

‘Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens’ (Heb 12:26 NIV)

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‘Paradigm shift’.

Thomas Kuhn bequeathed us that phrase in his landmark book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

The phrase is still useful, but its popularity obscures some of Kuhn’s insights. For example, paradigms overtake one another with a significant period of overlap; they don’t replace one another overnight. Also, new paradigms and old ones are not always mutually exclusive; we need both the certainty of Newtonian physics *and* the mind-bending paradoxes of quantum mechanics, for example. And new paradigms arise out of the failure of old ones which have exhausted their power to solve anomalies or provide new explanations.

But there is also this: because a paradigm is only a shared conceptual framework built on common assumptions, normal science mainly sustains the *status quo*. Paradigms can just be sophisticated group-think.

Instead, paradigm shifts arise disruptively. You need a Copernicus, a Galileo or an Einstein (or a Luther in the ecclesiastical world!); or you need the failures and limitations of the existing paradigm to become so self-evident that its fundamental assumptions are laid bare for questioning; or you need a serendipitous event (think the discovery of penicillin) met by a curious mind. Or you need all three.

The Covid crisis is a catalyst. The *status quo* (not just in the church, but in politics, economics and business) is no longer possible. The disruptiveness is upon us. The limitations and failures of our existing systems are being exposed; shared frameworks of thinking and acting are undergoing rapid change; and out of it all God is shifting our paradigms.

Prognostication is a fraught business. History is littered with dud predictions, not least in the church. At the time of writing¹ we have too many unknowns for *anything* to be certain, except the disruption and difficulty will not disappear any time soon.

For example, we don’t know if (via vaccine or natural immunity) we will ever find the Holy Grail of ‘herd immunity’ for SARS-CoV-2 we hear so much about. We don’t know how the virus will mutate. We don’t know what will happen when the economy is taken off life support. We don’t know what internationalism will look like, even if there is a ‘post-Covid

¹ June 2020.

world'. We don't know whether increasingly hostile, cold-war like rhetoric will result in hot war. And if there is a second or third wave of infection we don't know how many will die.

Or, in some far-off future, somebody might dust off a copy of this edition of the *LTJ* and laugh that there was so much ado about so little. But I think we're too deep in for that. I think we're seeing a number of paradigms (economic, political, social and ecclesiastical) being tested and overturned; the question is not so much 'if' that's happening, but what it means.

We also need to recognise we're still in the turbulent phase of changes SARS-CoV-2 has brought upon the world. That means we're experiencing this in different ways and different speeds. In the vineyard that is the LCA/NZ, some of our smaller, rural congregations are getting back to some semblance of 'normal' rather quickly. New Zealand will take the prize for getting there first at a national level. For others, 'normal' won't return for a long time; and for all of us we're yet to see what the economic cost will be. The Great Depression may no longer be a thing of fabled memory. Who can say it won't be?

But, with all that in mind, I offer the following observations:

1. The church has been dragged into the digital world almost instantaneously. Initially this was focussed on the delivery of *content* (mainly worship services). Increasingly the question is now not content, but *connection*.
 - a. The wholesale shut down of 'church-as-activity-based-Sunday morning focussed-club' has freed up relational space. Frankly, many have welcomed that with a deep sigh of relief. We're all used to a shrinking band of mainly older volunteers wearing multiple hats to keep the show on the road; but it has been exhausting. I doubt there will be nostalgia for the lost busyness.
 - b. Instead, thoughtful leaderships will seek to maximise and encourage the relational connectedness members are experiencing and eschew the temptation to reinflate the tyres on the church bus.
2. The front door of the church is now digital, not physical. That means the first contact people have with you or your congregation will be via social media (not your website).
 - a. You do not have control of that audience. Church services are OK for those who are used to church services; they'll reach that audience and the existing congregants will be grateful. But with a digital front door, content will need to be far more tailored to local mission through engagement in the online space; relational connection outside of the church building; and being aware that most of our Sunday morning jargon is impenetrable to those outside.
 - b. Thoughtful leaderships will be acutely aware of their non-churched audience and communicate in ways and using language that keeps the front door open, while inviting further engagement.
3. The church is therefore being shifted from a *closed, bounded community* to an *open, centred community*.²

² I have adapted these phrases from Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994).

- a. A closed, bounded community draws a clear line between insiders and outsiders. Insiders share a common language and/or jargon; are assimilated to a set of common cultural norms; move towards increased insularism over time; become self-protective in the face of threats from outside; and generally operate with fairly hierarchical leadership and governance structures.
 - b. Open, centred communities have a clear focus on what lies at the centre of their community life, but yet have porous boundaries. They are able to adapt to and accommodate those further away from the centre; tend to be more culturally diverse; are more welcoming of the stranger and the possibility of disruption that such a welcome brings; and tend to be less insular.
 - c. Thoughtful leaderships will embrace the new digital front door as means of opening up the community, and shifting from a closed, bounded stance to an open, centred one.
4. Pastors (in particular) now realise that they are not the only voice in town.
- a. In large measure the only meaningful Christian instruction, preaching, worship and bible study available to the LCA/NZ congregations has been that provided by the local church. This may employ 'off the shelf' resources (e.g. the old *Forty Days of Purpose*; the *Alpha Course*; *New Life New Love*; etc.), but for the most part the local church/parish under the tutelage of the local pastor has provided the resource hub. This has been especially true of heritage churches with older memberships. Digital engagement with other churches and/or teaching has been limited, though not entirely absent.
 - b. The current pandemic has turbo-charged people's exposure to and interest in alternatives. Faithful congregants are tuning in to the online services offered at the normal timeslot (either livestreamed or pre-recorded); but many are also tuning in to other Lutheran and non-Lutheran services. For some pastors this has created a sort of identity crisis: What voice do I have in this space? Why don't people flick my material on to friends and family in the way they flick on others' material? How do I make meaning of my ministry when the main event that I plan, prepare for and participate in (Sunday morning) no longer happens? What will a reconfigured future look like?
 - c. Parallel to this, the laity is finding a voice. They are flicking on digital products, sermons, study series, or evangelistic resources. They are talking about what they're finding. They're exploring. 'Church as normal' may not be so appealing when things resume.
 - d. Thoughtful leaderships will engage with what people have been discovering, encourage the exploration, and welcome the conversation about change that this engenders.
5. Ministry is being shaped as a cooperative task.
- a. There's some wonderful reverse mentoring taking place. Church leaders and pastors are being helped to think about the new challenges and opportunities by those who are digital natives, not digital visitors. This is not just around the technical side of things (though there's plenty of that). It's about the philosophy of

connectedness, the creativity of relationship building, and the key elements of meaningful communication in the digital world.

- b. Local pastors and church leaders are networking more than ever. This began out of necessity but is increasingly developing into true peer-to-peer learning communities deeply engaged with the grassroots movement among rank and file members.
- c. Thoughtful leaderships will encourage deep learning, reverse mentoring, experimentation and the creativity (the generative discussions) that such cooperative learning brings.

There is much more that could be said, and I've not even begun to address other important issues e.g. access to the sacraments outside of the 'normal' practices; the very real potential that some congregations may never (by intention or necessity) go back to 'normal'; and the possibility that some might have to close entirely.

Such matters aside, the current crisis has the potential to result in churches that are more relationally focussed than event driven; that value connectedness over programs; that are decentralised (making extensive use of small groups and lay leaders); that embrace the character of open, centred rather than closed, bounded communities; that encourage lay learning and leadership; that reward creativity; and whose front door is no longer physical.

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