



## LEADING IN A NEW SPACE: PART 1

### INTRODUCTION: A REFOUNDING PROJECT?

In 2018 the two of us published *Practices for the Refounding of God's People: The Missional Challenge of the West*.<sup>[1]</sup> In that book we proposed that Euro-tribal churches<sup>[2]</sup> had largely failed to grasp the missiological analysis Lesslie Newbigin had offered and, therefore, failed to grasp the nature of the missional engagement needed in a rapidly unraveling West. Since that time, the analysis we offered in that book has proven unsettlingly accurate. COVID intervened in our lives in painful ways. Even as COVID continues to ravage and challenge congregations and leaders, what is becoming clear is that the anxiety, distress and concern being experienced by leaders comes from the growing awareness that COVID has been both covering up and accelerating the unraveling of life for Euro-tribal churches. We are in a new missional situation in which existing forms of congregational life are simply incapable of addressing our condition. In 2018 we wrote about this unraveling and the need for a *refounding* project

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for both congregations and leadership. This series of essays looks at where we are as congregations and their leadership.

## **WE'VE ENTERED A WORLD WE'VE NOT SEEN BEFORE**

These long, disruptive months have been more than a hiatus, a hard-pandemic space that will soon rectify itself. Many in the churches sense that we're facing something more challenging than managing congregations through a pandemic. This is apparent in the responses to these times. We're seeing, for example, an increasing number of posts from pastors expressing relief and joy at being able to get back to 'preaching'. That's how they describe their feelings of relief - they're back in the pulpit preaching. It is as if this is giving them back some sense of security, that their lives can, in fact, go back to the normal for which they were trained. This is troubling. We aren't going back to that kind of world. There are other signs. Increasing numbers of leaders are cashing out. They're done with 'ministry' because they know things aren't going back to normal. We have moved into a world we've never seen before and we're not prepared.

We are also becoming aware that the systems and institutions we've inherited were never designed to address what we have to confront at this time. Global warming is no longer the crazy idea of marginal people, but an existential crisis. This is making us anxious and unsure about what it all will mean or what to do. Over the summer of 2021, Europe and North America experienced unprecedented climate events in the forms of devastating floods, relentless droughts, unheard of heat waves, and fires consuming great tracts of forest. The far north and high mountains saw rapid glacial melting. These 'abnormal' events are now normal. What were rare, one-in-a-hundred-year events are happening almost every year. We're awakening to the reality that our world is changing in unprecedented ways and we are woefully unprepared for what lies at our doorsteps. These threats to our ways of life mean huge changes to how we live but we don't know how to go about such transformations.

Illustrations aren't difficult to find. In late summer, states around the Gulf of Mexico entered hurricane season. Like Louisiana, they live with the memory of Katrina (2005), a category 5 hurricane that killed many while devastating property and infrastructure. Katrina showed that state and national systems created to address such disasters couldn't deal with the scaling up and frequency of hurricanes in an era of climate change. Something new had come and no one was prepared. This summer it was Ida, the second most destructive hurricane in US history. It blew in off the Gulf slamming into New Orleans, devastating communities, moving across the south to roar up the Atlantic seaboard to New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and further north.

It is not unusual for hurricanes, losing force, to bring heavy rains as they move up the Atlantic coast. This time was different. The flooding was catastrophic. Millions of people saw their homes under water and electrical systems devastated. Deaths were high. Storms like Ida would have been an exception forty years ago, now they come with a fearful regularity. Even experts on climate modelling (foretelling what might happen) were unprepared. Tripti Bhattacharya, an assistant professor of earth and environmental science at Syracuse University (NY) stated in a National Public Radio (NPR) interview:

'We are moving into a world we've never seen.'<sup>[3]</sup> As if echoing that sense, the Governor of New Jersey made a stunning observation about the systems that undergird the state's sewage and water systems. He was clear - in this catastrophe, the water and sewage systems did exactly what they were designed to do. They worked. The problem, he said, is that they were designed for, and built, a hundred years ago. They were built for a world that doesn't exist anymore. We are entering a world we've not seen. These infrastructures and systems cannot handle the world we've entered. This is also what is happening to our churches - our congregations and their leaders.

## CONGREGATIONS AND LEADERS CONFRONT A PARALLEL SITUATION

*... what we face today is not a set of discrete problems...but a systemic challenge arising from a pervasive invisible ideology. The problem is not just in one program or application but in the operating system itself. It is almost impossible for us to conceive that we are in the midst of a legitimation crisis in which our deepest systemic assumptions are subject to dissolution.*<sup>[4]</sup>

Over the months of COVID, as congregations and their leaders have travelled through difficult landscapes, there has been little time to pause and grasp what is happening. The assumption is that our tiredness and disorientation has been caused by COVID. Many believed this would pass and we could return to some sense of normal. The predictions of six months ago now seem hopelessly out of touch. Proposals for how to break the 'code' of ministry in the 21st century or make churches 'future proof' now seem absurd. We're tired. We're confused about how to lead in a time that has suddenly come upon us. Like leaders who are asking why climate events are coming at us so quickly and with such devastation, church leaders are asking what is happening and what they are to do. Most of the proposals we are offered are about how to fix our existing institutions and make them work again. Such tactics woefully miss the mark. We can no longer manage our way out of this situation. It is not possible to 'fix' or renew the forms of church life we have inherited from the 20th century because they were never designed to engage the world we are entering.

## LEADERS

It is not because of COVID that clergy are without bandwidth. COVID has exposed more fundamental issues. The forms of leadership still offered to serve our congregations cannot help us engage this moment. Both congregations and the type of leaders our clergy training systems and denominations have shaped, need to be refounded. As the structures and narratives of Euro-tribal churches unravel, we're trying to address this from inside systems designed for the realities of the 20th century. Leaders are working frantically to manage institutions for which they were trained but never designed for times these. Trying to manage our way back to some previous *normal* is killing us. This pivotal moment will be squandered if we focus our energies on questions of returning to in-person worship (or not), restarting programs or determining what kind of 'hybrid' church we'll be. These are the 'pipes and drains' questions of a previous age.

Recently, Martin reflected on some of the transformations that reshaped leadership ('ministry') through the 20th and into the 21st century. His father trained for the 'ministry' shortly after the end of World War 2. It was a time of rising confidence as the combatants in the war worked to rebuild their economies and their societies. All across western Europe and North America churches shared in a broader societal sense of rebuilding. Churches were fairly full, the number of candidates for ministry were rising, missions such as the Billy Graham crusades in the UK met with surprising success. Most nations in western Europe and North America spoke confidently about their identity as 'Christian' nations. The future looked promising. 'Ministry' for his father and most clergy was viewed as a vocation. The key requirements were to preach well, lead meetings, engage in pastoral visitation and participate in chaplaincies of various kinds in a range of civic institutions. Ministers tended to have a study rather than an office.

By the time Martin entered ministry in the early 1970s, the situation of the churches had changed dramatically. The 1960s had witnessed a degree of secularism that had pushed the churches to the margins of society. Many mainline churches were now in significant decline. 'Ministry' had become highly professionalised. It was not so much a vocation as a career and that required ministers to acquire a range of qualifications and skills in such areas as counselling, evangelism, management and conflict resolution. The study was now an office.

When Martin began to train the next generation of potential ministers at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the ground was shifting again. In the UK and Europe, Christendom had not only disappeared but the West had become a mission field requiring a completely different set of gifts and skills from that of the professional pastor with an M. Div. or D. Min. At the same time, the West was experiencing significant migrations from other lands. Now there was the presence of many world faiths which were becoming deeply rooted in western soil. An aspect of this transformation was that many growing churches were comprised of migrants from the global south.

Similar kinds of shifts were happening to North American congregations. As these shifts were happening and anxieties were growing about the decline of Christian identity, there remained a default sense that the institutions and systems needed only to be fixed or adjusted to address this new situation. The generations of leaders formed in the 70s forward were still captivated by the defaults of management. This professionalized clergy industry still remains the norm. While there is a growing sense that something very deep and basic is awry with congregational systems and the forms of leadership that service them, the conviction remains that management, technique and adjustment will save the day.

An emerging generation is turning in a different direction. There is less and less desire to commit a life to the denominational and congregational systems of the 20th century. Many are no longer seeing full time, professionalized clergy as a viable way of forming and leading God's people. These generations are looking for ways of calling forth new forms of congregational life and asking questions of what constitutes a church. The question of how to participate with the

mission of God in one's context (parish, neighbourhood) is a widespread concern.

These shifts, however, are accompanied by the accelerating decline of many churches. Pope Francis has been widely quoted as commenting that we are not so much in an '[Era of Change as a Change of Era](#).' The extent of these challenges is more than many in ministry can bear. Full time paid ministry may well be in question. The shape of a new leadership is not clear. How do we hear the Spirit in this 'Change of Era' about leadership, its shape and its task?

[1] Alan J. Roxburgh and Martin Robinson, *Practices for the Refounding of God's People: The Missional Challenge of the West* (New York: Church Publishing, 2018).

[2] That is the churches which can be traced back to the ethnic and religious identities of the fifteenth and sixteenth century reformations.

[3] NPR, "Why Ida Hit the Northeast so Hard, 1,000 Miles Away from its Landfall" *NPR website*, September 3, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/03/1034058911/hurricane-ida-climate-change-northeast-flooding-rainfall?t=1633874910977> Last accessed 10<sup>th</sup> October 2021.

[4] Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale, 2018) 179-180.



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