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essentials

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THE FUTURE OF THE PARISH

This edition of Essentials is focussed on this pressing question. In it we explore a range of dimensions to this big question. As we all know things aren't all that great in many, many, parishes. Given the Anglican Church is structured around the parish what might the future look like. I have previously written in Essentials about the forthcoming Great Collapse in the Autumn 2023 Edition.

There are lots of great articles here and all is not gloom and doom. Alongside of the many struggling churches there are lots of great stories of renewal and change in lots of different contexts. In this edition we feature a Diocesan perspective as well as a look at a range of models of what's happening on the ground.

We recently held the National Evangelical Anglican Conference in Sydney. It was a wonderful Conference, and we were greatly blessed by the ministry of Rev Charlie Skrine from All Soul's Langham Place as our international guest speaker. We hope to feature some of the talks in future editions.

STEPHEN HALE, LOCATION, EDITOR

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What is EFAC?

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1. To promote the ultimate authority, the teaching and the use of God's written word in matters of both faith and conduct.
2. To promote this biblical obedience particularly in the areas of Christian discipleship, servant leadership, church renewal, and mission in the world.
3. To foster support and collaboration among evangelical Anglicans throughout Australia.
4. To function as a resource group to develop and encourage biblically faithful leadership in all spheres of life.
5. To provide a forum, where appropriate: a) for taking counsel together to develop policies and strategies in matters of common concern b) for articulating gospel distinctives in the area of faith, order, life and mission by consultations and publications.
6. To promote evangelism through the local church and planting new congregations.
7. To coordinate and encourage EFAC branches/groups in provinces or dioceses of the Anglican Church in Australia.

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Parish Renewal in Tasmania

RICHARD CONDIE

The Anglican Church has for a long time held an audacious aspiration to reach the whole world with the gospel through the Parish system. Dividing up a diocese into a patchwork of joined geographic units, so that everywhere was “someone’s responsibility” has been a remarkable vision. It demonstrates a gospel commitment to the world, not just to the faithful who gather in church buildings each Sunday.

In Tasmania this has been a such a gift. Someone is looking out for people’s spiritual welfare in the remote and sparsely populated regions of the west coast, just as much as the battler suburbs of northern Hobart. But the traditional model of the Parish, with the priest dispensing the weekly word and sacraments and expecting people to come is not a model that meets the mission needs of the 21st Century.

The Diocese of Tasmania began to change when John Harrower was elected bishop in 2000 with much innovation in mission. More recently we have tried to meet this challenge by adopting a new Vision to be a *church for Tasmania, making disciples of Jesus*. The traditional parish patchwork is being transformed, as we rethink how Parishes go about their life and ministry. Here are the principles that have guided us over the last 8 years.

CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

The first thing we did was set clear expectations. Our 2017 Vision expected every Parish to work on seven areas. Each parish was to have:

- active disciple-making pathways – because we needed a clear plan for how people came from “no faith” to be mature followers of Jesus,
- active ministry to young people and families – as we know most people come to faith before adulthood,
- transformative public worship aimed at discipling – because church services should serve our main purpose,
- a transparent culture of safety for all – because everyone is valued,
- avenues of intentional prayer – as it is foundational to mission,



Richard Condie

pictured

- a commitment to world mission – because it is the best indicator of local mission,
- and leadership from well-trained biblically orthodox clergy.

We do all of this in relationship with our agencies like Anglicare and BCA, our schools, and chaplaincy teams in hospitals and prisons.

These expectations drive the conversations we have with our Rectors, their Parish Councils and incumbency committees. Being clear about what we expect helps us to focus resources and training. The priority of disciple-making has become the heartbeat of parish and diocesan life. Rectors working at revitalisation along these lines are encouraged to spend 50% of their time working on new things.

TRAINING IN DISCIPLE-MAKING

It would be unfair to set expectations without providing people with the knowledge and skill about how to do it. We have invested heavily in training and development for both clergy and lay people. All ministry leaders are in development cohorts according to their stage of ministry – the newly ordained, new rectors, senior leaders, chaplains and so on. This helps us target training to the right needs. All the ministry leaders gather twice a year for input as a whole leadership community.

We also hold an annual Bishop’s Training Event. 400-500 Anglicans gather to explore different aspects of disciple-making and receive practical training in the areas listed above. These days are a highlight of diocesan life.

INVESTING IN OPPORTUNITIES



So often in the church our best resources get spent on solving problems and dealing with conflict and difficulty. We decided to put our best resources into opportunities and growth, and this has become the sole focus of our Director of Ministry Development. This has led to a multiplication of innovation and growth. In the same way, the stance of the whole diocesan team is to support parishes, and enable partnerships where ministry is prioritised.

FUNDING FULL-TIME MINISTRY

We know that disciples are made by word and prayer. Under God we know that this depends in large part on the quality of the ministers that lead our Parishes. Over the last 8 years we have used our New Ministry Development Fund (built up from a percentage of the proceeds of property sales) to help eight parishes move from part-time or volunteer ministry to full-time stipends. It has been so encouraging to appoint full-time ministers to Parishes for the first time in over 20 years. Our hope is that with focussed ministry from well-trained clergy these parishes will see revitalisation. We are seeing some encouraging signs.

FOCUS RESOURCES

We didn't really plan it this way, but the crisis of having to fund redress for sexual abuse has helped us focus our resources. In 2018 our decision to sell church properties to raise the necessary funds, providentially led to reducing the number of church centres in our rural Parishes which in turn has led to more sustainable Parish life. One Parish has reduced nine centres down to two and is now able to focus on its mission. The reduction of maintenance on buildings and the release of capital to support ministry has meant the expansion of real ministry in many places.

NEW MODELS OF MINISTRY

We have also explored new models for Parish ministry. In very small communities we have adopted a "community ministry" model led by local lay people, with occasional visits from clergy for the sacraments. One of these, on the idyllic Flinders Island, enjoys clergy coming to visit, where we supply a house and car in exchange for some Sunday ministry.

We have developed two "network parishes" where several parishes have been combined under one parish council, Rector, and leadership team, while retaining local ministry in different communities. This has the advantage of united vision, centralised administration, team leadership, but targeted engagement in each centre.



Some of our larger parishes have developed partnerships with smaller parishes to provide encouragement and support. In one place the Rector of the larger parish meets regularly with the Rectors of three smaller parishes for prayer and mutual encouragement. The larger parish sends a team once a month to help with music and children's ministry.

CHURCH PLANTING

Lastly, we are working on congregation and church planting through our "Multiply Tas" team. With the help of City to City Australia, we have started a couple of new congregations in existing parishes and plans are afoot to plant new churches in the centre and northern suburbs of Hobart. Multiplication and innovation to make disciples is our goal.

We want to be a *church for Tasmania, making disciples of Jesus*, by reimagining parish structures in a variety of ways fit for a new generation of mission.

Richard Condie has been the Bishop of Tasmania since 2016.



The Compliance Crunch

MATT WILLIAMS

“The system is breaking. Let it break. Your first job is to ensure it doesn’t break you. Then stick around to help us build the new one.”

It seems a bit pompous to begin an article quoting myself, but I do so to illustrate that this has been going on for some time.

Back when the Diocese of Melbourne invested in a solid program for equipping new Priests-in-Charge of parishes (EPIC) they used to invite me back for some frank talk with my colleagues. I always said something along these lines.

Let it break. Your first job is to ensure it doesn’t break you.

The overall structure of our church is not fit for purpose. In many ways, we still have a nineteenth-century structure attempting to satisfy twenty-first century compliance demands. The inevitable result of this is a failure to comply, massive inefficiencies in resource allocation, and the burnout of many of those trying to hold things together in the interim with string and spreadsheets.

Let it break. Your first job is to ensure it doesn’t break you.

We should notice that we’re not alone here. This issue is not peculiar to the church. It’s a widespread problem in professional vocations – education, health, and social workers are all drowning in it, vocationally disoriented, burning out, and leaving in droves.

The whole approach of society to risk is to imagine that everything could have been prevented if only another piece of paper had been filled out. So, each time something goes wrong somewhere sometime; the paperwork and mental load is increased for everyone everywhere all the time.

This is unsustainable. Something bigger must come eventually, in the break of this whole system and the approach of our society to risk management. The pendulum is swinging to maximal red tape.

Let it break. Your first job is to ensure it doesn’t break you.

And yet, the problem in the church is worse. Because even if that pendulum swings back to a reasonable centre, our structures are still not fit for purpose.



Matt Williams

pictured

Let us speak frankly, for the time is short. These are our problems:

1. We do not have an alignment of responsibility, visibility, and capacity to act.
2. We cannot create that alignment with a heavily decentralised system, which is what we have.
3. Parishes do not trust the centre enough to allow it to centralise.
4. The centre does not have the visibility of the parishes to centralise competently.
5. Therefore the work of bearing responsibility is shafted onto vicars; the work of being the conduit of visibility is shafted onto vicars; and all expectations of action are shafted onto vicars.
6. Vicars have not been selected or trained for anything like that skill set.

These are problems which have proved intractable for a long time. This is not something solved by pat answers, like “just preach the gospel”. We need strategic managerial reform, because bad management hinders gospel preaching. We need, in a word, *centralisation*.

But can we trust our centre to competently centralise? From a long history of past performance and false starts, not really.

To break this impasse, we need to solve the fourth problem, and then use that to solve the third. We need to engineer systems that build visibility of parish life to the centre. Then – and only then - parishes should hand the centre trust to take over safety, compliance and property



management tasks based upon that visibility. If the centre can truly see them, we might believe they can actually do them, and let go.

The order is important. Centralising before visibility will fail to solve the problem and damage trust further, because the centre will be working blind, and we will both fall into a pit.

If we can achieve those two things, building a virtuous circle of central competence and parish trust, a world of good can break out. Management tasks will disappear from vicar's heads, they will be vocationally realigned, spend more time on the things they are trained for and passionate about, and more missionally effective.

The people responsible for things will be able to see if they are actually doing them right down to the parish level, through a series of reports.

And so responsibility, visibility, and capacity to act will belong to the same people, those people will be selected and trained for those tasks, and they won't be the vicars.

That's the dream. But the reality will be bumpier than that. Real people doing real jobs make real mistakes. Parishes are notoriously suspicious of giving up power. And this is definitely that.

But it's the only way out. We must support and encourage the centralisation of safety, compliance and property management tasks – even if our own parish can currently do it better than the centre.

We must encourage and honour those doing the slog work of compliance for us, not allowing them to be invisible.

We must use our power to strengthen others, rather than to think of our power as something to be grasped.

Huh. Sounds like someone else I know. Perhaps the solution lies in preaching the gospel after all.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus... Philippians 2:5

Rev'd Canon Matt Williams is the Vicar at St James' Old Cathedral, Melbourne West





The future of multi-site churches

JAMES HORNBY

I landed in Launceston in 2017 to begin as Rector of St John's and joined a Diocese that has an incredible vision 'to be a Church for Tasmania making disciples of Jesus.' My problem wasn't 'what'; it was 'how'. How would we take that vision and, under God, attempt to see that come to pass in our little neck of the woods? It became clear we weren't alone in that wondering. Nine other Anglican churches across greater Launceston were wrestling with the same. That's right, ten Anglican churches across a regional city. Where I'm from, given the population, that sounded like a lot. And these other nine, like us, were largely struggling to reach people with the good news of Jesus. Faithful in worship. Absent (almost) in mission, Struggling with discipleship. I'm sure not an isolated story.

A year later, I'd been meeting with a small group of visionary, strategic Anglicans, representing several churches and an idea emerged. What if we came together? Our collective response was 'Impossible!' If there's one thing true about Tasmania, it's how parochial we are. But the idea wouldn't go away. A nurse doing her PhD offered us the latest demographic data from her research, and the idea began to take shape. I met with all the local clergy, and together, choosing to put aside any differences for the sake of the Kingdom, we developed a strategic approach to future Anglican ministry in Launceston and surrounds. This strategy rested on forming two multi-church networks centred around the two city churches – Holy Trinity and St John's. Developing a strategy and implementing it are two very different propositions, and the journey of how it came to be, would be an article in its own right, but in October 2018, the Parish of St John's and the Parish of St Peter's merged together to form the All Saints Network, in 2019 a third parish joined and in 2020 a fourth and final parish joined the mix. In 2024, as of writing, the All Saints Network is a multi-church network comprising four churches and six congregations.

Multi-site churches and multi-church networks have been around for a long time. Anglicans are pretty late to the game – after all, we have our ecclesiastical structures, and they've served us well for centuries, except perhaps they're not serving us so well anymore. What if the future flourishing of the Anglican church requires us to deliberately move beyond the traditional parish model, or at least intentionally make space for other forms? Again, even within Anglican circles, we see larger and established



James Hornby

pictured

exemplars of this; Holy Trinity Network in South Australia and City on A Hill come to mind. What makes the All Saints Network a little different is that it has occurred in a regional/rural setting where it's often tougher going for clergy and their congregations than those who live in the big cities. I think the future of the Anglican church must increasingly and deliberately encourage the forming of multi-church networks, from establishing networks of micro/house churches through to the coming together of established, viable parishes.

So, what have I learned from my experience? What do I wish I'd known before we started? What are some of the challenges and benefits that have emerged over the last five years?

This could be a long list, so let me summarise.

Firstly, the process is longer and more challenging than you think it will be. In 2019, I visited England to gain insights from those in similar rural contexts, and I returned with two truths from other team leaders. 1. Networks work, and 2. It takes about ten years. Five years into our journey, I can attest to both. We've transitioned from 'formation' to 'consolidation,' and we are still figuring out how to 'work.' This has included a change in our staffing structure, which was a difficult decision. We still have a way to go, and we have only begun to see the benefits in the last year and a half. I'm hopeful that we will shift into 'flourishing' over the next two or three years. Change is always challenging, and we are not just talking about moving a pulpit. So, holding a long-term vision and being prepared to persevere through it is crucial. Secondly, it needs to emerge at a local level, not as an alien imposition. Bishops need to bless and support, not direct. Equally, the research would indicate that geographically and demographically discrete areas will be most amenable.



The old adage, ‘the right thing at the wrong time is the wrong thing,’ holds true. What might make sense strategically can still be practically and symbolically fraught, so patiently pray and wait for the opportunity to present.

Ongoing challenges include the push and pull of having a singular network vision and the need for individual expression and autonomy. This includes balancing the needs of every church against limited resources and being prepared to make tough decisions. The big heading would be ‘increased complexity.’ This challenges and stretches you and your team to grow as leaders, and not every leader will have the capacity to get there. For me personally, and our particular expression of multi-church, I have found consistent, clear communication to be an ongoing challenge. The other challenge for me has been flexibility. We are not as nimble as a network as we were when we were just a single church, which can test your patience in the face of challenges. Also, I was so fixed on the ministry side that it was a bit of a shock to discover that our administrative systems no longer sufficed. That has taken time to redevelop and probably circles back around to the challenge of communication.

Ministry is tough. It was for the Apostle Paul, and it still is in 2024. In case it isn’t clear – multi-site churches/multi-church networks are not a silver bullet. They do not replace the faithful proclamation of the gospel, a commitment to discipleship and ‘Christian social liturgy’ (doing good as Christians in the public square). But they do offer some tangible benefits that make going the distance that little bit easier.

So why do it? What have been the benefits? The slogan we used for the first few years was simply ‘better together.’ And that’s the biggest benefit. There’s something about people and churches belonging to something bigger than ourselves, pointing us to the kingdom of God while facilitating a sense of belonging and co-participation that you don’t always feel at an ecumenical or diocesan level.

At a strategic level, one of our core values for coming together as a network was that we might be able to enable ministry in gospel-poor areas. One of our churches is in a town of 4000 people, where no other Anglican church exists. This church is not financially viable and would struggle to exist on its own. As a network, we are able to resource this church and trust that the ongoing, faithful proclamation of the gospel will bear fruit. This principle works itself out in our other churches.

As a network, we employ a youth worker who runs a network-wide youth ministry. This means that any family

with teenagers that turn up to one of our churches can connect straight in with a youth group. This wouldn’t be possible otherwise, and this kind of representation speaks to many of the benefits of churches coming together. This also speaks to another advantage of multi-church networks, reserved usually only for the largest of churches, that of specialisation. Having people equipped and experienced in specific forms of ministry – whether youth or evangelism or discipleship or whatever your specific ministry needs are.

Personally, the biggest benefit is that I get to work in a team. I have colleagues and friends in the trenches with me, and we can (and do) support each other when we inevitably go through difficult seasons of life and ministry. Even though our theological colleges still tend to prepare ministers for solo ministry, the benefits of teamwork are well-documented, as are the dangers of isolation in ministry.

Would I do it all again? Well, we’re not there yet, but yes, I would. Our hope turned out to be a truth. We are better together. It’s been hard work, but the benefits for us have been clear. We celebrate the ‘wins’ together and mourn the losses. We cover for each other and are in it together. All the while engaging with worship and mission in ways that we couldn’t have dreamed of if we’d chosen to stay separate. I’m grateful for the vision and courage of both laity and clergy, who were willing to sacrifice and change in the face of significant challenges. It’s amazing what God can do when you don’t care who gets the credit. I look forward to seeing how it continues to unfold.

James Hornby is Lead Minister of the All Saints Network





Writing The Future of the Parish in Growing Country Towns

TRACY LAUERSEN



Tracy Lauersen

pictured

I led a parish in a country town in Victoria from 2018-2023. I loved it. It was a growing tree-change town an hour from Melbourne off the Monash motorway in Gippsland. Originally a wealthy dairy farming and regional hub, it was experiencing something of an identity change as the dairy farmers sold off and as young families bought up plots of land, city professionals sought an alternative lifestyle on hobby farms and retirees downsized from city dwellings to country digs with large gardens and chickens. The parish was over a hundred years old and there were some amazing old saints in their 80's who had been in the church since their infancy. The parish had an 8am prayer book service, a 9.45am contemporary family service and an occasional evening youth service. There was a smallish youth group (12 or so) and quite a large children's ministry. During my time as Rector, we worked on our parish vision and a five-year strategy, we weathered the lockdown years and worked to build up the youth and children's ministry.

I doubt there are any readers of this edition of *EFAC Essentials* who don't recognise the immense challenges facing both urban and country churches. The lockdown years of the COVID pandemic were hard going for most churches, but especially so for Victorian Churches. But even before the pandemic, church attendance was declining throughout Australia. Changing cultural forces, the sins of the church revealed in the Royal Commission into child sexual abuse in our institutions, opposition, disunity, and the slow pace of change in many of our churches have all contributed to falls in attendance, volunteers and in people willing to train for ministry.

Yet there is hope! There is much hope. The country church I was leading had so many strengths and has a great future ahead of it. Below I offer six characteristics that I observed at the church or that I leant into as a leader that are suggestions regarding how country churches can flourish.

GOD MUST SHOW UP

God showed up in my country parish, but I make this point because as ministers we are truly dependent on God. We can do many things to make our churches grow, but we cannot succeed without God. We are dependent.

Fortunately, we are encouraged by Scripture that our Lord loves the church and loves us. We need to remember this and let it guide us.

GOD'S PEOPLE MUST SHOW UP

We were blessed with a good core of regulars, including an awesome team of excellent musicians and cooks, and parents who were willing to teach Sunday school. It felt like a real partnership. A team. I did my utmost to make these people feel appreciated, with regular thank-yous and even engraved awards at our AGM. If you are blessed with volunteers, empower them. If you are blessed with teenagers, find jobs for them – we employed about 6 of our youth as casuals (as Sunday tech people and as cleaners). This helped us and gave them work experience and avoided them disappearing into casual work at the local fast-food joints on a Sunday.

YOU MUST HELP PEOPLE TO SEE GOD SHOWING UP

You may have heard about the famous “invisible gorilla” experiment at Harvard University in the 1990's which demonstrated that we humans have a tendency to be blind to what we are not focusing on. Well, that hour on a Sunday morning is the hour to help people to refocus and to see God. Thomas Merton wrote in 1965

Life is this simple. We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time. This is not just a fable or a nice story. It is true. If we abandon ourselves to God and forget ourselves, we see it sometimes, and we see it maybe frequently. God manifests Himself everywhere, in everything — in people and in things and in nature and in events. It becomes very obvious that He is everywhere and in everything and we cannot be without Him. You cannot be without



God. It's impossible. It's simply impossible. The only thing is that we don't see it.

Author Richard Beck reminds us that “God is everywhere, but we don’t see that. There is a pervasive spiritual disenchantment which affects Christians as much as nonbelievers ..and.. poses the single greatest threat to faith and the church in our post-Christian world.” (Beck, Richard. *Hunting Magic Eels*, Fortress Press. Kindle Edition.) It is easy to lose our ability to see God, and the job of the parish priest includes helping God’s people to recover their sight. We shared testimonies at church on a Sunday of how people were seeing God in their everyday lives. It was transformative, and helped people connect with each other too.

ENJOY GOOD RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER MINISTERS IN YOUR TOWN

I found my Anglican deanery in the city had felt like an obligation – we met and then rushed back into the traffic and all our commitments. But in a country town, the pace is a bit slower and our Christian minister’s network was a bunch of supportive colleagues across denominations that I looked forward to catching up with. We ran a Christmas eve service together in the local park, did an Easter outreach together, helped each other out with things like baptism pools and aged-care services, and laughed at the antics of church life (and people) together over breakfast once a month. I really appreciated the help and friendship of those other ministers.

BE DILIGENT AND ACCOUNTABLE IN YOUR SERMON PREP

Whilst it is true that a good crowd makes a good speech fly, it’s a bit chicken and egg really. Without a good sermon, the good crowd won’t keep coming back for more. It may seem like an odd strategy, but I used to tell myself that the Prime Minister might show up on Sunday and I’d better not be ashamed of what I’d prepared!

SERVE THOSE NEW PEOPLE IN TOWN

I don’t have any research to draw on, but it seemed to me that new people in a country town were a bit more open to an invite to church/seasonal services, or to a playgroup or youth group. Perhaps because they didn’t have a lot of friends yet or wanted to find connections for their kids. In country towns, the church can play an important role in those life transitions like early parenthood. In our town, the council couldn’t keep up with programs for early childhood in particular, so it was a great opportunity for us to connect and to serve our community. As Dietrich Bohhoeffer said “The Church is the Church only when it exists for others.”

**Rev’d Tracy Lauersen, National Program Manager,
Families & Culture of the Anglican Church of
Australia**





What is it like?

CAROLINE

What is it like to be the part-time minister of a church that was filled with children and families fifty years ago, with two Sunday school sittings per Sunday, Mother's Union and much more, but as COVID plunged us into new territory in 2020, had an average of 20 attendees on a Sunday?

Where do you start?

There's a story of three decades of decline with lightness and deep shadows. The current worship comprises four hymns, four Bible readings, a ten-minute reflection and Holy Communion. There are the faithful who have remained well, faithful, and are an inspiring 'treasured possession', 'oaks of righteousness'.

Yet, everything I pray will happen, with the eyes of faith and imagination, seems so fragile and experimental. Then one Sunday morning when ten masked people are allowed to gather at some point in the twilight of lockdowns, I hear myself confidently say through my mask, 'A church re-grows through small steps, micro actions'. This sounded comforting and manageable to me, in the first weeks, which became months.

I'd already found a puppet and as we live-streamed the second service I'd ever taken as the 'priest-in-charge', with a phone and laptop, I did a very average 'kidult talk' (kid+adult) in front of the phone, to set a tone of hope.

I bravely believed that somehow, our God was going to begin a new chapter and that a small suburban church could be a bright light for the kingdom. My missionary childhood had given me a love for people, challenge, and confidence that the gospel can do unexpectedly creative things.



So throughout lockdowns, I rang people, dropped off little parcels of cake if it was their birthday, and newsletters. That's right – the old parish newsletter came into its own and was read! It kept us together! It was emailed to most and printed and mailed to the non-techy elderly.

We used a zoom option where you could dial in from your landline! One lovely senior told me, 'I'm in my dressing gown in my comfy chair, listening on speaker phone, but when I close my eyes, I'm there, in church!'

As lockdowns ended, my garden produced roses in amazing abundance, so I picked them, removed thorns, wrapped them in wet cotton wool and foil (yes, micro actions speak) and presented each returning person with a rose and 'Welcome back to church!' I had not met them in person, though I picked quite a few from their voices!

The following list in no particular order, gives a snapshot of the variety of ministries in a small church that's kept us focussed, joyful and yes, hopeful, over the past three years:

- Ministry to ageing saints, as their lives end and they go Home. This has become a ministry I cherish, both with them and their families, many of whom have lost faith. The care of the dying and their funerals, have grown me. I hope I've also sown lots of seeds in family and friends or thrown compost on the soil of dry hearts.
- Ministry to very competent and mature people as they retire and are the core volunteers.
- Re-starting church morning teas by baking cakes, especially for each birthday!
- Ministry to a small number of new members who have joined our worshipping congregation, including parents and families, mainly from Asia, and their pre-schoolers, children and young people.
- The start of ministries to young people on Sunday.
- Ministry to grow people who are gifted to lead these groups.
- Ministry to grow young people's faith practice, through being on appropriate rosters: Bible reading, tech desk, welcoming-sides person, helping cook sausages after church for a simple lunch.
- Ministry to make every Sunday service a time of spiritual refreshment, through song, the Scriptures and the Sacraments.
- Ministry through weddings and baptisms.
- Ministry to the church building and gardens, needing repairs and refreshing – so fundraising and hard yakka.
- Ministry to the local community through fortnightly iGen (intergenerational) 'Play' Group, loosely based



on the ABC's TV series, 'Old People's Home for Four year olds'.

- Ministry to university students as an honorary chaplain at a nearby University.
- Ministry to two local retirement villages.
- Ministry to colleagues through Deanery.
- Ministry to become financially viable.

- Ministry to grow a paid lay leader to begin local missional activities.
- Ministry to pray for and financially support a missionary family as they travel overseas.

Caroline is Priest in Charge of a Melbourne Parish (name changed due to pastoral sensitivity).

The Parish as a Social Group

CHRIS PORTER

“What to do with the humble parish?” Why do we seem to be so entrenched within ideas of “my parish” or “their church?” Why do parishioners identify as more “members of the Parish of St Aethelredstone” rather than as “Anglican,” and why may they identify with their parish in opposition to say the Parish of St Cuthbertstonwick? [names changed to protect the guilty everywhere]

Setting aside the ecclesiological and pastoral specifics of Anglican parishes, I want to consider here the sociological challenges of the parish, for these sociological challenges lie at the heart of a wide variety of present questions for our church. While the questions of parish boundaries, church mergers, church planting, minster models, evangelism, normativity, and diversity, all have theological, ecclesiological, and pastoral dimensions, their sociological aspects are often left uninterrogated. Therefore, here I want to consider these social aspects and how they may contribute to our understanding of parish life.

For all of the other services of the parish one of the most significant is the social group which is formed around the parish, one for which those within the parish—and those attending from outside—find their identity. Parishioners are not merely “Jane” or “John,” but “Jane member of Parish X.” The formation of these social identities around the parish structure are sociologically one of its greatest strengths—and I would also argue its greatest weakness.

Leaving aside specifically Christian aspects of the parish, and the appropriate benefits of public worship etc—as these will logically continue with or without parish boundaries—we may consider the great benefits of social groups to be also applicable to the social group of the parish. Individuals who identify with a social group are more likely to engage with the work of that group—in this case the work of the parish—which in turn is more



Chris Porter

pictured

likely to impact on their own personal identity and sense of belonging within the social group—the church. Formally we can understand “social identity ... as that part of the individuals’ self- concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1982: 2). As Christians we value this identity structure, especially as it is positively correlated with other social items such as belonging, behaviour change, self-value, etc. Indeed, as we can see with civil parishes, and other local social enterprises such as “Good-Karma” Facebook groups, this desire for social connection and engagement is also highly sought after and valued in our broader community.

However, it is this same desire for social engagement and identity which is perhaps also its greatest Achilles heel. For with strong identity structures, comes the challenge of what is technically termed as “positive distinctiveness.” That is the challenge for a social group to be sufficiently different from other competing social groups such that members feel attracted to and can identify with their specific social group over and above other groups. This is especially the case where those competing social groups are normatively and geographically close, and in these cases “positive distinctiveness” will often require exclusive claims about one’s own social group, and similarly



denigrating claims regarding others nearby. For example, the members of the Parish of St Cuthbertstonwick may pride themselves on their liturgical style and support their own sense of belonging in that parish by referring the members of the Parish of St Aethelredstone as “Aethelredstoners” and generating negative appellations regarding their musical preferences.

This is further exacerbated in situations where near neighbours share the same normative belief and identity structures, as the demands of positive distinctiveness require sharper invective to create points of division. As Lewis Coser observed “A conflict is more passionate and more radical when it arises out of close relationships. The coexistence of union and opposition in such relations makes for the peculiar sharpness of the conflict. Enmity calls forth deeper and more violent reactions, the greater the involvement of the parties among whom it originates” (1998, 71).

Is this a good argument then for the abolition of parish boundaries, to remove the competition for positive distinctiveness? While this may seem like a logical way of reducing these challenges and uniting the church around a single focus for distinctiveness, unfortunately it only leads to further competition. For as groups cease to have avenues for generating positive distinctiveness outside of the groups the natural place to derive distinctiveness is within the group. This is usually seen through internal perceptions that certain members are not sufficiently normative, or somehow abrogate what some members consider the “core” identity of the group, despite remaining within the group. Indeed, this can be clearly observed within the Good Karma Network phenomenon, as, a couple of years into the project, large numbers of these neighbourhood groups devolved into schismatic fractures over internal accusations of members not upholding the norms of the groups, and significant disagreement over what these norms are, and their relative importance. Similar examples are found in civil parishes—and especially their American counterpart, the Homeowner Association. Lest we think that the church is immune from such debates one need only look at the plethora of churches which have split over musical styles, modes of preaching, or a host of other disputed norms. Schisms and the exclusion of members as black sheep for not being normative enough are part and parcel of group existence.

So far this seems to be a fairly dismal view of parish life: conflict with or without boundaries. Are there any avenues out of this social quagmire? Perhaps somewhat ironically the same ecclesial inheritance that gave the Anglican church the parish structure has also provided a resource

for addressing the impetus towards division for positive distinctiveness: episcopal structures. While evangelical Anglicanism tends toward a congregational—and parish—emphasis, the proven mechanism for defusing schism within groups is to direct social impetus towards finding social distinctiveness within larger groups, rather than the smaller immediate—local—group. Indeed, theologically, this is the purpose of the church universal.

How then can we leverage these oft-denigrated structures towards that bigger theological vision and social purpose? A significant part of this is the need for a distinctive vision for the larger structure to inhabit. What is the purpose of the episcopacy? What is a diocese for? But, as part of that vision for there to be positive distinctiveness of the whole, there must be a similar allowance of diversity within the subgroups which make up the super-ordinate, the parishes which constitute a diocese, the churches which contribute to the denomination—lest there be a devolution to solely finding distinctiveness in the local. Such that the Parishes of St Cuthbertstonwick and St Aethelredstone can engage in that same vision side by side. This vision setting and diversity of engagement can find a wide range of expressions and outcomes, and while it is well beyond the scope of this piece to provide a singular answer, we can find a series of biblical and historical examples for inspiration. Indeed, one example is given by Scott Goode’s examination of 1 Corinthians, where he finds Paul organising that nascent church around the framework of “Salvific Intentionality” that allows for both coherent missional imagination alongside diversity in the Corinthian community (review in this issue).

Ultimately the overriding question about the parish is not whether it stays or whether it goes, but rather what should we look to as a means to present an encompassing vision to unify the church around, with or without historical geographical and social boundaries?

Rev Dr Chris Porter is Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at Trinity College Theological School.





A Users Guide to Coaching/ Supervision

RICHARD TRIST

“As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17).

Intentional time spent reflecting on past actions for more effective future actions is vital for gospel ministry. Deep learning occurs when we are able to regularly slow down and consider in fresh ways issues that have impacted us. To do this with another trusted person can enable us to see past personal blind spots and lead to new possibilities.

In the light of dioceses across Australia rolling out programs of professional supervision or coaching/ supervision¹ for clergy and lay workers, what are we to make of such programs? What benefits might emerge from them? How can we make them work for us and our own ministry situation?

WHAT IS PROFESSIONAL SUPERVISION?

In many occupations the term supervision is synonymous with line-management. However, in the so-called helping professions the term is used to speak of a consultative relationship between an external supervisor and a worker, where the supervisee consults with their supervisor who is neither their trainer nor manager. This is not what

¹ In the Diocese of Melbourne there has been a temporary blending of its successful coaching program to enable a faster roll out of professional supervision – hence the term coaching/supervision.



Richard Trist

pictured

someone has called “snooper-vision” but rather an intentional time for reflection on work practice for the purpose of pastoral support and better ministry outcomes for the worker and for the people they serve.

Accountability is not to a boss such as a Bishop or Board of Management, but rather to the ethical framework in which the work or ministry is being undertaken (eg Faithfulness in Service).

As professional supervision becomes more of a norm for Christian ministers, there is a need for clarity as to how it is different from other activities such as counselling, spiritual direction, mentoring and coaching. The following table may help to clarify these differences.²

² Adapted from a table in the *St Marks National Theological Centre Graduate Certificate in Professional Supervision Students Manual*.

| | Counselling | Spiritual Direction | Mentoring | Coaching | Professional Supervision |
|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Focus | The person’s well-being; their emotional and psychological state. | The faith journey; relationship with God. | Issues of formation and development of career. | The development of skills needed in the workplace. | The overall development of a person’s work or ministry; becoming a more effective practitioner through reflection on practice. |
| Process | Undertaken by a qualified person whose approach is controlled by the ethical codes of a professional body. | Usually undertaken by someone trained in sensing the work of the Spirit in a person’s life. | The passing on of knowledge and experience to a mentee; usually undertaken by an older and more experienced person. | The use of support and challenge to deliver performance improvement; not necessarily undertaken by a person with the same occupational background. | Undertaken by a qualified person who pays attention to issues that arise from the supervisee’s workplace. The concerns of the institution and the ministry recipients are always kept in view. |
| Approach | A professional relationship; short or long-term depending upon the person’s needs; regular meetings. | Usually more informal; a long term and on-going relationship. | Usually, an informal relationship which is ongoing. | A short-term activity with structured meetings; usually contracted. | A professional relationship with an annual contract where ethical and legal accountabilities are made clear. |



Each of these different modes of support are important and useful. It is likely that we will all utilise them in different seasons of our ministry careers.

THE BENEFIT OF PROFESSIONAL SUPERVISION

The benefit of professional supervision lies in its ability to bring clarity and focus upon the complex nature of parish or chaplaincy ministry. Authors Jane Leach and Michael Paterson utilise a three-legged stool model to explain its three tasks:

1. The formative task – an educative aspect where the supervisor helps the supervisee come to a clearer knowledge of the issues they are facing leading to equipping and resourcing.
2. The restorative task – a supportive function which understands the challenges of the supervisee’s work and provides a place for the “recharging” of emotional and spiritual energy.
3. The normative task – assisting the supervisee to attend to issues of wellbeing, boundaries, and professional expectations.³

In a pilot study of clergy in the Diocese of Sydney, over 90% agreed that professional supervision (either one-to-one or in a group) was helpful for their ministry and personal well-being, leading to a greater ability to be reflective and self-aware. 75% of participants indicated that it developed their ability to be resilient.⁴

Although initially mandated by dioceses as a result of the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse⁵, the adoption of supervision is having a far-reaching impact for the good of the church, leading to growth, learning, support and healthier ministers and ministries.

PREPARING FOR SUPERVISION

It is important to remember that a supervision session is always for the benefit of the supervisee not the supervisor! It is important to spend time prior to a session thinking about what you want to talk about. This includes anything that arises from actual experiences which is affecting the quality of our ministry. Examples could be our role in a particular situation, our current priorities,

³ See *Pastoral Supervision: A Handbook* (Second Ed), pp 20-23.

⁴ *Southern Cross*, Nov-Dec 2023, p.4

⁵ See https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final_report_-_recommendations.pdf

issues of time management and boundaries, new ideas and insights, people we are finding it hard to work with, changes that are happening within our system, general pressures or needs.

The following may be helpful prompts:

- I am feeling [tired, miserable, elated, inspired, challenged, worried] ...
- This concern keeps pushing into my mind...
- I seem to keep putting off...
- I want help to clarify where I stand on this issue...
- I feel torn between these priorities...
- When [this] happens, it seems to be a pattern repeating itself...
- I want to stop something like [this] happening again...
- I want to get something like [this] to happen more often...

FINDING A GOOD SUPERVISOR

The key issue in finding a good supervisor is to find someone who is not only well trained, but someone we can trust. Someone with whom we are willing to speak about the ups and downs of ministry. A person who will enable us to grow and to learn.

Supervision used to be the sole domain of clinical practitioners such as psychologists or those trained in CPE, but more and more people with pastoral and church experience are undertaking this work. It has a rich theological and pastoral undergirding and many theological colleges including Ridley College, Moore College, and St Marks National Theological Centre offer training in this field.

Look out for trusted people on your diocesan lists, or check out the following:

- Red Sheep Supervision – a ministry that equips ministry leaders from different organisations and denominations.
- Pastoral Supervision Alliance – a collective of supervisors mostly from Sydney and Melbourne.
- Partners in Ministry – offers consulting, training, as well as coaching and supervision.
- Envisager Supervision – provides professional reflective supervision, coaching, and consulting services to teachers, school leaders, school chaplains, and pastors.



When you find someone contact them to arrange an initial meeting. Such meetings usually involve a discussion about the areas of your ministry that you are keen to explore, the ethical framework that will undergird the conversations, and mutual expectations such as frequency of meetings (four to eight times a year), mode of meeting (face to face or zoom), fees, etc. This will lead to a contract/agreement that will likely be sent into the diocese to inform them of the arrangement. Having done this you are set and ready to go.

IN CONCLUSION

Despite being yet another thing to add to our busy diaries, my hope is that we will find professional supervision as not just something we 'have-to-do'. Rather may it be a

space for refreshment, restoration and the re-forming of ourselves to enable us to fulfil the great calling God has given us "...to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ...and become mature attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ "(Eph 4:12-13).

Richard Trist is the Chaplain to the Anglican Institute and Adjunct Lecturer in Professional Pastoral Supervision at Ridley College. He runs his own supervision practice as well as being a member of the Pastoral Supervision Alliance and Chair of the Pastoral Supervision Network. He enjoys occasional preaching at his local church in West Brunswick, and trying to work out what semi-retirement really means!

On Solid Ground – training church leaders in the developing world

TIM SWAN

This past Easter, over 16,000 people gathered across 142 churches in Toliara, Madagascar. However, three-quarters of those churches didn't have a trained pastor to preach.

The Scriptures remind us how important it is to ensure the gospel is passed on truthfully. Hebrews 2 begins, "We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away."

This is a real danger in some developing countries, where the gospel is growing most rapidly.

Rev Berthier Lainirina, Principal of St Patrick's Theological College in Madagascar, shared the incredible story of church growth in his home country when he visited Australia last September. He exclaimed, "Over 2000 new believers were baptised in one week!"

His country is one of the poorest in the world, with political instability and limited access to education and medical care. When a terrible drought hit the southern region in 2020-21, many families starved to death. "The government couldn't do anything. As a church, we said, 'we need to do something!'" said Berthier.



Tim Swan

pictured

Berthier reached out to me for help, and through the generosity of Anglican Aid supporters, we sent funds to enable local churches in Madagascar to distribute food. But the story didn't finish there! By demonstrating the love of Jesus through practical care, thousands came to Christ and joined the church. Forty new churches were planted in Toliara in six months!

This rapid growth means there's an urgent need for biblically faithful church leaders who are equipped to disciple new Christians, so their faith will be built on solid ground.

TRAINING CHURCH LEADERS IN MADAGASCAR

Berthier explained that while serving in the context of poverty, he sees many Christians tempted to fill their needs in ungodly ways. Some of the biggest ministry challenges are the deception of the prosperity gospel, and



the temptation of syncretism (when people consult diviners and witch doctors for health concerns). Church leaders must be able to articulate the truth of the gospel clearly, to steer new followers of Jesus away from these practices. Berthier knows that pastors and ministry leaders must be equipped with a strong foundation grounded firmly in the Word – and he is spreading this message across the six dioceses of Madagascar.

One student, Rakoto Vincent, was supported through Anglican Aid to study at St Patrick's and graduated with a Certificate of Theology. He told us: "Doctrine is the subject that I understand well because it is the base of Christian teaching. I'm able to discern false teaching to protect my faith. My Bible understanding is growing. It helps me to prepare sermons."

IN AFRICA AND BEYOND

With the help of Anglican Aid, people from all over Madagascar are being trained to be faithful pastors, Sunday school leaders, youth leaders, and more. And this story is being replicated across many countries in Africa and beyond. Anglican Aid is partnering with church leaders in South Sudan, Tanzania, DR Congo, and Seychelles to equip them to teach the Bible well.

The impact of this training cannot be understated. Archbishop Justin Badi, in conflict-torn South Sudan, told me recently, "We talk of violence, we talk of wars... it is a symptom and demonstration of how shallow the gospel is in the hearts and minds of our people. So, my priority will actually be making and teaching disciples to disarm hearts and minds from violence and hatred." Badi believes in the transformative power of the gospel to end the hatred-fuelled war in his country.

In Seychelles, Diploma of Theology graduate Jude Marie told us of the profound impact his training will have on youths, who are frequently ensnared by the drug trade route running through his country. "On a physical level, the government is taking care of this, but on a spiritual level, we're going to be there when the people say, 'OK, I'm going to drop the heroin, what do I do next?' You've sown a seed in me, if I can sew a similar seed in another person's life, that will replicate. God multiplies."

Bishop Stanley Hotay in Mt Kilimanjaro, Tanzania, told us that they've planted over 465 new churches, and asked for our help. "We need help to support the education and the sound knowledge of the Bible to our students and many pastors and evangelists."

Too many people in places like Mt Kilimanjaro have to go to a church where the pastor hasn't received any training and doesn't know how to teach the Bible to their congregation. If we can invest in giving them good Bible training for two or three years at a local Bible college, they will be prepared to share and defend the gospel in their communities for a lifetime.

Canon Tim Swan is the CEO of Anglican Aid.





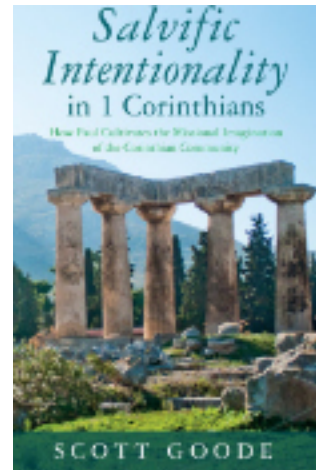
Salvific Intentionality in 1 Corinthians: How Paul Cultivates the Missional Imagination of the Corinthian Community

SCOTT GOODE

publisher

REVIEWED BY CHRIS PORTER

It is often noted that for all the emphasis which the Apostle Paul places upon evangelism in the book of Acts and the narration of his own endeavours, he seems to not have the same expectations for the audiences of his epistles. In this short and accessible volume Scott Goode draws on this apparent “riddle” of evangelistic outreach in the Pauline epistles, and places it centre stage. Taking his cues from a close reading of 1 Corinthians he helpfully examines the missional hermeneutics within the letter, and ties these with the social identity of the Corinthian church under the broad banner of “salvific intentionality.” Here he reads salvation as directed towards “two distinct, yet related, directions,” (6) first, a vertical salvation “action of God towards humanity through the eschatological Christ event (7), and second, a



horizontal aspect of “convey[ing] salvific influence towards one another and outsiders” (8). It is the interplay of these two aspects which Goode explores throughout the work.

In the first chapter Goode examines the challenge of moral formation within 1 Corinthians 5:1–8 and sets it within the context of the social identity—including theological aspects—of the Corinthian church. This chapter sets up the complexity of social and theological relations for the nascent church, and Goode provides a reasonably detailed and cogent examination of the challenges therein. While it could always be expanded, this foundational work sets him up well for the investigation at hand. The second chapter works from the social identity constructs at hand and examines the challenge inherent within mixed marriages in 7:12–16. Here Goode argues that the believing partner may have significant salvific impact on an unbelieving partner through a “theological vision to strengthen their marital commitment” (36). But Goode is not blind to the challenges of imbalanced relationships, and cultural power imbalances inherent within first century patriarchal social settings. Rather, it is his attention to the mess present within these expressed social identities that demonstrates the compelling nature of the salvific intentionality he identifies as “worked out in the concrete social reality of first-century marriage, particularly for women” (43).

The third chapter, through the lengthy exposition on 8:1–11:1, significantly expands on the prior vignette by throwing the doors open to the street, and considering how ethics of accommodation can generate missional opportunities for the believing community with their pagan neighbours. Goode carefully—and helpfully—navigates a fine line in his treatment of the “weak” and “strong” passages, taking seriously the nature of sectarian impulses towards fleeing from idol-food, while equally recognising Paul’s salvific commitment within his accommodation ethic that “seeks the salvific welfare of others” (56). Ultimately concluding that “the mission of

the believing community cannot be limited to those of insider identity only. The mission of Christ has incorporated the Corinthians, although they were once outsiders” (69). The verticality of salvation has temporal impact in the horizontal space.

The fourth chapter considers the nature of worship within the community (14:20–25), and Paul’s assumption that outsiders may be present within the gatherings of the Corinthian church, and this should govern the activities of the church. From a detailed discussion of tongues in 1 Cor 14, against the background of Isaiah, Goode then considers how this would spill over into the socioreligious nature of worship settings, suggesting that speech modes in the community should be “directed towards the salvific welfare of outsiders” (97).

Finally, Goode turns his attention to the nature of missional identity and salvific intentionality “then and now” (98). Although the argument that church communities should be oriented towards a missional identity—even as missional communities—has been regularly made, Goode helpfully highlights the messiness of such a missional identity. This “untidy sociotheological profile” (99) that he reads throughout the first Corinthian epistle emphasises the wrestling of the Corinthian’s with their own Christian identity. It is this wrestling that Goode seeks to apply as a salve to the modern church,

highlighting that the Corinthian social identity is not so different from our present embodiment. Of critical note here is his section on “soft difference in ecclesial boundaries” proposing that “Paul imagines the community in Corinth not simply as a place of purity but one of ‘spiritual formation’” (111). Here Goode aptly observes that this untidy reality challenges contemporary expressions of community, and his diagnosis of requiring a “socially open community” to “serve the salvific welfare of outsiders as well as insiders” (112-3) is a message that is sorely needed.

While Goode originally penned this work as an evolution of his MTh dissertation, he is to be well commended for his balance of academic rigour and pastoral readability. The book is firmly anchored within a scholarly foundation in social identity theory and missional hermeneutics yet is eminently readable and his insights spring easily from the page to the parish. This is recommended reading for anyone considering how to balance the challenge of an inward looking congregation for the edification of the comfortable with an outward salvifically intentional church on God’s mission field.

Rev Dr Chris Porter is Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at Trinity College Theological School.



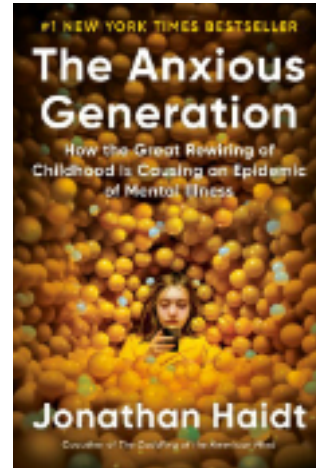


Jonathan Haidt *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*

JONATHAN HAIDT
 Penguin/Allen Lane 2024
 REVIEWED BY MARK SHORT

American social psychologist Jonathan Haidt is best known for exploring the factors which contribute to the tensions and complexities of modern life. In *The Righteous Mind* he considered how moral disagreements arise not simply from contested facts but from diverse intuitions that go to the very nature of morality itself. In *The Coddling of the American Mind* (co-written with Greg Lukianoff) he lamented the rise of political polarisation and cancel in US universities.

His new book documents the alarming rise in mental illness amongst teenagers and young adults since 2010, especially females. Haidt contends that the blame lies with the deleterious impact of social media, with a secondary explanation being the continuation of overly-protective parenting which has unnecessarily limited young people’s interaction with the physical world. “My central claim in this book is that these two trends –



overprotection in the real world and underprotection in the virtual world – are the major reasons why children born after 1995 have become the anxious generation” p9

So why 2010? The internet and to some extent social media had been present before that date. However Haidt points to a number of innovations around that date which increased both the attractiveness of social media and its potential to be used as a means of social comparison. These included the introduction of the ‘like’ and ‘retweet’ buttons and the addition of a front-facing camera to smartphones, which is ideal for taking ‘selfies’.

And why has the impact being worse on boys than girls? Haidt points to girls’ higher vulnerability to social comparison and relational aggression, both of which are magnified by social media. For boys, the impacts tend to be different, and are seen in a tendency to withdraw from in-person engagement in favour of online gaming and pornography.

Image: VCYC 2024



Since its release Haidt's book has received much publicity and generally positive reviews. Where there has been pushback critics have argued that Haidt has confused correlation (increased use of social media coincided with deterioration in teen mental health) with causation (social media is responsible for the deterioration). Haidt is aware of this critique and responds by pointing to some experimental data and to the absence of any plausible explanation as to why mental health declined this much at this time.

There is of course a long history of blaming technological change for the problems of youth. It happened with Y and the internet; perhaps with the printing press as well. Nevertheless there is something about technology that simultaneously expresses our vocation as divine image bearers and our fallen-ness as sinful rebels. In his book *The Life We're Looking For* Andy Crouch compares the promise of technology to the lure of alchemy – the aspiration for powers that would allow us to take the place of God. So the smartphone offers the promise of omnipresence and omniscience, but extracts a heavy price for this supposed privilege.

What is to be done about all this? Haidt makes a number of recommendations to legislators, parents and schools including raising the age of access to social media to 16 and developing schools that are both phone-free and conducive to unstructured unsupervised play. There is much wisdom here.

Of particular interest is a chapter called 'Spiritual Elevation and Degradation' where Haidt, who self-describes as a secular Jew, explores the potential of spiritual practices to elevate human well-being. These practices include shared embodied rituals, stillness and finding awe and nature. Haidt even references Pascal's God-Shaped Hole, although he locates its origins in biological and cultural evolution rather than any divine design. "There is a hole, an emptiness in us all, that we strive to fill. If it doesn't get filled with something noble and elevated, modern society will quickly pump it full of garbage. That has been true since the beginning of the age of mass media, but the garbage pump got 100 times more powerful in the 2010s." p216

One must ask whether these spiritual practices and the promise they offer can ultimately be sustained in the absence of a commitment to divine design. Digital technology after all is thoroughly designed to enlist us as online consumers in the world of late modern capitalism. Any resistance must begin with the conviction that we are created to know and be known rather than consume. As the Psalmist's ancient wisdom reminds us "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well." (Psalm 139:13-14. NIV)

Bishop Mark Short is Bishop of Canberra and Goulburn.





Be Encouraged: They Like Your Preaching!

MIKE RAITER & TIM COLLISON

Last year Essentials published my article, 'Homiletical Health Check', a survey of sermons in 20 churches from different denominations. In that article we heard the preachers speak. Now it's time to hear the listeners.

Essentials decided to conduct a follow-up survey, asking congregational members what they thought of the preaching in their churches. 47 churches were asked to participate; nine responded. Out of those nine churches 53 people filled in the survey. All the churches are evangelical, and just over one-half are Anglican. Nearly all the respondents live in urban areas, with most living along the eastern seaboard: 72% live in Melbourne, Sydney, or Brisbane.

The obvious weakness in the survey is the small data set. Nevertheless, the survey still works as a qualitative assessment of what value members of evangelical churches place on preaching. As such, there are valuable insights for people who preach regularly.

The survey asked 12 questions. We'll briefly summarise the response to each question.

1: WHAT IS THE FOCAL POINT DURING YOUR SUNDAY GATHERING?

The focal point of most of these services is the sermon.

2: ON A SCALE OF 1 - 10, WITH 1 BEING THE LOWEST, AND 10 THE HIGHEST, HOW IMPORTANT IS PREACHING FOR YOU PERSONALLY?

91% of people surveyed answered the question between 8 and 10. And the lowest score chosen was 7. And those who chose 7 did so because they understood that the other parts of the service were also important to them.

3: WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THAT PARTICULAR RATING IN QUESTION TWO?

Those who responded to question two with a "10" all answered that preaching helps them to know the word of God better, and grow spiritually.

4: WHAT DIFFERENT TYPES OF SERMONS ARE THERE AT YOUR CHURCH?

The most common type is expositional. The next most common are evangelistic and thematic.

5: HOW FREQUENTLY IS A SERMON IN YOUR CHURCH GIVEN IN A MANNER THAT YOU CAN EITHER TAKE SOMETHING CONCRETE FROM IT, OR THE APPLICATION IS CLEAR?

The majority of respondents (46 out of 53) felt that out of every four sermons at least three had something applicable to their lives.

6: WHEN THERE IS APPLICATION HOW OFTEN IS IT EITHER: "TELL SOMEONE ABOUT JESUS", "READ YOUR BIBLE", "PRAY MORE FREQUENTLY" OR SOMETHING ALONG THOSE LINES.

60% of respondents felt there is an appropriate balance of application in the sermons. 32% felt the application was always one of those three applications.

7: HOW OFTEN DOES THE PREACHING AFFIRM OR ENCOURAGE THE CONGREGATION FOR THEIR FAITHFULNESS AS CHRISTIANS?

81% of respondents felt that the preaching regularly affirms the congregation for their faithfulness as Christians.

8: WHAT'S THE TYPICAL LENGTH OF SERMONS AT YOUR CHURCH?

About one-third of respondents hear sermons which are between 21-25 minutes long. About another one-third are hearing sermons up to 40 minutes long. That means about one-third are hearing sermons between 16-20 minutes, or up to an hour in length.

9: ARE YOU SATISFIED WITH THE LENGTH OF THE SERMONS? ARE THEY: TOO SHORT, TOO LONG OR ABOUT RIGHT?

89% of respondents felt that they were satisfied with the length of the sermons at their church. This was regardless of whether the sermons were 16 minutes long, or longer than an hour.

10: WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT THE PREACHING AT YOUR CHURCH?

The most consistent comment is that people appreciate preaching which is based on the Bible (36%), is clearly and engagingly delivered, and which they can apply to their lives. People also mentioned that they appreciate well researched sermons.

11: WHAT PARTS OF THE PREACHING AT YOUR CHURCH MIGHT NEED MORE ATTENTION?

The majority said ‘nothing’ (30 %). Those who did comment would like more depth to the sermons, better application, and would like more variety in delivery and style.

12: ARE THERE ANY PARTICULAR COMMENTS YOU WOULD LIKE TO MAKE IN RELATION TO THE PREACHING AT YOUR CHURCH?

Here’s a sample of the comments:

- “They are Bible-centric, relevant to the sermon series theme, well researched and delivered.”
- “We are blessed with three ministers...with various styles of preaching and all keep us on our toes as they deliver God’s message”.
- “It’s consistently very good.”
- “I look forward to it”.
- “I like longer sermons that go deeper.”
- “We are truly blessed by the standard of preaching”.

There were many other similar comments.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Again, we need to bear in mind that this is a small sample. Perhaps preachers who are less confident about their preaching or were concerned about what their people might say, decided not to distribute the survey. Or, perhaps, in the busyness of church life it just was too far down the priority list. But a few things stand out.

People value good preaching. One of my (Mike’s) observations over many years is that a good sermon covers a multitude of – not sins - but perhaps deficiencies in other areas. The pastor may not be the best administrator, or a great counsellor, or even a less committed visitor of the people, but if a spiritually tasty and nutritious meal is served up on Sunday then people will thank God for the ministry.

People are receiving solid application. When I ask preachers where they struggle, the most common response

is in application. On the one hand, the survey suggests that people feel the Biblical expositions they hear are well applied to their lives. On the other hand, a number also feel that application needs to be a constant focus in the sermons.

People are happy with the length of the sermon.

While ‘how long should a sermon be?’ is a hot debate amongst preachers, if this survey is anything to go by, it’s less of an issue for the people. Most have been trained to listen to a sermon of a certain length and are content with that. The key issue isn’t length but faithfulness to the Bible and good application.

People appreciate sermons that ‘go deep’ and are well-researched. If I can put this in my own words, most people can discern when a sermon has been thoroughly prepared and not just hurriedly written the night before. And they like new insights, perhaps into the text or how the Bible speaks into our contemporary situation. In short, they appreciate sermons that are intellectually stimulating.

Well done! The last lesson to take home from this survey is that many (most?) evangelical preachers are serving God’s people well in their preaching, and so honouring the God who has set them apart for this work. The people really appreciate it (even if they don’t always tell you). Let this be a stimulus to us, not to sit back on any laurels, but continue to grow as preachers to the glory of God and the edification of the saints.

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