



## MISSION BEYOND COVID-19: NOW WHAT?

John Baxter-Brown | 28.07.2020

There are words that are overused. Some I dislike.

For example, I have asked the GC staff not to talk about 'unprecedented times.' It has been so overused in the last four months! And there are plenty of more interesting words and phrases we can use. 'Pivot' is another one, but there are fewer replacement words (Turn, Spin, Revolve, Rotate, Twist, Whirl, Swivel, Hinge, Swing), and, if I am honest, 'pirouette' doesn't work for me ... you do now want to imagine me attempting a pirouette!

'Paradigm' is another of those words – it has become so over-used that it has been robbed of meaning. When Thomas Kuhn used it in his seminal work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, he used the word to indicate a major shift in perspective from one world view to another one: Copernican theory to Galileo's radically new one; Newtonian physics to Einstein's quantum theory. In Kuhn's view, there is a significant and radical discontinuity between what went before and what comes after. A paradigm shift is a major shift in perception, perspective and theoretical framework. They are rare.

The word has been adopted by other disciples, and in so doing, the meaning has been weakened. It usually now refers to a little tweaking around the edges: the core concepts remain the same or very similar. In cultural terms the Enlightenment was the last paradigm shift to occur, bringing in the age of reason, of industrial expansion, and of colonialism. And the modern Protestant missionary movement of which we are a part.

It is arguably the case that we are living through a paradigm shift now – NO, not Covid-19 – but the shift from modernity to post-modernity (whatever *that* is), or post-post-modernity (sometimes called PoPoMo which is a lovely term 😊). One of the characteristics of this PoPoMo is a growing awareness of the weakness of the Enlightenment paradigm, of modernity:

- Rise of the nation state
- Growth of tolerance as a political and social belief
- Industrialization
- Rise of mercantilism and capitalism
- Discovery and colonization of the Non-Western world
- Rise of representative democracy
- Increasing role of science and technology
- Urbanization
- Mass literacy
- Proliferation of mass media
- The Cartesian and Kantian distrust of tradition for autonomous reason

In addition, the 19th century can be said to add the following facets to modernity:

- Emergence of social science and anthropology
- Romanticism and Early Existentialism
- Naturalist approaches to art and description
- Evolutionary thinking in geology, biology, politics, and social sciences
- Beginnings of modern psychology
- Growing disenfranchisement of religion
- Emancipation

Postmodernity is 'a late 20th-century movement characterized by broad scepticism, subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power.'

Obviously, these are very broad brush strokes I am painting: we can get lost at the level of detail and we don't need to go there now.

Where we do need to go is an acknowledgement that we, the Christian community, are just as much subject to the ebb and flow of culture as anyone. Our theology is always a mix of the Scriptures rubbing up against the culture, and finding fresh ways to explore our faith and its relation to the world around us. Sometimes this results in significant and long-lasting changes – leading to the four main families of Christian identity that exist in the world today: Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal.

And it is precisely in the rise of PoPoMo that we find Pentecostalism flourishing and growing around the world: the growth in the faith in the Majority world context is one sign of this. Covid-19, rather than being the bringer of change, is an accelerator of the processes of change that have been going on in the background for decades. Covid-19 merely brings what was already happening into sharper focus.

It is how we respond to this change that will define our place in the history of mission. And it is how we respond that will lead us into a new paradigm willingly or unwillingly. It will happen. That is guaranteed. How it happens, with or without our cooperation, that is the challenge Covid-19 brings into sharp focus.

I am going to suggest that there are four basic steps we need to take if we are to work with God as we move into the future, and each of these falls within the remit of Global Connections as a network.

**Listen and learn from each other** as we struggle with some of the issues. The two that seem to have come up most in questions, emails and feedback are concerned with leadership and governance, and finance. I will be talking with my team to see how we can develop these issues for future webinars *if that will help*. Let me know!

In brief: our leadership and governance needs to be focussed on the visionary stuff – where is God calling us to be not next year but in mid-century? And therefore, what are the changes in structure and financial models we need to make *now* to equip ourselves for *then*? This implies that our NDs and CEOs need to dream, to listen to God, to imagine in the Spirit *and that the Boards need to empower them to do so*.

**Become agile and pivot.** There have been several questions about how to pivot. This is about adapting, both to external factors, but also to the internal constraints that we can be trapped by.



The external forces we have no control over: zoonotic pandemics, recession, political and international realignment and strife, the eclipse of the West, the refugee crisis, the shifting of world Christianity and climate change.

But we have control over how we respond to these issues.

- Managing perception: our self-perception and the perception of our partners/ members/ clients
- Identifying the core vision – reducing and reducing until the minimum core DNA is identified.
- Establishing if there is still a place for that DNA in the environment. If not, letting it go.
- Developing a strategy which builds upon the core DNA (not one that builds upon tradition, current expectations, or business model).
- Not being afraid to let go of ‘peripheral’ or less important activities.
- Developing a business model and action plan that incorporates the core DNA, a realistic financial forecast, effective reshaping and use of resources.
- A willingness to take risks, to make mistakes, to seek forgiveness and to correct those mistakes where possible.

**Adopt a posture of humility** so that we do not need to control our brands or reputations: that that we ignore those issues, but that we maintain faithfulness to our joint vision, our vision of the Kingdom – and count others as more important. This might even mean acknowledging that our organisation has run its course, and needs to close.

We need to find the areas where we can work better together, even if our brand is diluted a little bit, as long as God’s Kingdom is not diluted.

Identify, therefore, the areas where we can do better together:

- Back rooms support functions?
- Local church engagement?
- Joint market places at conferences and festivals (rather like GC has done with Keswick over many years)?
- Shared comms, web and marketing work?
- Shared office spaces?

**Develop joint Diaspora ministries.** There are roughly 5000 diaspora churches in the UK – that is about 10% of all churches are diaspora churches. Broadly speaking, they tend towards being growing churches; they tend to meet identified felt needs – being support structures and networks for diaspora communities, embodying cultural identity and memory, being effective at reaching out *but often down monocultural pathways*.

I am aware of how white and male we tend to be (and middle-aged!). GC has attempted to ensure some level of representation in our presenters (Eddie is appearing twice as he stepped in at very short notice in the first webinar when a female diaspora speaker had to pull out).

We, the white indigenous church, **need** the insights and energy that so often characterises diaspora churches. We need to hear their voices and be shaped by them. Of course it is a two way street – but we need to have the humility to acknowledge our need of them, our desire for them to be part of the UK church, to be part of who we are and who we are to become.