

Discussion Paper regarding Multiple Congregations and or Services

Vision Statement 1. *“from a ‘one size fits all’ congregation to multiple congregations that are appropriate for their target demographic”*

A “Christian” church, coming together for a service or a gathering of any type, anywhere, does so for the purpose of learning about God, worshiping God and mutual fellowship. For the early Christians, “church”, was something that happened as people gathered to hear the good news of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:14-41) and then later the prominent reason for church gatherings was to “break bread” or share in the Lord’s supper, pray together, teaching about Jesus, worship and show support for each other as one people under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, within their own communities. (Acts 2:42, 46-47, 1Cor.14:19,23)

What is clear throughout the bible, from the first large gatherings we see in Acts chapter two, after Pentecost, through to the apostle’s letters, is that gatherings or house churches moved from large occasional events to smaller regular events held predominantly in people’s homes. The church existed as a network of house churches meeting separately, while supporting each other spiritually and practically where possible, while also fulfilling God’s commission. (Matt.28:18-20)

This was the case for the first three hundred years, until Roman emperor Constantine legalised the Christian church giving them access for public worship, to the temples once used for and dedicated to pagan worship. At this point in history, it’s believed there were as many as twenty million followers of Jesus Christ, compared to the hundred and twenty or so believers meeting with the Apostles in Acts 1:15.

As theologians and church planters alike have analysed what caused such phenomenal growth within the church, it would seem that healthy house churches growing Spiritually and numerically, living as active disciples of Jesus within their local cultural context, then reproducing new churches, was the catalyst to their success. The strength of this massive movement was in its relationally focused house churches. The church of today, has seemingly concentrated more on bringing people in and keeping them, then on sending people out. As I say this, I realise that churches do send out missionaries, to other countries, but here I’m talking more about our local context. It was Jesus himself that set the standard by saying, “go and make disciples” (Matt.28:19). The established church has had a number of new revival attempts over the past two hundred years, but in today’s society more and more people are turning away from the ways of the established church and looking for more agreeable models reflecting the true nature of the original house church: being missional in the local area where the church lives.

Neil Cole, pastor and church planter of more than a thousand churches makes this comment, *“One size does not fit all. What we need is to find the right size group for the God-given needs of the people so that they naturally want to remain in such a group. Expecting one size to meet all needs is not only unrealistic but disappointing to all involved.”* (church 3.0 upgrades for the future of the church)

Dr. Martin Robinson, (Planting Mission-Shaped Churches Today, 2006), makes the comment that, *“as many as 1 million Christians are meeting in home churches in the USA, and that a vast number of these people do so because they are disillusioned with the established church, who have no real missional impact on their local community.”* Dr. Robinson makes a similar observation regarding the church in Britain today.

Is this new idea of church also happening here in Australia? I believe it is. People are becoming more and more disillusioned with the established church and its apparent lack of concern and care for its local community.

Change is one of the great constants of life. Whether because of the slow and gradual erosion of time, or swift and cataclysmic moments of trauma, change happens to everyone. We don't always like it, but people change; relationships change; jobs change; technology changes; indeed life itself can be described as a process of continual change. Some changes are positive, while others are negative. The Bible teaches two great truths about change. The first is that despite the changing world around us, God is changeless and dependable. The second is that God calls for an inner change of heart, called repentance, that produces an outer change of lifestyle and activity, called obedience.

"Those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!" (2 Cor. 5:17)

Prove by the way you live that you have really turned from your sins and turned to God. (Matt.3:8)
Just as a fruit tree is expected to bear fruit, God's people should produce a crop of good deeds. God has no use for people who call themselves Christians but do nothing about it. Like many people in John the Baptist's day who were God's people in name only, we are of no value if we are Christians in name only. If others can't see our faith in the way we treat them, we may not be God's people at all.

Ok, so what does this all mean for Devonport Baptist? Am I saying that we are a total failure as a church? No! There are many God honouring ministries happening within the life of our church, producing fruit. We can do more though! Society and cultural thinking is changing in Devonport just like the rest of Australia and the world. Maybe not as fast, yet it is changing. It seems though, that the church often wants to be the last to have to change and is willing to fight for what makes it feel comfortable, rather than what is right for the community it exists within. Why has DBC struggled to keep the age group that should be our emerging leaders and younger active participants within the life of our church? DBC has also struggled to keep believers who are looking for another spiritual home. From comments made to me personally and my own observations, it's because we believe "one size fits all." Are we willing to look at different styles of services?

I pray that we as a church will be willing to look at creative possibilities and ways of doing and being church. That we would be willing to step out and take risks and not just on Sunday's.

Leonard Sweet, a professor of evangelism, writes in his book, *Reorienting the Church of the Twenty-First Century*, "*The twenty-first century church needs to be creative and courageous to keep in step with the always –advancing kingdom of God: Congregate anytime, anyplace, online or offline, small or large. Pray individually and communally, silent or loud, with words or with images. Read through the Bible partially and wholly, praying with and praying through, let the power of God flow In/Out and Out/In.*"

What changes are you willing to put in place, so we don't lose another generation?

What groups of people within our community are we presently not connecting with? Why?

How can we change this? Is our style of church relevant to our local community?

In His service

Pastor Scott

(On behalf of the Pastoral Leadership Team)