moral compass’ to guide or constrain media practice.

On a recent TV advertisement promoting a TV channels daily news programme, they strung together a sequence of key media moments to highlight the quality and impartiality of their ‘up-to-the-minute’ journalism. However, if the messages of the news clips were dissected, there was a clear favouritism to one political party. The innuendoes stood in ironic contradiction to claims of the ad script.

¹⁵ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/91145422/paul-moon-freedom-of-speech-in-new-zealands-universities-under-attack>

¹⁶ While there are ethics connected with journalism, if no actual truth (or ‘true north’) exists, to what standard is a reporters opinion or bias constrained? The answer is their own, or alternatively whatever the current popular standard held by the majority around them is. Of note, it doesn’t have to be the majority in a nation — just the majority around them, creating a self-perpetuating moral bias in the media. The challenge of this is that any who disagree with that subjectively defined morality can then be branded as the ‘bad people’. A new morality can quickly become the standard by which those with the old morality are judged and oppressed — while all under a guise of doing good. Without a fixed standard for morality, objective journalism by its very definition is dead.

This is another trend that is set to go further yet, and in which the Christian voice will continue to be overlooked, misrepresented or maligned.

We have covered five trends that are going against the general hopes and freedoms of the Christian community. Let's shift now to look at three cultural trends that have potential to push in the other direction.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cultural Opportunities

Positive realities our plans and innovations need to consider

In this chapter we will consider three cultural trends that are favourable toward the hopes and freedoms of the Christian community.

TREND #6: WESTERNERS ARE STILL A SPIRITUAL PEOPLE

New Zealanders are one of the most religiously sceptical Western nations on the planet — and yet we are still decidedly spiritual. A 2012 study found that 46% believed in a God, 31% in a Higher Power, and 19% neither of the above. Anyone who engages spiritual conversations with people regularly realises that the 19% includes a range of spiritual beliefs — of which atheism is just one. The majority are still spiritual at some level.

Con conversationally, it is rare that I encounter someone who is entirely non-spiritual. Even where there is negativity toward organised religion, there are other spiritual thoughts and beliefs. I would suggest that about 80% of Kiwis consider themselves to be spiritual at some level.

I would suggest that about 80% of Kiwis consider themselves to be spiritual at some level.

Consider someone who calls themselves atheistic. They might agree that a house or place could be haunted. Spirituality is all around us!

A 2018 study on faith and belief in New Zealand by McCrindle Research, commissioned and funded by the Wilberforce Foundation¹⁷, found that

- 33% of Kiwis identified with Christianity,
- 20% considered themselves spiritual — having spiritual beliefs while not identifying with any main religion
- 35% were ‘non-religious’ — identifying with no specific religion or spiritual belief.

I suggest here that many who have ‘no specific religion’ might still read their horoscope, and believe that real spiritual powers exist behind the Hollywood Medium they watch on TV.

I recall a study that revealed that 47% of Kiwi women believed people could communicate with the dead¹⁸. However, one of the best affirmations of the continuing spiritual views of Kiwis was when I heard a non-Christian academic who was studying spirituality in New Zealanders laugh when asked if Kiwis were secular (meaning irreligious or non-spiritual).

Those calling themselves ‘Christian’ in the national Census have been decreasing at about 1% per year for the last few decades. This trend will likely

¹⁷ <https://nzfaithandbeliefstudy.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/faith-and-belief-full-report-may-2018.pdf>

¹⁸ Source unknown

continue until those identifying as ‘Christian’ are around maybe 25 to 30% of the population.¹⁹

If we were to consider the Japanese or Scandinavians, who are highly secular in their religious views, they are still very superstitious and believe in the paranormal.

Consider the story of a friend who told me about a recent conversation he had with a dozen non-Christian tertiary students. He asked if they believed a spiritual realm existed — and nearly all did. The more surprising thing was when he asked if they believed evolution (naturalism / materialism) explained how we came to exist, most replied that they did not.

Another story that encouraged me came from a conservative Christian who engages regularly in street evangelism, with a direct, but also appropriately gentle and respectful approach. He relayed to me how youth and young adults were consistently intrigued by their request for a spiritual conversation. These younger generations did not have the antagonism often seen with baby-boomers. They are truly a different cultural group — comfortable in spiritual conversations, and intrigued by them.

I view all these examples as reflective of a positive trend. A starting point for spiritual conversations still exists, despite the continuing ‘secularisation’ of the public spaces.

TREND #7: POST SECULARISM

Where ‘post-Christian’ represented a rejection of trust and faith in Christianity, ‘post-secular’ represents the same scepticism toward the promises that secularism has been selling us over the previous 50 or more years.

Modern ‘secularism’ is a truth claim. At its core, it is connected with the belief that human beings can fix human being’s problems²⁰. The difficulty

¹⁹ To give a possible end-point for this decline, Professor Peter Lineham has suggested that about 16% attend church at least monthly, while 22-23% might attend a handful of times a year.

²⁰ Which is technically ‘humanism’.

with this idea is that, from the Christian viewpoint, the heart of all humans is

The weakness of the secular promise is in its philosophical foundations within humanism. Human nature really is corrupted — and this is why it will not work.

corrupted. We are all inclined to selfishness. It is a rare politician or person who will consistently do what is right — even when no one is looking. The weakness of the secular promise is in its philosophical foundations within humanism. Human nature really is corrupted — and this is why it will not work.

Consider the public rhetoric that seeks to separate modern secularism from the regimes of the 20th Century, with their 100 million murders, while at the same time aligning Christianity to the Inquisitions and Crusades.

This is intellectually dishonest. The non-Church public are slowly assessing their own culture's prejudices and promises, and are realising that the secularism they've been sold has no heart-beat, or hope!

Consider the vote of 'no confidence' in international government ambitions (specifically in the EU) that the Brexit represented in Britain.

Consider the vote for Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton represented in America. It has been suggested that Trump won only because Clinton was a worse alternative. Americans were suspicious of her agenda!

I was stunned to see a protestors' sign in France hailing 'We are a Christian nation', following the shootings of magazine cartoonists in 2015 (who had drawn cartoons of the Muslim prophet Mohammad). The irony here is that the French Revolution included an overthrow of the nations' religious hierarchy, and France has been known since then as one of the most secular nations on our planet! Out of interest, 2 million people joined

The non-Church public are slowly assessing their own culture's prejudices and promises, and are realising that the secularism they've been sold has no heart-beat, or hope!

that march in Paris, while 3.7 million in total joined marches in different locations across France.

In mid-2017 I was told of protestors' signs stating the same in Italy — another very secular nation. Mass Muslim immigration in Europe is causing many to ask questions that have previously been taboo.

Population growth is also a factor. In France, some put non-Muslim birth rates at 1.9 children per woman, while Muslim rates are 2.9. Others puts these figures at 1.4 for non-Muslims, and 3.4 to 4 for Muslims, while others I've read in previous years have suggested much greater differences.

However, the continuing levels of immigration also need considering, as these combine with birth rates to determine future populations, and the extent of impact this might have upon European culture by 2050.²¹

What is known is that there is impact now. For example, the number of Muslim terrorism investigations in Germany went from 200 to over 1000 in just one year between 2016 and 2017, and it was said that the nation's legal system could not keep up. Trends like these are not going unnoticed.²² Those living in Europe are waking up to the inconvenient truth that the mantra of the past 50 years is not actually true; all religions are not actually the same. The promise of a better world through secularism is not being delivered!

So, if a 'Western' nation clearly does not hold the same values as these other religious groups — what does that make them? An increasing number are concluding that we are actually 'Christian' — because this is where our values came from!

Those living in Europe are waking up to the inconvenient truth that the mantra of the past 50 years is not actually true; all religions are not actually the same. The promise of a better world through secularism is not being delivered!

21 <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/29/europes-growing-muslim-population/> as compared with <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/sep/26/muslim-majority-in-france-projected-in-40-years/>

22 <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5bcffa54.html> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_terrorism_in_Europe

Consider this 2016 quote from the outspoken British atheist, Richard Dawkins.

*“There are no Christians, as far as I know, blowing up buildings. I am not aware of any Christian suicide bombers. I am not aware of any major Christian denomination that believes the penalty for apostasy is death. I have mixed feelings about the decline of Christianity, in so far as Christianity might be a bulwark against something worse...”*²³

Like Dawkins, many are now considering these comparisons, and wondering if the extent of their negativity toward the Christian faith was fully justified.

In the same conversation the interviewer wrote, *“In a rare moment of candour, Dawkins reluctantly accepted that the teachings of Jesus Christ do not lead to a world of terror, whereas followers of radical Islam perpetrate the very atrocities that he laments. Because of this realisation, Dawkins wondered aloud whether Christianity might indeed offer an antidote to protect Western civilization against jihad.”*

When a leading Western atheist is saying things like this, something *cultural* is changing!

The most significant recent statement from Dawkins, in my view, was his response to a question asked in 2017 at the Cheltenham Science Festival. He was asked whether or not he thought religious studies should be banned over fears kids were being brainwashed. His reply stated that it was *an important part of our culture to know about the Bible because so much of English literature refers to it.*

Further comments then reiterated his view that teaching comparative religion would have value, because the religions cannot all be right (which Christians would agree with). After this he then turned his attention to Islam — where his increasing focus lies.²⁴

²³ <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2016/01/12/professional-atheist-dawkins-says-christianity-bulwark-against-something-worse/>

²⁴ <http://mychristiandaily.com/richard-dawkins-religious-education-vital-for-children-islam-most-evil-religion/>

In my estimation, post-Secularism is a significant trend in its implications, which we shall consider a little later.

TREND #8: BICULTURALISM IN NEW ZEALAND

I believe we have been gifted a ‘trump card’ as New Zealanders in our bicultural heritage. I will digress to summarise a few historical details first for context. I will mention a couple of current cultural trends I see in this area, and then a little of where I think some of this might lead in the next 20 to 40 years.

BICULTURAL HISTORY SUMMARISED

Christianity arrived in New Zealand in response to the invitation of Ngapuhi Chief Ruatara, a nephew of the more well-known Hongi Hika. His Pa (Rangihoua) was located in what is now known as Oihi Bay in Northland, 30 minutes drive north of Kerikeri. This account confirms that, while our nation was eventually colonised, Christianity was in this nation prior to colonisation, and was not an imposition of that phenomena. Notably, it was invited, not imposed!

Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi) is our nation’s founding document. Significantly, this agreement came about because of radical Christians, whose views were considerably anti-colonialistic.

For example, the origins of the Treaty document itself had direct connections with the ‘Clapham Sect’. This Christian humanitarian group in England battled against the slave trade, mentioned in a previous chapter. Lord Glenelg — a Christian believer in the Colonial Office became aware of Edward G Wakefields plans to send settlers to New Zealand, and helped raise the alarm. James Stephens — the nephew of William Wilberforce, wrote initial ideas for this Treaty with Māori. Lord Normanby — a successor in the Colonial office and yet another Christian in politics, then passed these ideas on to Hobson — who was also a Christian believer. The faith of these men stood in contrast to the prevailing religious culture of England at that time. French Enlightenment thinking had resulted in an attitude of mockery

toward sincere Christians. At the centre of the proposed Treaty was the radical ideal of protecting Māori in the face of a now-confirmed effort to colonise New Zealand.

The missionary Henry Williams and his son Edward translated the document into Te Reo Māori — and despite the modern controversy over the translation, no accusation of intentional misleading in the translation sticks well on Williams. He was a man of the utmost integrity and principle. Regarding the signing of Te Tiriti by others afterwards, wherever missionaries went there was general trust, and Te Tiriti was signed. This stood in contrast to the failed attempts of some non-missionaries to achieve the same.

The early missionaries were devastated by the betrayal that occurred, and some paid a high price for their allegiance to the well-being of Māori. Henry Williams stands out in this regard. The malign of some early missionaries is a gross injustice within our nation. The implications for Māori were, however, far more devastating. With their primary European advocates gone, and settler numbers swarming, they were out-numbered.

Throughout this period the Christian message had significant impact among Māori. The gospel is the primary reason for the laying down of weapons by Māori, ending centuries of tribal wars. Economics played a part; for example Northland tribes united to gain benefit from trade — rather than through war with each other. This resulted in He Whakaputanga — The Declaration of Independence, which was signed in 1835. This declaration has a history of discussion between Northland chiefs behind it dating back as far as 1812.

Because we are constitutionally bicultural as a nation – while saying a prayer in the public square might be frowned upon due to our ‘secularisation’, saying a Karakia is accepted.

As Māori embraced the faith in the decades that followed, Northland slaves were released. Many slaves had been impacted by the gospel also, and took the gospel with them around the nation. At a time when missionaries were counted in the low dozens, Māori evangelists were counted by the

hundreds. By the 1860s more than half of all Māori were found in a church service on a Sunday, and some of our nation's most powerful stories are of the radical peace-making efforts of Christian Māori in the face of British violence and gross injustice.

ACCESSIBLE TREATY RESOURCE

I've been privileged to be involved as the producer of a series of illustrated novels on early New Zealand bicultural relationships, called 'The Chronicles of Paki'. This is a unique and highly endorsed educational resource for families, churches and schools. The Te Tiriti o Waitangi series is especially noteworthy, and includes teaching resources for use in schools. See www.bigbook.nz for more.

Consequently, a prayer in the name of Jesus is as likely to be heard on a Marae as in a Christian church. Also, because we are constitutionally bicultural as a nation — while saying a prayer in the public square might be frowned upon due to our 'secularisation', saying a Karakia is accepted. Of course, a Karakia is but a prayer by another name!

This positions Māori for some significant influence in our nation's future, because the wairua (the spiritual) is a connected part of what it is to be Māori. This likewise positions non-Māori to influence spiritual things also — in as much as they are able to understand their bicultural roots as Tangata Tiriti. Non-Māori are only legitimately here because of Te Tiriti.

This care includes awareness of the spiritual. How that might work itself out in practice is a question that is yet to be fully explored.

Without it they would be colonisers. This biculturalism therefore justifies the continuing existence of spiritual things within the public square of our nation! Already the idea of 'holistic care' is found in the policies of our secular social institutions too. This care includes awareness of the spiritual. How that might work itself out in practice is a question that is yet to be fully explored.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS BICULTURAL DYNAMIC

Our honouring of Te Tiriti and biculturalism as Christians is a matter of justice. For the Christian Church this is about doing what is right.

Concurrent with this, as a cultural trend — Māori influence is increasing, as a result of Treaty settlements, and what this achieves.

I see significant future potential within partnership between Iwi and churches in the communities of our nation.

With wider societal trends in view I see significant future potential within partnership between Iwi and churches in the communities of our nation.

Māori are coming to a place where they will no longer need to be 'the beneficiaries of Pakeha charity'. The mana-whenua and mana-Māori are being rightly restored!

As Treaty settlements are made, the 'mana whenua' (the mana of the people that is connected with the land) is being restored. As funds are invested, increase comes. Two Iwi enjoy a 0% tax rate on earnings, and all other Iwi an 18% tax rate, while business usually pay 28%. Consider for example Tainui, who received a \$170m settlement. They have been criticised on many sides for their early expenditure, including millions lost in a failed casino project. However, many are not aware that this Iwi is worth \$1370 million

today! Māori are coming to a place where they will no longer need to be 'the beneficiaries of Pakeha charity'. The mana-whenua and mana-Māori are being rightly restored!

WHERE MIGHT THIS BICULTURAL DYNAMIC LEAD?

The restoration of mana-Māori represents a change in mentality that is taking place. From being the recipients of charity, Māori will eventually come back to a place of being able to be the givers of charity as a people!

While negative banter about Māori Treaty claims & settlements continue within some communities, the days of telling a joke about, “An Englishman, Māori man and Irish man...” are over! Iwi are beginning to strategise for the well-being of their people. Some already have specific goals in the areas of employment, education and healthcare. A few have, for example, set a goal that none of their people will be on the unemployment benefit.

What this means is that the influence of Māori is going to increase. The Māori economy is already \$40 billion (2018). I propose that some Iwi will be amongst the biggest contributors to the charity sector within 20 to 40 years. Where there is money, there is power to influence. Consider our ‘Hope Project’ media efforts at Easter — which have truly small budgets for what we do. Our churches struggle to achieve these efforts — while a number of individual Iwi will easily achieve the same all by themselves. If they wanted to give national profile to a message for the public to consider — they could do it. Times are changing!

The implications of this trend will then go a lot further. The idea of Māori sovereignty is generally accepted as being enshrined in Te Tiriti. Due to the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* that our nation has signed in 2010²⁵, my understanding is that the 1840 Tiriti o Waitangi now comes under the auspices of the UN. This is why UN representatives occasionally visit New Zealand to meet with the leaders of Iwi — because they might yet be (or already are) recognised as sovereign nations. Legal backing for Māori is therefore likely to grow also. Put differently, any attempts to stop or interrupt this trend might come up against some significant legal opposition.

²⁵ I cannot find my original news source, however this article refers to current efforts that stand on the basis of the UN agreement our government signed in 2010. <https://www.tpk.govt.nz/en/whakamahia/un-declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples>

Māori legal systems will likely proliferate also. There is a test-case for this already in place in Northland.

Regarding spirituality in the public square — as is mentioned above, the Māori worldview is holistic. In this regard, Iwi could be powerful allies for the Church in coming public conversations related to *Prayers in Parliament, National Anthems, protection of the charitable tax-free status for churches, Religious Instruction in Schools, the preservation of Christ in Christmas and Easter, and more!*

Iwi could be powerful allies for the Church in coming public conversations related to Prayers in Parliament, National Anthems, protection of the charitable tax-free status for churches, Religious Instruction in Schools, the preservation of Christ in Christmas and Easter, and more!

Remember, ‘truth’ in our society is now defined by public opinion. To turn the cultural tide we must turn public opinion. If we want to turn public opinion, this partnership could be helpful!

As a cultural trend, it’s also true that, as the mana-Māori is restored, the new generation of Māori are identifying as ‘Māori’ in a different way to the previous. An elderly Māori lady known personally to our family corrected me when I first mentioned the above point to her: “Nah” she said, “We were told to shut up!” But that is exactly the point. The identifying of younger Māori as ‘fully Māori’ is now being encouraged at every level. My 50 year old friend was denied an education in Te Reo by his fluent Te Reo father who, in the 1960s, saw no future for things Māori. The new generation of Māori parents would never think to do the same.

Being Māori is not just
‘a part of who they are.’
It is who they are — and
constitutionally speaking,
being fully Māori is
something they have
every right to be!

They see a future for their culture!

Consider the influence of the Kura Kaupapa (Māori Schools), which began around the 1970s. Our nation has young people in their thirties for whom

Te Reo Māori was their first and primary language of education through their Primary School years. There are more of them in their twenties, and growing numbers in their teens. They are assertive, intelligent and educated. Being Māori is not just ‘a part of who they are.’ It is who they are — and constitutionally speaking, being fully Māori is something they have every right to be!

Consider also the future place of Te Reo in our nation. While we are a multi-cultural society in the sense that we give common grace to all people, our nation is bicultural in its identity. For example, we will not become Chinese or Hindi speaking, no matter how many Chinese or Indian immigrants there are. Our official languages are three: English, Te Reo Māori and Sign Language! What does this mean? As uncomfortable as it might be to some, it is the right of any Kiwi to speak any of those languages, *and the responsibility of interpretation is then upon the hearer!* There are laws regarding this. For example, if someone wants to speak in Te Reo in a Court of Law, they must inform the Court prior, so that a translator can be arranged.

However, as the proportions of New Zealanders who are speaking Te Reo grow, it will become a matter of their grace to us that they speak in English in social and other situations. When I lived in Singapore the same was the case — where most people around me could just as easily converse in one or two languages other than English. This is already the case on many Marae, where there is no translation of speeches and discussions that are spoken in Te Reo. While we might think it wise for this practice (of using the English language) in everyday life to continue in the public square of our nation, it is not our right to tell them what to do, and this is especially so when they are speaking an official language of our nation! Speaking English would be their grace to us!

Something significant is happening here within our national culture and values, and I suggest it has lot further to go.

Biculturalism is a significant cultural trend for the Church because of the way it could interplay with the place of spiritual things in the public square.

SUMMARY

While more trends could be considered, these are the primary cultural trends I see within our nation relating to the hopes and desires of the Christian community.

- Trend #1: Post-Christian and Postmodern
- Trend #2: Secularism
- Trend #3: Family breakdown in a world of sexual and family politics
- Trend #4: The demise of the freedoms of religion and speech in the West
- Trend #5: The ideological and moral bias of public media
- Trend #6: Westerners still a spiritual people
- Trend #7: Post-Secularism
- Trend #8: Biculturalism in New Zealand

With all these trends noted, let's consider their interplay — because strategies formed without awareness of the others could prove to be detrimental!

CHAPTER FIVE

Cultural Trends Assessed

In this chapter I'll summarise some of my own 'top-line' thoughts, based on a consideration of the previous eight cultural trends. This will lay a foundation for the second half of this book, which will look to the matter of Church leadership at the city and national levels. How might we better release a clear and respectful Christian voice in the public square, to better engage in public conversations and decisions?

I note the importance of the following with regard to the damage we can do to our own cause when we act without all relevant cultural trends in mind. It is my opinion, and of grave concern to me, that a number of Christian boards, pastors and groups might be making strategic decisions that are detrimental for this very reason.

OBSERVATION 1: IN SUMMARY, THINGS ARE STILL GETTING WORSE

As mentioned at the beginning of this book, I think we have reached a critical tipping point in our national culture, and have lost our public voice as a result. Secularism remains a much stronger trend than post-secularism.

Biculturalism is in its infancy as a trend, and we do not know whether or not the wider New Zealand Church will manage to build trustworthy bridges to the 750 Marae, in our nation.

Secularism remains a much stronger trend than post-secularism. Biculturalism is in its infancy as a trend, and we do not know whether or not the wider New Zealand Church will manage to build trustworthy bridges to the 750 Marae, in our nation.

Ethically, recent changes in moral viewpoint in our nation are significant. For the first time ever in our history, being 'Christian' is considered morally wrong by a sizable (and growing) group of people. This is affecting no group of people in the church more-so than our youth.

For the first time ever in our history, being 'Christian' is considered morally wrong. This is affecting no group of people in the church more-so than our youth.

My own summation, based on the stories of pastors and pastors' groups throughout the nation, is that 'We are winning battles, but still losing the war'.

We can take courage that, with God, all things are possible. With a history of revivals behind us, we know great things really are possible. With prayer we are reminded that spiritual seasons can change. Yet with wisdom, we can also note that God has called us to be a united people who intentionally focus on our mission together. This is a work of the Spirit through us, requiring clear thinking and Godly character and wisdom — and sets the scene for greater things.

OBSERVATION 2: THE POSITIVE TRENDS ARE WAVES TO RIDE NOW

When a surfer sees a wave, they usually need to start paddling before the wave arrives to catch it. I believe there are opportunities we could take advantage of if we were to start paddling now.

For example, where secularism is pushing in one direction, both post-secularism and biculturalism could potentially push in the opposite direction. However, the full extent of post-secularism is not fully developed yet. It is a wave that is coming — but isn't here. I believe we can help this wave by anticipating its arrival, and paddling in that direction.

In application, consider that the secular trend suggests that *Bible in Schools* will end. The post-secular trend suggests that society will again value its Christian origins sometime soon — and therefore esteem a continuing cultural knowledge of basic Bible stories. So, now that we are aware of both possible trends, should we accept that an end to *Bible in Schools* is an unavoidable conclusion? Only history will tell us the outcome of this. We may be too late already, because public opinion will make the final decision — and public opinion takes time to change. However we will confirm and speed its demise if we don't act wisely.

How could we 'paddle' so as to catch or enhance the post-secular (and bicultural) wave — even though it is not yet fully upon us? We don't know who won the rugby match until after the game has been played. Until that point, it is the responsibility of all of our team members to play as hard as they can, with all possibilities before them!

OBSERVATION 3: DILIGENCE IN OUR UTILISATION OF CURRENT OPPORTUNITIES IN THE FACE OF CONTINUED SECULARISATION

The freedoms of religion and speech are a case of 'use it or lose it.' Because the trend of religious (atheistic) secularisation has further to go yet, it is important that we are diligent and wise in our stewardship of current opportunities and

No public ‘privilege’ given to the Church should be taken for granted. Neglect it for a moment, and it might be lost forever.

freedoms. No public ‘privilege’ given to the Church should be taken for granted. Appreciate and cherish everything — because this helps to preserve it. Neglect it for a moment, and it might be lost forever.

Beyond being good stewards of opportunities, we also need to diligently speak up in protection of our freedoms. Because we are in an ‘age of dirty media politics,’ some really are working to undermine and remove our freedoms! I have a friend who visited during the week I was writing this chapter. He was wanting ideas for a response to a national Christian organisation. Certain programmes they put out nationally had always had ‘prayer’ as an item in the agenda — until this month. I thank God that he noticed this small detail, and was willing to act. His response included a basic case in support of the Christian origins of our nations most treasured values. A month later he received an apology, stating that this removal had been an oversight and that it would be corrected in the next programme. (Was it an oversight, or were they ‘testing the waters’?)

As an example of free-speech protected, the first Hope Project national media effort in 2014 had over 1000 public ‘complaints’²⁶. Initially I thought this was because atheists were offended that we would dare to suggest that design infers a designer, and that intelligent information requires an intelligent cause. However, I’ve since realised that this was not the only reason. Many were offended because we had dared to speak — at all! To note the context, the Christian Church in our nation had not used its voice nationally in public like this for over thirty years.

Four years later I identified a pattern in the public responses. While the national media projects continued to enjoy a healthy number of public engagements, the number of negative feedbacks reduced massively. The fourth effort received only 12 of them from the wider public — and the project before it only about 20. Our conclusion is that the Hope Project efforts

²⁶ By ‘complaint’ we refer to a public feedback that is negative in tone

have served to re-establish an attitude of ‘acceptability’ toward the presence of Christian messages in the public square through media.²⁷

OBSERVATION 4: OUR NATION’S CONTINUING, ALTHOUGH INCREASINGLY NON-SPECIFIC, SPIRITUALITY

The continuing general interest among New Zealanders in spiritual things is an ever-present conversational opportunity that we must equip our people to ‘uncover’ and engage! The key to great conversations is great questions. Because conversational skills can be learnt, this represents a significant opportunity.

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Our own efforts in this area have included a range of resources to help pastors train their members to engage with others conversationally. We’ve suggested that Jesus’ approach to personal witness was both conversational and Spirit-led. The change in thinking is from ‘telling’ to ‘conversing’; from expecting gospel communication to follow a single trajectory, to viewing each conversation as a separate adventure. When you begin on an adventure you never know where it will go — and that is what a conversation is like. If conversational skills are taught, we can grow in confidence, and expect good results!

The effect of intentionality in this equipping could be quite profound. Beyond the impact it might have upon faith-conversations, the skill-set is the same as is needed for community and political conversations. Because people’s dreams sit to the right of what they believe to be possible, if we can help them see how engaging in certain kinds conversations really might be possible for them, they will have bigger dreams. Significant innovation could be catalysed as a result.

²⁷ As an important balance within this picture, I note that our manner has also been respectful in all we have done. We have not hidden from stating clearly what we believe. However, all words have been carefully considered. Had we not taken this care, I do believe things could be different. While our goal is not to avoid offending people, it certainly is to avoid unnecessarily offending them.

OBSERVATION 5: MESSAGES OF HOPE IN THE FACE OF SYSTEMIC FAMILY BREAKDOWN

While family breakdown and the associated ‘persecution of traditional family values’ are listed as a negative trend in the previous chapters, this trend also represents a significant opportunity. Christianity brings unique hope, and has a well-demonstrated ability to bring desirable life-change!

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Our nation’s churches are doing many amazing things in their communities. There is a lot we could sing and dance about here.

It is said that ‘there are no atheists in the trenches.’ Similarly, when people experience emotional brokenness, hearts become ready for the big questions of life. People become acutely aware of their need for purpose, meaning and hope!

We are the carriers of hope, believing in a God who loves, cares, and transforms! This trend is therefore both a challenge — in terms of possible prejudice we suffer, while also being an opportunity — in terms of there being a growing hunger for the kind of hope we carry!

The opportunities here are only limited to our creativity to engage meaningfully with the needs of our communities.

Connected with this, I suspect we are experiencing an increasing readiness among societal leaders to recognise the benefits of the Christian faith — and even the need for it within society. As noted earlier, the leading atheist Richard Dawkins has even admitted that Christianity might hold some of the solutions Britain needs. What we are seeing here is the intersection of ‘family breakdown’ with both ‘continued spirituality’ and ‘post-secularism’, as previously noted.

A friend recounted the story of a community group meeting that was pulled together to discuss the growing suicide rates among their young. There was a resulting call for more funding and education — but some stated how this has already been the call and approach for many years. The Christian

in the room suggested that maybe the reason for the problem was in our rejection of belief in a loving Creator God — because we're teaching them in schools that they are accidents of chance. Heads nodded in silence.

Despite the great work our churches are doing within their communities, we're not credited with or known for our good work. This is a branding problem!

While the public can be scathing of churches if it senses any insincerity, they can be openly praiseworthy of them also, when they see sincere and selfless help given to those who are in need! So how could we position ourselves to be viewed more often by them in the positive way rather than the negative way? I believe 'branding' has a lot to do with it. Despite the great work our churches are doing within their communities, and in welfare, we're not credited with or known for our good work. This is a branding problem!

We have a remarkable opportunity in the area of bringing hope — if we can position ourselves so we are viewed in a positive light.

Not all content is equal.

OBSERVATION 6: THE CONTENT OF OUR PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS

Not all content is equal. Some things are more important to say than others. The public are ready to hear stories about our cultural past — because our society is suffering a mild identity crisis (post-secularism). And they are ready to hear messages of hope!

Successive governments keep re-affirming the need for New Zealand children to be taught more of our own nation's history (Biculturalism is the primary trend here). When that happens, I hope that some educated Christians (or sympathetic historians with cultural awareness and integrity) will be in the room, because that group of people will establish the new history curriculum!

There are three areas of story that are both strategic (in view of these trends) and ‘untouchable’ to criticism in the public square, so long as we get our facts right. They are

1. The story of God at work in our global history
2. The story of God at work in our national (bicultural) history
3. The story of God at work in people’s lives today.

If your presentation topic touches the freedom of speech — discuss where and how that idea become established in New Zealand thinking. Research and tell the story!

If your topic touches education, are you aware that, if not for Christianity, we’d probably still not be educating poor people today?

If you are considering injustices, or racism and the like — are you aware that Christianity has been the source and power behind the most famous modern battles for the equality of races — and the abolition of the slave

Many assume Christianity to be an imposition of colonisation in our nation of New Zealand. The story of our early bicultural pioneers shows that it was not!

trade which sparked the modern equality movements also? This includes the ending of apartheid in South Africa, the ending of racial segregation in America, and was even integral to the fall of the Berlin Wall. In addition, prior to Christian effort in this area, there is no record of anyone even suggesting the idea of ending slavery!

In our society, history is often told by people with ‘secular’ viewpoints, who remove the Christian dynamic. Perhaps they do this because it is either uncomfortable, inconvenient or uninteresting to them. Our role is to reverse the trend though working creatively and tirelessly to get this story told and known. This is core work! Why?

- Many really do assume Christianity to be an imposition of colonisation in our nation of New Zealand. The story of our early bicultural pioneers shows that it was not!
- Many assume us to be a ‘secular’ nation — when our everyday thinking and values are decidedly Christian in nature (even if not so in the areas of sexuality and value of life). A study of history quickly reveals a trail of pioneers who challenged and changed culture because of their Christian faith — laying the foundations of the society we have today, and our very way of thinking. Their story needs continuously telling!

Many assume us to be a ‘secular’ nation – when our everyday thinking and values are decidedly Christian in nature. A study of history quickly reveals a trail of pioneers whose story needs telling!

Additionally, telling the story of God at work in people’s lives today evidences the continuing power of the Christian faith to bring about life-change. While we must be careful that our words never demean any other religion, I’m yet to discover a similar trail of positively-changed lives in the wake of another religious group. Spiritual experiences — yes. Amazing life-changes in a consistent direction of being more selfless, loving and self-controlled — no!

Intriguingly, newspapers will even publish Christian testimonies sometimes — like on the cover of the Gisborne Herald with the title ‘Set Free By Faith’. Others include the recent story (and testimony) of country musician Peter Posa in the Weekend Herald, or the brilliant telling of Owen Pounamu’s testimony of life-transformation in a Television New Zealand news report.

ILLUSTRATION

Consider a Christian leader who is invited to share a speech or thought at a public event. They begin with humour — and everyone laughs. They then share something meaningful connected with Jesus’ teachings, and bring a meaningful application that connects with a felt need in the community.

As a result everyone present applauds. We might think this person to have represented us well — however for what reason were they given this privileged position? I call it ‘Christian privilege’ — and it’s now in question in our society. Consider that an articulate atheist, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist could achieve the same response. Why do we give Christians these platforms? This question is being asked right across our nation. We must answer it! All content is not equal. Some things are more important to communicate than others!

Why do we give Christians these platforms? This question is being asked right across our nation. We must answer it!

What I am suggesting is that we would be wise to begin to always include evidences from our own nation’s history whenever we’re given a public platform, so our stories communicate both a relevant value to the audience as well as a subtle justification of the privileged position we are being given as Christians within this nation. We are, at the very least, ‘significantly Christian’ as a nation, as measured by its heritage and values, and this heritage is not a bad thing!

Of note, there are people in European nations that are far less church-going than we are, who are again wanting to label their entire culture as ‘Christian.’

OBSERVATION 7: REGARDING BICULTURALISM

I have four reflections:

1. A TIPPING POINT IN THE NEW ZEALAND CHURCH

I believe the biculturalism trend within the New Zealand Church reached a tipping point in 2017. In that year I sensed that something fundamental had changed throughout the nation. More Māori were gathering on Marae for Christian fellowship than before. More key Christian Māori were traveling to have hui together, for korero about the integration of their faith and heritage. Key Christian Māori in some cities and towns began to meet together to

consider what it was to be Christian and Māori in this environment — and also how they could best serve their local churches. While these changes were fed through the telling of stories, the various things happening around the nation were also considerably uncoordinated (it wasn't just one network of people). I've shared this observation with other Christian Māori leaders who have been well-networked, and they had sensed the same change.

The best illustration is to consider the possible reaction of church people five years prior to this change, that their local church host a Te Reo (Māori) language course. Most would have said, "What would you do that for?" Yet in 2017 and onwards, it was possible that none would question, and many would sign up. This trend is almost national in scope. Something fundamental shifted!

I believe the catalyst to this change was our nation's gospel bicentenary in 2014. The process is worth some reflection. For a couple of decades a number of like-minded academic historians had been writing about the positive Christian dynamics that have been untold behind Te Tiriti, and of the early influence and spread of the gospel among Māori²⁸. Their work was counter-cultural. In 2012 New Zealand Christian Network sought to bring this to the awareness of a number of key church leaders in our nation — because 2014 would be 200 years since the first preaching of the gospel at the invitation of Māori, and also the first invited Pakeha settlement.

I was privileged speak to about 150 times on this topic in that period with city pastors' groups and at combined church gatherings. Our own efforts (as the Shining Lights Trust) then sought to take these untold historical stories *to the public square* through the Hope Project national media efforts. I was concurrently privileged to be the producer of the 'Chronicles of Paki' illustrated history series which took these stories to public schools.

28 In talking with Professor Peter Lineham about this, he credits Gordon Parsonson of Dunedin as an early catalyst, who through his research into missionary dairies enabled source documents to be available, which enabled the role missionaries played in our early history to be revisited, and then viewed more positively. Others names that came to mind were Keith Sinclair and Judith Binney. Their work inspired the next 'tier' of academics, whom some in our time will be more familiar with, many of whom became connected with the Religious History Society including Peter Lineham, Allan Davidson, John Stenhouse, and a growing list of others, with many more added over the two to three decades since.

At the same time, many others also initiated various efforts, speaking on these topics to church audiences. Various publications and books, and one brilliant video documentary were also produced.

What I want to note here is how this small but nationwide change in our New Zealand Church culture and thinking came about as the result of 5 years of noticeable efforts by many. However, the thinking was ‘seeded’ prior to that. We had academics and thinkers in our universities who spawned these ideas through their critique of the anti-religious bias found in many academic and media telling of our nation’s history. Some key leaders then created platforms upon which some others could become aware of this thinking. From that platform, ‘creatives’ took hold of the new thinking to spread it. Key leaders adopted the new thinking and passed it on to those they were connected with. Five years later enough people were convinced within our churches *for our shared thinking to ‘tip’*.

This small but nationwide change in our New Zealand Church culture and thinking came about as the result of 5 years of noticeable efforts. This is a valuable reflection on how cultural thinking can change.

The above is a valuable reflection on how cultural thinking can change. It is also remarkable in its final pace of change.²⁹

2. A NEED FOR INTENTIONAL RELATIONSHIP BUILDING WITH MARAE

As another connection-point with this trend, I believe the New Zealand Church at a city and town level now needs to work on establishing intentional partnerships with local Iwi. The approach is very simple: Pastors contact local kaumatua with a request to meet, to hear their story.

²⁹ I note that most efforts related to this gospel-bicentenary were for church audiences and groups. Very few considered how we might communicate with the people of our nation, beyond the walls of churches. This is indicative of our thinking. I strongly suggest that a more strategic and mission-oriented way of thinking is needed.

An important dynamic in this is for local church leaders to take the position of a learner, rather than that of a teacher. The former will open doors — while the latter will close them, and possibly do damage. It is therefore vital that pastors do not try to talk and teach when meeting kaumatua. In the words of a Māori friend of mine (to paraphrase), “We’ve been listening to the Church trying to preach at us for 140 years. We know what you want to say already. It’s time for you to listen!”

It’s also vital that church people do not seek to defend themselves or Christianity too quickly when criticisms are levelled against the Church. The fact is, some of those criticisms are tragically valid. Demonstrating a willingness to listen will build trust. There will be every opportunity for conversation later if trust is built! Humility and patience are therefore necessary.

Maori elders then stand and state their own hopes that their mokopuna would continue to hear the stories of their tipuna Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Elijah, and Jesus. The effect could be profound!

By listening, new things will be learnt (including the validity of some criticisms). Stories may be heard that are

not recorded in a history book yet. Genuine friendship might result! Then, when a church opens a new building, the pastor will call a local Kaumatua who is now their friend — and they will likely happily come. Then when the local primary school questions the place of *Bible in Schools*, the churches ask local Kaumatua to come with them to present to the school board — and they willingly accept. The Māori elders then stand and state their own hopes that their mokopuna would continue to hear the stories of their tipuna Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Elijah, and Jesus. The effect could be profound!

This process of patiently developing relationship and trust has been undertaken in places like the Tauranga Moana, with long-term friendships resulting. A Christian group called Te Kohinga was established about 20 years ago. They sought to understand the concerns of local Māori and to serve them. In the process they discovered an injustice with the land that

was connected to the history of the Church in this region. Over a great many years, conversations were engaged, and an academic paper eventually written. Perspectives within the leadership of a Christian denomination were changed, and they decided it would be right to extend an apology. The City Council, the Church and local Iwi therefore stood in profound unity — as wrongs were admitted without defensiveness. Kaumatua — many of whom were Christian also, were profoundly humble and gracious in their responses and comments. One can only imagine what incidents like this bring about in the spiritual realm, in which both our promises and promise-breaking have a profound impact. This kind of partnership needs to be fostered everywhere!

3. A NEED FOR AN AUTHENTIC JOURNEY WITHIN LOCAL CHURCHES

As another application in view of this trend, I suggest it wise for local Kiwi churches to embrace a journey of learning regarding what it means to be bicultural as congregations. We are a bicultural nation that lives mono-culturally. Without question, embracing this change involves new learning, some awkwardness, and some vulnerability.

We are a bicultural nation that lives mono-culturally. Without question, embracing this change involves new learning, some awkwardness, and some vulnerability.

Consider the illustration of the surfer who begins to paddle before the wave reaches them. There are a range of things that local churches can begin to do which reflect an understanding of our bicultural identity. *Our churches need to adapt now, because we might not get the privilege of riding this particular 'bicultural' wave if we do not start to paddle before it arrives!*

Of course, people react with fear to things they do not understand. Let's be aware of this. Leading change too quickly will get a reaction — no matter what area you are leading in. I suggest churches take this bicultural journey slowly, with members on board.

However, authenticity is important too. The use of a lot of Te Reo in a church with no one of Māori descent in it might feel strange. I suggest being ‘bicultural’ means we have become familiar with and easily able to shift between two ways of doing things, without any awkwardness or loss of sincerity. A variety of very-understandable factors will influence the pace at which various churches embrace their journey toward this goal. However, the encouragement is that, at some level, we do this — and quite soon!

I suggest being ‘bicultural’ means we have become familiar with and easily able to shift between two ways of doing things, without any awkwardness or loss of sincerity.

Why soon? I know of cases where Christian Māori have become increasingly impatient with the wider Church and its continuing disrespect toward our bicultural identity as a nation. In some cases these Christian Māori have been patiently serving local churches for decades. They have been patiently waiting for a little more sincerity in bicultural things from us — their brothers and sisters in Christ. But the years keep passing by. Meanwhile, the mana Māori is being restored at a national level. It is only natural that expectations will change! Where a request for a powhiri at an event was once considered an honour by Māori, it is now sometimes almost considered a tokenism. Cynically one might say that most have forgotten their ‘biculturalism’ by the time they’ve finished their cup of tea afterwards. So, what is important is that we’re not like that! But how do we achieve that? *What is needed is sincerity in the journey!* There will always be grace where there is sincerity.

Another reason why it would be wise for us to engage with this journey soon is because biculturalism as a trend in the public square is shifting quite quickly also. Māori are forming partnerships that will affect the direction of things into the decades ahead. We need to be at this table!

4. A NEED FOR CLEAR VISION OF FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Consider the future of Māori spirituality. If Māori do not come to a place of respect for the Christian faith (returning to the view of many their ancestors did in the days prior to our colonisation), they might choose to broadly align themselves with the animistic religious beliefs and practices they had prior to European arrival! In truth — this trend is already in play, and if it continues, Christian references — even in Karakia in Te Reo Māori, might one day be removed from our society. Already, numerous Māori on numerous Marae avoid Christian references. This is another growing cultural trend within Māoridom, and while it hasn't crossed a tipping point to be the majority view yet, it's far from uncommon! Christianity is connected to colonisation in their thinking — and so, to decolonise means to de-Christianise!

The Christian basis of the Kingitanga movement is a possible future influence here, that could help to preserve the Christian dynamic within Tikanga Māori, and certainly in the Waikato and Bay of Plenty regions. However, even there Christianity could be relegated to formal speeches, and lack the vibrancy that true faith in Christ brings.

The Church at large is not viewed as a strong partner by many Māori currently. We need to change this!

Māori on the Marae are forming their vision of the future — and the question is who their partners will be. What relationship will they have with the Christian faith — if any? If we do not engage with the bicultural journey now, we might miss the opportunity to engage with this conversation.

Māori on the Marae are forming their vision of the future — and the question is who their partners will be. If we do not engage with the bicultural journey now, we might miss the opportunity to engage with this conversation.

There was a time in our past when there were only about 35 missionaries, while there were over 200 Māori evangelists! Those evangelists swayed the Māori population of our nation. Could it happen again?

IN SUMMARY

By understanding how culture constantly changes, and how these trends could push against each other, we can align ourselves with the kinds of thinking and actions that will yield the most beneficial results.

The next chapter concludes the first half of this book. It summarises our engagement in what I call the three levels of activism. Then we'll begin to look at the topic of city and national leadership.

CHAPTER SIX

Three necessary levels of activism

Activism is an evangelical tradition, springing from our wider Kingdom mandate as Christians to transform all aspects of this planet to be as they are in heaven (Matthew 6:10).

William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, is one of my heroes in the area of cultural change. As a powerful gospel preacher, he had a belief that he was not only responsible for saving souls, but also for changing the world he lived in. In addition, he believed this was achievable. His faith led him to attempt bold things, and with good results!

One of the Salvation Army's notable early fights was against the match-makers (in reference to matches that light fires). The hazardous work in their factories gave the poorly paid workers phosphorous poisoning. The workers' bones eventually turned fluorescent and would shine at night. Their bones would also gradually crumble, leading to a premature and miserable death! Because people wanted matches, and poor people needed work, no amount of protesting would stop this evil. So, the Salvation Army started the 'Safety Matches' company. Because of the different chemicals used, their matches were considerably more expensive. How would they get the public to buy them? They worked to inform the public of the horrors of the phosphorous-based match factories. Gradually they won over public opinion, and put the phosphorous-based match companies out of business!

Another effort was to challenge the human trafficking that was taking children out of England, and across to the continent to work in brothels. With government officials unwilling to listen (and sometimes possibly financially involved) the Salvation Army proceeded to use the supply chains to smuggle a child to the continent themselves, who they then rescued. This provided the evidence they needed to expose the existence of this cruel trade. Those involved in collecting the evidence were initially arrested and put in prison for what they did. However, they were soon released — and measures came into place to hinder this trade!

Another notable effort was the introduction of a minimum age of consent for sex to protect children. As a result of William Booth's efforts this was set at age 14. Our thanks for this precedent for our culture goes to William Booth! (The Women's Christian Temperance Union campaigned here in New Zealand for the same in the late 1900s — initially getting the minimum age of consent set at age 12. It was later raised to age 16).

But a new era of activism is needed!

As shared in the opening chapters, some people know how to shape public opinion. In a non-truth-based society, the process is as follows:

Profile affects perspective; and perspective defines truth.

The conclusion is clear:
In a media age like our
own, ‘profile activism’
yields results!

Through playing the ‘profile’ game (through giving wise profile to particular messages in the public square), perspectives are affected. As the weight of public consensus shifts, this then defines the future truths of our nation! The conclusion is clear: In a media age like our own, ‘profile activism’ yields results!

A story of Helen Clark and friends is notable here. Previous Politician, the late Gordon Copeland, relayed this story in his book, *‘As It Is — My time in Parliament and thoughts for the future’*. A group of friends on a university campus in the 1970s adopted ‘The Working Women’s Charter’, which outlined areas in which they wanted to change the thinking of their nation. Years of effort followed. At one point, three of the women involved were the Prime-minister, Governor General and Speaker of the House — concurrently. It was during this time that I understand Helen Clark to have spoken quite authoritatively about the fact that we are a ‘secular’ nation. Together, they successfully changed the self-perception of our nation, and achieved all but one of their stated goals.

However, I don’t believe the clearer defining of our national identity (in

While politicians in power can work to change culture, it is also true that they are the pawns of a changing culture. If they stand against public opinion they’ll be voted out! We, the public, therefore have a role to play.

Our efforts create the ground upon which politicians who share our value can stand to bring change.

keeping with our Christian and bicultural history) is something we can expect Christians in politics to achieve for us. In fact, I think many Christians expect far too much of politicians! While politicians in power can work to change culture, it is also true that they are the pawns of a changing culture. If they stand against public opinion they’ll be voted out! We, the public, therefore have a role to play in shaping public

thinking and culture. Our efforts create the ground upon which politicians who share our value can stand to bring change.

Those who ‘led’ the changes detailed in the ‘Working Women’s Charter’ were but a small part of a much wider movement. Before they could successfully propose a bill in Parliament and see it passed, they not only needed to get into Parliament. *Public perspectives on the matter needed to be changed!* The point here is that change was the result of many people working concurrently upon multiple platforms, towards a common goal.

Change was the result
of many people working
concurrently upon
multiple platforms,
towards a common goal.

To positively influence our nation in a few areas, we’d need to do the same.

LEVEL 1: INDIVIDUAL ACTIVISM

Earlier in this book we referred to a Rensselear study that had demonstrated that when 10% of a population were fundamentally convinced on something, the majority view followed. If 16% attend church monthly as suggested in the recent McCrindle research,³⁰ with a population of almost 4.5 million that is 720,000 ‘regular’ church-goers. To repeat the numbers given near the start of this book, this might represent 500,000 active evangelical and orthodox Christians in our nation, and a further 200,000 Catholic Christians.

16% is obviously more than 10% of our nation’s population — and doesn’t include that additional 6 to 8% who still attend church a few times per year! We have potential for great good, if we can work together.

The first level of effort that is needed is individual effort. Individuals in our churches need equipping with conversational skills, so they can engage in difficult conversations winsomely. They then need information (education) — so they can engage in a timely manner, and wisely.

³⁰ <https://faithandbeliefstudynz.org>

With the content of the previous chapters in view, they don't need information on every issue though. Some things — such as a knowledge of our bicultural and Christian history, are of particular strategic benefit.

The point of this book is that we could yet become an effectively activated minority. In the context of this chapter, it is not beyond note that we are no small minority — if we can be united in a few things!

Here are some examples — purposed to illustrate how the seemingly small efforts of individuals to stand for a point, or to engage a conversation, can have a cumulative effect that really matters for our nation.

A teen magazine included an article about anal sex, and how it can be 'delightful'. Shocked by this, some complained on Facebook — because the magazine's target audience included youth aged between 11 and 14. One man I read of, walked into a shop and grabbed all the copies they had of the magazine. He took them to the shop counter and asked to see the manager. He opened the page to the offending article and said, "Would you want your 14-year old granddaughter reading this article?" The shop owner looked, and then took the pile of magazines and dropped them into the trash bin, while telling the cashier to write them off as damaged stock. The need for a standard was reinforced, and if enough people responded, it could influence the publisher.

My friend heard a debate on talkback radio in which the announcer commented that he didn't want any Christians ringing in with their opinion. What? Is a Christian opinion somehow not valid? My friend challenged the radio host via Facebook — to which the host denied having said what he said. However, social pressure was applied. Every piece of feedback counts!

An Easter insert in the Auckland Herald³¹ was titled '7 Deadly Sins of Easter.' The publication proceeded to give ideas under seven headings — all of which were all sins such as materialism, lust, greed etc. Each then listed a range of possible recreational activities that people could engage in over the coming weekend if Christianity was irrelevant to them. The tone was more than disrespectful toward Christianity. Then, having stated that this is for those not interested in spiritual things, one of the points went on to promote a spiritual fair at which, amongst other things, people could get their palm

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read. I have no clue how many Christians in Auckland wrote to complain. I hope it was at least 2,000 — but I fear it might have been more like 2 or 5. The above was not an isolated incident that year. Change doesn't happen by itself. If we do not speak up, others will!

I was watching a 5.30pm news item and suddenly there was a news report in which a guy said our Lord's name as a swearword twice. Were he to have said any other kind of swear word, we can be sure that they would have edited that word out. I contacted them to complain about the religiously discriminatory language they were allowing at a time of day when children — including my own, were listening. While I received no response, the point is that a piece of social pressure was applied, and every effort like this counts, because they accumulate!

Easter trading was being debated. A local pastor wisely put together some words, and an article went into the local Tauranga Sun paper. A view was heard and expressed things that might not have been heard otherwise. The same paper also included a promotion by the local Bible Society who were raising funds. In addition, there is a full page every week in this paper that promotes church services, and includes two short articles written by local pastors. The Christian community was represented in three places in the publication — combining to create an impression in the mind of the reader. 'The Church is alive and well in this community!'

I attended a children's camp with two of my children. It wasn't a church-based camp. Prior to eating, one of the key leaders asked, "What do we do before we eat?" "Karakia!" He then proceeded to ask everyone to bow their heads, and began a habit of thanking God prior to eating each meal (and he prayed in English). It took a small bit of boldness, yet was entirely acceptable to the 100 or more predominantly non-Christian children present, with maybe 20 parents in addition. Every effort counts!

I was sitting engaging in conversation with a couple of others, and the tone began to assume certain things to be true on a matter — with a critical innuendo of any who would disagree. I awkwardly interjected to say that the wider Church community I serve amongst would still be divided on the matter. The tone was pulled back to one that was more respectful of differing views, and a social reminder was given that differing views still exist. Even a small awkward moment in a private conversation has value, because it's an inter-connected subset of the wider public conversation.

It is important that Christians are engaged in the conversations of their society. Encouraging this is an important thing for local church leaders to do, because every interaction brings a social pressure.

Every interaction brings
a social pressure.

Positioning ourselves to be aware of important and timely information on some community and national issues is also beneficial. Newspapers, blog subscriptions, discussions in local pastors' groups, and news updates like those from Family First or other similar organisations can all help.

Even a small awkward moment in a private conversation has value, because it's an inter-connected subset of the wider public conversation.

Regarding the strength of the New Zealand Church in the area of individual activism, I get the feeling that the general trend is one of improvement. Maybe due to a consistent pattern of losses, the Christian community is learning afresh that it really does need to speak up? I can't say for sure, but I hope so!

Putting a figure on it — 10%

How many non-church people might Christians be communicating Christian messages with personally? To repeat statistics found near the start of the book, if 4 out of 10 non-church people are aware of having a Christian friend, and if 25% of these 'known believers' were bold to speak about spiritual things, 10% of the non-church population would have someone actively seeking to connect Christian messages with them through personal outreaching efforts — just to put a figure on it.

Let's consider two other needed levels of engagement.

LEVEL 2: COMMUNITY ACTIVISM

I think that this is an area of engagement that the Kiwi Church is doing really well in. While there is always room for improvement, I personally think a little applause for local churches is due here!

If we were to make a list of all the things that local churches are doing within their communities, it would be an extensive list. Only twice in 6 years of travel to connect with city pastors' groups did our team ever make the mistake of asking what they were doing within their local community. Why was this a mistake? Because the opportunity to discuss anything else in the meeting was lost on both occasions! Once started the conversation couldn't be stopped. The extent of their engagement was significant, and the resulting picture very encouraging!

Is the Church still present and relevant within our nation? For all those in our communities who are connected with these programs, the answer is yes! Well done Church!

Our nation's churches are engaged with their communities in a huge variety of ways including drug and alcohol programmes, debt centres, counselling centres, food banks and op shops, marriage and parenting courses. There are children's activity programmes such as Mainly Music and a variety of other programmes and clubs, boxing academies, sports clubs, sports chaplaincy, music tuition, after-

school care, kindergartens, schools, youth ministries, drop in centres, school chaplaincy, rest homes, elderly care programmes, employment schemes — and much more.

If profile affects perspective, and those perspectives define the future truths of our nation, the critical question is this: Is the Church still present and relevant within our nation? For all those in our communities who are connected with these programs, the answer is yes! Well done Church!

One area of weakness that is quite consistently highlighted is the seeming absence of Christian messages within many churches' community

programmes. Without a Christian message somewhere, some suggest (to quote a comment I recently heard) that churches are nothing more than ‘Rotary Clubs with pointy roofs.’ Might there be something to consider here?

Most Christians accept that church programmes can play a variety of roles in a person’s spiritual journey. Some are first-connection points. They establish contact and trust through the works of love. While others might be suitable bridges for the Christian message of love (the gospel) also.

My own view is that Christian messages should be included somewhere, or somehow. This could be through intentionality in conversations, or an invitation to a place where the Christian message is directly explained. It could be a Hope Project booklet given at Easter time, or a prayer prayed out loud because of a sense of great compassion for someone who’s suffered a health crisis.

While I personally feel the New Zealand Church might be improving in this area (in terms of restoring Christian messages to their community work), I’ve recently heard well-travelled Church leaders suggesting the opposite. You can decide — but let us not forget that, giving a hungry man the gospel booklet while not giving him the sandwich in our hand is terribly foolish, while giving him the sandwich and not the gospel booklet (if we have the freedom to do so) is distinctly unloving!³²

Giving a hungry man the gospel booklet while not giving him the sandwich in our hand is terribly foolish, while giving him the sandwich and not the gospel booklet is distinctly unloving!

The right balance is surely that the message of love (the gospel) and the works of love (good deeds) go hand in hand. Let’s pursue this balance!

To put a figure on it — 10%

Regarding how many people our ‘community ministries’ might connect with; I believe it would be generous to suggest that 10% of the non-Church

³² The idea behind this illustration is a quote from General William Booth who said, “If you want to give a hungry man a tract, put it between two pieces of bread.”

population within a community might be connected with a local church's programme — let alone hearing verbal Christian messages within that programme. For arguments sake though, let's say it's a 10% reach.

LEVEL 3: PROFILE ACTIVISM

This is the level at which I suggest the New Zealand Church is the weakest, and in which new initiative is most needed! But where might leadership for new innovation in the public square come from? Who can speak on the national issues? Who can speak on the city issues? Who can represent, protect, or build our 'brand'?

I believe it is the Holy Spirit who raises up these key leaders. It is not something that can be contained within a human structure — even though some might lead from within existing positions in denominations or other 'para-church' organisations. Put differently, Church leadership at the city and national levels must be very-much Spirit-led.

Some of our nation's larger churches are intriguing within this conversation. They are in one sense like denominations. Because the economies of scale within a larger congregation are very good, key leaders in these churches bring a disproportionate Christian presence to the public square. Consider television programmes like Life TV, Impact for life, Running With Fire and more. Some run conferences and facilitate various united efforts in addition.

Very little thought is
given to the public
representation and
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Church (united)!

However, these 'bigger church' pastors are not the only ones gifted to work in this area. Where are the others? This is our challenge! We don't yet have the necessary mechanisms in place to release them, so they become the pastors of churches, or enter into various regional or national denominational positions. Others have given up on attempting to live out a felt calling because of frustration, and are in business or elsewhere. As a result, very little thought

is given to the public representation and communications of the Church (united)!

OUR STATISTICAL ILLUSTRATION REVISED

Jim and Joanne Smith are your average Kiwi parents. They have no church involvement, and no particular religious views. Their primary source of information is public media, and they generally trust what they hear.

The question is, Is Christianity still around and relevant within our society?

The first way they could get a positive impression is through some Christian friends. However, Jim and Joanne are amongst the 6 out of 10 non-church people who are not aware of having any church-going friend.

As far as Jim and Joanne can tell, there is nothing to contradict what the public media are saying. So, what do you think they are going to believe?

A second way they could get an impression that Christianity is still relevant is through some kind of local church community ministry. While the churches in the city Jim and Joanne live in are doing many good things, Jim and Joanne aren't the kind of people to admit they have a need. They're self-made, and hard-working. They're currently busy renovating their first

house, and their weekends are full due to the various sporting and other cultural activities their children are involved in.

So, is Christianity still present and relevant? Well, as far as Jim and Joanne can tell, there is nothing to contradict what the public media are saying. So, what do you think they are going to believe? Christianity is outdated within our nation, and irrelevant to our future!

Jim and Joanne represent about 80% of our nation's non-Church population — or 2.7 million of our 4.5 million people (if we assume 23% to be visiting a church two or more times per year as our starting point).

A SIGNIFICANT DISCONNECT BETWEEN THE WIDER PUBLIC AND OUR MESSAGE

I recall a conversation with an intelligent liberally-minded agnostic. He stated to me as a fact that Christianity was basically dead and gone in New Zealand. I then pointed out to him that the percentage in the previous census who still affiliated with the Christian faith was well over 40%. He was genuinely surprised. He had never heard that, even though he was consistently engaged with news media.

It was immediately apparent to me that neither television or newspaper, friends or professional colleagues, had ever even mentioned something that might burst the 'secular' bubble he'd been led to believe was present fact, and assumed future.

Our church circles are small.
There are many, many people
we are not connecting with.

Our church circles are small. There are many, many people we are not connecting with.

TOWARD AN APPLICATION: BECOMING VISIBLE

We need to engage with wider groups of non-Church people, to engage with and even help to shape their perspectives! This includes with gospel messages — but also through just working out how to be visible in the public square!

To illustrate, the church we go to runs a programme called 'Kids Go Wild.' It is a free carnival, including Ferris wheels, go carts and the like. The Christian message is not shared, though invitations to youth and family programmes are extended. It is a huge effort, with at least 2000 attending (and about 5000 at its peak). So, is it worth it?

Since moving into this community I've discovered that, whenever I tell a local that our family go to that church, they are consistently quick to respond 'That is a great church!'

To assess this a little, what do you think they know about our church? Most know almost nothing — other than that we're a church that is willing to give something back to the community without needing to push an agenda.

Some admittedly do know a little more — like that we never complain at the myriads of parents who fill the carpark daily when running their children to and from the primary school across the road. My point is, these 'profile' efforts have created an impression within the community, and it gives our church a great starting point for a conversation!

A similar example would be Light Parties. These now exist in many places. The best two stories I'm aware of are from Whakatane and Alexandra. The Whakatane churches began to run a Light Party as a positive alternative to Halloween about 14 years ago. These days, their local programme enjoys significant attendance (maybe 6,000 people or more)! The event is organised by a committee of volunteers from the different churches. During the event, other community and performance groups are involved, resulting in a programme that includes games, food and entertainment. There is a positive message to be shared — with a lot of creative thought given to how that might be done most appropriately. A lot of good will is generated as a result.

Down in Alexandra, amongst the town pastors there are four who are all about 35 to 45 years of age. To have a group of pastors that has such youth in it is very rare. They are a great bunch, and recently ran a light party to which one third of their community turned up. It out-stripped the 'Blossom Festival' — which has been a notable even in Alexandra for many years.

They are engaging with their entire community within the public space themselves. It's smart!

Again, the point is that, through these, churches are taking care of their 'brand profile' in their communities. Instead of silence, or of having their 'brand' represented second hand by others — like secular media reporters, they are engaging with their entire community within the public space themselves. It's smart!

A NEW UNDERSTANDING: BRAND

New Zealand is being re-branded as a ‘secular nation’. To consider how this is being done, our Christian values are being picked off, one by one. Our people have been separated from their history and the stories that define and explain who we are as a nation. This leaves us entirely vulnerable to being led in any direction. The word ‘Christian’ has been removed from our nation — and a new vocabulary for our nationhood and values is being given to us. The last of the cultural icons of our Christian past are now being deconstructed and removed, one by one. From various politicians declarations that we are a secular nation, to the removal of nativity scenes from shop windows and city decorations, and onward to the removal of ‘Jesus’ from the Parliamentary prayer — the progression is directional and consistent. These changes are

The great irony is that – while the Church is being ‘stereo-typed’ (branded) as irrelevant and ‘fringe’, it’s actually a leader in care in our nation!

happening at the community level, city level and national level. They involve politicians, local Mayors, and parents on the school board of trustees. And remember, culture doesn’t just change; it is changed! There are people who have put plans in place for these things, who have then encouraged, enabled and fed them.

The great irony is that — while the Church is being ‘stereo-typed’ (branded) as irrelevant and ‘fringe’, it’s actually a leader in care in our nation! Church-based community ministries and charities are a big deal in this nation. We’re also big on giving to charity. Christian faith continues to rate highly in recovery statistics also (like in drug or prisoner rehabilitation). The ‘very religious’ in our nation give 5.7 times as much money to charity as the rest, and volunteer 2.3 times as much, with Christians representing 95% of those who self-classified as ‘religious’ in this study³³. In addition, Christianity has gifted our nation many of its most-treasured values including tolerance, equality of genders, equality of races, education for all, health care for all,

³³ From a Victoria University of Wellington Study, as presented by Dr Joseph Bulbulia and Dr Geoff Troughon at Engage Conference, September 2018, Manukau City Baptist

concepts of charity, democratic forms of government, separation of church and state, systems of law — and even the idea of activism itself (which presumes that right, wrong and justice must exist). What we clearly have here is a brand problem — exacerbated by the fact that we have almost no city or national level leadership as the Church (united) seeking and released to address it!³⁴

We have a brand problem — exacerbated by the fact that we have almost no city or national level leadership as the Church (united) seeking and released to address it!

Consider the Coca-Cola company, with their sugar filled, diabetes inducing and possibly cancer causing drink. With a huge marketing budget, they have survived all of this! Look at their global success — even when Coke is not good for you! The way we market and represent ourselves makes a lot of difference.

There are certain skills involved in this. For an amusing local example, consider the media reporters' hounding of Bill English in 2017 when Prime Minister John Key stepped down. They immediately pursued him for a definitive statement on Gay Marriage, because he had voted against the Bill prior to its passing. Amongst the many attempts by the media to get a clear statement, Bill talked in circles — leaving a clear impression that he was not out to change the law. He alluded to the idea that he might even vote for the bill now — but did so without clearly explaining what that meant. And he did all this without ever giving a truly quotable quote regarding his personal views. Why? Because he understood that public media might 'box' him with any stated views, and he didn't want this to be the issue that would define him in the coming election. As a good Catholic, it must have been rather awkward — but he didn't give that quotable quote! That's 'brand control'!

Seeking to manage what you are and are not known for is a necessary skill in a media age!

³⁴ We have many local churches, connected to maybe 30 denominations, while most would struggle to identify one handful of people whose full time focus is public-square engagement with a view to public profile and communication

It makes me think of another guy who lived a good few hundred years ago who you might have heard of — Jesus. Try to find his ‘quotable quote’ on whether or not he was the Son of God. Why would he not just tell people the truth? He was Mr. Elusive when it came to a clear answer on that matter, even though he did answer the question in various other ways.³⁵

In private company he eventually did talk openly, and in riding the donkey into Jerusalem he did a deliberate act which said the same — which explains why the events remembered now on Palm Sunday took place. Yet everyone had to wait until his trial for the actual quotable quote, and it got him killed! Jesus knew the damage that a misunderstanding on the matter could bring³⁶, and so controlled the development of his ‘brand’ with purpose. He did the same when asked by what authority he did what he did, or whether to pay taxes to Caesar, or what to do with a woman caught in the act of adultery. He gave no straight answers or quotable quotes on the topic requested. Instead, he redirected them or distracted them with something else. In short, he was wise enough to know he should not answer!

The Christian Church is a marketer’s dream in terms of the good we do, and yet a marketer’s nightmare, because we can’t get our heads together.

Imagine a company that makes a cool \$20m profit annually in our nation, but who’d like to make more. They decide to donate \$30,000 to a charity. They then spend \$150,000 making a TV advertisement about their \$30,000 donation, and another \$500,000 on having that TV ad played on our televisions — and they don’t even really care about people! The Christian Church is a marketer’s dream in terms of the good we do, and yet a marketer’s nightmare, because we can’t get our heads together.

While churches are maligned by some — the same critics applaud a North Auckland previous pastor (and now entrepreneur) for his charitable business

³⁵ For example, Jesus declared people’s sin forgiven — which only God can do, and called God ‘Father’ — which the Pharisees immediately recognised as blasphemy, because he was claiming to be equal with God.

³⁶ Because the common expectation was of a military Messiah who would rescue them from the Roman occupation through the use of with swords and spears

‘All Heart NZ’, which redistributes equipment that various companies no longer want to charities. They applaud the ‘Good Neighbour Trust’ in Tauranga, which supplies food to food banks and others around the region. They applaud our Hope Project media efforts too — which include specifically Christian messages, while avoiding association with controversial issues. Over 500,000 people engaged with online media this past Easter, separate to the booklet distribution which connected to over 1.36 million homes. The public stand and applaud the Drug Arm / Street Help teams, who from their vans give free coffee and Milo with pies and cakes to half-inebriated people on city streets on Friday and Saturday nights. These are all initiatives of, and primarily staffed by, Christians. These are Christians who are able to openly share their inherently spiritual motivations for their work in the public space, while being applauded by secular audiences.³⁷ The point here is that we could address some of our branding issues by proactively engaging in the public space with an awareness of ‘brand’. While it takes time to change public opinion, together we really could do more to engage this conversation!

We could address some of our branding issues by proactively engaging in the public space with an awareness of ‘brand’.

IN SUMMARY

We have discussed three levels of activism: individual, local-church and profile.

Profile activism refers to united efforts at a city and national level.

- It is my suggestion that ‘profile activism’ is our weakest area

³⁷ So it is noted, it doesn’t take many unwisely spoken words to damage a brand. Consider the immediate efforts companies take when something negative connects with their brands. Brand mistakes can affect a company’s reputation for decades — which is why they act swiftly! Special wisdom is needed in public representation of the Christian faith because of the scope of wrong-doings it can potentially be connected with. Honesty and humility regarding the failings of people claiming to represent Jesus is needed. As a test-case, the Hope Project has done this, openly admitting wrongs like the Crusades, Inquisitions, the failure of some early missionaries in New Zealand — and more. Public audiences have appreciated our honesty, and this has gained us the respect and opportunity to tell other stories.

- The Christian Church used to be gifted profile for free by public media, so we didn't need to be very active in this area. This has changed.
- Public views are also changing. Like in the opening illustration of the owner of 40 competing motor vehicles brands, united efforts to promote a united message are now needed in a way that is different to one or two decades ago.
- ...and regarding what is at stake, it is the existence of any messages at all about the Christian faith to the 80% majority of the non-church population within our nation.

'Profile' engagement can help to shape the thinking of the public, regarding our faith.

The challenge is, this kind public engagement is a function of our unity. This leads us to the second half of our book. How might God raise up leaders who could engage with various cultural challenges and opportunities? How could we work together better in our cities, and nation?

SECTION II

The first half this book was about culture and cultural change within our nation.

The second half is about Church leadership, and how we might better position ourselves to be a voice within our cities and the nation as a whole.

CHAPTER SEVEN

From the Book of Judges to today

The nature of Church leadership in the Age of the Spirit — Part I

The Book of Judges in the Bible has some revelations in it for us regarding Church leadership in this current period of history.

We currently live in what is called the ‘age of the Church’, and also the ‘age of the Spirit.’ This refers to the period of time spanning from the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost until the eventual return of Christ.

While we have the presence of God's Spirit personally with us, the parallel I'd like to draw with the book of Judges is that our King is physically absent in both eras. The Church has no single earthly leader as 'stand-in' for the King (unless you are a Roman Catholic). This is just as it was in the time of the Judges. There are therefore similarities in the leadership paradigms of these two eras that we could consider and learn from. Let's take a look:

In the time of the Judges, it was God's purpose that Israel had no king. God wanted to be their King. However, God was physically invisible, and they struggled to submit to this invisible King! They rebelled and turned to idolatry again and again. They would then suffer God's discipline — causing them to turn again to God for help. So, from time to time, God raised up Judges to rescue them from oppression, while bringing needed leadership in the areas of civic and moral law.

The Book of Judges serves to show us how, due to the corruption of our flesh, we seem addicted to our prideful independence from one another and from God.

The first part of the book has a chiastic structure (A-B-C-B-A).

- A: **Ehud** — the lone hero (Judges 3:12-30)
- B: **Deborah** — the unexpected female judge (Judges 4-5)
- C: **Gideon** — the ideal judge (Judges 6-9)
- B: **Jephthah** the unexpected 'social outcast' (Judges 10.6-12:7)
- A: **Samson** — the lone hero (Judges 13-16)

After this, there is an epilogue that tells two stories.

Micah — Illustrative of compromised leadership through idolatry

Dan — Illustrative of moral compromise that led to some severe discipline

The key phrase that unlocks the purpose of the Book of Judges is found in the epilogue: *"In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit."* (Judges 17:6). The Book of Judges serves to show us how, due to the

corruption of our flesh, we seem addicted to our prideful independence from one another and from God.

It is from within this context that the book of Samuel then explains the transition to the time of the Kings. The books of Chronicles and Kings then narrate the history of the kings of Israel and Judah. God's original intent was that Israel would not have a king. The move to have a king in Israel was therefore considered a rejection of God — while also being a grace that God allowed (1 Samuel 8).

THE PLAUSIBILITY OF A FUNCTIONAL MISSION FROM A UNITED BASE

The book of Judges is very much like this current era of the New Testament Church. Jesus is our King — and we have no spiritual king on earth. Nor does God desire for us to have a stand-in king to rule on his behalf (again, unless you are a Catholic and believe the Pope to have this role). The challenge is that this approach to things clearly failed in the Old Testament times. The people of Israel were unable to stay focused on God or to obey his commands. They wandered! So, God eventually granted their request for an earthly king, because of their cyclical failure. So, what's different now?

What is different is that we now have the Holy Spirit! This is the single reason why the New Testament Church can succeed in its unity and effort where Israel failed. This belief and hope is a premise of this entire book! The Holy Spirit can help our hearts to remain humble and teachable, submitting to God's Word and ways. The Holy Spirit can lead us. Like with an orchestra, we are each to play the musical score given by the conductor on the instrument we hold. The Holy Spirit then pulls everyone together. It is because we have the Holy Spirit that the ideal of the Church as a functional missional community can work! While the praxis is yet to be considered, at a theory level, I believe the idea that we really can

We now have the Holy Spirit!
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have functional leadership as the Church at the city and national levels is established!

In case the point is being missed, this perspective stands in contrast to a widely held belief that the united function of God's people at the city and national levels is really just an 'idealism' (not realistic).

A REFLECTION ON THE ORIGINS OF LEADERSHIP

There are some other observations I see here. For example, their leaders did not always arise out of their recognised leadership structures. There were no royal families, leading tribes, or even the Levitical priesthoods that had any inherited right to leadership power in Israel. Certainly, they were divided into tribes — and by reading between the lines, they also had city leadership structures, just as we have local church and denominational leadership structures. However, broader national (Church) leadership did not exist in a human-made, structured way. It was something that God brought about when needed — separate to their own structures. This meant that recognising God's appointed leadership required a discerning heart. God did not always raise his leaders through their tribal structures or priesthoods — just as he may not do so through our local church and denominational structures today, or even from within our city-pastors' groups.

National leadership
was something that
God brought about
when needed.

As another observation, many of the Judges were not recognised leaders from their upbringing. Deborah was uniquely already a prophet who was leading Israel at that time (including the function of being a judicial judge who mediated disputes — see Judges 4:4-5) prior to promotion as a military leader. Others, by comparison, were simply undesirable to have as leaders. Consider Samson the 'lone ranger', doing as he pleases, then over time also ignoring cultural and moral boundaries, and being subservient to no man.

VOLUNTARY ACCOUNTABILITY

We come to what I suggest to be the key principle that makes this whole system of government work: Voluntary accountability! It is found in Judges chapter 5, where Deborah's song is recorded. She begins her song with these words; *"When the princes in Israel take the lead, when the people willingly offer themselves, praise the Lord."*

I suggest that the words, *'willingly offer themselves,'* hold the key to Church leadership in the present time. Until we understand this, I too believe that functional Church unity is just an idealism!

Broad-sighted Church leadership is something God brings about in a nation. While structures may exist within our denominations and other similar networks of churches, God can raise up leadership both through and separate to these structures. In short, God will raise up different people at different times for different things. Some of these people will be quite unexpected — like Deborah was in those times, leading men into battle. Others may even be a little 'abrasive' while having an ability to go where others will not. Consider that the strong personalities of Samson and Ehud are God-given parts of who they were, enabling the kinds of bold actions they undertook. In contrast, other leaders God raises up may be much more 'respectable,' dependable, and dignified — like Gideon (who was surely a Baptist).³⁸

God will raise up
different people at
different times for
different things.

All this is to say, I think Church leadership at a city and national level is unavoidably Spirit-led by nature. This statement is no new revelation in itself. However, the way we function and channel resources doesn't reflect much belief in it! This understanding that God can appoint leaders in both cities and nationally is not very clearly seen in our thinking, prayer, planning, voluntary accountabilities and resourcing — and to our detriment.

³⁸ Joke!

Regarding things we might all be accountable to — as a part of God's Church, I believe that the pastor of a local church is accountable to what God is doing in the nation, and then to what God is doing in their city or town. I do not believe it appropriate to run a local congregation as if it were an independent entity, without something of these accountabilities. The pastor and church are then concurrently accountable to the denominational network they are a part of. Only through such a recognition can the local Church exist as a functional entity at the city level, while also being appropriately in synch with a nationally united work.

This means that local pastors need to be a participant in — or at least be in genuine connection with, their local city pastors' group (sometimes called a Ministers' Fraternal or Ministers' Association). How else can they act in unison with the Church? Regarding boundaries, I believe the words 'voluntary accountability' are applicable here. While not every pastor is gifted to be a pastor to their city, logically there needs to be a connection of some kind with the wider body of Christ, to enable various multifaceted city and national level efforts and communications.

Only through this most-basic functional unity together will we be able to achieve a level of engagement that is, in my view, essential to our wider mission within this current cultural context.

As I see it, it is only through this most-basic functional unity together that we will be able to achieve a level of engagement that is, in my view, essential to our wider mission within this current cultural context. We are no longer in the majority. We need to adapt if we are to become an effectively active minority!

AN IDEALISM?

To those who might think this idea of achieving united city leadership is unrealistic, we will consider this in various ways in the coming chapters. However, for now, I'd like to establish the plausibility of a single leader playing

an effective role within a city — because this is maybe the most radical of all scenarios. I note that this is not to say that I am proposing that one person lead the Church within a city. However, God might raise up an individual to play a key role at times, so let's consider the plausibility of this.

Consider how a church of a few thousand would never think of not having a Senior Pastor to facilitate and encourage. Note that their church might include 6 to 10 different congregations in a larger city, made up of different ages, groups and ethnicities. My point is that this is not overly different to the scale of operation a person would have if they were the 'key encourager' to all the churches in a small town, for the purpose of their shared mission.³⁹

If we think it unrealistic for someone to bring servant leadership to 100 churches in a city — what does a denominational leadership position exist for? Clearly, people can and do have gifts and abilities that make them effective in these roles!

Likewise, if we think it unrealistic for someone to bring servant leadership to 100 churches in a city — what does a denominational leadership position exist for? Clearly, people can and do have gifts and abilities that make them effective in these roles!

Also, I encourage the view that it is possible for someone to be in such a role without having to be 'in charge' or 'the boss.' Jesus' model for leadership was of 'servant leadership', after-all! Consider that participation in many denominations is voluntary too. They are voluntary 'unions' of churches. We give accountability to the leadership of these movements because we believe it is for the greater good, and we follow most of their suggestions because of trust, and because we understand the reasons for whatever is being proposed.

The principles for our collaboration together within our cities are really no different. This includes the possibility that people could be raised up and released to key leadership roles, bringing encouragement within the city,

³⁹ As articulated earlier, denominations bring valuable training, support, and accountability. City leadership doesn't need to duplicate all this.

and also facilitation to the united missional efforts of the Church as a united entity in that place.

Until we get our heads around this picture, our eyes may struggle to recognise those whom God has called to serve in our cities and nation,

There are many possible and even necessary functions of the Church that are not happening currently, because we have not yet created the united context within which they can exist and thrive.

because we don't yet believe the role they are attempting to lead in to be valid!

Let us also be reminded that the implications of all this affect none more-so than those who do not yet know Christ! There are many possible and even necessary functions of the Church that are not happening currently, because we have not yet created the united context (through the way we think and believe) within which they can exist and thrive.

A GEOGRAPHICALLY IDENTIFIED CHURCH?

Regarding the New Testament model, the Church is always geographically identified in the New Testament. As mentioned in the introduction, the word for church (ecclesia) refers to the people. The various letters to the churches in the different cities were therefore always to the Church (singular) in that place. For example, Paul's letters were to 'the Church in Corinth' or 'the Church at Ephesus.' The Church then fellowshiped in various house churches (or 'home groups') — akin maybe to the various congregations now in each of our cities.

It is noteworthy that these churches had problems within them — just as we might have within and between our various congregations within a city today. The many challenges within the Church at Corinth stand out especially. Yet the singularity of their identity together as 'the Church' in that place remains at the forefront, and with their unity together as a foundational commitment.

I wonder if Paul's words to the Church of Corinth found in 1 Corinthians 3:4-9 reflect a time when they were becoming a little 'denominational' in a way that was divisive. How might this apply to us?

For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere human beings? What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labour. For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building. 1 Corinthians 3:4-9

What is Paul? What is Apollos?
What are the Baptists? What are
the Presbyterians, Anglicans,
or ACTs churches? Together
we are servants of Jesus – and
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voice we need to be!

What is Paul? What is Apollos? What are the Baptists? What are the Presbyterians, Anglicans, or ACTs churches? Together we are servants of Jesus — and it is only through our working together that we will be the voice we need to be! Only together will we be able to enable certain functions of the Church to exist within our cities and nation. To achieve our mission, we need to function not only in one Spirit — but also as one body!

In the book of Revelation, we find the letters to the seven Churches. Each begins with the same formula prior to stating the place: 'To the angel of the church in Ephesus.' Spiritually, this suggests that there are angels who are appointed as the spiritual 'overseers' of the Church in each city. Again, the identity of the Church is geographic.

I appreciate that some may still prefer to see differently on this. In case it is helpful, I include here a summary of a paper on this topic.

UNITY AN IDEALISATION — OR A REALITY WE SHOULD PURSUE?

Dr. Alan J Thompson is a lecturer in New Testament at Sydney Missionary Bible College. He completed a Ph.D on this topic of the unity of the Church. In an article of his that a friend shared with me, titled “Unity in Acts: Idealization or Reality?”⁴⁰ Thompson summarised references to unity in Acts. The question being discussed is whether the hope of functional unity within the Church within cities is realistic — or just idealism. Should local churches expect to be able to work together effectively in a city — or are they better to each do their own thing and hope that God somehow fills the gaps?

The reason the book of Acts is a focal point for this topic is that Luke (the author of the Book of Acts) is so positive toward the unity of the Church, while Paul’s letters seem to point to so many divisions. The relevance, therefore, relates to whether or not the functional unity of the Church within a city or nation is an idealisation in the Book of Acts, which might mean it is not a vision we should realistically believe for and pursue (and therefore also make ourselves accountable to). Thompson argues that the staunch affirmation of the unity of the Church in each city was so because it was the functional and conceptual reality — not a mythical idealisation. His argument is that this is maintained despite the disagreements that existed as referred to in the book of Acts, with many more in Paul’s letters. For an analogy, a family remains a family — even amongst disagreement, and expects all members to come together at key family events. So it is with the Church. There are things we can and must do together at the city and national level.

I quote here a portion of two paragraphs near the start of this article:

With regard to the unity of the church, Acts draws attention to the “Togetherness” of the early Christian community...: praying together (Acts 1:14; 2:42; 4:24), being together (Acts 1:15; 2:1, 44, 47; 5:12), holding everything in common (Acts 2:44), being of one heart and mind in agreement (Acts 4:32; 15:25) and sharing possessions (Acts 2:45; 4:32, 34).⁴¹ Furthermore, disputes are resolved. The Ananias and Sapphira

⁴⁰ JETS 51/3 (September 2008), p-523-42

⁴¹ J.Dupont draws attention to, among other things, Luke’s use of *koinonia*, *koinos*, *apanta koina*, and *mia psucha*.

incident (Acts 5:1-11) is surrounded by summary passages that highlight the unity of the people of God, and the continuing spread of the gospel (Acts 4:32-37; 5:12-16). Similarly, the complaint of the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews (Acts 6:1-7) is resolved and surrounded by statements that highlight the continuing spread of the word (Acts 6:1, 7; note that in 6:5 Luke points out that the proposal pleased the whole group...). Likewise, the Cornelius incident and subsequent criticism from the circumcised believers in Jerusalem (Acts 10:1-11:18) is resolved (Acts 11:18...), as is the disagreement recorded in chapter 15 (Luke notes in Acts 15:22 the unity after the council of the apostles and elders and also “the whole church”...). In 15:15 James is also reported as drawing attention to the “harmony” between the report of Peter (and that of Barnabas and Paul) concerning God’s inclusion of the Gentiles and “the words of the prophets” continues to be a recurring theme throughout the narrative (Acts 24:14; 25:8; 26:22; cf. Acts 10:43; Luke 24:44) culminating in the remarkable agreement between Paul, Isaiah and the Holy Spirit at the conclusion of the narrative (Acts 28:25). These examples indicate that for Luke the unity of the Christian community is important.

Thompson goes on to illustrate from contemporary literature (of that time) how unity was not a matter of idealisation in the First Century, but instead one of sincere admiration and pursuit for a people and their government.

He further suggests that Luke really wasn’t actually idealising unity in Acts either, because he openly recorded disagreements between believers (19:30-31; 21:1-14; and 15:36-41), — and left the outcomes of some of these unresolved. Luke was not interested in the theme of unity in and of itself, nor did he think that mere unity was a sign of blessing or a guarantee for victory (cf. 18:11, 15, 17).⁴² Put differently, the unity of the Church in its geographic identity was conceptually fixed within Luke’s thinking. Luke also notes there was ‘unity’ among those who opposed the Christian faith. In short, Luke didn’t see hope in uniformity. Instead, unity was in Christ, and hope for the Church existed in a matured submission to one another — even where disagreements were not resolved.

42 JETS 51/3 (September 2008) 535-536.

In summary, despite all the challenges we might see to the united function of our churches together within our cities and nation, this practical unity needs to remain the ideal that we aim for in both our prayers and actions, because it is not only what Jesus wants (John 17); it is what the Holy Spirit is with us to see achieved — with the vision that we become enabled to achieve our greater mission!

Before ending this chapter, I'd like to discuss briefly our concepts of denomination and parachurch.

DENOMINATION AND PARA-CHURCH

I believe that clear thinking is essential to clear strategy and effective engagement. For this reason I believe a clearer level of thinking on the roles and functions of denominations and various differing types of para-church organisations is needed. Only through this will be able to wisely discern how we should relate to or work with them — or even under them.

'Para' means beside, so para-Church refers to organisations that stand beside the Church to help it in its role.

In this sense, to consider our denominations first, these are technically para-Church organisations. While this is not common terminology, please bear with me for a while, because some value could come from this conversation. Denominations stand alongside a network of congregations, who are based in a wide range of places. They are a support structure to these congregations, located across a

A clearer level of thinking on the roles and functions of denominations and various differing types of para-church organisations is needed. Only through this will be able to wisely discern how we should relate to or work with them — or even under them.

broad geography. This is no criticism of denominations. This does not in any way devalue what they do. There is clearly nothing wrong with supporting congregations! This is categorically a needed role!

The primary functions of denominations — as I currently understand them, are (1) training, (2) support and (3) accountability. These are important functions.

The one function that a denomination cannot lead in, however, is mission. The Assembly of God churches of the Manawatu (as a random example) cannot decide to reach Manawatu for Jesus *as if they were the only Church there*. Instead, the function of reaching out to the people of Palmerston North rests with all the local churches of Palmerston North. The same is true for Shannon, Foxton, Feilding, Ashurst, Woodville, and Dannevirke.

In this sense, denominations have a responsibility of empowerment toward their churches, for localised mission. They can encourage their congregations (1) to be intentional in their own missional efforts while (2) being functionally united with the wider Church in their city or town so that some of the necessarily-united functions of the Church can be made possible. It is, maybe, only this second encouragement that is sometimes overlooked. However, I suggest this isn't really much of an issue. Many pastors already appreciate the value of their relationship with other churches in their own cities or towns!

Some of the broad statements we sometimes hear about the place of para-Church ministries — as if they were all just one category, are more than a little confusing, and sometimes genuinely counter-productive. If we are to engage better with our nation, this needs a re-think!

Regarding terminology, I do not suggest that we now call denominations 'para-church organisations.' That would be confusing. However, the understanding represented here is very important in its implications upon how we work together!

Regarding organisations typically labelled ‘Para-Church,’ I also note that I see three categories of these. As a result, some of the broad statements we sometimes hear about the place of para-Church ministries — as if they were all just one category, are more than a little confusing, and sometimes genuinely counter-productive. If we are to engage better with our nation, this needs a re-think!

- (i) The first is those para-church ministries that are support-organisations to local congregations. These provide resources or tools that local churches could utilise — to better enable Christians in local churches to do the work. Alpha and Christians Against Poverty would be two prime examples. These ministries provide local congregations with tools for ministry that are of high quality. These ministries strengthen the local church’s level of engagement with their community.
- (ii) A second category is those para-Church ministries that do the work themselves — rather than empowering local churches to do it. While some might debate the semantics, I’m thinking here of Campus Ministries, various forms of Chaplaincy, Health Care Ministries and the like. These are specialised areas of ministry. These ministries, therefore, look to local congregations for support. This approach to finances is entirely legitimate as well because the financial structure of God’s Church within our society is denominationally structured. Individual congregations are the receiving ‘vehicle’ for Church funds. These are genuinely ministries of the Church in that city or town!
- (iii) The third category is those para-Church organisations that are about the leadership directions or voice of the Church at a city and national level.⁴³ Our efforts with the Hope Project, or the efforts of Family First, the Maxim Institute, Rhema Media, New Zealand Christian Network, City by City, Christian Broadcasting

43 ...which technically represents two distinct categories — but these two areas of focus are often connected, and are the same in the sense that their focus is national in scope, and with a view to broad public engagement

Association and the like, could all potentially be examples. These ministries seek to bring Christian perspective to public conversations nationally — or alternatively to help shape what local Christians do and say so as to enable a national voice that is authentically connected at the ‘grass-roots’.

As a reflection on these three types of ‘para-Church’ organisations, I would also reflect that the second two are technically Church ministries — not para-Church ministries. For example, we would never call various children’s, youth and community ministries in a local church ‘para-church’, as if they were not part of that local congregation. In the same way, these ministries are Church ministries, potentially being representative of the united Church body. These ministries do things that would not be happening if we were to limit our activities to things that individual congregations can achieve. In contrast, I would place the first category alongside our various denominations, due to their commonality as support ministries to the function of individual congregations.

Clearer thinking on these matters might enable us to better measure the strategic value of things, better appreciate the various lines of mutual accountability that might exist between us, and to better achieve our mission as a result.

To note it again — none of this is to devalue any of the above. However, I believe this reflection has a necessary purpose. Just as a body needs all of its parts, God’s Church needs all of the above. Clearer thinking on these matters might enable us to better measure the strategic value of things, better appreciate the various lines of mutual accountability that might exist between us, and to better achieve our mission as a result.

Let’s turn now to have a quick look at a little of the New Testament model of leadership — after which we’ll consider how we might put ‘flesh’ on some of these bones.

CHAPTER EIGHT

National and city-wide Church leadership

The nature of Church leadership in the Age of the Spirit — Part II

I recall being in a meeting of Church leaders in which we were asked to share what we thought the key hindrance was to greater health and effectiveness of the New Zealand Church in its public engagement. I would have replied at that time to say something like ‘a weakness in understanding regarding how to equip and mobilise believers in local churches to their

mission.’ However, I recall one leader who replied to suggest it was a lack of leadership, or an inability to recognise and empower leadership. A few years on, I’ve come to agree.

THE NEW TESTAMENT LEADERSHIP MODEL FROM EPHESIANS 4

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Ephesians 4:11-13

I believe that the leadership offices listed here in Ephesians 4 are distinct from those found in other lists of spiritual gifts, like in 1 Corinthians 12 or Romans 12. The purpose of these rarer leadership offices is not so much to do the work of the ministry, but rather to equip others to do the work. These are people with particular leadership gifts, whom God has raised up for a season or time to encourage and enable others to lead.

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To consider each ‘Office’ in simple terms:

- The apostle’s role is to equip all believers to lead in the work of the Kingdom, including the mission of the Church, in a pioneering way in their places of influence, with an awareness of the whole
- The prophet’s role is to equip all believers to seek God’s voice so as to find his leading and revelation for today
- The evangelist’s role is to equip all believers to represent the message of Christ to those around them in a way that is clear, respectful and compelling

- The pastor's role is to equip all believers to care for others in ways that are sensitive, useful and meaningfully felt
- The teacher's role is to equip all believers to read and understand the Word of God in a way that is sensible, contextually-considered and true.⁴⁴

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As rare leadership gifts, I believe these are to be found within cities and provinces more so than within every local church. There may however be people with a moderate strength in some of these areas within many local churches.

The relevance of this is that our health as the Church at the city and national levels may struggle if we are not able to recognise or release gifted people into these kinds of leadership roles.

In considering what might hinder this releasing of 'apostolic', 'prophetic' and 'evangelistic' leaders, in particular, the conversation becomes unavoidably uncomfortable. Some only want to see our existing denominational structure — and, thus, decline from real consideration of what true geographic unity might mean, and from imagination regarding what it might enable.

In discussing this with pastors' groups, they have commonly identified hindrances to unity as things like personal insecurity and pride, because these inhibit the ability of some to release others to lead 'above them' at the city 'level' (Such thinking has, of course, misunderstood the idea of servant leadership — which these groups recognise also. So it is noted, these are their words, not mine).

In other places, the pastors' group is seen as existing for nothing other than friendship and care among pastors — so there isn't 'thinking space' available for consideration of its wider mission. In addition, some who are

⁴⁴ These roles might be defined differently by some. The purpose here is only to give a starting concept of each, so the idea of their real-time application today can be considered.

gifted to lead local congregations may not have ever thought through the need for city roles, so they rule out the possibility out — which goes toward inhibiting of this possibility.

HOW ARE WE TO RELATE TO THE TITLES, 'APOSTLE' AND 'PROPHET'?

The titles apostle and prophet are particularly awkward for some of us. For example, if a person were ever to be identified as an Apostle, does that mean we must follow their leadership? If they were called a Prophet, does this mean they have a special connection with God and we are to obey their command?

The answer to both questions is, of course, a simple 'no'. However, these words are within use in various circles, which makes finding a paradigm for sensible conversation together beneficial. For me, it has been helpful to talk more about someone who may have 'an apostolic anointing' than to label a person 'Apostle'. The same goes for the prophetic gift. This has released my mind to take more seriously the idea that God might raise certain people up with certain giftings to bring servant-natured leadership and encouragement at the city and national levels.

THE NEED FOR ALL 5 OFFICES — AND WHERE THEY MIGHT FIT

I suspect that a priority order is intended within this list of 'offices'. I'll share some thoughts briefly — with the awareness that much of this will not be new for many people, and that others will have written with greater detail, revelation and length on this. This is a summary also — so we have a context.

ROLE 1 — THE 'APOSTOLIC MANTLE'

Regarding the 'apostolic mantle' — in my mind, these are people whose primary heart and focus is the advance of the Kingdom in the city or nation

(or even internationally) — as contrasted with those whose focus is more on a single local congregation or denomination.

Beyond meeting all the biblical requirements of leadership, (1 Timothy 3, Titus 3, etc) these people are natural ‘pastors to the city’ (or nation), whose minds are continuously filled with thoughts about the need for Christian representation

in various spheres of influence. They have a pioneering gifting, with both a broader Kingdom and evangelistic motivation — because of their belief in what Christ could achieve through his people. To reiterate one point, the ‘apostolic’ voice is, therefore, an evangelistic voice, because it is about pioneering leadership in service to our mission.

They have a pioneering gifting, with both a broader Kingdom and evangelistic motivation – because of their belief in what Christ could achieve through his people.

The contrast here is with the many ‘pastors’ (vicars, ministers)⁴⁵ whose primary calling really is to one congregation, and its efforts within its own neighbourhood. This broader ‘apostolic’ vision and perspective is what makes these ‘apostolic-natured’ leaders stand out — and I can think of a number of them within our nation’s pastors’ groups. Many are key players in unity amongst churches within cities and towns already!

However, to reiterate a point; as with all of these ‘offices’, this is a *faciliatory servant-leadership*’ role. Such a person isn’t in charge of the Church. They are an encourager and servant-leader within God’s Church, with city-wide, national or international goals in view. They bring something to the table that local churches need!

To reiterate it, because human nature connects leadership with power, personal insecurity and pride are the key hindrances to be aware of here, in terms of what might inhibit our ability to recognise or release people who might have a city or nationwide calling.

⁴⁵ In our culture we use the term ‘pastor’ as a generic term, simply meaning ‘key church leader’ — not Pastor — as defined in Ephesians 4

Additionally, it needs noting again that God's ways are not ours. God does not choose people as we do. God might call people to city or regional roles who are not pastors. We're blessed to have some great examples of this in Tauranga where I live, where a man with a passion for prayer is bringing humble yet clear leadership to our united prayer efforts, while another with a passion for marriages and strong connections with local Marae is likewise a city-influencer, sitting as a peer amongst the local church pastors.

ROLE 2 — THE 'PROPHETIC MANTLE'

The prophetic (prayer) voice comes next, and this voice is significant to our discerning of what we are going to do, and how. At the same time, this 'prophetic' voice is an encouraging voice, bringing a perspective of faith and hope for the future. It is an extremely important voice because it is motivational.

This 'prophetic' voice is an encouraging voice, bringing a perspective of faith and hope for the future. It is an extremely important voice because it is motivational.

Dreaming up ideas of what we could do is easy. Deciding which ideas we are to give ourselves to is harder. The 'prophetic voice' therefore needs drawing out before any action is considered. This voice is key within the 'agenda-setting process' of a Church leadership team within a city, as also in individual local congregations.

I can easily think of people in a number of pastors' groups who have this encouraging 'prophetic' gifting. They are continually wondering what God might be saying. They love prayer and are regularly calling others to it. They then facilitate and feed the prayer life of the city. They speak life, hope and vision into everything around them. They are needed!

So the distinction is noted; if the 'prophet' leads without release of other gifts, the group might digress from its mission to become a prayer group. This would be a tragedy — and for none more so than those who do not know Christ!

Prayer is needed, but prayer alone does not change the world — or even hearing the voice of the Spirit. This is why all the gifts are needed!

ROLE 3 — THE ‘EVANGELISTIC MANTLE’

The evangelist answers the all-important ‘why’ question. They call us back to our core mission. This is something we cannot afford to neglect. The well-being of those who do not know Christ must be pre-eminent in our view.

They call us back to our core mission. This is something we cannot afford to neglect.

However, so that the distinction is noted: the ‘youthfully zealous’ evangelist may not be the ideal person to lead the whole group. The ‘apostolic mandate’ is broader than the spiritual salvation of people. It is more multi-faceted, including the transforming of all areas of society to better reflect the ways and values of Christ.

The ‘apostolic’, ‘prophetic’ and ‘evangelistic’ come first, because the Church is supposed to be action-oriented. The ‘pastor’ and ‘teacher’ are needed because this is to be within a culture guided by love and truth.

Yet again, I can easily think of some pastors who carry this ‘mantle’ when amongst their peers in the city pastors’ group. They bring vital leadership and encouragement in the area of mission. With good people-skills — which many do have, they make fine pastors’ group conveners too!

ROLE 4 AND 5: THE PASTOR AND THE TEACHER

I believe that the Pastors and Teachers are mentioned last because their role is to care for and teach the people, so that all that is done as a result of the apostolic, prophetic and evangelistic encouragement happens in a spirit of love (as encouraged by the Pastor), and of truth (as encouraged by the Teacher).

Put differently, the ‘apostolic’, ‘prophetic’ and ‘evangelistic’ come first, because the Church is supposed to be action-oriented. The ‘pastor’ and ‘teacher’ are needed because this is to be within a culture guided by love and truth.

While most who are gifted as pastors and teachers will have local-church roles, I believe the possibility suggested here in Ephesians is that God may have gifted some to be Pastors and Teachers within regions and nations. These have a special ability to equip and strengthen many.

THE PATTERN TO AVOID

Some have jokingly pointed out that the first letters of the words Apostle, Prophet, and Evangelist spell the word APE. These leadership gifts can be unsettling because they are action and change-oriented. As a result, the Pastors and Teachers are often criticised for ‘controlling’ churches, keeping them safe from the risk and innovation that the APEs would bring. The Pastors and Teachers can sometimes constrain the vision and focus to things that can happen within the four walls of the local church.

It is a worthy reflection that the exact same issue could potentially come about in our nation’s city pastors’ groups — which are often Pastor-led.⁴⁶ To achieve what we exist for as the Church, we really do need the apostolic, prophetic, and evangelistic voices. We are wise to seek them out!

IN SUMMARY

‘Independence’ is a natural human trait. It is easy for churches to function as in the time of the Judges. *“In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.”* (Judges 17:6).

However, we have an advantage over Israel in those times. The power of God’s Spirit within us can help us to be different — if we are willing! God’s Spirit gives gifts — and this includes key leadership gifts that can bring leadership (apostolic), encouragement (prophetic), focus (evangelistic), care (pastoral) and understanding (teaching) to the Church, so it can achieve its greater purpose.

Our churches are weak in their city and national identification and ministry. Through identifying and releasing God-gifted leadership, this could be changed!

⁴⁶ The word ‘Pastor’ here is in reference to the spiritual gifting, rather than as a generic title for the leader of a church

CHAPTER NINE

Geographic Pastors’ Groups — The purposes

In an attempt to enable the Hope Project efforts to be well utilised around the nation, our team travelled annually to meet pastors’ groups in 60 or more cities and towns in New Zealand — six years in a row. Meeting such groups was always a privilege!

Throughout my travel, I felt I was led by God not to analyze any of the happenings within the groups, but simply to try to encourage. This was made easy because I consider pastors to be my peers. We are on the same mission. It’s just that we currently serve in different roles. In these meetings various ideas were shared, and conversations engaged.

Then, prior to the sixth trip, I felt like God was saying to me that it was now time to reflect on the range of things we had seen. Within a couple of months, I was enjoying conversations with pastor groups on the very topic of pastors' groups, and after a couple more months, this book was mentally outlined.

What had I seen — and also others who joined or helped with our travels? We'd seen many inspiring groups and many amazing sincere pastors. There wasn't much of a story there. The real observation was in the range of groups that exists, the ways they operate, and the purposes they perceive themselves to be meeting for. What is the primary purpose of a geographic pastor group?

CARING

There is a strong sentiment around our nation that 'care for each other' is the primary purpose of their city and town pastors' groups. I'd agree this is this a very important purpose too. 'Care' is certainly the first purpose also, because without relationship and trust, will be unable to achieve anything together. It is entirely foundational!

While 'care' is the first purpose of these groups, that doesn't make it the only purpose.

However, the point I want to make is that, while 'care' is the first purpose of these groups, that doesn't make it the only purpose.

Relationships are foundational to most groups. The same applies to almost any workplace too. Yet businesses exist for a purpose beyond their relationships. My suggestion is that the same is true for city/town pastors' groups. This isn't to de-value relationship. It's simply to say, there might be more!

As an observation, attendance in local pastors' groups is often a lower priority in cities as compared to towns. I suggest the reason is because of this very perception, that 'caring' is the primary purpose of these groups. Many pastors are part of regional denominational groups within which their care

for one another is the specific goal. So, if ‘care’ is the prime focus of the city pastors’ groups as well, there is no reason for them to attend two groups for the one thing.

In contrast, involvement in pastors’ groups in towns is quite highly esteemed. If we think of places like Westport or Greymouth that are more geographically isolated, the purpose of ‘caring’ is understandably going to be more important, because their denominationally-based pastors’ group won’t meet as often due to the long distances they have to drive. A much higher level of friendship and priority therefore exists in these groups.

So, while caring is certainly a key purpose for city or town pastors’ groups, and is the foundational purpose of the group, my suggestion here is that there is more.

Unity is a goal – but in what and for what?

UNITY

Some see unity as the greatest goal of city and town pastors’ groups. For them, pastors’ groups exist to bring about the unity of the Church. Certainly, unity is a goal — but in what and for what? My suggestion is, again, that I think there is more.

There are some challenging questions here too — which I don’t have answers for. Unity needs to be in truth and purpose. Sometimes a range of beliefs exist amongst church leaders in a place, to the point that ‘unity in truth’ is difficult for some. This is a truly difficult dynamic!

PRAYER

Some see prayer as the primary purpose. I think all would see prayer as one of the purposes. This is vital too. As St Augustine very interestingly put it, *“Without God we cannot; without us God will not.”* Or as Jesus put it in John 15:5, *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”*

I agree prayer is one of the purposes, but not the main purpose — because it’s prayer for what?

MISSION

I have found very few geographic pastors' groups to view the primary purpose of their groups as the mission Jesus gave. United action in a city is viewed as a 'nice thing' or maybe as 'an excellent extra thing.' It seems to rarely be considered the core business. However, I'm sure you've guessed already that I believe this to be the primary goal. Or, to state it differently, it's the non-compromisable end-goal — because all of the above are also a valid and necessary part of this picture!

The mission of the Church is the main thing for every Christian, every Christian small group, every local church, every Christian family, and every geographically identified pastors' group — because it's our mission, and that's what a 'mission' is!

The mission of the Church is — in short, to make disciples out of people who are not yet disciples (Matthew 28:18-19). It involves both 'evangelism' (the sharing of the Christian message of hope and reconciliation through Christ) and discipleship (teaching those who connect with Christ to obey Jesus' teachings).

The list of things that we might do together as city pastors' groups is defined by considering the missional efforts that might be needed in our city or nation that our local churches cannot achieve apart.

To state the obvious: The mission of the Church is the main thing for every Christian, every Christian small group, every local church, every Christian family, and every geographically identified pastors' group — because it's our mission, and that's what a 'mission' is!

It follows that the list of things that we might do together as city pastors' groups is therefore defined by considering the missional efforts that might be needed in our city or nation *that our local churches cannot achieve apart.*

How might we ‘...stand firm in one spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel’ (Philippians 1:27)? That is the question!

THE PROCESS TOWARD MISSION SUMMARISED

The necessary process seems to follow this order also.

- Pastors come together to **care** for one another
- ...and develop a sense of **unity** together as a result.
- Freedom in **prayer** together often follows
- ...out of which God’s heart and leading come, resulting in united **missional** efforts.

WHAT IS THE POINT THEN?

If a group does not know the purpose for which it exists, it is unlikely to achieve that purpose! Even worse, we might ‘fend off’ this purpose — and this is certainly happening!

If a group does not know the purpose for which it exists, it is unlikely to achieve that purpose!

If more of our groups could accept from the beginning that we have a mission to consider and accomplish together, the outcomes of our discussions would be different!

These are very real issues, affecting none more-so than those who are without Christ!

In balance to this, most pastors’ groups do achieve some level of outreaching output together. This might include some basic facilitation of *Bible in Schools* teachers, a combined church event at Christmas or Easter, and occasionally more.

However, it remains that, if more of our groups could accept from the beginning that we have a mission to consider and accomplish **together**, the outcomes of our discussions would be different!

A MEMBER-BASED HINDRANCE TO OUR UNITY

It has been commented numerous times to me that church members are very pro-unity. For example, they seem to love combined church prayer gatherings and services far more than pastors do. I observe this to be true too. However, this comment tends to push the blame for a lack of priority on our united efforts to the church leaders. I don't think this is the case.

It's difficult to disagree with the critique that the 'independent spirit' is strong in the New Zealand Church. This is true of our culture as a whole. This independence is the reason New Zealanders make great pioneers — but can be a negative thing too.

It's also true that pride and insecurity in the leader can be factors that inhibit united effort and identity. However, I don't like the idea that we just blame the leaders. It's not that I'm trying to be defensive of anyone here either.⁴⁷ Instead, I think we've all somehow set ourselves up for this problem. There is a *'cause and effect'* dynamic here, which leads me to conclude this is something we need to address together.

On the one hand members want pastors to be more committed to unity. While on the other hand, if pastors neglect to give full diligence to their single congregation, their heads can be on the chopping board. It's not fair.

With declining church-attendances nationally, there simply aren't as many people to go around. Maintaining our many churches isn't therefore viable — because people are the source of money. Towns often have about one church per 1000 people. This isn't sustainable in the current situation. Because of the way we've disciplined ourselves to serve the well-being of individual congregations more than we do the well-being and health of the Church as a whole within a town or city, the default job for the pastor really is to maintain enough members to pay the bills. If we are honest, members expect this too! Some members expect their pastor to turn up at their home the moment they

⁴⁷ The topics of pride and insecurity are openly discussed in some groups. The potential of some culpability in the problem isn't being hidden from.

have a problem or crisis. So, on the one hand members want pastors to be more committed to unity, and to love united events etc. While on the other hand, if pastors neglect to give full diligence to their single congregation, to maintain the membership and visit every needy member, their heads can be on the chopping board. I might have overstated it a little — but this is a real situation, and it's not fair!

The responsibility for changing the current *deprioritising* of the Church (united) is therefore something we need to share together! Right now, we are often prioritising the survival of many smaller congregations — who are essentially competing for the same decreasing 'clientele' within a community.⁴⁸ We're all responsible here — and for this reason, I hope many church members read these chapters also. It's only when we value the health of the Church in our city or town more than our own individual congregation that we'll be ready to become the united Church Jesus envisaged.

A SPIRITUAL POWER-DYNAMIC TO OUR UNITY

John 17 is a key chapter within which Jesus' view of unity is revealed. I believe the key outcome he had in view in this prayer was the accomplishing of our mission.

In John 17:15 Jesus says that his prayer is not that we get taken out of the world, but instead are protected from the evil one. Why did Jesus wish that we stay here in this evil, fallen world?

Having stated that we are being sent into the world (Verse 18), Jesus then continues to pray for our unity. The immediate context is again “...*that the world may believe that you have sent me*” (Verse 21). This statement is repeated again in verse 23.

I recall first hearing the analogy of a multi-lane highway being used to explain how our various denominations fit together. The idea is that, while we might each be in our own lanes (as denominations), this level of

⁴⁸ To note it, this dynamic is different for many churches in places with growing populations like Tauranga or Rangiora or Hamilton. Growing numerically is easier in these places — though in any place it can still become a competition, leading to a neglect of some important aspects of the wider work of the Church in the city.

independence is fine because we're all heading in the same direction. Upon hearing it I had immediate discomfort with the analogy. As in the opening illustration in this book, I think our denominations are more like the brands of car we drive. Once we are on the road — we're just another car, doing what cars do.

Ps David Dishroon of Tauranga further fed my thoughts on this area. He reflected from his experience how it seemed to him that 50 or more churches functioning independently within the city seemed to lack the spiritual 'punch' needed to break through and change the spiritual environment. He pondered that it might only be through our greater unity that the 'spiritual punch' needed to break spiritual strongholds comes about. Might Jesus' prayers for our unity have come from a deeper understanding?

The Bible explains that we fight not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, authorities, and powers of this dark world (Ephesians 6:10-12). The weapons we fight with have divine power to demolish strongholds. These powerful spiritual weapons include things like arguments, ideas, and knowledge (1 Corinthians 10:3-5). Winning the spiritual battle has a lot to do with how we think! Could it be that Jesus prayed for our unity because it actually has a profound significance to our health, influence and growth when viewed from a spiritual-authority perspective?

Could it be that Jesus prayed for our unity because it actually has a profound significance to our health, influence and growth when viewed from a spiritual-authority perspective?

Theologically, my mind quickly jumps across to Matthew 18:19-20, where Jesus essentially tells us prayers that are prayed by two or more people together will have more power and effect than prayers that are prayed individually. The idea that a prayer could be more 'powerful' just because it was prayed in unity with someone else seems somewhat illogical — and even unfair. Yet, there it is in the Scriptures! *The Scriptures affirm that there is a spiritual power or benefit that comes into effect through our unity.*

To adjust the highway analogy above, imagine there is a large brick wall or barrier further down the highway which no individual car has the mass needed to break through. Then imagine a big piece of metal is welded across the cars to unite them as one, thus giving them the mass needed. If denominations are to be called ‘lanes’, this is how the Church in each city (and between our cities) needs to work! We are one Church and one body!

SPIRITUAL ENVIRONMENTS CAN CHANGE

Recently, I drove to a town that I have previously felt to be under a spirit of disunity, with the influence of a range of alternative spiritualities in the mix. However, as I approached the town this time something felt different. The air felt clear. The place felt somehow free; even light.

In checking my own discernment, I considered the weather. Was it a particularly nice day? It was not — for it was overcast and rained heavily soon after. I considered my immediate environment. Did it somehow give me a feeling that things were fresh? It did not also — for one of our children who was with me had just been impressively sick in the car, and the smells were far from refreshing.

The pastors of the community had reconnected over the past year or two and were now in unity together. Something had changed, and others had noticed it too.

Once in the community at a gathering, I cautiously shared my observation with a pastor to see what he thought. He replied to say that the pastors of the community had reconnected over the past year or two and were now in unity together. They even had a combined worship gathering, and at the conclusion of it, the pastors had huddled together to pray together. He said something had changed, and that others had noticed it too.

I mentioned this to only one other person during my time there. She was an elderly widow who I enjoyed a great conversation with. It turned out that she had been in pastoral ministry for many years with her husband prior to his passing. She commented with joy how she had personally observed

that 'huddle' of praying pastors at the combined worship service. In her view, something had indeed changed, and she had waited for many years to see this.

Could it be that there is more importance in our unity for the purpose of our mission than we realise? This is certainly my own conviction!

THE RESULTING LIFE-CYCLE OF A PASTORS' GROUP

If we can accept that the mission of city pastors' groups is very-simply the mission Jesus gave us, this then informs something of our understanding the life-cycle of these groups. To pack some simple words around this, let's consider the life-stages of a regular church small group — and then we can consider the differences.

STAGE 1: ORIENTATION (FORMING)

The group is new. New relationships are forming. A vision is cast and discussed. The group feels exciting to the members.

STAGE 2: TRANSITION (STORMING)

Two to four months later, the members get to know each other's personalities. Some talk too much — and others too little. Some are opinionated, while others crack jokes all the time. It's a bit uncomfortable. As a result, some members have doubts about whether this group really is the right one for them.

STAGE 3: COMMUNITY (NORMING)

About six months have passed and the group is now gelled together. Members know each other and their differences. These differences are now valued. Relational boundaries have become established and are being respected. Members enjoy coming to their group!

STAGE 4: ACTION (PERFORMING)

The group intentionally shifts its focus to be more outwardly focused. The leaders are now balancing their efforts to build community in the group with their efforts together to facilitate ministry and mission to others.

STAGE 5: MULTIPLICATION

More than being a stage in the life-cycle, multiplication is the by-product of a healthy group. Because numbers grow, the group multiplies to become two groups, and the journey through the different life-stages of the group begins again.

A FEW QUICK OBSERVATIONS

- **The uncompromising end-goal** of ‘regular’ church small groups is multiplication because the mission Jesus gave us demands this!
- **The most dangerous stage** is the ‘community’ stage because, while the starting stages feel unstable, this is the stage at which the group can become inward-looking, and forfeit our greater calling.
- **The most challenging leadership stage** is, therefore, the ‘action’ stage because the input-output balance requires active leadership intuition and a keen ‘ear to the ground.’

HOW MIGHT THE LIFE-CYCLE OF A PASTORS’ GROUP BE DIFFERENT?

The single difference is that *there is no multiplication stage*. While our mission is still the chief (or end) goal, a pastors’ group is not looking to add numbers to its group through outreach. As a result, a city/town pastors’ group is a ‘closed group’, as contrasted with being an ‘open group.’ Membership is exclusively limited to those who are pastors (ministers/vicars/priests) within

local churches. In some places other Church leaders (beyond those leading congregations) are welcome also.

However, there are some other unique dynamics. Pastors quite regularly change churches or move locations. This affects the ability of a geographic pastors' group to reach the 'community' and 'action' stages of development. This is a particular challenge to the effectiveness of these groups. I observe that some of the strongest pastors' groups are those where there are the longest-serving pastors in that one place. These long-serving pastors 'anchor' these

I observe that some of the strongest pastors' groups are those where there are the longest-serving pastors in that one place. These long-serving pastors 'anchor' these groups to their purposes of caring, unity, prayer, and mission.

groups to their purposes of caring, unity, prayer, and mission. Put differently, they establish and preserve a healthy culture, which enables these groups to stay in a place of comparative health, and to journey through the 'life-cycle' stages quickly whenever pastors come and go.

However, there is one dynamic that needs bringing into this picture before we move on to become more specific in our discussions.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF CHURCH IN THE CITY TO THE CHURCH IN THE NATION

In leadership, the big picture determines something of the details of the smaller picture. For example, if I'm putting together a year plan for a church small group I lead, I should place the church's key events onto my calendar first. It would be wrong of me to create plans for my small group that are in conflict with the plans of the church I'm in. My church small group is a subset of a local church. This means there are boundaries and accountability to consider.

A local church is a subset of the Church in the city in the same way. The Church in the city is itself a subset of the

The point here is that a local church is a subset of the Church in the city in the exact same way. In addition, the Church in the

city is best represented by the pastors' group — and it is itself but a subset of the Church within the nation! Lines of accountability, therefore, need to somehow flow in all directions between all these levels of function in God's Church. Without this, we cannot function 'as one, in one Spirit, for the faith of the gospel' (Philippians 1:27).

This is where I believe the principle of *voluntary accountability* discussed earlier comes into play. No one is the 'chief' — except Jesus. There is no human structure we can create that can 'contain' this either. It is about the 'framework' that exists in our thinking, because this determines what can exist. If we can only view the Church through denominational lenses, we will struggle to understand this. We are blessed if we can grasp one thing here without letting go of the other. *In our situation, the Church has two leadership structures. One is denominational — to bring training, support and accountability to congregations; while the other is geographic — to achieve our mission together in our cities, and in our nation!*

To enable this, we are therefore to seek God's leading, and to do what we feel God leads us to do — while also positioning ourselves to listen carefully to others. We are to discern the nature of our relationship to one another — so that we enable our united missional function, with its various interweaving applications in individuals' lives, small groups, local churches, city efforts, and national efforts.

Through seeing what is needed in the nation, something of the agenda of the city pastors' group is therefore defined. This, in turn, must have an effect at some level upon the function of individual local churches and their memberships. Which is all to say — an ability to somehow recognise and release leadership at the city and national levels, to which we can all be aligned, is a necessary dynamic for our greater missional success.

While I am deliberately avoiding using too many illustrations from our own work, one of our current initiatives does illustrate this well. 'Hope Project Christmas' purposes to return Christ to Christmas in the public square. But how could that be achieved across our nation? A simple and empowering strategy

Local church and city efforts
can synch with concurrent
national media efforts and

is needed that respects the individuality of all congregations, yet that could bring a level of commonality capable of creating an impact upon public perception. The goal is, therefore, simply to return nativity scenes to Christmas in the public view. This is done with the awareness that nativity scenes are a platform for the nativity story. The goal is to give Christian believers, at every level of society, ways they can easily participate — while also functioning ‘independently’ if they want that. For example:

- Individuals can choose to only use Christmas cards that include nativity scenes
- Businesses can include ‘Hope Project Christmas’ branding on doors, posters, and billboards (which are all free to download).
- Local church and city efforts can likewise synch with shared branding while, over time, ideas for public engagement can become shared between cities.
- These many levels of function can sync with concurrent national media efforts and make the sound of one voice.

In short, this illustrates how effective innovation at a national level, in a context of the principles being discussed in this book, is a very real possibility! There are many applications. What is needed is a framework of thinking that can not only allow it — but esteem it!⁴⁹

THE POWER OF ENCOURAGEMENT

City by City is a strategic and unique ministry in our nation that has connected regularly with a dozen or more pastors’ groups over the previous 15 or more years. Its specific focus has been on encouraging the spirituality and prayer life of pastors together in their cities and towns. In our visiting of groups around the nation over the past 9 years, I have found the DNA of pastors’ groups and individuals whom *City by City* have connected with to be

⁴⁹ Functionally, I note that God’s people nationally will only have the capacity for a small few such united efforts at a time — which is where earlier questions and points on cultural change and the clear defining of national goals comes into play. These bring a framework for necessary prioritisation.

warmer and more positive toward the idea of united effort. In fact, they are often the encouragers and facilitators of it!

Over the previous dozen or more years New Zealand Christian Network has also engaged with a few dozen pastors' groups around the nation. They have worked to encourage unity, and to feed certain conversations and perspectives, with a view to encouraging and enabling a positive united influence in society. This has been a notable work, and yet again I have sensed that a level of commonality amongst pastors' groups connected to this in their awareness of some issues, and in their valuing of a united approach in some things, has resulted.

I would hope that our own efforts have had a similar encouraging effect — even though our work is more strategy and action-oriented, with that same view to enabling broader cultural engagement within our nation. Others in addition to the above occasionally work in a similar capacity where invited to visit with a group. In all cases, intentional encouragement from people who have a clear vision of what could be possible through these city leadership groups can make a difference!

IN SUMMARY

The primary purpose of all Christian groups is the mission Jesus gave us, and this includes city pastors' groups. While these groups have other purposes — as also do local churches and their small groups, this one thing remains the primary: God has given us a mission to fulfill on earth.

The fact that city pastors' groups share that same mission in no way devalues the importance of their fellowship and care for one another. This is no different to how the existence of this same mission in our local congregations and church small groups doesn't devalue the importance of care in those groupings either.

However, geographically identified pastors' groups are 'peculiar' groups because their membership is exclusively limited to those who lead local churches. Due to regular changes in pastors within communities, these

groups are often in a continual process of building relationships, coming to unity, and praying together. Upon this foundation, their missional work together in the community is discerned and undertaken. The turnover of pastors is, therefore, a great hindrance to the united missional function of the Church within a city. The value of long-serving pastors in a place, who sense a calling to be pastors to the city rather than only their local church, cannot be underestimated. A great deal more strategic thought regarding the sustainability of city-level mission is needed!

The scope of what these groups must achieve together does not have to be large. While God must be the one to lead the group (as discerned through prayer and conversation), the question for these groups is ‘what can we achieve together that we cannot achieve apart?’ This is the topic of the next chapter.

An added consideration for city pastors’ groups is their connection with national efforts that relate to public understanding of the gospel — with the option of voluntary accountability to those God might raise up to lead various things nationally. There are responsibilities and accountabilities here that are too-often overlooked. We pay a big price for this. We are understandably busy with local things. The question is what we serve. Is it one congregation, or the Church? It makes a difference! Discernment is needed.

The great news is, however, that we really do have the Holy Spirit! His presence is the one reason this vision can work, despite our many short-comings. This is no ‘tag-on’ in a chapter for me. I’m 25 years beyond my theological studies already, and have seen plenty. I do not trust people to bring about great outcomes for God’s Church — but I do trust God at work in and through people to achieve that. It is the Holy Spirit’s presence in us alone, tempering our pride, insecurity,

It is the Holy Spirit’s presence in us alone, tempering our pride, insecurity, independence and competitive natures, that can enable us to work together, beyond our own interests, to be the Church he prayed for us to be! What a great hope!

independence and competitive natures, that can enable us to work together, beyond our own interests, to be the Church he prayed for us to be! What a great hope!

Let's now consider the possible responsibilities of city pastors' groups.

CHAPTER TEN

Geographic Pastors’ Groups — the responsibilities

If asked what a Senior Pastors’ primary responsibilities were, most Christians could quickly conclude on a few core points like raising leaders, preaching the Word, caring for members, and so on. This is to say that, while there would be some variance, there are core things that could be predicted. *The point here is that the question is not unreasonable* — and in the exact same way, it is possible to deduce some of the core responsibilities of city and town pastors’ groups. The question is not unreasonable!

A CASE STUDY

I live in a city (Tauranga) where a group of pastors has been very-intentionally praying together for the city for a couple of decades, with fellowship to follow. Another gathering of pastors meets specifically for fellowship. Various pastors have come and gone from the groups (and the city) during that time. I'm a participant in the prayer group, and highly value it.

Through the efforts of a number of people in our city to be intentional in their city-level engagements, there is an encouraging range of things going on. Here is a current 'snapshot' of some things I'm aware of:

- A group called Te Kohinga has been effectively engaging with local Iwi, with a view to relationship, encouragement and support in things that matter to them. Some very real justice issues exist with regard to our history and the betrayal of Te Tiriti. There have been some wonderful outcomes. Recently, a long-standing historical grievance that stood between Iwi and the Church was publicly addressed, with an official apology from the Anglican Church of Aotearoa. The Te Kohinga network and their research were catalytic within this picture. One kaumatua summed up the historic wrong in a simple sentence: "Our pastor betrayed us." The honesty, humility and conduct of all Church leaders present was exemplary. It was a truly significant event because it has the power to mend the relationship between local Māori (some of whom are distinctly Christian) and the wider Church that they are spiritually a part of, but sometimes structurally disconnected from. Spiritually speaking, I believe this broke something also — because the Church was taking responsibility for one of its historic failings. I believe a more 'open heaven' over this region results!
- Concurrently, some Māori who attend local churches have been arranging their own hui, with an agenda that has included discussing and resolving some of their own personal and inter-tribal issues. As mentioned elsewhere, there is also a growing movement to see Christians attending the Waitangi Day Dawn Services as the single

united ‘bicultural’ effort in the year, to serve the work of the wider Church. I’d venture to say that a significant majority of the increasing attendance in recent years is due to church people who are attending — and this will be noticed.

- In the sphere of education, we’re blessed with the *Cool Bananas* ministry team — who lead in the Primary School area through taking *Bible in Schools* classes and assemblies regionally, and with excellence. Our city is also blessed with at least four Christian-based schools (Bethlehem College, Tauranga Adventist School, St Mary’s Catholic School and Aquinas College).
- At the High School level, things are more fluid — with different people encouraging Christian school groups in different seasons. However, there are seasons of excellent initiative. (The need for a way to bring about better long-term intentionality in youth outreach is one of the reasons the national Godtalk.nz initiative was established).
- In the Tertiary sector, we not only have a Christian Tertiary Institution (BTI), we also have someone pioneering TSCF work in our two local Polytechnics, and another has been pioneering Tertiary Chaplaincy in what are otherwise ‘unreached’ campuses.
- In terms of Biblical training, Tauranga is host to three YWAM bases, South Pacific Bible College, Pathways College, Faith Bible College and more. A number of churches have their own intern-based Bible college courses, through connection with the wider denominationally-based training options available to them.
- Others amongst the churches work on a relationship with the local Council, with various meetings and annual Mayoral Prayer Breakfasts resulting.
- There are also many truly amazing individual and united efforts that bring Christ into profile at times like Christmas and Easter — some of which will be mentioned in a list of *success stories* a bit later.

- In the business sector, there are connections with *Business Edge*, but also occasional seminars with Christian business people that others initiate. A number of prayer groups are established for business people — though there is space for this area of encouragement and engagement to be strengthened further.
- In terms of family ministries, local churches run a myriad of ministries within the community. In addition, *The Parenting Place* has recently moved to town, while the *Pregnancy Choice Centre* has been here for many years. Another person has been the key advocate for *Marriage Week* in our nation — giving profile to the importance of marriages while involved in marriage counselling. Were the combined efforts of all local churches to be assessed, community connections are considerably strong on some measures — while being weak on others. (A survey of community services in our city didn't even engage with most churches, one reason being the challenge of churches 'doing their own thing', in contrast to many secular agencies who were viewed as showing more willingness to collaborate.)
- In terms of the gospel going to all homes, the Hope Project gets Christian booklets (in addition to TV and web media) to all homes except those with 'no-circulars' stickers on their letterboxes. This is a big win as part of a bigger picture. Others have been working together to get these booklets to people at the doors of the 'no circulars' homes in the city — which represents 15% of the total nationally. By doing this in the two weeks prior to Easter, there has been a noticed higher receptivity by homes. As a result, Christ is therefore represented to nearly all homes at least once annually in the city!
- Notably, over 20 churches gather regularly for united prayer a few times per year in wonderful gatherings of 400 to 700 believers, with speakers from different spheres of society. These gatherings not only enable prayer and inter-church relationships, but they also inspire faith for new vision and initiative!

However, if a real epicentre for these various efforts were to be considered,

The simple revelation is this: It is through efforts of *people* that the missional initiatives within a city are spawned and encouraged!

I believe it fair to say that it would be this network of Church leaders who gather from a desire to pray for the city, while working with their friends (which includes church leaders well beyond those who attend the prayer gathering).

The simple revelation is this: It is through efforts of *people* that the missional initiatives within a city are spawned and encouraged! People are God's method. We must encourage, equip and release people!

A BROAD LEADERSHIP BASE

The involvement of church leaders who are not in the role of 'pastor' is of note here. However, all are clearly mature Church leaders, as evidenced through the things they initiate and lead. This ability to recognise leadership irrespective of the title, and to work together because of a common vision for the city, seems fruitful.

Everything becomes more blessed and favoured when there is unity and prayer, motivated by the purpose of mission.

A SPIRITUAL DYNAMIC

My own view is that the fruit we see above — as measured in action, comes about because of a spiritual dynamic that is at play through united prayer, and this deserves some articulation. I believe this gathering of 'praying pastors' has been a key dynamic in the building of an environment of blessing and favour for others in the city. As the network grows, the *water level* (favour) in the city rises. I believe this is happening currently. More things can 'float' as a result — which is to say, everything becomes more blessed and favoured when there is *unity and prayer, motivated by the purpose of mission*.

To reflect on the spiritual environment for a moment, I believe the recent reconciliation with local Māori through the above-mentioned Church

apology was spiritually significant. In terms of evidences of a general sense of favour in the city, for example, a Christian teacher in a decile one school is working to see bicycles restored, so children can be taught to ride bikes, amongst a few *visions* he has to show love to the school's community. A Scouts leader initiates a first Christian Scouts Club in our nation — based upon the Christian foundations of the movement. Children in the *Keas*, *Cubs* and *Scouts* age groups begin to hear Christian messages and values as a part of their outdoor and life-skills training, and a prototype for church-based Scouts clubs is established, which others could follow. A pastor in Greerton feels convicted by God to propose a name-change for the suburb back to its original (Māori) name because the land was taken unjustly and renamed without consultation. People readily sign because there is trust and understanding between churches. Local Iwi are surprised by the initiative because never- before has a Caucasian spear-headed an effort like this on their behalf, and the key person is also a woman. In addition, a number of the above bullet-point initiatives in the city are also new in just the past five years.

As another example, where nearly all of a 'batch' of 5 church plants attempted in the city 20 years ago fell over — as confirmed by longer serving pastors like Mike Cullen, Andrew Warren and David Dishroon, every one of 8 church plants attempted in the city 5 years ago are now thriving. While population increase is a part of that, I believe it is also true that the *water level* has risen a little. There is more favour for all God-motivated innovations to succeed. This is what united prayer and fellowship — with a vision for mission in the city, can be used by God to achieve.

Yet, what is happening has not come about by mistake, and is still viewed as deficient in the eyes of all involved because so much more is needed — which is why there is prayer!

The question is how we move on beyond these 'early stages of development' that many would consider their city pastors' groups to still be 'stuck' in, to become more functional in our engagement in the spheres of influence in the city.

City pastors' groups can have a powerful effect upon the city. *The question is how we move on beyond these 'early stages of development' that many would consider their city pastors' groups to still be 'stuck' in, to become more functional in our engagement in the spheres of influence in the city.*

So with the previous points on the importance of relationship, unity and prayer noted, let's now consider some of the logical responsibilities of city and town pastors' groups, just as we might assess the logical 'core business' of a senior pastor or denominational leader.

1. STEWARDING KEY COMMUNITY OPPORTUNITIES FOR UNITED REPRESENTATION OR ENGAGEMENT

There are key seasonal opportunities within our nation's cities and towns that provide opportunities which naturally belong to all of the churches in that place. Consider:

- Christmas
- Easter
- Waitangi
- ANZAC

Other possibilities could include Matariki (Māori New Year), or other local events — like we have a large annual Jazz Festival every Easter here in Tauranga.

As mentioned a couple of chapters ago, *profile activism* — that brings perspective to people through activities at the city and national levels, is now more important than in decades past. To illustrate with Christmas again:

- There are towns and cities where the participation of local churches is not welcome in the Christmas parade.
- Churches are losing the opportunity to run community Christmas celebrations and *carol services* in partnership with Councils.

- Christmas Carols with Christian lyrics are being removed from Carol celebrations also (while they already are removed from most shops and shopping centres).

All of these are national trends. Due to this, what the churches do or do not do in one place does affect the others, because it affects the momentum of the wider trend. The Mayors and Councillors of our cities have annual conferences. The roles they do or do not invite churches to be involved within their communities are surely discussed at times. These trends within our nation will not be without cause. Our churches need to work 'as one' (Philippians 1:27) across the nation if we are to engage with 'conversations' like this, which are expressing themselves at the national level! We need to become *a strategically activated minority!*

What the churches do
or do not do in one
place does affect the
others, because it
affects the momentum
of the wider trend.

As an example of what the public profile efforts at Christmas might look like, here in Tauranga currently...

Bethlehem Baptist run an amazing large Christmas event called *The Night Before Christmas*, with thousands in attendance.

I'm aware that another of our larger local churches (Curate) has also run a larger scale programme in a park — though I don't know the details of this. Both of these are large churches. They bless our city in this way.

A combined church effort runs a programme called *The Road to Bethlehem* — which has many thousands go through it each year, and which I'll give a summary of soon.

Some churches in the central city area do a walk around central city churches, and then host a publicised event called *Carols by the Waterfront*. If we each imagine ourselves to be Church leaders taking a strategic view of our city, most bases are already covered!

However, there was no noticeable float in the Christmas parade last year with a distinctly Christian theme in it. The many spectators were never

reminded that Christ is the reason for this season within our culture. An apostolic-natured, city-loving team could, therefore, consider how to resolve this oversight. At a practical level, what is needed is a truck and just one creative person who'd love to create a visual spectacle upon it, with a team of their choosing. Amongst our many churches, if there were the desire to see this happen, we could certainly achieve it. Then — afterwards, we could heap praise upon that person so they feel appreciated for their effort, with the hope that they might be encouraged to do it again the following year also. Additionally, someone might note that there were some ethnic entries in the parade and that these were actually Christian in nature. The problem is that the songs they sang in their native languages were not understood, and the imagery they carried didn't tell the public they were singing praises to Jesus. A quiet conversation could yield results. (Nativity scene imagery could be incorporated.)

The point here is that taking leadership with a view to the city does not mean a person or group has to do everything. It is about facilitation of the body of Christ in a common direction. It is also highly fruitful too, for it represents many of the larger opportunities we will ever have!

Neglect cannot remain an option! There are national trends in which Christian involvement in key seasons and community occasions is being side-lined and removed. If we do not use the freedoms and opportunities we have, we will lose them. There is something valuable to steward here.

2. PARTNERSHIP WITH RELEVANT NATIONAL INITIATIVES

As mentioned in the previous chapter, a city pastors' group is a subset of the Church in the nation. One question for a local church and pastors' group is, what might God be initiating in the nation? Put differently, what things could we achieve

An important question for local pastors' groups is, what things could we achieve together nationally as a 'collective of city pastors' groups', that we cannot achieve apart?

together nationally as a 'collective of city pastors' groups, that we cannot achieve apart?

When asked in private conversation how much Parliament considers the voice of the Church recently, a noted and sympathetic politically-connected person replied sincerely, 'What voice?' As God's people in this nation, we are failing to sustain a viable voice at the city and national levels.

God raises up different people for different things at different times. The Holy Spirit can give us eyes to see this. Through a choice to support various people, or support their initiatives, we enable their efforts to exist and have an influence upon our nation. We all have a part to play in this.

3. ENGAGEMENT WITH THE SPHERES OF INFLUENCE

A single local church rarely has the resources — and certainly not the mandate, to bring city-level leadership alone. This is correctly the function of the churches together in a city or town. As a solution, pastors' groups could enable spiritual influence to be released in various areas of their city, through seeking and empowering people who are capable of taking on representative roles.

The spheres of influence are commonly listed as:

- Arts and entertainment
- Business
- Education
- Family
- Government
- Media
- Religion

Some add an eighth: Sports.

I'll outline here some principles and processes by which this empowering of leaders could become functional and more realistically achievable.

To state a key point, a city pastors' group's role isn't to bring leadership to all of these areas themselves. Instead, as *spiritual overseers* or encouragers in a city or town, *it is their role to ensure that someone does*. This is, therefore, in part, an 'administrative', facilitatory or team-building role, coming from an apostolic leadership heart. The motive is that of an encourager. I believe this fits with the Biblical model of leadership.

The *Priesthood of all believers* is a key New Testament principle. The 'clergy' are not separate to (or above) the 'laity.' Instead, together we are all servants of God, and ministers of the gospel in our areas of influence. Jesus' model of leadership is of the *servant leader*. All believers will eventually be called to account for what they did with what they were given, and duly rewarded ('to whom much is given...' — Luke 12:48).

It is the local church pastors' job to empower the members to do the work of the ministry.

It is the city pastors' group's job to ensure that *someone* is empowered and supported to fulfil certain functions in key areas of city life.

A city pastors' group's role isn't to bring leadership to all of these areas themselves. Instead, it is to ensure that someone does.

Pastors' groups can be active in recognising the calling that might exist upon some lay people to be Church leaders in city roles.

If someone doesn't stop to consider what those areas might be, no one might be empowered and vital roles will be neglected. The cost of negligence to leadership at a city level can be of far greater than the same at a local church level! Clear thinking is needed.

ASSESSING THE DIFFERING LEVELS OF SUPPORT THAT DIFFERENT LEADERS NEED

Having considered who could lead in each area, the next question relates to the level of empowering or affirmation the 'leader' in each area might need

so as to function well in their roles. At what times in the year might they need support? Might some benefit from having the attendance of a few pastors at an event to evidence that they really are empowered as representatives of the wider body of Christ locally? Consideration of these small details can yield greater longevity and impact.

For example, imagine if the key people bringing a voice to each level of education in a city were to be invited onto the stage at a combined Church prayer meeting at the start of each year. A pastor affirms their leadership, everyone applauds, and they are prayed for. This would not only encourage them. They would probably become even more diligent in their roles as a result. They would also be more widely recognised by others for what they do, which might help them find volunteers they need too.

Imagine a school questions the presence of *Bible in Schools*. Instead of the teacher engaging with this alone, if those ministering there are connected to a servant-hearted city 'oversight' group, they might ask this group for help and prayer. The resulting effort might yield improved results.

As another example, imagine that those engaging with Iwi (as representatives of the local churches) are doing fine in their role without much support. However, it would be monumental if 500 local Christians would start attending the dawn Waitangi service they participate in facilitating each year. That kind of support from churches might serve to shift negative perspectives of 'the Church' held by some — including not only Māori but also civil servants working in the local Council or social service sector. 'Mere attendance' could be highly strategic!

Consider what follows. Public perspective begins to recognise the Church as being present and relevant within the every-day functioning of the community. Church representatives are therefore invited to participate in community 'round table' discussions on key community issues — where they previously were not. What follows? Someone thinks to have a coffee with a particular business person whom they now know — and a new door opens up. Someone thinks to ask a question of a local Councillor whom they now know — and certain resources become available. Awareness begins to exist

I am convinced that one of the devil's strategies must be to keep us from any revelation of what might become possible through our functional unity!

regarding various social needs in a given location — and connections are made to churches in that suburb, who walk into amazing opportunities as a result. Funding from social agencies follows.

I am thoroughly convinced of the Kingdom-potential sitting within this kind of thinking. In fact, I am convinced that one of the devil's strategies must be to

keep us from any revelation of what might become possible through our functional unity! Scepticism of this possibility is one of his strategies. Confusion regarding the structure of the Church and the role and place of denominations as compared to geographic unity is another. As a result, many accept the status quo without a question.

Question the status quo!
We have the Holy Spirit!
More is possible!

Question the status quo! We have the Holy Spirit! More is possible!

Some people are natural entrepreneurs, networkers and innovators. While they can run churches well, they suffer significant frustration when doing so because it's not what God has 'shaped' them for. As a result, they may end up in various denominational leadership roles when they might be better deployed in service to a city! (So it's noted, some are also very well deployed in denominational leadership roles. The absence of options for doing a similar kind of work but with a geographic base is the point I'm making.) What would happen if we could create geographic contexts within which these kinds of leaders could be released?

I believe such leaders are among us, and we need them!

Our points regarding the possible scope of responsibility for city/town pastors' groups thus far are:

1. Stewarding key community opportunities for united representation or engagement

2. Partnership with relevant national initiatives
3. Engagement with the spheres of influence

4. ONE-OFF UNITED EFFORTS — AS GOD LEADS

We are the people of the Spirit. God can do more in just one minute than any of us in a lifetime, if he chooses. God can reveal divine keys to us that can unlock doors. This can result in increased opportunity, influence and favour. All this is to say — we must never underestimate the importance of seeking God's leading in all we do!

However, there is an uncomfortable challenge in this, because we must concurrently never underestimate the essentiality of working with all our strength, mind, strategy, skill, planning and effort. Prayer and effort go together. It is 100% of both!

The strategy that I have concluded upon, and which I have taught to teenagers for their Christian school groups, and also to adults for their workplaces and communities, is as follows:

P — PARTNER

Partner with other Christians where you are, irrespective of the churches you come from.

P — PRAY

While you might meet for breakfast or lunch, be deliberate in praying for your workplace/school, colleagues/students, and for ideas as to how you could bless them.

A — ACTION

Do what you feel God leads you to do. As a general principle, I've heard it is suggested in our culture that 90% of these efforts in a workplace or school be focused on good works that encourage and

bless people, with only 5% to 10% more directly gospel-related things. The idea here is that, reputation brings credibility. As a tip, planning can be done with natural seasons and opportunities in mind, like Christmas and Easter.

P — PERSEVERANCE

Having done the above, start the process all over again by reaffirming your unity and its purpose.

I believe the above summarises Christian missional strategy — whether local or overseas.

The churches of
our cities and towns
are winning many
battles, but still
losing the war!

THE BATTLE VS THE WAR

Before moving to some strategic considerations in our final few chapters, let's hear a few stories. These demonstrate what pastors' groups are already achieving. However, I would like to give you a perspective to hold in the balance as you read.

When I reached home recently, after travelling the entire nation over a four-month period, I remember feeling burdened by what I had seen.

We love to tell positive stories
— but there is a danger
that they become used as
justifications for our continued
lack of engagement with some
important conversations about
some very real issues, and
their necessary solutions.

Because I'm instinctively positive, I knew I'd soon forget the perspective I had clarity on at that point in time, so I made a conscious choice to remember it. It was this: *The churches of our cities and towns are winning many battles, but still losing the war!*

While this sounds glum, it is an important perspective for us to remember well. We love to tell positive stories — but there is a danger that they become used as justifications for our continued lack of

engagement with some important conversations about some very real issues, and their necessary solutions.

Imagine a city or town with a positive story of public representation that we all feel delighted to hear. Yet, this one story was preceded by 5 or 10 years with no comparative positive story. During that time, they also lost *Bible in Schools* in maybe two more schools, the rights to lead the Community Christmas Carol gathering, and more. Do you think our jubilation is valid — or might we be in danger of making it a 'smoke screen', keeping us from this more sobering yet important conversation, which this book represents?

While the stories I've shared from the current city I live in are positive — it remains that our nation's city pastors' groups are, on average, on a consistent journey towards less, not more. Doors are closing, and are rarely opening again (though there are occasional exceptions). I know of numerous positive stories — however, from all that I knew when finishing the above-mentioned travel, a loss of opportunities remains the distinct trend!

Might the time for a more serious 're-think' on how we function as God's Church in our cities and nation have come?

With these things noted, let's hear some positive recent stories.

SOME STORIES FROM PASTORS' GROUPS

In **Tauranga**, God led Stephen from Australia to Tauranga. In seeking God, he felt led to start some united city prayer gatherings, now called 'One Voice.' He joined a group of praying pastors, with an attitude of humility. As he felt God's leading, he shared the vision, and those pastors endorsed and supported him. The first few gatherings saw people from 22 churches involved, with about 500 attending each time. This year, these prayer gatherings are continuing every quarter — with worship, prayer, and a couple of short messages each time. The speakers are people whom God is using to bring leadership within different areas of society. The city has had 10 of these meetings at this time. It's a catalytic initiative and is bringing churches together.

In **Auckland**, a group of pastors got a vision to see church leaders in the city gathering for a prayer breakfast. About 500 came together as a result. The pastors of some larger local churches then became involved also — and it has grown further. Another layer of networking has then been attempted in the four key divisions of the city — North, South, East and West, encouraging pastors to buy into a vision of increased unity between churches in each area. In a big city, united gatherings are difficult. It's an amazing current effort.

However, to humble us all, in **Gore**, the pastors meet monthly with the Mayor for prayer together and then breakfast. This tradition is in its 14th year. Prayers and petitions are made for the Mayor and his commitments, the Gore District Council, major community needs, and the cause of Christ's Kingdom in the area.

The Gore Ministers' Association also has a united prayer week at Pentecost, with five prayer gatherings in a row hosted in five different churches. They have been doing this for the past five years. Additionally, two years ago, they started a monthly prayer bulletin that is emailed to various people from the churches who wish to receive it.

However, God doesn't stick to one formula. **Te Awamutu** and Districts pastors established a community *Day of Blessing* seven years ago, initiated by Rev Diane Yule from St Andrews Presbyterian. It involves community leaders, Iwi, local government, volunteer groups, Fire brigade, St Johns Ambulance, Police, Business owners, School groups and Principals and family groups. Up to 150 people gather for a complimentary lunch. Each group is recognised and encouraged for what they do. Then, seven or eight local church pastors pray a simple prayer of blessing for each sector of the community represented. The event has become cherished by the community.

In recent years, the *Day of Blessing* has started with a prayer at the local Fonterra dairy factory. A small team prays a blessing for the tankers and drivers for safe travels. Interestingly, after this was done the first time, the factory went on to have the first year in a while in which they had no trucks crash. Enthusiasm for this prayer visit increased as a result.

In **Hawera**, Pastor John was led to engage with the wider community in a different way. During a drought, someone in their church (Hawera Presbyterian) had the idea of gifting food parcels to a dozen farmers to encourage them. Pastor John and his wife drove to give the food parcels, and the visit and gift were so appreciated that they thought, 'Why not do this for all farmers within 10km of town?' So, their church did! They then hosted a free dinner for all these farmers. It was attended by 50 farmers, plus other invited

guests including the Mayor and local MP Chester Burrows. A local Christian farmer also shared a short message of hope as a part of the evening.

In the same vein, they have run appreciation meals for the St Johns Ambulance volunteers and the Fire Brigade. In every case, this encourages the community while building valuable relational connections.

In **Gisborne**, the local Equippers Church has been running an annual Easter-Egg Hunt in the Botanic Garden. I'm told that many from the community have been involved, bringing a positive profile to the Church within the city, and a valuable connection point for Christian love and faith.

In **Tauranga**, an individual church (Bethlehem Baptist) is big enough to run some large-scale events by itself — for the benefit of the city. This is a fantastic scenario! One of their efforts for a few years was a series of very creative Easter displays, laid out throughout their building. A path led from room to room, and I can speak from experience in saying that the creativity in each display made the experience truly impacting! Some displays were static while others involved actors — or real people as 'props' within a visual display. At the conclusion, a simple connection point to the Christian faith was offered, along with something for children to take about Easter. It's another example of how the economies of scale involved in bigger churches can enable things that can bless a city or the nation.

To highlight an opportunity that could be duplicated in places that have a higher Māori population, the House of Breakthrough church in **Gisborne** celebrated Matariki (Māori New Year) with a special church event for the first time recently. They ran a bicultural celebrative service, with a message of hope for the New Year. It was well attended and appreciated by Māori in their congregation and community.

While I did mention Light Parties as an illustration earlier in the book, with the sizable efforts in **Alexandra** and **Whakatane** as examples, I note that these are now run in many places around our nation as a positive alternative to Halloween.

Regarding Christmas, I was impressed by a story from the **Dannevirke** churches, who have had superbly creative annual floats in the Christmas parade for a number of years. I've been told their floats are put together by someone with a creative bent who loves the opportunity, and who therefore delivers with excellence. Surely, God has given people different passions and abilities for a reason. What a blessing when the right person is found for the right task!

In **New Plymouth**, for about 20 years in a row now, a bi-annual Christmas Theatrical Production for children has been put on. Schools from throughout the region bus their children to the performance venue to see the production, which tells of the birth and life of Jesus. Theatrical creativity, combined with a united approach, has enabled an excellent and ongoing regional opportunity!

Some of the larger community Christmas gatherings really are noteworthy. For example:

- **Ashburton's** churches run 'Mitre 10 Christmas Carols in the Park', with a carnival atmosphere.
- In **Cambridge**, 'Christmas in the Park' is run primarily by one local church, but on behalf of and with participation from all. It attracts crowds numbered in the thousands and enables Christ to be seen in Christmas.
- Likewise in **Tauranga**, Bethlehem Baptist — in addition to the Easter event mentioned above, run a large-scale programme called 'A Night Before Christmas,' with many thousands in attendance.
- **Napier** has also had similar programmes, with attendees counted in the thousands.
- In **Balclutha**, the churches have, for a number of years, run a Christmas Tree Decorating competition. About a third of their community participates in the carnival-like atmosphere that is created around this, with the competition's prize-giving as one focal point.
- In **Kaikohe**, the Celebration Centre (a church) had the idea of running a Christmas street party. They arranged for a part of the central street to be blocked off, provided free sausages and various activities. The event was given the theme, 'Even Superheroes Need Jesus'. People were encouraged to come along dressed as their favourite superhero. The community has loved it!

These are praiseworthy efforts, and also important contributions to the public conversation regarding the relevance and continuing place of Christianity in the public square!

At Easter, every two years in **Tauranga**, a programme called 'The Road to Bethlehem' is run by local churches. It is a walk-through nativity drama, and this tradition — hosted at the local Seventh Day Adventist School. So many people want to go through it that they have had to create an online booking system. Each group is taken through a 'theatrical tour' in which different scenes of the story are acted out in different places — with new groups

starting the tour about every 10 minutes. The nativity story is clear within the drama, and clear-thinking Christian literature (and also real humans for conversation) are available at the conclusion of it.

Taupo has, however, attempted something on a different scale. EasterFest is a multi-faceted community-engaging project, run by the combined churches in Taupo since its inception in 2015. The weekend includes games programmes for children, topical 'apologetics' afternoons with speakers and discussion, combined church community Easter celebrations, concerts with well-known Kiwi artists, and more. With support from Rhema Media and others, it has gained wide recognition and has become a place of 'pilgrimage' for some. The local council has recognised and supported the effort also, with as many as 8000 extra people believed to have been in Taupo in 2017 as a result, as one example. Christ's name is being heard, and some wider public TV news broadcasts have spread this positive influence wider still, while relationships of favour and trust throughout the community are strengthened.

In **Gore** last year, the churches decided to attempt an idea our team had suggested to pastors' groups around the country as an illustration of a different type of 'profile' engagement. They went to *personally* visit every home in town with a flyer that promoted things that were happening in the community at Christmas, thus inviting community participation. (Such a list could include both church and non-church things and could be in partnership with the local council, giving it an even broader reputation than that of the local churches.) No one is threatened by someone encouraging community participation at Christmas — and especially if they turn to walk away after giving the flyer over, as it proves they have no other agenda. Conversations are, therefore, often initiated by the householders! There are a few people in each church who could enjoy this kind of opportunity. The Gore churches rallied a team — and found and released these people. Householders appreciated it!

Of note, the 'win' from this effort is different from that caused by a large event or media effort. Remember non-church attending Jim and Joanne from our earlier illustration? Within an average year, they have no connection at all with a local church or any believing Christian — except through innovation happening at a city or national level. What this 'visitation' effort achieves in an entirely unique way (as distinct from all other larger programme ideas mentioned in this book) is a *personal human interaction*. Even if that interaction is only 15 seconds long, the Church is perceived as present, involved and relevant, because it has a human face. From a 'marketing' point

of view — as long as the manner of approach is gentle and respectful, you can't put a dollar value on this!

City West Church in **New Plymouth** has similarly visited homes in their part of the city a number of times, as have others. The **Hope Project booklets** have also been personally delivered to tens of thousands of homes each time the Easter media effort has taken place. Letter boxes with 'no circulars' signs on them do not get the booklets — yet represent 15% of all letterboxes. To 'plug' this gap, for the statistics, 67% of partnering churches had members who took booklets to people at the doors of these homes during our first three Hope Project efforts. One story that came back to us following a more recent Hope Project effort was of a rural person who had personally taken booklets to homes a few years in a row. They were now finding householders to be delighted by their annual visit saying, *"Great, you're on the job again!"* These levels of involvement are a positive reflection on the true heart of God's people across our nation.

Much is possible. More is needed.

THE NEED FOR NEW ARTICULATION

In summary of this chapter, one of the challenges we face is that very few are able to articulate the vision of the Church (capital C) in their cities, or for our nation. Much time and focus go into the leadership of individual churches or denominations. City and national leadership are, by comparison, grossly neglected.

The problem that follows is that, if we cannot articulate a vision clearly, we'll be limited in our ability to find and deploy needed resources to it. Our struggles to articulate things in this area are reflective of the challenge that is before us. We cannot serve the city if we cannot really 'see' the city!

There are amazing opportunities in front of us, but we may need to think differently before we will see many of them.

If we cannot articulate a vision clearly, we'll be limited in our ability to find and deploy needed resources to it. We cannot serve the city if we cannot really 'see' the city!

WHO DOES ALL THE WORK?

The 80/20 principle is well known — 20% of the people will do 80% of the work. This seems to be as true of combined Church efforts as it is of any effort within a local church.

It is usually only through the servant-hearted efforts of a few that local churches function. It is likewise usually only through servant-hearted efforts of a few that the various united functions of the Church at a city level happen.

It is not easy for the pastor of a local church to also bring clear-thinking leadership to the wider functions of the Church in their city. The theory of all this is easier than the application. It is a question of personal capacity. Yet, great things remain possible for those with the faith and tenacity to try!

“Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.”

— William Carey (1761–1834)

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Geographic Pastors’ Groups — unique leadership dynamics

In this chapter I’d like to continue the reflections of the previous ones, albeit taking into consideration some unique leadership dynamics of geographic pastors’ groups.

This chapter will also dig into some of the character challenges that sit within this picture, because they are real. Prepare to be challenged.

As a proviso, I note that I'm not making any judgements of others here. Comments regarding possible character issues that hinder unity have all been made by pastors within conversations we've had with these groups. I mention this only in case any readers misinterpret anything written here as 'attacking language' or accusatory.

“DON'T BRING YOUR AGENDA HERE!”

The matter of agendas is sometimes a touchy one in some city pastors' groups. Here are a few contributions I'd like to bring to this conversation.

1. JESUS HAS ALREADY GIVEN THE CHURCH IN EACH PLACE AN AGENDA

While 'care' might be the natural starting agenda for a city/town pastors' group (as in chapter 9), the mission of the Church remains their necessary mission.

If a city pastors' group wants no agenda other than their mutual care — and there is no other group taking responsibility for that necessary 'city' mandate, I'm not convinced that local pastors have enough authority to make that decision. I believe Jesus has already decided on this matter for us.

The closest thing we have to a leadership group for the Church in each city is the city pastors' group. In this sense, I believe it is fair to suggest that these groups already have a clear starting mandate and agenda.

Of course, if a group wants to avoid this agenda it could arrange for two distinct church leaders' gatherings in their city — one to consider their shared responsibilities, while the other would be for relationships only. This is done in some places.

However, if a city pastors' group wants no agenda other than their mutual care — and there is no other group taking responsibility for that necessary 'city' mandate, I'm not convinced that local pastors have enough

authority to make that decision. I believe Jesus has already decided on this matter for us.

2. PERSONAL AGENDAS DO NEED LEAVING AT THE DOOR

However, when we come to the application of the above, it's not always so simple. When Christian leaders from churches and various other spheres come together, there are many possible agendas in the room. Everyone has something they could potentially say or promote. A few might have something they'd hope the whole group would support too.

The more specific agenda-finding process begins by having everyone leave their agendas at the door.

For this reason, it is generally suggested that the more specific agenda-finding process begins by having everyone leave their agendas at the door. This is because establishing an environment of relationship and trust is foundational. Then, through prayer and conversation, a group seeks to discern God's leading — because there will be no end to the 'good ideas' that a city pastors' group could consider. To articulate that differently, without any initial agenda other than to seek God for the agenda, the agenda becomes clear.

To consider a human dynamic involved here, it's important that concluding group agendas really are whole group agendas — not those of only a portion of those involved in a city pastors' group. If that error is made, and discussing those agendas dominates future meetings, attendance in the group will decline or the group could become divided. The things being pursued by a few together might better be discussed after the meeting by those involved over a second coffee.

Maintaining good attendance at united pastors' groups is not easy — and especially as the group becomes active in its mission. This is the challenge outlined earlier when discussing the lifecycle of the pastors' group. The 'community' (care) and 'action' stages of the group are a balancing act, just as in any church small group.

Where half or more of the group time might be given to ‘care,’ the remainder needs constraining to the things that can only be done or enabled together as churches (that cannot be achieved apart) — so the agenda isn’t too full. Secondly, even-handedness is needed when advocating for the various things that do fit that criteria, because otherwise people will feel unappreciated. This will especially be a challenge for someone leading a group who is a visionary themselves, as they could easily give their own city effort a greater emphasis than others. As a servant leader, the challenge is to serve the city, which entails truly esteeming all the various efforts involved!

Generosity in public advocacy for various city initiatives is also important. It can keep a thing alive in the minds and hearts of many — and deliver remarkable results.

Generosity in public advocacy for various city initiatives is also important. It can keep a thing alive in the minds and hearts of many — and deliver remarkable results. This will sometimes require a leader to put their own agenda aside entirely so they can generously promote someone else’s area of work. This requires a servant-heart, but it is also a key to building trust! In addition, a person promoting someone else’s work will always have more credibility to an audience that a person will who is promoting their own!

3. WHEN YOUR PERSONAL AGENDA IS REJECTED

Because some people’s agendas will be overlooked, we need to become experts in managing this potential disappointment. For example, imagine a city pastors’ group engages with the education sector — but has no concern for engagement with Iwi, leaving one person or pastor feeling their area of focus has been overlooked. Point two (above) is obviously written to try to avoid this situation — but it is still going to happen.

Authority does not actually come from the city pastors’ group. It comes from God. The pastors’ group is merely a servant body, not a control body.

Irrespective of whether or not the group is wrong it needs noting that ‘God plus one is the majority’. Authority does not actually come from the city pastors’ group. It comes from God. The pastors’ group is merely a servant body, not a control body.

If a pastor or key Church leader feels called by God to serve in an area, they should do that! If there is a lack of support for their idea from the city pastors’ group(s), they have to accept that this is beyond their right and ability to control. None of us have any right to tell a group what to do. Nor do we have a right to be offended. Also, even if this group has rejected your idea, that doesn’t necessarily excuse you from needing to continue as a supportive member of that group and the things it has chosen to support together!

Consider Elijah on Mount Carmel, we are told there were 7000 in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal, but where were they on that day?

Consider Elijah on Mount Carmel, facing off with King Ahab, 400 prophets of Baal, 450 prophets of Ashtoreth, and a crowd of onlookers. We are told there were 7000 in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal, but where were they on that day? You do not need the endorsement of others to achieve what God has called on you to do. So why feel disgruntled when others don’t support your thing or idea? Might that instead be personal insecurity coming through, or a misplaced dependency?

This certainly isn’t to justify a neglect of mission by city pastors’ groups. However, it is to define clear emotional boundaries, because without them we will lose sleep, which isn’t Jesus’ way (Matthew 6:25-34; 11:28-30)!

I think I have authority to make the above statements. The Hope Project has been one of the widest reaching gospel efforts in each community throughout our nation each time it has happened, and yet has had less support and participation from churches than most would think.

But we don't feel neglected. Why?⁵⁰ While I would love it if these efforts could have wider local support, it remains that it is God who provides — not churches or people. People are merely the vehicle God might use — while he could equally use a fish (Matthew 17:27). Any frustration that any of our team might feel regarding the above is therefore actually their own problem — because it is a misplaced dependency. With such thinking, we can all sleep well — even when in the midst of what might seem to be a 'terrifying storm' (Matthew 8:23-27).

So it is noted, many who advocate for things among churches will share these same challenges and temptations.

Only through the surrender of personal agendas can a group come to the kind of functional unity needed for shared agendas in service to the city to be discerned, committed to and led.

With the right boundaries in our thinking we are freed to support other people's initiatives, even where our own are not supported! These kinds of character qualities are a foundation for united effort and function.

To summarise: Only through the surrender of personal agendas can a group come to the kind of functional unity needed for shared agendas in service to the city to be discerned, committed to and led.

HOW TO IDENTIFY LEADERS

Various Biblical qualifications for Church leadership are found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

However, I think there are some leadership dynamics that are unique to city/town pastors' groups. In reflection on this I think of characteristics like the following:

1. Someone who can see the city
2. A proven encourager and relational networker

⁵⁰ ...Sometimes we are all tempted to think this way — but when this arises in our team we very-intentionally discuss the heart issue, and reiterate our values, as are mentioned next in the main body of text.

3. Someone carrying the respect of many
4. Someone secure enough to consistently facilitate and empower the leadership and involvement of others
5. Someone with enough managerial ability to facilitate a direction that releases many, and that can sustain the profile and support of shared initiatives once they are chosen.

To put this last point differently, these groups need someone in them who has an ability to hold the group to the agendas it agrees upon. They need to be able to keep everyone on point and on task. If this isn't the case, the group might struggle to move past the caring, unity and prayer stages of development, or alternatively might have a completely new vision every 2 years. Leadership needs to discern what is important, commit to it, and then follow it through.

HOW NOT TO IDENTIFY LEADERS

Leadership is ideally not given on the basis of seniority, taking turns, or by simply empowering whoever is willing because no one wants the role. This has historically been the process by which a good number of pastors' groups conveners have ended up in the role.

A GREAT NEED FOR EMPOWERED CHURCH LEADERSHIP

As mentioned elsewhere, across our nation I can only think of one part-time paid position connected with the function of a city pastors group, and that is an administrative role. In addition it needs noting that there are a number of combined-church initiatives in particular spheres of work, like Te Haha in Gisborne, or 'Empowerment NZ' in Te Puke. However, the total number of people or hours that are released to focus on 'city' needs remains few, and the idea of it rare. To me the pattern reflects that together we still have a reasonably limited view of the potential that exists in united Church leadership at the city level — let alone the more difficult matter of the national level. A contrast with the various paid positions in the leadership of our

various denominational structures does exist. This is again no critique of the importance of those roles, because they bring valuable training, accountability and support to their pastors. (City leadership is made comparatively easy because denominations do exist!) However, leadership roles for city and national-level mission work are also very-much needed.

The challenge in writing the concluding parts of the book has been that I feel that a certain level of rationality has left the room. We are so 'involved' in the way we see things that we struggle to see what we don't see.

The availability of salaries isn't the issue or solution either. They are nothing other than one possible measure by which we can assess what we, as Christian believers and leaders in this nation, currently see and value.

A CONFESSION

At this point of writing this book I have found myself continually stuck for words. I've even written an entire extra chapter that I then deleted. The challenge has been that I feel that a certain level of rationality has left

the room. We are so 'involved' in the way we see things that we struggle to see what we don't see.

I believe there are significant opportunities in front of us if we can change the way we think a little, and engage more strategically within the public square of our nation. But a change in thinking will precede a change in behaviour.

Imagine again the illustration found in the introduction of this book regarding the person who purchased all the motor vehicle companies or franchises in a nation. I noted the gross inefficiencies they would immediately be responsible for, including the duplication and competition of company head offices, distribution networks, local car yards and marketing budgets. This is illustrative of our various denominations, yet owned by our one God. I suggested that the variety of cars that are enabled might justify the inefficiencies. I then shifted to explain an imagined demise of the motor-vehicle industry — illustrative of the same significant decline in attendance

our churches have and still are experiencing nationally. In view of this, I suggested that the first change would be to combine the marketing budgets. The logic was that, allowing car companies owned by one person to compete when they were all losing money made no sense. They needed to promote a unified message: “Motor vehicles are awesome, and you need one!” My point was that a change in thinking is needed if we are to thrive in this changing environment.

Was my assessment honest? Was not my application actually a huge understatement, and therefore a dishonesty. Can you imagine any business advisor ever allowing that business owner to stop the conversation there?

Was my assessment honest? Was not my application actually a huge understatement, and therefore a dishonesty when contrasted with the scale and nature of the problem identified? Can you imagine any business advisor ever allowing that business owner to stop the conversation there?⁵¹

Every now and again I end up talking with someone who really can’t understand what pastors do with their time. I mean, we pay them all this money, and they only work 4 hours on a Sunday morning. What do they do the rest of the week? I suggest this is how it is with Church leadership at the city and national levels.

I believe our neglect in the release of Church leaders within cities is a gross neglect. It is nothing small! The ‘opportunities’ and ‘threats’ that exist to our hopes as Christian believers, which are playing out all around us, are significant in scale and effect! This needs greater priority.

Every now and again I end up talking with someone who really can’t understand what pastors do with their time. I mean, we pay them all this money, and they only work 4 hours on a Sunday morning. What do they do

⁵¹ Of course, the illustration falls down there too — because my application isn’t that we need to change anything in denominations, but instead that we need to more highly value our unity within cities and towns.

the rest of the week? Yet — having been a pastor, I know well what I was doing. My week was full, and then some! Sometimes we don't appreciate the opportunities that exist, or the fruit that can come from those opportunities, until we engage in the role. I suggest this is how it is with Church leadership at the city and national levels. Until we step out to try a few new things here, we may not see the scope of what could be possible.

For example, if we consider the national picture for a moment, regular church attenders represent 16% of our population. This is no small number when the tipping point for ideas within a culture is 10%. How could we connect with this broad group to bring a united focus in a few small yet strategic things? It could be possible. However, a change in thinking regarding the priority of our united identity and function would precede that possibility!

So, what could motivate a willingness to consider that change?

Can we see the harvest fields? Can we see the myriads who are unreached by our existing local church efforts and members? Can we see not only the potential of our united efforts — but also the necessity for them?

Who could lead us in various areas of united function? Who could we release? *Who would we support?*

HINDRANCES TO OUR ENGAGEMENT

Earlier we discussed the leadership offices of Ephesians 4, and I alluded to idea that, just as 'pastors' and 'teachers' often protect churches from the more pioneering and visionary leadership of the 'apostles, prophets and evangelists', the same can be true of city pastors' groups. This is a challenge to be aware of!

I earlier summarised four key purposes of city pastors' groups as caring, unity, prayer and mission. This current chapter began with comments about a commonly held view that city pastors' groups should have no agenda other than caring for one another. I have validated the 'no agendas' idea in this chapter — while pointing out a wider context, for we still do actually need

to recognise the mission Jesus gave us. From observation, I would venture to say that those who react the most to the idea of someone bringing an agenda to a pastors' groups are usually those gifted as 'pastors' or 'teachers'. It's rarely the visionary, pioneer leaders ('apostle, prophet, evangelist'). These things need discussing, because I suspect we are 'protecting ourselves' from ever allowing someone to be empowered to apply the full focus of their leadership acumen to the city! This is another challenge to be aware of.

I suspect we are 'protecting ourselves' from ever allowing someone to be empowered to apply the full focus of their leadership acumen to the city!

WHERE TO NEXT?

This is all to say — I think we are on a journey together here, and while we have a distance to go, I really believe there is hope. Our functional unity is possible — and principally because God is with us.

God is with us. His Spirit really can do more in people's lives in a few minutes than we can achieve in a lifetime! The level of our 'success' or potential isn't therefore determined by our capacity, or where we are up to on this journey either. It is instead connected to the willingness of our heart to be on this journey! I believe it is our sincere commitment to enable our united function that brings the blessing!

Consider how God's Spirit can do more in people's lives in a few minutes than we can achieve in a lifetime! The level of our 'success' or potential isn't determined by our capacity, or where we are up to on this journey. It is instead connected *to the willingness of our heart to be on this journey!* I believe it is our sincere commitment to enable our united function that brings the blessing! That's our starting point for a journey that I believe both Jesus and the Holy Spirit want us to embark on!

The next four chapters are going to cover a considerable amount of ground.

This includes two chapters that were added three years after the book was first written. Here is what they are, and why.

In Chapter 12 we consider a sample plan for how a pastors' group could pull many things together through a quarterly prayer gathering. Through our *intentionality* together, we could enable things to be achieved that go beyond what is achieved at this point in most places.

In Chapter 13 — which was the original conclusion of this book, there is a summary of the message of this book thus far, and a story that gets to the heart of the matter.

However, what I could not do when first writing this book was complete it, *because our churches did not yet have a sufficiently shared vocabulary for the conversation*. Any attempt at a final chapter resulted in words that, because I do connect with pastors' groups face to face regularly, I knew would be misunderstood. We had no common language with which to discuss the dynamics, nuances and boundaries of capital 'C' Church leadership function!

Three years later this has changed — and I marvel at how quickly this happened. With prior chapters as fodder for the conversation, and an amount of travel including over 130 separate meetings with city and town pastors' groups in 60 different cities and towns to discuss this very topic, a vocabulary and range of perspectives we can all agree upon has now emerged — enabling the wider conversation that is needed.

Chapter 14 is therefore about a framework for thinking by which we could 'manage' multiple things concurrently in the unity space. This conversation is needed because increased collaboration is taking place in cities and towns — at least in part as a result of changes in thinking. The question before us is therefore now about how we manage the potentially vast array of things happening in the 'unity space' in the simplest possible manner. With this ideal in view, the chapter presents a paradigm similar to the 'prayer gatherings' of chapter 12. It represents a higher level of intentionality than is currently applied in most places, yet remains simple, Spirit dependent, and could catalyse additional new levels of collaborative effort if applied.

We then reach the conclusion (Chapter 15) — with an *articulation* of how our wider missional function could work in a city, and nationally, in connection with geographic pastors' groups. This takes everything written prior to its logical conclusion and articulation — in simple and non-religious words.

The stage is set for some important conversations regarding how we might unite together at a level higher than we have previously, to engage with both the needs *and perspectives* of the people in our cities and nation.

The stage is set for some important conversations regarding how we might unite together at a level higher than we have previously, to engage with both the needs and perspectives of the people in our cities and nation.

Fasten your seatbelt!

CHAPTER TWELVE

Geographic Pastors’ Groups — a sample plan

My intent in this chapter is to open our minds to see how servant-hearted leadership applied at the city level in God’s Church could work within the current paradigm — so some possible hindrances in our thinking to this idea can be removed.

It is important that it be noted that I’m not suggesting that the below plan be followed as an exact model. This is only to demonstrate the possibility, and the rationale that could sit within this kind of leadership. This exercise is especially important because this topic is so rarely discussed. Theological colleges don’t even discuss it. The irony is that the topic in these chapters is (united) Church leadership!

As an illustration, when leading a single local congregation, I would spend time with my key leaders early in the year (or late in the previous year) to establish a year plan, based out of what we felt God was doing and saying.

I'd communicate the resulting vision for the year at the start of the new year with everyone involved — before then checking that all necessary planning and coordination was taking place in the various ministries of that local church, so all its various functions would be achieved.

I'd also ensure that I highlighted the importance of every ministry in front of all the members because I'd understand that this valuing of each area would encourage the diligence of each leader. This would additionally help the whole team to appreciate what others are doing, and how they really do function as a single larger team!

While there is a lot more that could be said — consider now the application of these same leadership points at a city level. There is a team base, a need for a clear vision and planning, and a need for some administrative acumen to facilitate and encourage vision, diligence and teamwork.

All that is needed for this
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level is sufficient belief
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be functionally united.

Far from being an idealism, the leadership principles within the above are quite simple. All I'm suggesting is that the same process be undertaken at the city level. This is about nothing more than basic intentionality in leadership — and all that is needed for this to eventually begin to be applied at the city (and national) level is sufficient belief in what I believe to be a Biblical idea, that God intends for us to be functionally united.

A SIMPLE LEADERSHIP OUTLINE FOR THE YEAR

To put prayer on the calendar first, semi-regular combined church prayer meetings would be a useful platform. Within our cultural context, our years are naturally divided into quarters (terms), based around the school year.

This is a natural *rhythm* within the lives of many people. This is especially so for families with school-aged children, and many of their grandparents. This could be a useful framework for united gatherings.

What is then needed is someone to be released to fulfil an *apostolic-administrative* role in which the vision of the Church (united) is repeatedly communicated, key leaders in different spheres of influence affirmed, and the body of believers united in prayer for them and their various spheres of work. This isn't to say one person does all the speaking. Instead, one person ensures that *someone* speaks affirmingly regarding each necessary area. As a result, the *perception* of our unity in serving our city is built.

The value of this perception-building is not to be overlooked — because it feeds faith and hope! That faith and hope will, in turn, feed new innovation and effort!

The value of this *perception-building* is not to be overlooked — because it feeds faith and hope! That faith and hope will, in turn, feed new innovation and effort!

Imagine one of your church members says to you that they feel your local church isn't really achieving much. Would you stay silent? Of course not! You would reply by explaining the vision of your local church to them, and by updating them on what different people or groups in the church are doing. You would help them to see how you are being effective together. As a result, their perception of what your local church is doing would hopefully be changed, and they would again feel invigorated about the vision and energised to serve it.

What was lacking was the perspective — not the substance.

Perspective needs building regarding our united functions within a city or town. This is commonly neglected. If we don't talk about it,

If we don't talk about it, people won't see it. If they don't see it, they won't pray for it, believe for it, or serve it.

people won't see it. If they don't see it, they won't pray for it, believe for it, or serve it.

Until they can see it, many can not serve it!

The below simple vision-empowering *rhythm* could work for a city or town.

TERM 1:

VISION CLARIFICATION, PLANNING AND TEAM BUILDING:

City leaders consider (1) the key seasonal opportunities within the coming year, (2) anything happening nationally they could synch with, (3) the various spheres of influence in their city and who could oversee them each, and then (4) consider whether any of the ideas members bring to the table might be God-inspired. The first time pastors do this, it might require considerable discussion, because it hasn't been considered before. However, once the pattern is set, the boundaries and potential of the exercise would be understood, and it could become quite a simple matter.

What is then needed is a combined platform from which to bring life and encouragement to each *sphere*, to enable health in united city things.

The simplest idea I can think of for this is a combined church prayer gathering at the start of each school term — possibly preceded by a pastor's vision meeting on the same topics. On this combined church platform, vision can be cast for key areas that are a united responsibility, key people's roles affirmed, and everything appropriately prayed for.

TERM FOCUS:

- **Biculturalism — noting Waitangi Day is at the start of Term 1**
Side note: Support at a local Waitangi Day celebration or dawn service could be encouraged. Local Marae and Iwi could be prayed for. Relevant local issues could be mentioned for prayer, etc. (If a local Waitangi Day commemoration doesn't exist, why not connect with local Marae and start one?)
- **Faithful gospel focus at Easter — which is at the end of Term 1**
National Easter and other gospel efforts like the current Hope Project every-home media effort can be affirmed

Any local City-wide Easter outreach efforts could be affirmed

Intentional outreach equipping (conversational skills) in all local churches could be affirmed.⁵²

The importance of all members being mobilised as witnesses could be affirmed

- **Education (Primary, Secondary and Tertiary) — noting Term 1 is the beginning of the school year**

Those leading *Bible in Schools*, facilitating Christian groups in High Schools, leading Tertiary Campus ministries, or serving as school Principals and teachers (or similar) could be affirmed.

Gospel needs amongst the young, and the roles of these various people in that picture, could be recognised and prayed for.

TERM 2:

It would be logical for Church leaders to consider administrative details related to the various spheres of influence in their city at the start of every term, prior to leading prayer at a united gathering. This would ensure true clarity in the very few things that are being facilitated at the city level.

TERM FOCUS:

- **ANZAC**

This is a cultural opportunity and is usually timed for the start of Term 2

- **Matariki**

This is a growing cultural opportunity and is timed near the end of Term 2

- **Civic and national government**

- **Sports and other recreational activities**

Term 2 marks the beginning of the winter sports season

⁵² A focus of our work is empowering churches for this. See sermon series — including outlines and small group studies, and also concise conversational outreach equipping videos at AllTogether.co.nz

TERM 3:

Church leaders again meet to consider administrative details related to the various spheres of influence in their city, enabling an ongoing clarity of vision, and the encouragement of key people involved.

TERM FOCUS:

- **The agricultural, farming and business sectors**
Spring represents the beginning of the agricultural season, and also of the start of the primary sales season for many businesses.
- **Family**
National Marriage Week or another similar occasion might be found in this period of time as a possible platform for focusing on families. All city-level ministries serving families could be recognised and prayed for.

TERM 4:

The same patterns of administrative encouragement and prayer could happen again. This would also be the time to consider key dates for the next year — and especially things happening early in the year like Waitangi Day, so they can be promoted.

TERM FOCUS:

- **Christmas**
There is no limit to the creativity that could be brought to community engagement in this positively charged season
- **Media and creative arts**
- **Thanksgiving to God and those who have served the city in Christ's name**
This could be a time of encouragement, with success stories and testimonies shared, all to bring esteem to the united prayer and efforts of God's people throughout the year. This would motivate everyone to do the same again the next year.

A PLATFORM FOR NEW POSSIBILITIES TOGETHER

If focus were given to these areas on a united platform throughout the year, new possibilities would soon arise. This is no different to leading in any other area within a local church. With certain goals achieved, there would be the possibility of establishing new goals. In other words, some *measurability* of the improving united function of the Church would become possible. Each level of *success* would become a platform for the next. As a result, *greater intentionality* in the united function of the Church would be enabled.

For example, if a partnership with local Marae and Iwi were to become established through a growing mutual commitment to Te Tiriti and its values, the opportunity for discussing the place of NZ history in schools could arise. With Christ's name now being heard more often on the Marae, a partnership between *Bible in Schools* teachers and some local kaumatua (Māori elders) could result. Kaumatua could tell local stories — and the manna of *Bible in Schools* thus becomes more esteemed. Maybe all children are taught a few Christian karakia in Te Reo, which the Principal then proudly has them pray at the start and end of the school's weekly assemblies. A healthy relationship between the school, Iwi and Church thus becomes consolidated — and another set of new possibilities then arises. Some from amongst those children become civic leaders 10 or 20 years later. Council meetings begin with Karakia in the name of Ihu Karaiti, and new buildings are blessed in this name also. Some still pray in English too — while understanding the bicultural ground they stand upon. Society becomes able to accept this.

My point is, when we start a journey like this — we don't always know where it will lead!

We often fail to apply basic leadership thinking to what we do as churches at the city-level. However, many are clearly very capable of clear-thinking directional leadership — as demonstrated by the way they lead their local churches. There is no question we could achieve more!

To summarise, we often fail to apply basic leadership thinking to what we do as churches at the city-level. However, many are clearly very capable of clear-thinking directional leadership — as demonstrated by the way they lead their local churches. If we were to value our united function more, there is no question we could achieve more!

THREE REFLECTIONS:

(I) GROUPS WILL OFTEN BE INITIALLY RALLIED AROUND EVENTS

While a laying down (surrendering) of agendas is an important starting dynamic in finding a city agenda that is in line with God's agenda, it is only natural for people to love programmes. Sometimes, strategic engagement in a city, or the empowering of others in some way to minister in an area, isn't tangible enough for a pastor to feel excited about the Church (united) they are a part of. However, sometimes these same pastors will become very excited about a big programme idea that they could participate in. This is a practical reality we are wise to be aware of.

Some of us are not overly programme-driven, and have little trouble being motivated by a good purpose — without a big programme attached. Yet it remains that a big programme, with a 'big name' speaker or band, will sometimes catalyse new excitement for involvement with a pastors' group, and that this can bring about a new season of unity, and of fresh vision together. Sometimes big events help some people to see their city again with fresh eyes. It's a dynamic to be aware of, and open to.

(II) GOD'S METHOD IS SPIRIT-LED MEN AND WOMEN, NOT MINISTRIES OR ORGANISATIONS

While different organisations may exert different levels of influence and initiative at different times — and even for a considerable length of time, it remains that God works through people, not organisations. Even where people work from within organisation, God's principal method is 'men not ministries'. This can be a challenge to some.

Consider how in the Book of Judges peace continued in Israel for the remainder of the life-span of most of the Judges. For example, “*So the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel son of Kenaz died*” (Judges 3:11), or “*No sooner had Gideon died than the Israelites again prostituted themselves to the Baals*” (Judges 8:33). Some great organisations and denominations are like this. The movement became a ministry as the initial vision or distinct reason for existing became the new ‘normal’, and then became a mere mechanism for the good it once achieved. People then exist to serve the systems of the organisation — because they have become so esteemed (rather than the organisation existing as a conduit for people to do pioneer work). As its end draws near, the organisation becomes little more than a monument to its former self, and financial woes slowly choke the remaining life out of it.

I believe God has minimal regard for our various organisations. It is their purpose and the people involved who count. The backgrounds of the various Judges in the *Book of Judges* illustrate this well. God didn’t choose many who were from the centre of the ‘recognised establishment’. The people of Israel struggled to accept the leadership of some for this very reason (Judges 5:16-17). In the same way God might raise someone to a key role in a city who those in the local pastors’ group have never heard of — all just to thwart our pride or comfort in our self-perceived position. This will test our humility and character. Maybe God does this for the same reason he left the peoples of other nations in Israel to test their hearts (Judges 2:22; 3:4).

It is, therefore, important that our first reaction when we hear of another person’s ministry that might somehow ‘compete’ with our own is to thank God for their work — so as to build a bridge. God will not always reveal everything to us. Jesus is the Lord of the harvest. We need to know our place, and that is the place of a servant. Our tongues are there to build up, not to pull down. When we’re pulling down, we’re helping the wrong side!

(III) THE CHARACTER FLAWS OF THE GODLY

It is important that we do not wrongly use our influence to support — or not support, a thing based upon our own emotions or feelings. For example,

maybe we feel disrespected by someone. Feeling negative about them, we pass on a quiet negative comment. This undermines their reputation — and that could undermine a work of God if our judgement of them has been incorrect.

Consider again the likes of Ehud (Judges 3) who independently plunged a dagger into the King of Moab, and then went out to incite a war. Consider Samson — the independent-minded, somewhat compromising and yet anointed 'lone hero'. With these guys, it was 'their way or the highway'. Samson wasn't even a team player! Yet both were God's man for the hour. If negative words are spoken because our own self-perceived status has somehow been offended, we could find ourselves speaking against people whom God has appointed. God doesn't stay inside our boxes!

To explain this dynamic just one step further: Imagine someone who has been in ministry for 20 or 40 or 60 years. They are involved in city leadership. They are widely recognised. Then some young pioneer decides to do something new but fails to ask their permission — and offence is taken because they were not duly consulted. I suspect the reader will sense quickly that I might feel myself to have some personal experience in this, and maybe on both sides of the fence. While there are many amazing secure church leaders around, these issues are real — and they need discussing somewhere, because they affect things.

The question we must ask ourselves when feeling uncomfortable is, why are we uncomfortable? One danger I perceive is that, if we have many years of Christian ministry behind us, we might begin to trust our own discernment a little too much. As a result, we confidently place blame for our discomfort on the other person. However, if this discomfort is just plain-old insecurity, we just gave our insecurities a dangerous platform; we believe our discomfort to be the Holy Spirit's prompting. The result? It is division within the wider Church and its ministries, and possibly also the thwarting of God's purposes!

The implications of this kind of mistrust are wide-reaching too. For example, simple and sensible conversations with a person can soon become impossible because offence, suspicion and mistrust have been thrown into

the mix. But then conversations with those around them (like other church leaders in those communities) become difficult also — because words of suspicion have been spread. Suspicion and mistrust are like a disease. They spread, and their affect can last for years, and even decades.

To paint a picture with words: It starts with a misunderstanding we react to, or something or someone about which a judgement made. This leads to a negative word spoken, and the possibility of a united effort is gone. One season shifts into another, and significant opportunities that might have built over time through partnership do not exist, because the platform they required never came into existence. Because we always build on the foundations of those who went before us, the possibilities of the next season of ministry in that place are affected also. New leaders step into an environment that isn't connected to, supportive of or strengthened by its unity with the wider Church, and the collaborative efforts it could have enabled.

Where then is our hope? It is in what is made possible because the Holy Spirit is with us! He alone can vindicate the 'falsely accused', convict the heart of one who is judging another incorrectly, and give us vision of what we could do together were we to think about and value our unity a bit differently.

'In One Spirit' (Philippians 1:27)! While we really must work with the best of our intellect and ability — for God deserves no less, the Spirit's enabling is what we depend upon, and our only truly rational reason for hope!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

In One Spirit

In this chapter I will summarise some key points, and then share a story to get to what I believe to be the heart of the matter.

The final two chapters will then take everything written to its next level — imparting strategy and perspective that assumes everything written thus far as its platform. In terms of this book, the best is yet to come!

We began by discussing the idea that culture does not just change — instead it is changed. There are people involved, with agendas, and strategies! This means that the future of current cultural trends is not a foregone conclusion. There is a conversation here we can engage.

Upon analysis of the various cultural trends that are in play, I identified 5 primary trends that are generally against the wider hopes of the Christian community, and three that are for it. The point was again to demonstrate that the outcome of the current ‘cultural struggle’ is not a foregone conclusion. The trends of post-secularism and biculturalism in particular could, if wisely understood and leveraged, eventually counter-balance the trend of secularism. A number of applications were then identified.

What is therefore needed is our engagement, at which point we discussed the ‘three levels of activism.’ The first of these was ‘individual efforts’ — which I believe we might be slowly improving in as Christian believers across our nation. As an example of evidence for this, I think of the nature of online engagement by Christians that we observe through our Hope Project social media at present, as contrasted with 5 years ago. They are engaging with a level of confidence, clarity and sensitivity that wasn’t the same 5 years ago. This isn’t to mention the tens of thousands of church people in our nation who are now being equipped by their pastors with conversational outreach skills through the pulpit and small group. This is, again, in contrast to general patterns of behaviour about 8 years ago. Increased conversational confidence results!

The second level of ‘activism’ was local church engagement — which I rate highly. Our churches are doing well in representing themselves to the wider community through church-based community ministries.

The third level of engagement I called ‘profile activism’, in reference to the need for united efforts at the city and national levels that engage with public opinion and perspective. I suggested this as our weakest area of engagement — and yet a highly important one in view of the way our current society operates and thinks. The question this begs is how we might get this ‘voice’ at the city and national levels released — which unavoidably leads us to the question of Church leadership at the city and national levels. We thus shifted in the second half of the book to a discussion about this.

With the *Book of Judges* as a backdrop I suggested that the guiding principle for our united function was ‘voluntary accountability’. In New Testament

terms, we're discussing the 5 leadership 'offices' of Ephesians 4. This led us to discussion of the roles and function of geographically-based city and town pastors' groups, which are the closest thing we have to a Church leaders' group or team within a city.

The key issue that arises at this stage is the plausibility of a united function at the city level — let alone the national level, as contrasted with the idea that the most these groups could achieve is to be supportive friends to one another. As a result of struggles to get churches working in unity, many seem to have concluded that this idea of 'functional unity' is nothing more than an idealism. My contention, in contrast to any loss of hope some might have, has been that this functional unity is entirely possible *because the Holy Spirit is with us*.

The Holy Spirit's presence is the thing that distinguishes our era in history from that of the Judges. In addition, our unity was also the focus of Jesus' prayer in John 17, which was a prayer made in the context of mission. I don't believe him to have prayed for something that is not possible.

We therefore discussed the possible scope of what geographically-based pastors' groups might be responsible for — from a belief that our united function within cities and towns really is possible. As a basic definition, a pastors' groups' role is to do things in local mission together that they cannot do apart. Specifically this included local and seasonal opportunities, alignment with national opportunities, engagement with the spheres of influence in the city, and the pursuit of any other efforts the group felt led to do as the result of prayer and conversation.

Functionally, I suggested a simple paradigm by which united prayer gatherings could be based around school terms, and could serve as a conduit for vision sharing to feed a journey together in which united efforts are strengthened. This was illustrative only, and led us to our final area of discussion, which was the identifying and empowering of leadership.

As in the opening illustration of the person who purchased every motor-vehicle company or franchise in our nation, the logic of collaboration is not

difficult to see. The question is maybe where we start — and I believe it is with this:

This journey begins with our decision to both esteem and pursue our united identity and function at a higher level than we do — while realising that that fulfilment of this will only be possible to the extent that we are dependent upon the Holy Spirit.

We need the Spirit to temper the independence and pride of our hearts, while replacing our ambitions with his vision and heart. This enables us to do what he envisaged we would be doing in service to his mission *together!*

I see great hope in this, because God is one to honour our hearts!

Our capacity is not limited to what we can do — or are even ready for. It is limited by our faith and willingness.

Jesus' promise of help for our mission is recorded in Acts 1:8. *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”*

I wonder if what we didn't see at first is that this empowering by God's Spirit is not only needed for boldness and faith in our mission. It is also needed to enable the humility and faith that are necessary in our hearts for true teamwork and collaboration in our mission work to be achieved!

A CLOSING STORY

From the mid-1990s onwards, I served for just under seven years in a rural community in which I'd grown up. My friend Stuart Millar and I had both felt from the age of 14 that God had somehow called us to serve in this community. To the surprise of a few, we both returned there half a dozen years later to do just that, wide-eyed and full of belief.

Stu returned one year before I did. A local pastor helped Stu to get some of the early ministry involvements in the community started. I then joined that work a year later, with some good starting foundations in place.

Because our focus was on community outreach and engagement, our primary responsibilities did not include the weekly leading of a local congregation, and I'd say we were too young for it anyway. We were soon doing *Bible in Schools* with all the year 6 students in five local primary schools. As a result, within two years we knew practically all 400 of the students in the local Intermediate — where we also shared messages of hope through weekly school Assemblies, lunch-time programmes, an after-school 'values' programme and also a weekend 'youth group' type of programme. Most of these were under Stu's leadership.

I then ran a youth group with High Schoolers while facilitating a local youth leaders' network through which combined events were facilitated. We ran a 'Drop In Centre' on Friday nights, giving us connection to a wide group of Māori young people. We then innovated in wider ways, including 'Beach Missions', and the running of some sizable three-day combined Church programmes in a local park. I recall that in an average week I'd have the privilege of sharing something of the Christian message of hope with well over 400 different non-church people. Other creative initiatives achieved sizable one-off audiences in addition — and soon involved wider networking within the province in support of other gospel-related things. We were widely connected in this rural community, knowing the Mayor and some Councillors, Māori Wardens, a few who worked in social agencies, nearly all school Principals, many teachers, numerous business owners — and more. What amazed us throughout these years was just how easy it was to find opportunities once we were engaged in these public spaces.

What amazed us throughout these years was just how easy it was to find opportunities once we were engaged in these public spaces.

One day, I was sitting in a local Council meeting at which a community issue was being discussed. Due to the nature of the matter, I asked if anyone present had discussed it with any of the local pastors. What I heard next hit me — and does to this day. No one in the room knew the name of a local pastor.

This started a chain of thinking in my mind because it seemed clear to me that something must be fundamentally wrong with this picture. The town had a great bunch of pastors — so this is no criticism of them. I truly love them all (then and now)! However, our corporate representation in the community as God's people clearly wasn't working!

To give a picture of the dynamics at that time, the 11 local churches had 16 equivalent full-time paid positions within them, a range of great community ministries, and more than 10 buildings within which to meet. (Some churches also had secondary and tertiary congregations and buildings in smaller rural communities close by.) At this same time, Stu and I did not receive salaries. We lived by faith, and my own income only once in 6 years equalled what I would have received were I on the unemployment benefit (which I was not). This is to say, finances were distinctly connected to church buildings, while wider community engagement (beyond various church's own community programmes based out of their buildings) was unfunded and largely un-engaged.

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My reflection soon led to some conclusions. They felt a bit radical though. I suspected — with good reason, that no one would ever accept them. So, I left my scribbblings on some pieces of paper and made a decision never to share them *unless specifically asked to do so by the local pastors' group*. I kept to this commitment.

After five years serving within the community, I was invited to join the local pastors' group meetings — which was a privilege, as I was still young

and wasn't leading an individual congregation. I enjoyed the friendships and encouragement I received, and this became the context within which a memorable conversation took place.

Two more years had passed. I was 28 years old, and it was my second to last meeting with this group of pastors before relocating to Singapore. Then an older pastor asked, "Dave — do you have a vision for the Church as a whole within this community?" I couldn't believe my ears. I replied that I did, but I assured them that they would not want to hear it. However, they felt differently about that, and so it was agreed that, on my last time with them, I'd share that vision.

I was nervous as I started — and with good reason. As best I recall it, the vision included closing down two or more of the 11 congregations, and selling 2 to 4 of the building premises for which funds could be kept (with awareness of differing denominational policies on these things). Those funds would go into an investment to support broader community engagement while the continuing regular donations would release at least two of these now 'ex-pastors' to become full-time workers for the Kingdom *within the community*. Now unrestrained by an attachment to the four walls of a single local church, they were free to engage in ways they could never have otherwise. As a result, the local churches would, together, *literally multiply the combined level of their engagement with the local community and its various leaders*. It was fair to expect that additional new opportunities would soon arise from the relationships of trust that would develop too — further aiding the Christian witness and engagement within the community.

It's difficult to describe what transpired in the 10 minutes following. My own recollection was of a fair amount of confusion — as the ideas were new. There were plenty of questions. Some were quite fairly reacting to the proposals — which included a considerable level of change to some of their churches and roles.

I recall that the idea that a pastor might lose the leadership of a congregation so as to be 'freed to work outside the four walls of a church' being viewed almost as if it were a demotion. This puzzled me — because

I had thought they'd be excited about the opportunity to engage with the community. It was all admittedly a lot to digest in a short space of time. I recall one who stayed entirely silent, and then there was the pastor who'd asked the original question. He was visibly excited. Of note, he was unthreatened by the proposals too — which included his own church being closed and sold. He was then eager to keep my notes when I left, which I gladly gave him. I think we could learn a thing or two from that pastor!

So, was my youthful proposal idealism — or *could it be the way of Christ?* I think this is a very, very challenging question!

The engagement of Christian churches within the public square of our cities and nation remains considerably weak. We don't have anything like the voice we could have if we were united. What would it take to change this?

We are paying a significant cost for our dysfunction. However, the real cost isn't really upon us! It is actually upon those who don't yet know Christ!

I think the answer begins with a simple decision to esteem and invest in our united identity and function — while knowing we will need to be entirely dependent upon the Spirit for the reality of this to come about!

And regarding what might motivate us: We are already paying a significant cost for our dysfunction as the Church (united). We are in decline, and our public profile isn't strong. However, the real cost isn't really upon us! It is actually upon those who don't yet know Christ!

WHAT ARE WE HERE FOR AS THE CHURCH?

Would you be willing to let your local church die, and even your denomination, if that somehow meant that more people would become connected with Jesus? As valuable as each local church and denomination

might be, I believe this question digs at the very heart of the matter! *What vision do we really serve?*

What would it take for us to be so freed from restraint that we could fully and most-rationally serve our mission in our cities and nation? It would take a miracle! That's the answer — and that is exactly why the Holy Spirit was given!

What will you do?

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.

Philippians 1:27-28a

THE PROMISED CLOSING CHAPTERS

These last two chapters were penned three years after writing the prior chapters. The book had alluded prior to the fact that I had not fully completed the writing this book. The hindrance was a lack of shared vocabulary for this discussion. In the interim I was able to travel to discuss this very topic with pastors' groups an additional 130 or more times — separate to weekly gatherings I have with a group of pastors where I live. A broadly shared vocabulary for defining how united Church leadership might work, and something of its purposes and process, resulted. Of note, these definitions avoid key Biblical terms for which different movements and individuals have different definitions. The paradigm articulated has found acceptance from pastors of many denominations, and in pastors' groups across the wider geography of our nation.

However, as various pastors' groups began discussing what they could do together with increased intentionality, this immediately highlighted a new challenge regarding how we manage specific agendas we now accept within our meetings. So, we will consider this topic first.

I hope this will prove useful.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Principles for managing agenda in pastors' groups

A pastors' meeting is unavoidably a 'hub' for the united efforts of the Church in each city and town. If certain things aren't considered by the pastors together, where else will they be considered?

With an increase in united efforts taking place amongst churches, a key area of challenge is the juggling of the discussion and management of these things. So how do we manage agendas that we might now agree need to be on the table before us *when there really are multiple valid agendas?*

At one level the answer seems simple, and the question almost redundant. Pastors already manage the operation of their church communities, with their various programmes and activities. Those of us who run businesses, already manage them too. We have managerial experience, so what needs discussing?

The reality is that the managerial dynamics are different to most local churches. Firstly, time is tight because these meetings are not highly regular (maybe 10 times per year), often short (rarely as long as 2 hours), and have the relationship of pastors as a priority (usually including coffee or a meal). It is hard to fit an agenda in. This challenge is then compounded by the reality *that many groups have previously not allowed an agenda into their meetings!* This makes juggling agendas in this specific context an understandable challenge.

However, it remains that many things that sit within the 'unity space' of our cities do not even get a mention in most pastors' groups in an average year. The reasons why we're somewhat weak in our united function is understandable — but changing this is also our responsibility! We need to lift the name of Jesus up in our cities while we can.

To be clear on our context, in many places nationally few have had time to really consider what God's people might be wise to do at the city or national levels, or to take a great deal of responsibility to encourage and support the array of things that might result. To note how we have structured our local churches, pastors are employed by denominations to run congregations — not to bring leadership to the vision or efforts of the Church as a whole in their city or town. So, when pastors give their time to unity things — it's extra work — and I think they are amazing!

However, it remains that many things that sit within the 'unity space' of our cities do not even get a mention in most pastors' groups in an average year. The reasons why we're somewhat weak in our united function is understandable — but changing this is also our responsibility! We need to

lift the name of Jesus up in our cities while we can. We must work while it is light (John 9:4)! There is also something to discuss here because it really is a bit complex. We should expect this to be the case! Encouraging and facilitating the united efforts of the Church in a city or town is, by its very nature, going to be broader and more complex to manage than one individual congregation!

Encouraging and facilitating the united efforts of the Church in a city or town is, by its very nature, going to be broader and more complex to manage than one individual congregation!

So, we'll start by looking at how we already do this in our local churches. We'll extrapolate out to the work of a city — and consider a simple framework for what does and doesn't get onto the agenda. We'll then discuss how we manage that agenda — so it doesn't exclude our relationships and prayer, which are foundational dynamics to these groups.

THE ONE HOUR PER WEEK CHALLENGE

I suggest most pastors have only one hour per week available for unity things. Those with a stronger vision for wider city work might have two hours per week available. For example, the monthly pastors' meeting takes two hours — so only 2 hours per month remain (or 6 for those with a greater vision or sense of calling to united things).

A combined church service takes 3 hours. Intentional conversations over coffee with 3 different pastors, to strengthen relationship with them, take 4 hours in total. Someone invites pastors to hear about a possible united project — and that takes 90 minutes. We then each drive back to our local church office and have a full schedule ahead of us. We have very little time available amongst us to consider what exists on the united platform — let alone to manage it well. What is the way forward?

STARTING SMALL

In a local church, only a few things can be included in the weekly Sunday announcements. What gets that profile is hopefully determined on the basis of what is (i) most current, (ii) most important, and (iii) what affects the most people.

This challenge is multiplied many times over in a bigger church. Let's now imagine a church with three to five separate congregations, 150 small groups, and 50 entirely separate ministries. (I previously pastored in a church of over 1000, with 63 small groups, services in 3 languages, and I'd guess about 20 to 30 ministries).

- A youth leaders' meeting might be a current and important matter — but only affects 25 people. A phone call or text message could suffice. They therefore do not get Sunday announcement time.
- An upcoming small group leaders' meeting might involve 200 or more people, and it is important — but this promotional message could likewise be communicated by other means.
- A community ministry special event might be a current matter, and involve a sizable number of people — but in the balance might not be the most important. (We therefore create other habits and platforms on which we encourage these people).

The leadership principles for a larger church are the same for the united Church in a city or town. There is increased complexity — but there are still principles that can guide decisions. The task isn't impossible. This can be effectively managed, and it is important enough to consider.

PRINCIPLES FOR MANAGING AGENDA IN PASTOR' GROUPS

1. THE ONLY ITEMS THAT COME TO A PASTORS' GROUP ARE THOSE REQUIRING OR REPRESENTING UNITY

Chapter 10 was about things that could plausibly be considered the responsibility of the churches together in a city or town. It listed:

1. Stewarding key community opportunities for united representation or engagement
2. Partnership with relevant national initiatives
3. Engagement with the spheres of influence
4. One-off united efforts and local initiatives, as God leads

To consider how we manage the many things that could sit within this scope:

- A city wide programme run by one larger church doesn't need discussion — because it doesn't need unity. However, giving it a little profile, and praying blessing on it might be wise because their programme does represent us all (as in area 1 above) as well as because this affirmation might be important to the relationship we have with the church running the city wide programme.
- A united effort like a proposed united outreach effort in a park (area 4 above), or the establishing of a Pregnancy Choice Centre (area 2 above), might need collaboration between a few churches. These kinds of proposals need space to be aired — so pastors can be aware, to then communicate these things to their interested members. They therefore deserve a space in the time together (even if short), so the vision can be shared and expressions of interest from church leaders given — so those interested can connect and discuss the proposal later.
- People working in spheres of the city in a role that might be representative (area 3 above) could also be on the agenda at certain points — like a campus ministry, or people relating in a representative role for the Church with Council or Iwi. While we might sometimes ignore some of these works because they are structured separately, it remains that they actually represent us. We can affirm them, pray for them, support them and help them. This not only has value; it can be catalytic.

Giving profile to something affects the perspectives of those listening.

The point is that giving profile to something affects the perspectives of those listening. This is no different to how local church leadership works. Our comments breathe life into things and enable collaboration. This builds culture, releases resourcing, and brings encouragement.

Our comments breathe life into things and enable collaboration. This builds culture, releases resourcing, and brings encouragement.

We only ever innovate in the areas we have, in some sense, taken responsibility for.

Regarding how the various things in the united space could be managed, the outline of Chapter 12 can help. Imagine if the first pastors' meeting of every quarter gave 10 minutes to highlighting things God's people were doing in the city in 2 or 3 spheres of influence. Those areas are then prayed for. This would achieve something valuable in the hearts and minds of the pastors.

We only ever innovate in the areas we have, in some sense, taken responsibility for. This is an important and profound spiritual principle. If I only believe myself to be serving a local church, I will only ever innovate or aid solutions that sit within that scale of operation. If, however, I were to accept that my platform for service were in God's Church in a city (or nation), I would begin to see a different level of problem — thus prompting thoughts of solutions that operate at an entirely different scale! If we do not, as a practice, put the wider vision in front of our pastors, we will see neither the kind of innovation needed, nor the support it needs, coming about to see it achieved!

If we do not, as a practice, put the wider vision before our pastors, we will see neither the kind of innovation needed, nor the support it needs, coming about to see that wider vision achieved!

One thing we are trying to facilitate here *organisationally* is the connecting of churches and their members to things that might be of interest to them.

This is about ‘resource management’ — with a view to all our assets and people in the city, to enable and feed our united function.

This is about ‘resource management’ — with a view to all our assets and people in the city, to enable and feed our united function. Without information, vision and awareness, there is no shared vision, collaboration, or innovation!

Only when pastors see the needs of the city will they then be able to take that to their

members, to enable their involvement.

This is about releasing church members to unite as one body, in one Spirit, in their areas of interest and influence, for the faith of the gospel!

Without information, vision and awareness, there is no shared vision, collaboration, or innovation!

2. WE PRAY FOR AND SPEAK ENCOURAGEMENT INTO ALL UNITED EFFORTS AND THEIR INNOVATORS GENEROUSLY

I believe pastors have a role to play in speaking life into areas of ministry that we ‘own’ *together* in the unity space (even if unconnected to our own congregation’s programmes), as well as to pray for them. This is a big statement, and a challenge directed toward all of us involved in facilitating unity, with the glory and mission of Jesus in view.

If we ‘take responsibility’ for the lifting of Jesus’ name in the city, rather than only in our own congregation, all Christian work in the city becomes something we care about.

The attitude here is one of vision and faith. If we ‘take responsibility’ for the lifting of Jesus’ name in the city, rather than only in our own congregation,

all Christian work in the city becomes something we care about. Words of encouragement then become easy *because we care!*

I also encourage a view that recognises that the various people God has raised up to represent him in city-wide roles *are a part of our team as pastors.*

Even if these people don't attend the pastors' meeting, they are part of 'us.' It is our attitude that is important here.

For example, who gives authority to someone to lead God's Church in its engagement in a University? Who appoints them as our representative? The answer is, God! The authority to appoint Church leaders (vs local church leaders) sits with God alone — as contrasted with the authority I believe we have to prayerfully appoint local church leaders. Our role with regard to Church leadership is only to discern who God might be raising up, so as to then empower and support them if we feel led to.

It is also true that we genuinely need the innovators God raises up — whether in relation to a campus, the facilitation of Bible in Schools, chaplaincy in a hospital, prison or workplace, connecting with Iwi or Council, social services, town planning, or in some other area! Some of these people will have opportunities with greater potential for spiritual influence and witness than many of our local churches do. We need their efforts!

Pastors are spiritual leaders, and are looked up to. Their words and affirmations are respected — and desired. The positive words and prayers of our pastors for each united work, or representative work, matter! Their words shape perspectives; they encourage; they build; they empower; and they enable.

Recap:

1. The only items that come to a pastors' group are those requiring or representing unity
2. We pray for and speak encouragement into all united efforts and their innovators generously.

I suggest pastors' groups are a place for clarifying vision in a wide range of areas for the city and nation — but not for discussing it's management.

3. WE DEFER THE *MANAGEMENT* OF UNITY THINGS TO SEPARATE MEETINGS

With many things getting small mention, the reality that they cannot all be discussed is obvious. Where things are discussed, the time allocated will often need to be small. In short, I suggest pastors' groups are a place for clarifying vision in a wide range of areas for the city and nation — but not for discussing its management.

It is right that there is a high level of empowering, delegation and trust. This is how large churches, and larger organisations, manage what they manage!

Regarding united things — for which a pastors' group might be the primary connection point, we have to recognise that those in the room are already mostly senior leaders. It is therefore right that there is a high level of empowering, delegation and trust. This is how large churches, and larger organisations, manage what they manage!

To consider a scenario, if a larger number of churches are involved in a particular united effort, a temptation for those involved will be to bring their own managerial matters into the pastors' meeting. There is a natural human dynamic to this. In view of the limited time most pastors' groups have together, this generally needs to be avoided.

To consider an exception, some who oversee united ventures might be lacking in experience or confidence. It is therefore with a pastoral sense of care that exceptions might be allowed — to encourage, affirm or reassure a leader. They might be feeling insecure in their role, needing confirmation that the group is behind them, or unsure if they are truly entrusted to lead in a given area.

However, to the most part, pastors' group meetings will be meetings for senior leaders — each capable of 'holding a sword' and leading a charge into battle alone (David's Mighty Men — 2 Samuel 23). Vision needs to be made clear, while managerial matters are discussed separately.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PROCESSES *THAT MANY OF US FEEL INCLINED TO RESIST*

The Western Christian tradition has often been guilty of separating the 'sacred' from the 'secular'. In this thinking, prayer is 'spiritual', while human effort to achieve something is 'of the flesh.' While every church leader I've ever discussed this topic with can agree this separation isn't Biblical, I suggest the thinking it represents is embedded in our thinking.

Specifically, if we discuss the need for prayer — many are keen. However, if we discuss the need for strategy — many will withdraw, because it is seen as an 'effort of the flesh'.

I point out that 'administration' sits within the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12. Human ability and human effort is not 'of the flesh'. It is the attitude of the heart that determines the nature of an action!

Human ability and human effort is not 'of the flesh'. It is the attitude of the heart that determines the nature of an action

We need simple strategy!

Here is a simple approach that can catalyse life and innovation.

I refer us again to Chapter 12, which shows how the various things that exist in the united space could be highlighted, encouraged, prayed for and therefore helped, all in connection with a quarterly combined prayer gathering. Four gatherings a year isn't difficult in many places. Synching their timing with the four terms of the school year makes simple leadership sense. I see no simpler way of ensuring that a *vision* of what we might be responsible for together is kept before us all.

In case the point is missed, the purpose of the prayer gatherings is, therefore, not only the prayer. Through our words and prayers we are concurrently building the perspectives and vision of our people *to see the city!* We are also building relationships amongst ourselves. This becomes a platform for teamwork!

As a second step, the same areas mentioned for united prayer in each quarter of the year (Chapter 12) *could likewise be brought to a pastors' group meeting beforehand.* This might only need 10 minutes to achieve. The purpose could simply be to highlight a dozen ministries or people who are working in the selected spheres for that quarter — to encourage everyone with a vision of all that God's people are doing in the city. You then pray blessing on them together, while having raised awareness of these various efforts and people in the process.

The purpose could simply be to encourage everyone with a vision of all that God's people are doing in the city. Faith and vision for increased collaboration in service to the wider city (and nation) would result!

This would be catalytic. This would endear increased support for or favour toward these united things — even if only in small amounts.

This would likely draw out stories about other thing happening that were not mentioned too. Doing this would build a picture in the minds and hearts of the pastors of *all that we (the Church) are actually doing in this city.* This perspective would be transferred to their members through their words and attitudes. Faith and vision for increased collaboration in service to the wider city (and nation) would result!

IN SUMMARY

A pastors' meeting is unavoidably a 'hub' for the united efforts of the Church in each city and town. If certain things aren't considered by the pastors together, where else will they be considered?

In view of this, I suggest that the managing of necessary agenda in pastors' groups is a topic requiring more thought and discussion. This is especially true given the changes taking place amongst us, with an increased vision for unity, and regarding our potential united function.

The NZ Church is more united than many have realised. What churches are achieving together is amazing. We are concurrently in a season of change. Our unity is going to be more needed in our future than it has been in our past. Let's keep adapting — and let's keep this journey going!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A vocabulary we can agree upon

As a closing chapter for the book I'm delighted to share an articulation that I was unable to pen when first writing this book because of a lack of a shared vocabulary for unity things amongst our nation's churches.

The challenge came from the fact that our churches have historically talked very little about the dynamics of (united) Church leadership — as compared to (local) church leadership. Different church movements have also had different meanings for key 'leadership' words from the Scriptures — and some individuals have developed strong opinions on the meanings of specific words too.

Three years on, and with the thoughts of prior pages having been in discussion, that seems to have changed. The following is now a broadly representative vocabulary, and it will hopefully help this conversation about how we might better achieve our God-destined united function be engaged to a higher degree.

This chapter will therefore conclude this book with its originally intended explanation of the principles and boundaries by which our unity can become more functional. I suggest what is presented here is Biblical — but I have found that presenting this *without Biblical references or words* is necessary for the reasons noted above.

May Jesus continue to build his Church amongst us!

THE PURPOSE AND FUNCTION OF PASTORS' GROUPS

1. COFFEE UNITY

As articulated earlier in this book, the first purpose of a geographic pastors' group is relationship. These days, for humour, I call this coffee unity. Things move at the speed of trust.

2. PRAYER UNITY

However, the goal is not just relationship. Instead, it is that our hearts unite in love both for one another and the city or town we are all a part of. Beyond any need we might have ourselves, our desire is for the good of the whole community. In seeing a need, we therefore find ourselves uniting, for example, in prayer for the council (local Government), or regarding a community problem or issue etc. We become united in vision to see God work in the city or town as a whole.

3. FUNCTIONAL UNITY

As we pray, the thought arises: What could we do together here that we could not do apart? We find ourselves discovering fresh strategies that could make a difference, and that we're uniquely able to achieve *together*.

THREE QUESTIONS FOR PASTORS' GROUPS

QUESTION 1. WHAT COULD WE DO TOGETHER THAT WE COULD NOT DO APART?

This has been considered already.

I suggest this is the main question, or 'best starting question'.

However, there are times when the next two questions are also worthy of consideration.

QUESTION 2. WHAT COULD WE DO BETTER TOGETHER?

This is a far harder question because it requires Kingdom thinking. Beyond mere generosity, I suggest that true 'Kingdom thinking' is about self-sacrifice. For example, if one part of Christ's body serves with another — who gets the credit? Joining with some other churches 'for the greater good' might even be to the detriment of one church's independence and distinctiveness as a congregation. Will we do it? When, and why?

A simple story from a South Island church illustrates this principle well.

Unable to get a breakthrough in growth, a small church decided to close its doors. In doing so, they agreed together to all attend another church. *The reality — which I'm sure was not lost to them, was that there was actually no net loss in the Kingdom of God if they did this!*

Arriving at their new church they found that the regular roles of rostering, welcoming, worship leading, giving sermons, mowing lawns, doing accounts and preparing cups of tea were all taken — so they ran the youth group and started a couple of outreach ministries. The closing of the 'independent identity' of their 'church' now not only meant no net loss for the Kingdom; it had produced net gain!

We are five years on from this now — and I'm told by a leader in that church that these people are still the key leaders and initiators in the outreach ministries of that local church.

"...but wait — there's more!"

They still had a building. They offered its use to another church. Today that other church has grown — as has the church these people moved to join, and both churches are now embarking on building projects because they have both grown! So there is ‘net gain’ two times over!

When we partner with others behind a goal or endeavour we often sacrifice something. Sometimes what we sacrifice is who gets the credit — like when three churches get their youth to gather in one youth group, based in just one of the three churches. Sometimes, like in the above example, it is our very identity as a separate group. But of what importance is a local church’s name?

A congregation’s name and reputation in a community does have importance. The perception (‘brand identity’) people have of each local church does matter — because it is connected to the reputation of Jesus.

However, if we think it through, the separateness of each local church does not really matter. While there is nothing wrong with having different congregations — as they are like family units, their continued independence isn’t of high importance, as there is also only one Church in each city and town, right? This means the first question should be, “What is best for the Kingdom?”, not “What is best for my own local church?” This is why the second question of unity is so much harder than the first.

To put this differently, only two things really matter. People, and things that help people. A local congregation has value in as much as it is loving its people, while also helping other people. So, if we could achieve all this *and more* by uniting with others, that might be the right thing to do!

A hindrance to partnerships for some will relate to the heritage and history of their congregation. Shouldn’t we keep our local church alive “because it had an amazing call on it? We even ran a Sunday School of 300 back in the 1960s!” That story (history) is testimony, and it should be written down! Tell that story. Celebrate it. But the work of God in a prior era is no reason to maintain a work today. It is people, and things that help people, that

matter. The question today is, how could I serve Jesus best today? This takes courageous leadership.

So question 1 is, What could we do together that we could not do apart?

Question 2 is, What could we do better together? Here is question three.

QUESTION 3. WHAT COULD WE *BE* TOGETHER THAT WE COULD NOT *BE* APART?

With thanks to a friend for this articulation — the third question is a rephrasing of the first. What could we *be* together that we could not *be* apart? The answer is, ‘The creators of an environment, or culture, from which our *members* could become united!’ We could become the facilitators of united efforts *amongst our members* that go well beyond our own abilities or capacity as local church leaders!

As a statement, unity is not only for pastors; it’s for the Church. Unity is also not measured only by what the pastors do or facilitate together. It’s measured by the ability of Christians everywhere to work together when it counts. What I believe lies in front of us is a change in perspective through which we realise it’s time ‘to give unity back to our members’!

Unity is not measured only by what the pastors do or facilitate together. It’s measured by the ability of Christians everywhere to work together when it counts. The role of a local pastor is to create an environment out of which the members could be empowered and released to be all they could be for the Lord. This is likewise the role of pastors’ together in a city or town.

To illustrate: What is the role of a local pastor? Is it to be the CEO who knows about everything happening in that church to lead and manage it — or is it more about creating an environment out of which our members could be empowered and released to be all they could be for the Lord?

Most would agree it is the latter — in which case this is likewise the role of pastors’ together in a city or town! Our greatest function as a pastors’ group isn’t in what we lead as a group, but in what we enable our members to

achieve through their efforts and unity. Our role is to create the environment out of which they are released to unite together and innovate in their service to the Lord!

This highlights an important point regarding capacity, which we will come back to shortly. But first — boundaries.

BOUNDARIES FOR UNITED FUNCTION

I suspect one of the reasons many city and town pastors' groups historically reduced their purpose to 'just relationship' was because of bad experiences when people did bring agendas into the room. Because we had never (or rarely) discussed a framework for how we might discern what agendas should be in the room, nor the principles by which they would be managed, we were stuck. When agendas entered the room — they took over. People promoted their pet projects or initiatives — and the relational needs of the pastors stopped being met. Boundaries were broken, and trust undermined. The attendance began to decline as a result, until the group finally decided, 'No more agendas!' Two years later the attendance was back up again — and so the cycle would repeat. Many in ministry for a few decades will be able to attest to the reality of this cycle.

What may have been missing was *boundaries* suiting this level of united function! I suspect we hadn't yet sufficiently recognised the differences that exist between local church leadership and united Church leadership, and the principles and boundaries by which the latter works. Because these differences were not articulated, we had no framework together for the conversation, or for managing the challenges.

BOUNDARY #1. THERE IS NOTHING WRONG WITH INDEPENDENCE

If our starting question is, 'What could we do together that we could not do apart?', this immediately implies that there is nothing wrong with doing things apart.

Imagine a large church in a city *independently* running a city-wide event. They don't consult other churches. They don't invite ideas. They don't invite participation. They don't even invite donations. Instead, 'all by themselves' they get Council permission, invite guests, arrange facilities, venues and promotions — and then run it and pay for it. All we have to do is turn up with our friends and we find we're at an excellently run city-level programme that represents Christ well. So, are they independent in a way that is wrong?

We don't need unity
for unity's sake

I've illustrated likewise when speaking on this topic by referring to a TV outreach programme run out of one of our larger New Zealand churches. The programme is brilliant! It relates very well to non-believers. A programme like that could be a Church ministry run by a group of people from various churches — but in this case it's run and funded by one larger church. We thank God!

Boundary 1: There is nothing wrong with independence. We don't need unity for unity's sake! Nor do we even all need to be together in one place!

BOUNDARY #2. WE DON'T ALL HAVE TO

My easiest illustration is from a part of our own work — because to illustrate from someone else's work might be misunderstood. Do all churches have to help with the current annual 'Hope Project' national delivery of booklets to letterboxes? This certainly needs volunteers, right?

No, all churches don't have to help!

In fact, *none* have to!

None have to help financially either!

By being clear on these boundaries, we've been able to work with emotional freedom ourselves — while also enabling the freedom of others from any feeling of obligation coming from ourselves.

To push the illustration further, what if all the pastors in a city or town didn't want to help? This is a real scenario, so you know. I suggest the onus is back upon our teams to go to God about that, because God never made us the boss of any other person or church. God can make a way — and in these situations he has! This is about healthy boundaries!

The same value (or boundary) applies to every other initiative that desires to see churches working together. None have to participate — and none should be judged for not participating!

Boundary breaking in relation to this second boundary is where I suggest we have most often failed. Imagine a promotion of a proposed united effort to a group of pastors that incorrectly implies that everyone 'should'. Some agree to participate — while others don't. Those who don't participate feel pressure is being put on them to do so. Words carry an innuendo that criticises them for their 'lack of unity' with others. There is coercion!

Unity isn't uniformity!

When well-meaning people believe their thing is God's thing, they can inadvertently assume this means it should be everyone's thing. The tone of their words implies this. This is boundary-breaking. It betrays trust, and trust is foundational!

For a challenging example, consider a combined church prayer gathering is proposed. There is possibly nothing simpler and more compelling that we could be united in. I personally love these things too — but I suggest that it remains that churches do not have to unite in these. Remember, unity isn't uniformity!

To illustrate, consider the prayer style of these gatherings. Sometimes it is that of the more 'vibrant churches' — leaving those with a more traditional

We are united without ever meeting because we love the same God, read the same Bible, and are serving on the same mission! An approach to unity that is based in some idea that we're all supposed to come together in one place isn't what unity is about.

faith-style not feeling so comfortable. (Imagine the lights, the high volume that causes some old people to go outside during the worship in song, the enthusiastic yelling of praise to God, and everyone shouting out their prayers at once). Those churches then sometimes say the others should ‘get past the style differences’. There is some truth to this — and that is what makes it a dangerous argument because, ‘We don’t all have to!’

For a contrast, if the more traditional churches were organising the combined prayer gathering instead of the ‘more lively’ ones, and the prayer style was more formal and ‘subdued’, I wonder if the members of all those other ‘more lively’ churches really would attend, and keep attending. (Imagine a liturgical prayer service if that helps.)

The principle for united Church leadership is that God raises up different people at different times for different things.

This isn’t about right and wrong. Style differences exist — and ‘we don’t all have to!’ Consider this: We are united without ever meeting because we love the same God, read the same Bible, and are serving on the same mission! An approach to unity that is based in some idea that we’re all supposed to come together in one place isn’t what unity is about.

God’s Spirit can give his people the wisdom needed to work in unity in a city or nation — and all without any big gatherings in the picture!

Unity isn’t uniformity! We can be united without ever meeting. We can also work in unity in specific ways, and with great effect, all as the result of sensible strategies and simple communication lines — without ever meeting!

BOUNDARY #3. LEADERS ARE DISCERNED, NOT APPOINTED

Without use of Biblical terms, I suggest the principle for united Church leadership is that God raises up different people at different times for different things. The key here, as detailed earlier in this book, is that there is a difference in the way leadership works in a local church (small ‘c’), as compared to in the united Church (capital ‘C’).

The Book of Judges was the illustration earlier discussed. They had authority to appoint leaders in their tribes, and later in their cities. They did not, however, have authority to appoint a king. Only God would raise up a leader for the nation — when he wanted to. The onus was then upon the people to discern this, and God didn't always raise up the kind of people they expected (Ehud, Jephthah, Deborah, Samson, Gideon)!

People will rise to serve in various areas because they feel compelled to — and some of these will do so irrespective of whether they get paid or recognised. We need eyes to notice, and then to discern, and then to support if we feel God is up to something.

It is also possible that some might discern favour on one person, while others feel to support someone else. This could be God's purpose, rallying enough support to each, to enable what they have initiated. *This is how God works, and also how he could enable multiple citywide and national endeavours to come about and thrive at once!*

It is also possible that some might discern favour on one person, while others feel to support someone else. This could be God's purpose, rallying enough support to each, to enable multiple citywide and national endeavours to come about and thrive at once!

Ironically, without these good boundaries, the efforts of those who are pursuing unity can be the undoing of it!

God raises different people up at different times for different things!

Remember — we love the same God, read the same Bible, and serve on the same mission. Unity isn't uniformity. We are united without even meeting!

There is nothing wrong with independence.

We don't all have to.

Leadership is discerned, not appointed.

...and this is important because, ironically, without these good boundaries, the efforts of those who are pursuing unity can be the undoing of it!

SO, HOW MANY DO WE NEED TO GATHER TOGETHER FOR A THING?

I suggest the answer is ‘enough’!

This is a simple, but important, understanding.

Most united things only require a small portion of our people — and if we can really grasp this, a revelation awaits us regarding our capacity!

I am yet to discover any combined church effort in a place that really did need everyone to unite together. Most united things only require a small portion of our people — and if we can really grasp this, a revelation awaits us regarding our capacity! Meanwhile, it remains a temptation for all who promote an idea in the unity space to infer that ‘everyone needs to come

together’. Let’s be aware of this, because everyone doesn’t have to!

A FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING A UNITED VISION

To bring simple application to these boundaries for enabling united function, I see two key dynamics in connection with things that seem to gain favour with many pastors’ groups:

(i) **The approach was non-coercive and open-handed**

Because involvement is requested not demanded, boundaries respected, and approaches empowering, no one feels manipulated or coerced, there is no reaction against the idea — which means the idea gets considered.

(ii) **The goal was sensible**

What is proposed meets a need, and in a sensible way. It is useful, simple and empowering.

Sometimes a proposed goal isn't sensible or considered necessary in the way a person is suggesting — so churches don't support it. There can be many factors behind this.

Sometimes the approach of a person proposing a collaborative effort is coercive, maybe pursuing uniformity — so churches walk away. If we respect healthy boundaries, and take care with our words, it pulls people together.

In summary of boundaries, it is of note that emotionally healthy people gravitate toward emotionally healthy environments. As we increase the emotional health of our unity, through an active pursuit of healthy boundaries together, levels of participation with united things will increase!

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NEW LENS #1: THE CAPACITY OF OUR MEMBERS WHEN TOGETHER

How much might the members of our churches be capable of beyond what they already give in our local churches?

The capacity God's people have for bringing leadership to Kingdom things is probably far, far greater than all the leadership effort currently exhibited by God's people in recognised positions and roles inside our various congregations. To put that differently, there might be more Kingdom-leadership potential sitting in the memberships of our local churches than there is involved in the leadership teams of our local churches!

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What if we could release more of our members to *their* thing, and their ministry — *in collaboration with others*? New innovation ‘for the city’ is the answer!

The current annual Hope Project booklet delivery at Easter is a useful starting illustration.

8 years ago many pastors’ groups did not consider a volunteer delivery possible. Today a national volunteer delivery is being achieved each year, and we’re all discovering together that it’s simpler than we first realised. A city of 130 churches like Tauranga might have 34,000 eligible letterboxes for the booklets. We now know this only needs about 150 volunteers. If 15 churches are involved, that’s only 8 to 10 volunteers per church.

10 volunteers is not even everyone in one church small group!

So, do all the churches really need to unite for this? If we have united hearts, and some communication lines amongst us, what is our capacity really?

CAP (Christians Against Poverty) Debt Centres have spread nationally. These are run by people who are good at math — and good with people. These people aren’t always from the same local church. This is the body of Christ ‘working as one’ — and the pastor doesn’t have to be busied by these Debt Centres. Competent members can run them!

Pregnancy Choice Centres (or similar) are now spreading in our nation too. These are supported by people who have a passion to support young mums and their families through pregnancies where they can. Take a few people from a few churches, and it’s done! (Pastors can facilitate the connections between their members, but don’t need to be busied by these).

Te Hāhi is a ministry maybe similar to victim support (for a simple way of explaining it). This is now spreading from city to city, usually run by people with a heart for social justice and a desire to help people in their moment of need. Again, if 5 or 8 churches are involved, *it’s actually only about 5 people from each of those churches who are involved*. This is a remarkable illustration of our capacity when working together — because this ministry takes a lot

of effort. However, it doesn't need busy pastors. There are people in our churches with a heart for social justice, who consider the opportunity to help people in their moment of need a privilege!

Then consider various types of Chaplaincy. How much capacity is not yet tapped for this within our congregations — in service to schools, work places, rest homes, prisons and more?

Bible in Schools (now called Launchpad) is a united effort — and it's amazing to think of the numbers of teachers who have been going into schools right across the nation in service to this vision! These volunteer teachers also connect stories about Jesus with more people than many churches do — which is worthy of our notice. What is encouraging and needs noting is that these teachers are our people — and it only takes a few of them working together to connect with every school!

Then consider combined youth group events, combined food banks or op shops, counselling centres, combined Alpha courses or marriage courses or parenting courses, and more — run as the result of people from different churches coming together to serve in their areas of specialised interest or gifting.

Now imagine if all the above were happening in every city and town. Would the pastors' group be overwhelmed? My suggestion is that these things are possible, concurrently, in many places — and no one need be overwhelmed!

Pastors are informing their members of things that are happening or possible in their cities, and then releasing them to unite together in their various areas of interest and influence. This is what is releasing this otherwise-untapped capacity!

If we only function with the resources of one congregation, the limits of what we can do are very different to what is possible when we view ourselves together. If we also limit our capacity to what our pastors can personally lead

— it will be considerably limited. However, if we can release the leadership capacity of our members, we'll quickly see that we have more capacity than we realised!

How could we begin to release the people in our churches with 'specialist' interests to unite together more for our city? The starting key is our enabling of information and communication lines! We share vision — and this is why the managerial practices discussed in Chapters 12 and 14 are so vital! The leadership approaches shared are important — because they will be catalytic!

Right now, as an encouragement, we are seeing many of the above ministries coming about in many places concurrently. This is an evidence of the amazing job many of our pastors are doing in building a united perspective in their people. *They are informing their members of things that are happening or possible in their cities, and then releasing them to unite together in their various areas of interest and influence. This is releasing an otherwise-untapped capacity!*

NEW LENS #2: THE POTENTIAL OF 'IN UNISON' APPROACHES TO UNITY

If releasing members to unite is one approach to releasing more of our capacity, another is what I call 'in unison' approaches to unity.

Habits create culture. So what if 1000 or more pastors were to unite in certain habits — with the goal of generating a national effect or change? This is a specific area of our work, with ongoing encouragements related to about 15 such habits currently in play, with an estimated 200 to 1500 churches applying each habit their own way. (None are accountable to us in any of their applications).

For example, to see Christians engaging more in witness, and with public issues, what if we all preached an annual sermon series on 'The Conversational Skills of Jesus' — or similar. If messages were reinforced through small groups, we'd have tens of thousands (and then possibly hundreds of thousands) finding new confidence and wisdom to engage in conversations like Jesus, and even in hostile environments! Various key leaders would, in time, become

passionate about this matter also — and then promote it on their various other platforms. We could build a culture amongst us of wise and proactive conversational engagement. This would make a difference — and has been significantly achieved in recent years, even though many are not aware it is happening, as a united effort. Hundreds of leaders (and more) are intentionally engaged in their own way, each being entirely self-motivated — but all pointing in the same direction!

What if, in view of public media bias, pastors not only connected their members with access to a balance of information so they could consider two sides of a matter (like e-updates from Family First, NZ Christian Network and others), but also preached three times annually on a current issue? Many apparently don't do this yet. Some topics would admittedly need preaching with care. (The 'conversational skills for hostile environments' mentioned earlier might be wise for use in the pulpit in some cases.) However, we really could build a *culture* amongst ourselves in which our members seek out truth, and then engage wisely — because they are both informed and conversationally equipped! This is significant — *and 1500 pastors embracing habits like these in a small nation like New Zealand could enable changes that are felt nationally!*

The point is that, without need for uniformity or anything 'big', and without need for any extra programmes, we can achieve national objectives together by simply working 'in unison' toward common goals!

Our capacity — if we have communication lines amongst us that connect us with habits or ideas that are sensible, meaningful and realistic for the goal, is truly enormous!!!

The point is that, without need for uniformity or anything 'big', and without need for any extra programmes, we can achieve national objectives together by simply working 'in unison' toward common goals!

Unity is for God's people, and church leaders have a role to play.

IN SUMMARY

Unity is for God's people, and church leaders have a role to play.

Pastors' groups are unavoidably a central 'communications hub' for the wider work of God's Church in each city and town. Yet, the key isn't in pastors being busy. It is instead in what they can enable together that they could not enable apart!

I pray that the thoughts and strategic keys in these pages will bring freedom, and prove to be catalytic.

*May we 'stand firm in one Spirit,
striving together as one for the faith of the gospel...'
(Philippians 1:27-28).*
