

Dear Friends,

I am writing this on the first anniversary of the initial lockdown. So much has changed in the last year. My own personal reflections note how I felt I coped quite well at first: I am an introvert (which doesn't mean I'm shy, it means I'm energised by solitude) and so the enforced isolation wasn't a threat. But as the months have passed by, I have increasingly missed seeing people in-person and sharing hugs with family members outside of our household. I imagine that my extravert friends (who are not necessarily the life and soul of the party but are energised by being with people) found it all difficult and stressful from the outset.

So where have I got my bearings? Who has helped me think about what we are facing as the Church and how we move forward in these strange times? I have turned to a sensible, grounded evangelical pastor from Canada called Carey Nieuwhof. I already followed his work, but over these last twelve months he has turned out consistently insightful blog posts and other resources to help church leaders. I hope he won't mind if I share with you my summary of a post he wrote recently entitled, 'Why The Current Crisis You're Leading Through Isn't A Marathon. It's the Future.'

Nieuwhof begins by talking about how when COVID-19 first hit, we treated our response as like a sprint: it was short-term and would soon be over. Then we realised it would be a bit longer and needed a variety of skills, like the triathlon. After it went on even longer, we saw it more like a marathon. But now, even the image of the marathon may not work, because we don't know where the finish line is, or even if there is one at all.

Therefore, assuming that we mustn't go at the problem like the clappers and must instead build margin into our lives so that we don't burn out, he sets out five shifts we need to make in our thinking and attitudes.

'From Denial to Acceptance' Business leaders know the world has changed, but many churches are in denial, longing for a return to how things were. If we want to reach more people, we need to recognise we are in a new reality. The businesses that have done so have thrived or at least made headway.

'From Obstacle to Opportunity' Yes, there are difficulties, but we need to ask ourselves, what does this new reality make possible? There are many new possibilities.

‘From Method to Mission’ The things that have died or disappeared at least temporarily are not in themselves our mission, but the methods we have used to serve the mission. We need to remind ourselves what our core mission is and ask how we can accomplish it now.

‘From Control to Openness’ The desire to go ‘back to normal’ is really a desire to control things, but that isn’t the way of faith. It’s no good trying to relate to ways that have died. We need to be open to change. ‘The gap between how quickly things change and how quickly you change is called irrelevance,’ he writes.

‘From Atrophy to Renewal’ This sums up what Nieuwhof is saying. If we don’t change, then we’ll die. We mustn’t confuse our methods with our mission. Agile churches have a chance. We might not like change, but we will like irrelevance even less.

If this has given you a taster for his writings, find him at www.careynieuwhof.com.

Finally, as we begin this period in the circuit while Keith is on sabbatical and I am Acting Superintendent, one or two things are changing and others are not.

Firstly, this weekly Pastoral Letter will continue. So many have commented about how helpful they have found Keith’s letters that I did not want that to stop. However, since I am doing the Superintendency on top of a full appointment, some things must be altered. Therefore, several of the other ministers will be contributing. Look out for offerings from Sam, Asif, Claire, Allan, Barrie, and (next week) Peter.

Secondly, one thing that is not happening this year (as you may have guessed by now) is the daily devotional videos for Holy Week. There were insufficient people available to create an adequate rota, and so I have let that go. Perhaps it is a sign of how we have moved on these last twelve months, where many of our churches have developed various video acts of worship anyway which weren’t in place this time last year.

God bless you all,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dave Faulkner". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

Dave Faulkner