



Dear friends in the EMBA

New Normal Essentials

We write to you at this significant time to share some perspectives that we hope will help guide the way ahead for our Baptist churches. We have been living through extraordinary times – extraordinarily disruptive, extraordinarily distressing and extraordinarily disorientating. The Covid pandemic has affected us all, some of us very closely. To those who have experienced acute personal loss – our hearts and our prayers go out to you.

Our normal patterns of church life have come to a standstill, and whilst this has been distressing for many we have seen churches adapt and find ways of functioning. The disruption to our normal life, whilst painful for many has, however, given us a unique opportunity to pause, reflect on what's happening around us and start to dream about a different future – a new normal. It was to create a shared “reflection space” that we recently held a Zoom gathering for the ministers of our EMBA churches. We encourage you read the notes from the [Towards a New Normal](#) gathering where many deep insights were shared.

As a Regional team we have continued to reflect on what emerged at that gathering. Of the many insights shared we wish to highlight four things to help our churches grow back healthily. These are not new, and they are not unique to the Baptists of the EMBA. Nor do they replace our values of being “Christ centred, effectively led, discipleship focused, missional, intentionally inclusive, committed to partnering and open to new things.” Instead, they underline and emphasise these values.

1. A renewed vision of the church's place in society

A few of our churches have found themselves playing a prominent role in their communities responding to the needs of lonely and vulnerable people. In these cases, the churches concerned were already engaged in their communities before the pandemic struck and their response was offered in partnership with other organisations. Engagement and partnership – these words are worth noting!

More generally, the pandemic has underlined what we already knew – that the privileged and central place of the church in our culture and communities has long gone and that, consequently the church is largely seen as irrelevant and unnecessary to the majority of people. This sounds very negative, and we apologise if our bluntness is offensive, but this “post Christendom” reality doesn't mean that there isn't a place for us. There is! It's just that it's a different place to one the church used to occupy. We no longer have an assumed leadership role in our communities, so we don't have a right to set the agenda for others.

But if we are willing and humble enough to operate as equal partners on shared agendas we will be welcomed and will find a place to serve with others. In brief, we need a change of mindset, attitudes and behaviours so that we can learn to function as guests within the culture, not hosts. It is our conviction that from this humbler place, freed from presumed leadership and power, the Christian message will still be influential, but its influence will be via the quality of our lives and relationships rather than through presumed power. Coupled with this, we need ...

2. A recommitment to serving God's purposes in the world.

Our vision must be bigger than the perpetuation of our churches; it must embrace God's vision for the world! We are convinced that the God revealed in Scripture; the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is a missionary God who is working in his world to save and redeem it. It's God's mission, but he invites his church to join him in serving his purposes in the world. Or to change the language, the church serves the kingdom of God in the world, by seeking to embody it and promote its values and life. The church is an agent of God in the world – the only agent that names the name of the Saviour, Jesus – but the church is not the only agent.

During recent months we have all seen many signs of God's "hand" in our local communities and on our TV screens. We have also heard a cry from the heart in society – a YouGov poll in April showed that only 9% of those surveyed wanted to return to "the old normal". Under lockdown a desire has been awakened for a fairer, kinder, greener, more caring society - all of which sound a bit like the kingdom of God! Having seen God's hand at work in society this leaves us with two options: acknowledge it but dismiss its relevance to the church. Or embrace the bigger agenda and play our unique part through prayer, action and witness.

3. A re-centring of our churches around discipleship

We discern that the experience of lockdown has revealed an overdependence on our Sunday gatherings. We are not suggesting that gathering is unimportant, nor that the desire to be together face-to-face again is wrong in some way. The opposite is true. However, we do suggest that the *activity* of our Sunday gatherings has been given too much prominence and the *purpose* of making disciples hasn't been given enough.

Gathering for worship is good, but it is not the 'be all and end all' of making disciples. We suggest that the pandemic has shown fault lines in our discipleship and disciple-making processes and that a re-centring of our churches on discipleship is both necessary and urgent. So, we call on our churches to revisit this crucial area and invest more in forming:-

- Whole life disciples – able to engage Christianly in the world as it is and wherever God has placed them
- Self-feeding disciples - who take responsibility for their own life with God and know how to pray and read the Scriptures etc.
- Disciples who make disciples – who know how to share their faith.

There are plenty of resources and approaches available, but we stress that programmes are not enough – that a commitment to personal and relational discipleship is necessary.

4. A harnessing of the power of digital technology

Whilst some of our churches have been unable to use digital technology during lockdown, many have had their eyes open to its usefulness and potential. We would place ourselves in this second category! And, of course, the millennials and younger people amongst us have probably sighed a collective, "At last!" We've seen, experienced and observed multiple benefits, including:-

- The ability to stay connected in churches
- Online ministry serving our own people and attracting many visitors, some of whom are not regular churchgoers.
- Effective and accessible platforms for leaders' meetings, prayer gatherings, community groups etc.
- The ability to gather people from across a wide geographical area for online events, e.g. prayer events.

Like most people, we long for the day when we can gather in person again, but like many others we have seen the power and potential of virtual gatherings. And having seen, there should be no going back. Instead, we suggest that most churches should develop competence in using digital technology and then use it appropriately. We hope for churches that blend physical and virtual gatherings in the future, where the right media is chosen for the activity.

Final thoughts

We share these challenges now, incomplete and half-formed as they are because we think that there is a window of opportunity to bring about lasting change. Lockdown is beginning to be released and the forces pulling us back to the "old normal" may soon be felt strongly. Churches are free to return to business as usual if they wish, but for those who have caught sight of a different, more connected, more engaged future then the time to think, pray and act is now.

As a regional staff team, we are on a journey with these issues too. We plan further reflection events for Leadership teams and Diaconates (look out for *New Normal Essentials events*) and a resource list for those who want to dig deeper. So, let's journey together shall we? Do let us know what you think and, particularly, how we might partner together on the journey.

With our prayers and good wishes,

The Regional Minister Team
17th June 2020