

No More Business As Usual

“These are exciting yet challenging days for the church of Jesus Christ as it continues to face massive shifts taking place throughout the world. One of the more interesting shifts, to those of us in the West, is the growing recognition by churches in the United States that they are now in their own mission location. This awareness is generating fresh opportunities for new ministry, but it is also introducing disruption to long standing practices. Business as usual by congregations in the United States is no longer possible. As a result, many historical denominations are now in serious decline. Alongside this development, significant new movements are coming into existence: the rapid expansion of megachurches, the significant increase of the number of immigrant congregations, the dramatic expansion of the number of congregations along generational lines, and the rapidly growing emergent church movement.

In the midst of such shifts, it is profoundly important to keep returning to the foundations of what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ in the world. This involves the issue of ecclesiology (ecclesia = “church”, ology = “the study of”). In the midst of our changing world, we are in constant need of continuing to engage in the *study of the church*, to explore its nature, to understand its creation and continuing formation, and to carefully examine its purpose and ministry.” (from *The Missional Church and Denominations*, edited by Craig Van Gelder)

I believe this is an accurate description of the situation we find ourselves in today. This is both an exciting and a challenging time to be in ministry. While new ministry opportunities continue to surface all the time, many churches are struggling to know how to respond to them or what to do. Without a new imagination to engage a rapidly changing culture, our default position is to continue to do business as usual, even when we know it’s not working as well as it used to.

What’s the answer? Where do we look? Where will our help come from? We need to look to the Lord, Who better than any of us, understands the massive changes going on in our culture today. We need to re-engage the scriptures in new ways from a new place, to hear God’s Word in fresh ways. We need a deeper understanding of what it means to be the church – to be the people of God in this time and place. We need to understand what is going on in our communities, what is happening to people, and what God is doing there. And we need to look to each other. The Bible does not speak of a Lone Ranger Christianity. Our faith is always worked out in community with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

One of the most important functions for the presbytery during these times is to be a learning community. One of the gifts of the presbytery to you and your church is to provide a place and a space for people to gather together to share the stories of our lives. Where have we seen Christ at work in our world? How have we encountered God? What new discoveries is the Holy Spirit leading us into? What new insights about the mission of God and the church are we uncovering?

The next opportunity that our presbytery is providing for us to gather as a learning community is coming up on August 21-22 at Solana Beach Pres. We are calling it Moving Back into the Neighborhood. This will be an opportunity to gain some fresh perspectives on some timeless scriptures. It will be a time to hear encouraging stories of how God is at work across the street and around the world. It will be a time where your imagination will be sparked about ways you can discern what God is doing in your neighborhood, and plan out some next steps for your congregation to engage it. Because the truth is that we really don't want to be stuck continuing to do business as usual. We don't want to miss the new opportunities that are emerging around us. We want to learn and grow together because we know none of us are experts. No matter how well your church is doing or how big your challenges seem, this is an opportunity for us to learn together and build new relationships and connections for the journey. Please consider joining us for this important conversation. We all need all the help we can get.

God bless you!

Clark Cowden