

To: my fellow Pastors,
former classmates,
church leaders,
(and of course my congregation)

a priesthood of all believers
a response to COVID-19

I can still remember the weight and the look of my dad's 'church bag'. A big-lug-of-leather brief case. And if memory serves, he only took it church. It was filled with loose papers, his Bible, pens without lids, and church candy. Oh that sweet, sweet church candy! Our family would sit two rows from the front (keeners) - spitting distance from the Pastor. Sunday morning and Sunday night - every week - without fail.

And I loved it.

I loved going to church. I loved being a part of a church. Seeing the people. The feeling of being swept into the river of folks mixing after service. I loved the stories. I felt safe in the building.

I loved the community. The flyby-pencil-stealing-missions past Mrs. Ernst every week. I needed to draw! And she could only guard the supply room door for so long, until SWOOP. Another stash of church pens in my pocket.

Looking back, it isn't a wonder that I wandered into the clergy. I still love the church. It is my second home. The people are my family. Even my children have been absorbed into the same way-of-being I experienced as a child. They run through the doors, kick off their boots, find the secret stock of baby cookies, and settle in. Our family schedule and weekly rhythm has been molded around the church rhythms. You know as well as I, pastoring isn't a job - it's a way of life.

COVID-19 has disrupted almost every facet of pastoral life.

We have literally watched the world stop. Our government has closed its borders. World governments have completely locked-down and shut-out. Airlines have been grounded. The markets are in free-fall. The streets are nearly empty. The toilet paper is gone! And millions upon millions upon millions of people are in isolation. Projections for the crisis to end are a moving target. Our government has signalled we should prepare for weeks and months. Scientists forecast June, or July, or August as a possible end to social isolation and the return of 'normal life'. Some

have suggested even a year. Maybe they are wrong! Maybe they are right. Our world has changed in a blink of an eye. Our churches have followed suit.

COVID-19 has disrupted almost every facet of church life.

Nearly every operation of our in-person community building mechanisms have halted simultaneously. Sunday Worship. Midweek meals. Small Groups. Youth. Visitation. Events. Missions trips. Staff meetings. And all those precious impromptu conversations in the foyer. The hugs. Smiles. Weekly updates. Jokes and rants.

Stopped.

Worse. It is conceivable that as Pastors we may not physically see, or speak, or cluster with our parishioners for weeks on end. It is conceivable that our people may not physically gather for groups, events, meals, game-nights, conferences, or Sunday worship for months.

Let that sink in.

Like you, my soul is grieved. There are moments I am speechless at the thought. Breathless. Where is this going? What will happen to the spiritual health of our people? What will happen to our churches as institutions? What will be left of our denominations, our bank accounts, the volunteer corps, summer interns, that cream I left in the fridge? Can we hold out for weeks, or months, or years? I know it sounds apocalyptic, but I can't help but wonder:

is the Evangelical Church on the brink of extinction?

Oh, hear me local church Pastor - Sunday gatherings will happen in the post-COVID era. There will be sound glitches, mediocre coffee, hugs and songs, endearing awkward conversations, greetings in the foyer. It is all waiting on the other side. It may take weeks, or months, or longer. But how, oh how, can it ever be the same?

We are all scrambling. Upping our online presence (at least until the internet collapses). Our care teams are in place. Calls are being made. Groceries delivered. But live streaming alone cannot sustain us. We risk becoming a literal 'show' and just another barrier to an already passive-consumer-Christian experience. Zoom groups will keep us talking. But they limit our capacity to fully care. Besides, these methods are adult-centric and tech-heavy. Our most vulnerable - the kids, youth, and elderly - remain the most vulnerable. We are in a crisis of faith.

But beneath my feelings of dread and grief, there is a surge of excitement welling out of my soul. Jesus spoke: *'It is the people, stupid.'* It has always been the people. The kids. The youth. The adults and singles and elderly. The families. It is not our brand. Our programming. Not our vision. Our building. Our production quality. Our preaching. It is the people.

It is time to reimagine the church. It is time to reequip the people!

In this moment, in this crisis of faith, we have a profound opportunity. We have a chance to re-energize our parents to be the spiritual caretakers of their children, youth, and families. We have a window to re-charge our adults to be self-motivated, self-teaching, self-driven people of faith. We have a moment to re-invigorate our people to be the church in action! We have the freedom to reimagine our congregations as JOEL 3 - ACTS 2 people of faith. *A priesthood of all believers!*

Our congregations are desperate for it.

Every family needs a Storyteller.

(someone who can open up their Bible, read it aloud with conviction, weave a picture with their words, and make it alive!)

Every house needs a Worship-Arts Director.

(someone to paint and draw and express, someone to take charge of the family playlist, load it with Jesus-songs, fill the air with hymns and praise and dance music!)

Every parent and grandparent needs to be Child and Youth Worker.

(someone who takes the work of play seriously - who guards the imagination of their children as their highest priority - who dares their youth to ask tough questions - and who is secure enough to listen without judgement!)

Every person needs a Counsellor.

(someone to listen, create sacred spaces for sharing and prayer.)

Our communities are desperate for it.

Every house needs a Pastor.

(someone who cares deeply for those around them, checks in, prays, and shepherds their flock!)

Every street needs an Evangelist.

(someone to speak boldly the love of Jesus without judgement, or fear, or hesitation!)

Every block needs a Prophet.

(someone who will cry out against injustice, hold truth to power, exclaim God's promises, advocate for the poor, the starving, and the vulnerable, in Jesus' name!)

Every town needs an Apostle.

(those who will be sent out on mission - in both physical and digital spaces - to redesign public space, and reinvigorate public conversation, for Jesus' sake!)

Everyone needs not one - but many Teachers.

(people who adore the ancient scriptures, teach the history, adhere to context and form, embed the biblical narrative into daily lives of those around them!)

And everyone needs a Care Pastor and Encourager.

(people who actively see and intuitively read the needs of their neighbours and respond in kind with open hands and joyful hearts!)

Toddlers. Children. Youth. Adults. Parents. Singles. Grandparents. Families. Generations. We all have a part! There is no time for us to sit idle. We cannot wait this thing out.

If ever our towns needed an organic network of Spirit-led people - it is now.

If ever our world needed to hear and see the Good News of Jesus Christ working and flowing through everyday people - it is now.

If ever your church needed you, as a Pastor, as a shepherd, as an equipper of the saints - it is now.

In this moment, we must do what we were trained to do: *reimagine the church and equip the people for the ministry!* And then watch, as the priesthood of believers reshapes our world for Jesus' sake.

There is no model on 'how to do this'. Complications will abound. Our plans will be a mess. The work is insurmountable. But the spirit will lead.

This is our moment:

To **rethink** our purpose.

To **reequip** our people.

To **reimagine** the church.

May the Spirit lead us.

Your friend and brother,

in love,

in Christ,

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