

TLDR: For a local church to be a 'local people of God', it will usually need a structure which puts believers into identifiable, small, diverse (e.g. intergenerational) and enduring groups, with the call that members at least love those within the group.

The Church Less Gathered: A discussion of Scripture's implicit theology of the local people of God

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Can you really cancel church?

In the last few months churches have had to cancel church – or more precisely they've had to cancel church services, or gatherings. Most of us, though, have an instinct, and a hope, that church isn't just the gathering, and that it includes a community. If you like, we hope that church is not just an event we *go* to, but also a community, or a family, we *belong* to. And yet our language regarding 'church' differs from our language around 'family' in important ways. The short hand of 'cancelling church' for cancelling services is widely used, but the same language isn't used regarding family. Most weeks my immediate extended family (i.e. including children that live out of home) get together for a meal, but when we cancel this meal no one thinks to say, 'we've cancelled family'¹ – the family continues to exist even without family dinner.

That is, while we have an instinct for Christian community, we should admit how dominant Sundays are in our thinking and practice. Sometimes it seems we have loaded up all the New Testament exhortations for how Christians should treat each other, and laid them at the door of the Sunday service. They are no longer just a gathering where I am taught and encouraged, through reading Scripture and hearing it expounded, and through song, prayer and communion. Now they are where we love one another, where we are discipled, where the most important worship happens, where intergenerational relationships happen, where we can confess sin, where all our gifts are used, where mission occurs and so on. A gathering cannot bear this weight.

We need to reflect on what Scripture says about our common life outside gatherings. More specifically, while Scripture has much to say about specific types of relationships, such as parents and children, and while it has much to say on how to conduct all relationships, we are concerned here with a narrower question; whether it anticipates the existence of specific identifiable local communities of believers, and then secondly, if so, what shape or features must these communities have?

The Local People of God

I want to suggest that Scripture presents the local people of God as a real aspect of reality with real implications. In a moment, I will unpack this suggestion, before that, though, I have three brief comments about the nature of the task itself.

Firstly, an aspect of reality is something which exists in the world, and can be observed. Marriage, for example, exists as an aspect of reality. It is a concept or category, with specific features, that exists separate to any one marriage. It is, amongst other things, a relationship between a man and a woman, from different families, who freely enter a lifelong exclusive sexual union. With this in mind, we are then able to make two kinds of observations about any specific relationship. Firstly, one of health – is it a good marriage? And secondly, one of existence – is it even a marriage? Note they are observations. There is no verse in Scripture telling us that this or that relationship is marriage.

¹ Although children and families being what they are, if any of them read this article, they will almost certainly start using the language of 'we've cancelled family'.

Scripture provides the category of marriage, but whether it exists, or whether it's healthy, is discerned by observation. Note too, that it's not enough to claim a relationship is a marriage. Scripture alerts us to the possibility of dissonance between our claims and reality – 'though they claim to know God, they deny him by their actions'. And we've found ways to respond to this truth regarding marriage. We have annulment for when a marriage is claimed but doesn't exist, and *de facto* legislation for where none is claimed, but does exist.

Similarly, I claim the local people of God is an aspect of reality that exists separately to any specific community. Once its salient features are understood, we can observe a specific Christian group and discern whether it's healthy on the one hand, and whether it's a local people of God, on the other. As with marriage, this observation is informed by the claims of the group about itself, but it is not determined by them. That is, it's possible to claim to be a local people of God, but not be one².

Secondly, as hinted at in the sub-title, I have adopted the phrase 'the local people of God' as a term to describe the type of identifiable community I claim Scripture presents. This is simply because the English word 'church' has so many uses. For example, if I say, 'the church is the bride of Christ', I'm talking about all people who have ever and will ever belong to Jesus; if I say, 'the church faces difficult times today', I'm referring to all people who identify as belonging to Jesus who are alive now; if 'the government isn't listening to the church', I'm referring to appointed leaders of denominations; if 'I'll meet you outside the church', it's a building; if I ask 'how was church this week?' I'm asking about a church service, and when I inquire 'how is your church handling the current circumstances?' I'm asking about the local church. There is nothing scandalous here. Words change. Even now our language is shifting again. We'll still say, 'welcome to church', rather than 'welcome to our online replacement of church'. It does mean, though, when we ask, 'what does the Bible say about church?' we are asking several separate questions. Specifically, I don't think we yet have adequate language to describe the questions of this article, and so I've proposed a new phrase – the local people of God ('the local household of God' would also work). The closest current terms are 'local church' or 'church community', but each of these have limitations. The 'local church' is inextricably linked with local legal entities and the governance and formal membership questions that attend them. The word 'community' has morphed to mean almost any group. That is, any Christian group is likely to be a community, according to current English usage, but may not be the type of community presented in the New Testament.

Lastly, again hinted at in the sub-title, is that 'the local people of God' is an implicit theology. That is, there isn't a specific New Testament Greek word that refers to this category, nor is there a single passage providing an explanation of it. As with changing language, there is no cause for concern here, many theologies are implicit. For example, the Trinity is an implicit theology. As far as I know, there is no Biblical language equivalent for the word 'trinity', and neither is it spelt out in any single passage. Rather it is a concept that explains and synthesizes various things that are said about God. Something similar is happening with 'the local people of God'. Rather than laying out a specific template, Scripture offers various clues, commands, constraints, and contours regarding how Christians should relate with each other, and from these emerge a picture of the local people of God. We might wonder why Scripture doesn't address this directly. It's speculation, but it may be that it wasn't needed. It was simply an assumption that everyone lived in a certain type of community. It is only in modern life that attending a local church service where I wouldn't know almost everyone is thinkable, let alone possible. Our search is for those clues left latent for a time when the question became necessary.

We turn now to consider three claims I think Scripture presents, albeit implicitly, followed by a suggestion for how to ensure a local church is a local people of God.

² That is, this essay follows in a long tradition of asking what are 'the marks of the church'?

i) *The local people of God exists as a real aspect of reality*

As we indicated above, Scripture's data doesn't appear in a single passage, but is rather to be found in 'clues' in various passages. So, for example, consider the widows' list in 1 Timothy 5.

No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband,¹⁰ and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the Lord's people, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds.

Firstly, note the criteria for getting on the list. They are to be noted for 'good deeds', but these good deeds are not specifically associated with an event, but ones undertaken in the context of various relationships – some within a family (such as being faithful to a husband), no doubt some towards anyone, and some amongst Christians. The passage doesn't insist those deeds were done within an identifiable group, but the fact that they are 'well known' suggests they were. This is reinforced by the creation of the list itself. Again, creating a list, and enacting it, does not seem like the activity of a gathering. Certainly, the list could have been made at a meeting, but it's not a list for a meeting to act on – it's not a 'this is how we should treat widows on Sundays' list, but rather a 'this is how we should care for widows all the time' list. Neither does it seem like a list for a random group of Christians to act on - 'we should each create our own widows' lists'. Paul does encourage Christians to do good to all as we have opportunity. But the framing of Paul's instruction to Timothy does not have the tone of a general opportunity for individuals to do good, but rather a specific obligation for a group of Christians to do so. When you put together who the list is for, how the widows are known, who is expected to act on the list, the breadth of expectation, and the necessity of acting on it, all this makes the most sense if there is a specific identifiable community of Christians.

Similar dynamics are at play in Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 5 regarding disciplining an unrepentant believer. He exhorts the Christians to pass judgement on the man concerned, and to exclude him with the hope that he will repent. The judgement itself (if it happened) could have taken place at a gathering. But the scope of exclusion was to be beyond the gathering, as Paul says, 'with such a man do not even eat'. It is technically possible to read it as all Christians everywhere to exclude all excluded Christians everywhere, but to be meaningful this would require a global list of excluded people. Paul, and elsewhere in Scripture (more below), is concerned with what is actually possible. I referenced earlier his exhortation for Christians to do good as they have opportunity, which embeds the idea that some things are not opportunities, and therefore not possible. It makes more sense to read Paul's exhortation to exclude, as exclusion from a group, enforced by a group.

Perhaps the strongest clue that the local people of God exists is found in New Testament's language around elders; it points to elders having responsibility for Christians and not only a gathering, but responsibility for a specific group of Christians, and not for Christians in general. They are to be shepherds, to pray for the sick, to work amongst the people of God, and to direct affairs. It is not that they are not also responsible for a gathering, just that they are more responsible for more than a gathering.

It's possible that elders are called to be elders in the people of God generally, rather than elders within a specific community, but it's not likely. There are textual clues. Christians are called to submit to elders, and elders called will be held to account for how they have discharged their responsibilities. It's hard to make sense of this language if, either elders are given responsibility for all Christians, or if Christians need to submit to all elders. This is reinforced with the Biblical language around 'neighbour'. Perhaps most simply, God loves the world, we are called to love our neighbours. It's part of Scripture's acknowledgement that we are

given to a time and a place, and this comes with opportunities and constraints. 'Better a neighbour nearby than a brother far away' reinforces that while a brother has stronger relationship, if you need practical help it will come from those who are actually able to provide it. If we imagine that elders are appointed to the whole church, rather than a specific community, we need to reckon with the fact Christians have the scope of their responsibility to love limited to neighbour, but that elders are somehow responsible for everyone. A better reading is simply that elders are appointed within specific communities; that they know who they are responsible for, and in turn Christians know which elders they should cooperate with.

ii) *The local people of God is at least an open, public³, enduring, diverse, local community of believers committed to loving each other.*

It is not enough, though, to note the local people of God exists, or to name it as a community. The meaning of the word 'community' has expanded considerably. It now means 'any identifiable group of people who have some common bond.' In recent years, I've heard the following used: the academic community; the rugby community and the Northern Territory cyclist community. It's now a word used to evoke a feeling rather than describe a relational reality. But the local people of God does have a relational reality. It is, at least, an enduring, local, open, diverse community of believers committed to loving each other.

Scripture goes further than just anticipating Christians belong to a community, it provides guidance on what shape that community needs to take. Firstly, it must be a community committed to loving each other. There is of course the general call for Christians to love each other, with specific shape provided by the New Testament's many 'one another' statements⁴. Christians are, amongst others, to be devoted to each other, and to accept each other, as well as more pointedly, to forgive one another, and to bear with one another. These are commands for how we should relate with all Christians we encounter, and so if the New Testament anticipates that Christians belong to a community, they must be commands for how we will relate within these communities. This doesn't mean we always will. Scripture provides evidence, and the expectation, that Christians won't love each other, and that even when we do it may be difficult – the commands to bear with each other, and forgive each other, for example, presume difficulty in relating. The key distinction here, for a group of Christians, is between welcoming the call to love, and failing, as opposed to refusing the call to love at all. The first is a Christian community, perhaps even a very healthy one, the second has refused to be a Christian community.

The sheer range of 'one another's' implies that we will have meaningful intensive relationships; that we will see some people often enough, across enough domains of life, over a long enough time, for opportunity to have displayed more than one 'one another' towards each other. This is not spelt out explicitly in the New Testament, but it is hard to make sense of the New Testament if it is not the expectation. We do not need to 'bear with one another' if we are never going to see each other again, for example. Of course, not all our relationships will be multi-dimensional, and even single dimensional relationships provide opportunities for love; I may one day be able to again treat a parking volunteer at a conference with courtesy, I can respond graciously to a harsh remark on social media, and I can pray for people I'm never going to meet. But the New Testament assumption is that, bar an emergency, some of our relationships will be multi-dimensional. And so, in the normal course of events we should expect some of our relationships within a local people of God to be

³ I acknowledge there are complications surrounding how to be public in persecuted contexts – the whole church is in an emergency. It's beyond the scope of this piece to discuss how to navigate that.

⁴ A quick google search will yield more than 50 examples.

friendships; we should expect some of our relationships not to be optional; and, we should expect many of them to be enduring.

Secondly, as well as being a community committed to loving each other, the local people of God must be a local community. This is an implication of the command to love, and the reality of 'neighbour'. It is not enough to simply wish the people of God well, they must actually be loved. And so, our communities need to be local. We need to allow that in modern life 'local' is somewhat flexible. The answer won't be an arbitrary distance, but rather the discernment as to whether it is possible to be neighbourly towards others in the community. Geography no longer starts our relationships in the way it used to, but it still does place a constraint on how possible it is to develop them. If I meet two people at work in the CBD, and one lives an hour's drive from me, and the other fifteen minutes, I'll have more opportunities to extend my relationship with the person who lives nearby. We need to ask if it is realistic for us to build relationships, serve, and be served, beyond Sundays.

Thirdly, the local people of God must be open, public and diverse. That is, any believer, and any kind of believer, must be free to belong, which in turn assumes and requires that the community can be discovered. The primary New Testament data arises from the interplay between the nature of the Christian message and the concept of neighbour. That is, Jesus is not just rescuing and forming individuals, he is rescuing and forming a people. Neither is he rescuing people privately; 'Christ is Lord' is a public message for all people. And he is rescuing all types of people, he is rescuing slaves and masters, Greeks and Jews, men and women, adults and children. When we belong to Jesus, we not only belong to him, we also belong to each other, and we belong to each other whomever we are. This belonging has two forms. Firstly, it is a status. We are now brother and sister with everyone else who belongs, or will come to belong, to Jesus. But secondly, and this is where neighbour is salient, the limitations of time and space mean we cannot, in this creation, enjoy or experience this with everyone who belongs to Jesus. Rather, we experience it with some people, as we belong to specific people, and as we belong to a specific group of people. Just as the status of belonging to a family brings with it the expectation of the experience of belonging to a family, so too the status of belonging to all kinds of people who belong to Jesus brings with it the expectation that we'll be able to experience belonging to all kinds of people who belong to Jesus. In other words, unless some emergency is in place, it is unthinkable that we would enjoy the status without the experience.

This theological grounding is reinforced with various textual exhortations in the New Testament. James speaks harshly to those who show favouritism to rich people. Paul speaks harshly to Peter when he withdraws fellowship from the Gentiles. The New Testament assumes we know leaders well enough for them to be a model. It assumes the older will teach the younger. Paul, in his letters, directly addresses different groups; men and women, adults and children, and slaves and masters. Together these build a picture of a community where anyone could belong, and in turn where anyone who belongs is expected to relate with any kind of person that does belong.

iii) The experience of the local people of God needs to be real in practice and not just on paper.

When we belong to Jesus, we have the status, but not the experience, of belonging to all other followers of Jesus. The local people of God provides the context where we can experience now, with a few followers of Jesus, what we will be able to experience in the future, with all followers of Jesus. But for this experience to be real, and for the local people of God to exist, it must be possible to build relationships with people, and it must be possible to build relationships with a diverse range of people. It is not enough for it to be a community we can formally join, and it is not enough to share a meeting with people we don't know. Belonging to a community requires relationships, and

belonging to an open, diverse community requires the possibility of relationships with a range of people, including the possibility of non-optional relationships. In other words, the local people of God must exist in practice, and not just on paper; it is a community determined not just by what it intends, but what it makes possible.

To make it more concrete, if it is practically impossible, or nearly impossible for older people to build relationships of love with younger people, or if it is impossible, or nearly impossible for new people to build any relationships, or if it is practically impossible for believers of one ethnic group to build relationships with believers from another ethnic group, then, the community, while claiming to be a local church, is not in fact a local people of God. Typically, when we notice these features in a church we treat them under the rubric of health rather than existence. It would be nice if the older and younger got together, it would be nice if new people could join, it would be nice if some of our relationships had depth, or it would be nice if the locals were more welcoming of internationals, and so on.

A key reason why we view these challenges under the rubric of health rather than existence, is that we tend to privilege the precision of a formal policy over the reality of an actual situation. For example, when I was studying at theological college, there was some discussion as to whether our college chapel services were public. The argument was that anyone was allowed to come. And this was true, if you turned up uninvited, or otherwise, to a chapel service no one would ask you to leave, whereas if you turned up to a lecture you may have been politely asked to leave. But the chapel service times were not advertised to the wider world, the times and locations were liable to change, there was no sign placed on the street closest to the service, and the door to that street was kept locked. Note though, the issue of whether an event is 'public' is not about whether people came – plenty of public events don't have new people turn up to them, but whether it was possible for them to come. If you relied on the formal policy college chapel services were public, but if you observed reality they were not.

It's more difficult when a group claims to be a church. Consider the following example. I remember talking to a friend on the edge of tears explaining how she hadn't been able to build any new close friendships at church in eight years. She is a much nicer person than I am, and her kids are all the right ages. It's just that somehow this is a church where it's practically impossible for 'newcomers' to integrate. We could simply say 'the church is not very healthy', but I think it would be more accurate (if not precise) to diagnose that, in some meaningful way, her church was not a local people of God, at least not for her.

There are three challenges of discernment here. Firstly, it's difficult to see people not relating. That is, if a church declared they were running a gathering at a certain time, and then didn't run a gathering, it's easy to see. But if a church claims it's welcoming, but then isn't, it's hard to see. Of course, it's easy to see if a church is unwelcoming to an event, but that is not the question the example above raised, rather it's whether its relational structure can welcome new people over the longer term. In fact, the two may not be correlated. Some years ago, friends had cause to change cities twice over a couple of years for work. In the first city, the church had great systems for welcoming people at an event, but after a few weeks they quickly realised it would be almost impossible to build any new friendships. In the second, the church was hopeless at formal welcoming, but after a few months they had many friends.

The second challenge is that some good work is always happening. You cannot have people called by Jesus, regenerated by the Holy Spirit, without those people doing some good. Some good things will be done, and some good relationships will be built. But we are tempted to use the 'some good' as the evaluation of the overall state. In a recent conversation, I was told the church they had newly

arrived at had great community, and they'd made good friends already. But in the same conversation I was told the people they'd just had over for Sunday lunch indicated this was the first time in seven years belonging to that church they had been invited into someone's home. A local people of God does not exist because of the strong relationships a few people have (any community can generate that), but because of the types of relationships it enables everyone to have.

The third challenge is discerning whether a good just isn't happening, or whether a good is practically speaking impossible to happen. To return to the earlier question of college chapel. The question of whether it was a 'public' meeting wasn't determined by whether anyone came, but whether it was possible for anyone to come – the college could have provided more consistent and better advertised times, a sign on the road could have put out, the door could have been unlocked. It's likely that no one would have come. But it would have been possible to do so.

A similar dynamic is at play with church services that target specific demographic or ethnic groups. They do not formally exclude people from belonging, but practically they do. There is of course no in-principle reason why some Christian activities cannot exclude people: a leaders' meeting can exclude people who aren't leaders, a women's convention can exclude men, a crèche can exclude primary school children. The problem with church services that target a specific demographic is not the service itself, but in the fact that, for many, the service constitutes the community; it is not just a gathering, but a 'congregation'. And while it is appropriate to run any number of activities for specific groups of people, it is not appropriate to exclude certain kinds of believers from a community. The very structure of the good news of Jesus Christ has a 'from many to one' movement. Jesus is rescuing people from many backgrounds to become one, united with him, and with each other. When our churches preclude oneness across demographic and ethnic boundaries our collective actions undermine and deny the message we proclaim. Most of us, I hope, would recoil in horror if ethnic or demographic segregation were part of our formal policy, and yet we are quite comfortable with its practical reality.

How we discern the problem will have big implications for what solutions we propose. If a good thing simply isn't happening, then the problem is cultural or spiritual. We'll think we need to be more captivated by the grace of God so that we'll in turn extend his welcome to us, to those others he has also welcomed. We'll exhort people to be less selfish, or to develop a new habit, or perhaps to learn a new skill. In each case, we'll think the solution is located with individual initiative.

But if we think it's impossible, or nearly impossible, then the problem is structural. It's the difference between Christians not going to a church gathering before COVID and not going to one during COVID. Before COVID we could be sure if we weren't there, there was either something wrong with the service, or something wrong with our motivations, or perhaps something wrong with how we had constructed our lives, or some other condition related to us individually. But during COVID no one has thought this, we all know the reason no one is going to church services is that there haven't been any church services to go to. The problem in other words is not one of individual initiative.

Living as the local people of God

I think the diagnosis is at least structural. It is likely cultural as well, but just as it would be futile to motivate people to attend a service that doesn't exist, so it is futile to exhort people to live as the local people of God, investing in non-optional, diverse, enduring and new relationships, whenever it is practically impossible. Simply, modern life bequeaths us too many relationships, with too little overlap. In a village, the people I knew from one sphere of life, I knew from another. This is no longer the case. Typically, the people I know from work, I do not know at church, and the people I know from church, do not overlap particularly with the people I know in the community, and none

of these overlap with my extended family and so on. It is not possible for me to invest in all these, and so I end up, through direct choice or happenstance, relating deeply with only a few, or sometimes with none. To put it differently, in modern life everyone is our neighbour, and to misquote *The Incredibles*, 'when everyone is your neighbour, no one is your neighbour'.

We need a structure. A structure is required when something good will not happen organically. Most of us find this concept uncomplicated when applied to scheduling or physical structures, but we balk when applied to social structures. We would roll our eyes if someone thought the Spirit would lead people to gather at the same time each week without announcing when the service was. And we would think it lunacy if someone planned to run an event for 100 people in a living room designed for 10, who 'just' trusted that God would provide the space.

And yet, when a large group of Christians, all with more relationships than they could ever possibly invest in, fail to organically coordinate themselves so that the older know the younger, so families build relationships with single people, so there's a mix of mutual and difficult relationships, so different ethnic groups relate and so new people are welcomed, we are still tempted to locate the problem with individual habits and priorities. In the New Testament times they needed, in at least one place, a widows' list. We need a neighbours' list, or 'neighbourhood'. That is, we need a simple structure that places us in identifiable, enduring (but not static), diverse groups with the call that we love at least these people.

If you are familiar with recent trends in church structures you may think I'm about to suggest 'missional' or 'gospel' communities. But my suggestion is more modest than that. The Missional Community movement correctly identifies that the local church should consist of communities, and that these communities would not arise accidentally, and that Christians should undertake mission and blessing in the world together rather than alone. Its mistake (in my view at least) was to imagine that Scripture mandates, or that modern life makes possible, for these to occur in a single structure.

Alternately, we may think existing small groups, or Bible study groups, are already providing the solution. And no doubt some are. But most small groups are designed as learning occasions, with relationships as a hoped-for by-product. Our verbs betray us here, they are typically something we *go to*, rather than something we *belong to*. Further they are often built around specific demographics, never include children, only exist for part of the year, and are usually too small to sustain a community.

Rather I think a single purpose structure that enables Christians to commit to and love a specific group of believers is required. Let me offer a precise suggestion as opposed to a proscriptive one. Namely that churches form groups:

- Of between 15 and 25 people (including children)
- Which include adults and children, married people and single people, and where possible, people from different ethnic groups
- Who live close enough to each other to be neighbourly
- Who commit to love each other
- That meet at least 8 times a year for a meal
- That encourage opportunities to relate outside the formal meal
- That have a method for identifying needs within the group, and for attempting to see them met
- That run continuously
- Which have little expectation of formal teaching

- And which have little expectation of the group together blessing or undertaking mission in the wider world.

Firstly, note, this is no return to the New Testament. New Testament Christians would probably be shocked at how little we would be relating with each other. It is rather an attempt to fulfil the minimal requirements of enabling Christians of any kind to relate and belong to Christians of any kind. To borrow from an earlier metaphor, it's a structure to unlock the door. Secondly, by itself, this would not meet the requirements for a church; it does not include teaching, elders or mission for example. It is a structure which assumes the existence of other structures. As such, the details of how groups are constituted will vary from context to context, according to what other structures and circumstances are present. In some places groups can be bigger, in some they will need to bear most of the teaching weight, in others they will include obvious opportunities for mission or blessing.

None of this is to stop or discourage Christians from loving beyond the bounds of this group. In fact, the very design of the group presumes we all have opportunities and responsibilities to love them. The parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us that anybody could be our neighbour, regardless of ethnicity, class or religion. This structure is not designed to eliminate serendipitous opportunities to love, rather if we imagine for a moment 100 Samaritans walking past 100 victims of assault, the structure is to help coordinate it such that every Samaritan stops for someone, and in turn every victim has someone stop for them.

Such structures are of course just the beginning. Just because a widow had their name put on a list doesn't mean anyone bothered to care for them. While, as I have argued, they make it possible for the local people of God to exist, this doesn't mean the local people of God will be healthy. There will still be the long slow work of calling people to commit to each other, and of by the grace of God developing new hearts and new habits. To put it differently, if the teenagers and the old people find it impossible to ever even meet each other, then maybe the local people of God doesn't exist; but if the teenagers and old people hate each other, the local people of God is unhealthy. The first is whether it's possible to relate, the second is whether they relate well.

Leading the Local People of God

There are always individual actions Christians can take. We can commit properly to a fewer people from a wider range of backgrounds, or attempt to create an informal community group. However, when overall structure is concerned, it is hard to make much progress as an individual without appearing to, or in fact, undermining the church leadership. And so, inevitably discussions about this kind of topic end up being for leaders. I've laid out a suggested structure which attempts to solve one thing. And we could have further discussions about other structures, or about how to implement them, or about how to develop a culture to live alongside them. But I think such discussions would be unproductive without a shift in thinking about the role of a leader of a church.

That is, amongst other things, in modern life, a church leader will need to take responsibility for creating structures, and with it a culture, that makes relationships possible and probable. This is to require from leaders more than the requirements for elders set out in the New Testament. This should not surprise us. In each age, the requirements for church roles exceed the requirements for elderships. In our own age, most church leaders are required to have a theology degree, have spent some time learning original languages, be able to preach (as opposed to other kinds of teaching), understand budgets, have some familiarity with human resource and child protection legislation, be a competent manager of volunteers, and understand various issues regarding property. None of these are requirements of eldership in the New Testament.

I know here, I am at risk of turning a largely undoable job, into an even more undoable job. And I feel it all the more keenly as someone who doesn't have anything close to the range of skills required for most modern church roles. It is why, although I have advocated for the creation of smaller groups, when it comes to the legal entity of the local church I am an advocate of larger 'churches', where staff and volunteers are able to use fewer gifts amongst more people. Our current model requiring generalists seems to cut against a theology of gifts, and against observation of people.

Taking responsibility for such structures requires an additional shift in thinking. Competence is measured less by how well a leader does things directly, and more by how well they enable other people to do things. In other words, they prepare us for works of service, and help create the contexts where we can undertake those works of service.

More than gathered

COVID helped raise the question of what to think the people of God are when we can't gather. And here our instincts were correct, community does matter, the local people of God exists. Church, in that sense, can't be cancelled, but it can be revealed, and we were perhaps either surprised or disappointed by what we discovered. In the coming weeks and months, as our restrictions are slowly lifted, we will God willing, be able to meet again. But I hope we won't just gather, but take the time to ensure we are more than gathered.