

Washing up, the Imperial Church and Covid-19

Shane Altmann

When I was young and beautiful my young wife and I lived in Noosa. We were in our early 20s, country New South Wales kids at the beginning of our teaching careers. We had begun our teaching careers in a small Christian school when we got jobs at Good Shepherd Lutheran College Noosa in the mid 1990s. Well, boy oh boy we thought we had landed, and we had. The college seemed huge, but more importantly, the church! There were just so many Lutherans, trendy songs, great fellowship and people our own age. Life as a Lutheran in country New South Wales was very different; our denomination is not very well represented out there, then or now, just a few faithful families keeping the Lutheran fires burning.

Every week after worship at Noosa we would all gather outside the church there at Good Shepherd and have a cuppa, chat and make plans for the afternoon. We were young and dangerous, no kids, and the world at our feet. Ultimately, we would wander off to a café somewhere, or to a round of golf or to a friend's place. They were good times. After chatting we would wander into the kitchen to wash up our coffee mugs and, usually, there were two lovely old dears there at the sink washing up. No matter how hard we tried to wash up our own cups they would not let us. At the AGM one year someone suggested a roster so that the old girls could have a break and come out and chat.

They were indignant.

'It's our thing!', they protested, 'Leave us alone. You lot are young and active and running youth and leading worship and everything. This is all we have, it is our way of contributing, it is our *ministry*.'

So, we let them wash up. And learned a lesson at the same time.

When Constantine became Emperor and made Christianity the official religion of the known world (don't quiz me on the details or the dates) we refined the process of institutionalising Christianity. Even today we have The Office of the Bishop, The First Assistant Bishop, various other layers of hierarchy and structure that we can probably trace back to what some call the Imperial Church (again, don't quiz me). Luther and his fellow reformers, amongst other things, rallied against its abuses many years later and asked questions of its habits and helped Christians, then and now, to understand how to live in a new and emerging world. But the structures largely remained unchanged.

And now they are irrelevant.

At best they scratch and struggle for relevance a fifth of the way through the 21st century. Whatever we talk about, reflect upon, opine regarding and work towards a new future for our church and fail to attend to the structures, and I am not speaking of apostolic

succession, but the imperial structures and hierarchies whose dependence rests upon everyone turning up to church each week and putting money on the plate (or via REG, so much more modern) to sustain it, well, we waste our time.

My generation ran away from the church over thirty years ago, and the baby boomers before that! How much more irrelevant is it, and will it be, in a post-Covid-19 world for the young and fit who will survive this disaster. The last of us who are still hanging on to those archaic beliefs in systems and structures are statistically the most likely not to have made it when this pandemic blows over.

The future of our church, its secret to success, lays in the lessons learned from those two old dears at the washing up sink at Good Shepherd Noosa all those years ago. It is in small groups. Stop it, don't go straight to bible study thinking and try to build structure and hierarchy around my words. I mean in small groups of like-minded people, active in the world, allowing a God of Grace to work through them, invited into ministry where they are, how they are, who they are. If you are musicians, play. If you are teachers, teach. If you are golfers, golf. If you are foodies, eat. If you just like washing up, then wash up. Our God works through physical means. He is hidden in the work of the most humble in service of our world. And in the work of the magnificent too, for the record.

Acts 2:4–6 might read, 'And they met at church every now and then, and sometimes went for coffee, they played golf together and washed up. They wandered around and did different things at each other's places and looked after each other. They loved it.'

The footnote in the *Concordia Study Bible* could state, 'And it was Covid-safe and contact-traceable.'

Our 21st-century church will emerge looking very similar to the biblical church, and coronavirus has accelerated this. Our structures will collapse as we continue to rely on regular attendance and giving to prop them up. Those days are gone, we just haven't realised it yet. Our departments and hierarchies will be no more. But the church will go on.

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