
CHRISTIAN LIFE COMMITTEE

Official Report

The committee's discussions this year focused on the health of BGAV churches and the challenges they continue to face as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is possible in the years ahead that these reflections will slowly grow less surprising or insightful, but if that is the case, they might yet serve as confirmation that we are currently living at the beginning of an entirely new moment in the Church's life together. For this reason, we pray the thoughts below will serve not just as an encouragement to the churches in the BGAV of today but as a historical record for the Christian communities of the future: that they might find strength in knowing they face nothing that has not been faced before – and that the same God who has been faithful in 2024 will undoubtedly be faithful to His people tomorrow.

We have organized our reflections around three main themes: The Post-Pandemic Era, The Church's Response, and The Hope of the Gospel.

1. The Post Pandemic Era

Regardless of what exactly the pandemic caused, it remains a critical inflection point in the life of the Church. Certain trends that were evident in years prior have only quickened while others have disappeared or transformed. In either case, it is imperative for us to reevaluate our current context given these dramatic changes.

There is a presiding sense among many ministers and lay leaders that the purpose and relevance of the Church can no longer be assumed; that what once felt self-evident and self-explanatory no longer seems to connect in the same way, either with long-standing church members or those we seek to reach with the Gospel. One of the more superficial examples of this shift has come with the rapid adoption of new technology. When in-person attendance was simply not possible for so many months, many congregations by necessity began streaming their services online for the first time. Doing so has been a powerful tool and a decisive advantage in many places yet has also prompted significant theological questions about the nature of Christian community and the value or sanctity of physical presence. The answers are not yet clear.

Reaching younger generations continues to be a challenge, and for many young people, the pandemic only normalized life spent without connection to the Church or to faith. Some who were only loosely affiliated have never returned and the consequences have been complicated. On the one hand, the Church must choose to take responsibility for the loss; not because of fault, but because of love. We cannot simply welcome young people back if and when they decide to return. Rather, we must engage them by seeking them where they are. Doing so will require more energy and knowledge than most churches currently have at their disposal. But the pattern of Jesus' ministry among us remains clear: we cannot wait for the broken and hurt to reveal themselves. We must seek them as we have been sought.

On the other hand, we also cannot allow the vacancies in our churches – especially those of younger generations – to breed resentment among those that have stayed. We risk perpetuating a cycle of misunderstanding if we blame young people for abandoning our current models or refuse to acknowledge that other forms of Church might now be necessary. Again, we must choose to take responsibility as Jesus has done for us. The BGAV should seek out young adults to lead short-term projects. We should pay special attention to the skills and insights these young adults bring to the table. We should carefully invest in the next generation – not just in formal mentorship or preparation for tomorrow – but in extending the opportunity to actually lead and shape ministry today.

It would be unfair, however, for us to ignore the impact of the pandemic on other generations as well. Most churches rely on older members for financial support and volunteers, but these senior adults have also chosen to participate less in the Church since the pandemic. We must be creative, therefore, in reestablishing connections but also in diversifying the Church's "human resources" portfolio. If in reality, the pandemic has diminished participation across all ages, God's people must renew their efforts at reaching not just younger and older adults, but unmarried adults and adults without children as well. Too many feel isolated and disconnected from the life of the Church and too often we have failed to provide them with any opportunity to foster those relationships – especially those in churches who currently base their programming around the traditional family structures. The body needs all of its members – and each demographic stands to gain when the others are present and nourished.

Unfortunately, the pandemic continues to fuel incredulity, hatred, and complacency – both within the Church and the world. Those who are disgruntled and angry with religion and religious institutions have only become more brazen in their criticism. Long-standing problems continue to fester without any real resolution in sight – in part, at least, because our capacity for empathy and compromise has been so damaged. Cynicism and distrust are rampant. Fractures are tearing many revered institutions apart at the seams. Consensus to face significant crises, even amongst Christians – e.g., the abuse of women and children, financial indiscretions, socio-economic, racial, and gender inequity, etc. – feels stubbornly and confusingly out of reach. Often times, crises like these have been the impetus for renewed unity but the pandemic is unique in that it has unfortunately not resulted in that same strength.

At root, because the Church exists to make disciples, any existential problem it faces is ultimately a discipleship problem. The world must see that Jesus actually makes a noticeable difference if they are to commit or recommit themselves to gathering with His people. We must guard ourselves from envy, greed, and jealousy (Luke 12:15), speak out against racism and ethnic strife (Acts 10:34-35), avoid self-righteousness and passing judgement on others (James 4:12), and forfeit our desire for revenge and retribution (Romans 12:17-21). Because trust in the Church as an institution is so low, we must choose – not just to be welcoming and gracious – but to avoid even the appearance of inhospitality. We must become more interested in resolving the systemic problems of “church hurt:” the idea that individuals have had harmful experiences or somehow have felt rejected by the Church, and now no longer feel capable of even approaching God, let alone God’s church.

In short: old problems have taken on a new intensity and urgency, and it is our opinion as a committee that we may need to do Church in ways that are different from the ways we are used to doing them. In the face of undeniable and unrelenting change, we must set our aversion to change aside. We must adapt – not just in small, incremental ways – but we must ask ourselves “what can we do that no one has ever done before?”

2. The Church’s Response

If it is true that we inhabit a new “era” – replete with undiscovered dangers, exciting opportunities, and unprecedented upheavals all its own – the Church must be mindful of its own bias as we weigh what actions to take in response. In other words, if new times call for new measures (and new wine should not be poured into old wineskins), we should be reluctant to apply old solutions to our current predicament – regardless of how effective they once proved to be.

Certainly the worship service – and worship ‘style’ in particular – has been a more obvious lever for church leaders in past seasons. Seeking to adapt aesthetically has been a consistent suggestion for churches struggling to attract younger people. But this advice risks misunderstanding the depth of the problems we face. For one, regardless of what style is deemed preferable, church cannot succeed in concept if it is understood primarily in such superficial terms. The pandemic may be revealing that there are deeper and more substantial purposes that have been neglected below the surface – even if the style of our worship may seem like an easier problem to solve. The fundamental objective of church must be to foster community with one another and with God. Only when this remains at the center can a Christ centered community/family take root. In which case the worship service may not be the central issue at all. Perhaps other elements become more important: preaching a compelling Gospel, serving the community, building consistent groups, rhythms, and habits, etc.

The pandemic has clearly focused our attention on the ways we choose to gather as the Church. Certain ways of doing so seem to have unraveled in recent years – or at least have slowly grown less effective. The Church, therefore, now faces the choice between recommitting to previous practices or abandoning models altogether in favor of new possibilities. These decisions will determine the discipleship pathways of future church communities: Sunday School programs, small group initiatives, mentorship programs, community service projects, etc. But behind all these programmatic choices and adjustments is a larger question: something like, “are there different ways of organizing our life together – or better yet, different goals, that may be common across all churches, that we can re-prioritize to keep our discipleship strategies thriving?” And implicit here are other questions about the ‘metrics’ of our success. What can we measure to determine the severity of the problem and the effectiveness of a given remedy? Perhaps in the years ahead, the BGAV could help churches in our family define these priorities more clearly. If we can identify what drives “success,” perhaps we can measure it and manage it to greater effect.

Churches must demonstrate in word and in deed – both to those inside and outside of their walls – that there is ample reason to participate. As much as we want that to arise out of an ingenious new program or strategy, the reality is that it will only come by our love for one another. Church leaders and laity must demonstrate that love clearly and effectively if

we are to attract a hearing for the Gospel. We know, because Jesus has shown us, that incarnating the love and reconciling power of Christ in our community creates a powerful attraction, especially to those who recognize various levels of need in their lives. We have to engage – not just creatively – but in ways that cost us time, money, and talent – and to extents that exceed what we may once have thought was normal or appropriate. Essentially, we need to work harder and with greater innovation than we have typically been willing to do.

Whatever form our response takes: the BGAV must face at least two distinct challenges: First, that as Christians we are too often known by what we are against and not what we are for; and second, that we do not offer any unique contributions to the current problems and issues facing the world more broadly. With respect to the first: we must choose to assert the Gospel in loving, robust, and constructive ways (through service, compassion, advocacy, etc.), and avoid allowing our witness to be controlled by negative, polemical reactions (boycotts, denunciations, contention, hatred, etc.). With respect to the second: we must prioritize our collective identity as Christ's body on earth, and not allow other associations – especially in culture and in politics – to constrain our moral imagination. Only in Him can we find our life and our future. All other attachments are forfeit.

3. The Hope of the Gospel

Throughout our conversations together as a committee, we have chosen deliberately to set these daunting challenges alongside the hope of the Gospel; allowing Jesus to have the final word in each case. The “Gospel” is “good news:” the announcement of Jesus Christ, and the proclamation of His birth, life, death, and resurrection – just as John the Baptist proclaims in Mark 1:4-5. It is joy for those who mourn, forgiveness for those who sin, and meaning for those without purpose. And so as we look to scripture, we find rich reservoirs of comfort and assurance. Rather than give in to despair, it is fitting that the Church savor and recount these many gifts God grants us in His word – not only to encourage and secure us, but to equip us for the work ahead.

For example: in Revelation 21:5, John writes, “And the one sitting on the throne said, ‘Look, I am making everything new!’ And then He said to me, ‘Write this down for what I tell you is trustworthy and true.’” Penned by John while in exile on Patmos, these words remind us that believers have indefatigable hope in new beginnings. The broken cities, homes, and lives of individuals and families will all one day be rebuilt. Natural disasters and man-made destruction will all give way to new life. What comes about may have scars – and it may involve remembering realities that no longer exist in the same way – but God remains faithful in bringing the new out of the old. Where terrorism once took down towers, there is now a memorial. Where hurricanes and tidal waves once wiped out everything in their path, new homes and playgrounds exist – and new beginnings are to be enjoyed. So churches, too – in all the obstacles and challenges they face – must see opportunities for proclaiming the Gospel message even in the midst of what feels daunting or uncertain.

In Luke 4:17-21, Jesus inaugurates His ministry by reading from Isaiah. He says, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” His announcement of this “year” is the announcement of God's eternal jubilee – and this is a relevant and rich idea for the Church's witness today. Not only is there joy in the life God has promised us, but perhaps more significantly, there is serendipity. The upside-down Kingdom of God that Jesus has brought to earth upends our expectations and assumptions, reforms our relationships, renews our minds (Romans 12:2), and grants us motivation for the struggles we face today in His name.

In Jeremiah 29:11, the Lord tells us through His prophet, “For I know the plans I have for you ... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” We pray that these words would spur the BGAV on towards hopeful prayer and expectation – seeking the guidance of God's Spirit and His leading over any of the suggestions and strategies of people. His plans for us are for our flourishing regardless of the challenges, and only in His leadership can we find – not only a path through obstacles – but courage and optimism along the way.

Exactly how God will lead us is up to Him alone. In Acts 7 we see that the results of faithfulness may be uncomfortable and tragic. But even in the death of martyrs, God is quick to use His people for incredible good. If God cared for Stephen in His life and His death then God can certainly take care of His Church, even when it faces such tragedy and loss. No historic moment is beyond the purview of His power or outside the boundaries of His mercy. As representatives of the BGAV, we confess our need for His intervention and wisdom, and we abide in His unrelenting support and care as we follow Him in obedience.

Respectfully submitted,

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