

What might God be saying?

Collation of our discussions with about 50 ministers from across the EBA at meetings held on 28th April & 28th May 2020

Discipleship is more than programmes

In our discussions it was generally recognised that one of the effects of lockdown has been to release many churches and ministers from the pressure of programmes and weekly groups, therefore there needs to be a careful review of what may go 'back in the box' when there is the option of returning to the building. Linked with this was the image of church potentially being like a strong elastic band, with a risk that things will just ping back to normal. To take this analogy further, this probably depends on whether we are holding onto the band or letting go of it, allowing God to work with us.



The lockdown has created the potential for some to become more missional in their immediate neighbourhoods because we have become more available. This raises the question about whether we have actually become too complicated with all of our activity over the years, which has actually inadvertently disconnected us from our neighbours, friends and families, the very people with whom we were trying to connect. A possible conclusion which could be drawn from this, is that letting go

of some of our systems and activities actually releases and encourages mission. Discipleship begins with our earliest contacts with friends, families and neighbours and possibly something we are learning is that it is therefore much more than our programmes.



As church has met online and as people have connected more with their neighbours, some would say and have experienced, that church has become a much more genuine community rather than a series of gatherings and meetings, surely this is where true discipleship lies? Leading us to the next point, that discipleship is relational.

Discipleship is relational



There was a general recognition in our discussions of the greater value of small groups and through this the deepening of relationships which have been formed. In lockdown many have discovered the value of small groups in a new way and in turn this has the potential to lead to a more relational way of working. If small groups are of such high value and can be seen as a key place for discipleship, that may lead us to the question about where our churches should focus their resources.

Moving forward do we need to let go of the high attention paid to gathering on a Sunday morning and all the resources that go into that and instead invest in, empower and equip our small groups and their leaders in relational discipleship both for Christians and for those who do not yet know Jesus?

It is almost as if we are being forced into missional communities as a result of lockdown. Small groups can be easily relational; they can be creative and imaginative much more so than one large weekly gathering.

With all the changes which have come about regarding how we meet and connect as a result of lockdown, it begs a further question about whether we will naturally become multi-congregational, meeting through differing platforms.

However, for churches who have either chosen not to or not been able to connect online, what changes have there been? Anecdotal evidence would suggest that these churches which have connected with each other and their communities by telephone or through newsletters, have still seen an increased value placed on relationships and for some, a deepening of those, as well as greater missional opportunities.

What will church look like post-lockdown?



Discipleship happens where God places us.

Do we believe this statement and what do we mean by it? The discussions we held included people who were running Zoom church, Youtube live church, pre-recorded Youtube church, Facebook live church, telephone conferencing church and newsletter church. In each of these situations the common theme was that God was at work in a new way. Different people were logging on, listening in or asking to receive the newsletter, each of whom had never set foot inside the church in question. The gathered community of church was not just the community of a Sunday morning, but people from the Toddler group or coffee morning, or the neighbour who had been chatted to at the local shop or even somebody from Florida. Each of these people were part of the discipleship of these churches. Whatever church is currently looking like, God is calling us to be disciple-making disciples for our viewers, our listeners and our readers.

Simon Goddard has recently asked the question: 'Are we called to be a distributed Church?'

He writes:

"We know from Acts 8 that the scattering of the early disciples caused the growth of the church, so why aren't we more intentional about creating a distributed church? A church in which mission and ministry are distributed, leadership and power is distributed, and where ordinary disciples are equipped and released to engage in the extraordinary mission of God."



*The things that we have always known
are being brought into sharper focus*

One minister shared that as a result of lockdown, God has been bringing about what they had been thinking pre-pandemic into sharper focus, that is the need to move out and invest in relationship. In order to do any of this we need to recognise more clearly that God uses

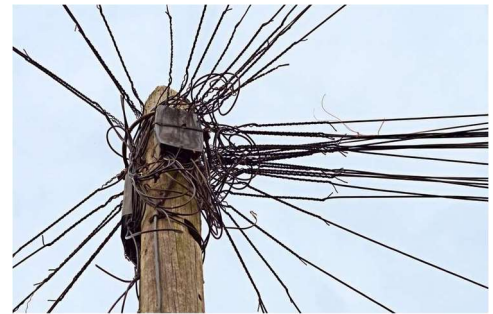
everyone where they are placed because they are unique and called to be in that context. The work of mission doesn't just lie with the pastor. Therefore mission and ministry are distributed and released.

Will this time be a catalyst for change or merely a pause before returning to 'normal'?

One person shared that they felt that there were three possible responses following lockdown: 'remain faithful to the past and plod on; have a hardware reset and redefine church; pack up and leave'

Discipleship in lockdown makes new connections

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, many congregations are dispersed and not all of the people are even known to the leaders, especially where church is going out from a platform like Youtube. This raises the questions of who is listening in, therefore who are our congregation and does this affect what and how we preach?



If a minister is preaching to a regular Christian congregation known to them, that by necessity is different from preaching to an unknown online congregation, some of whom may be seeking to learn more about faith. How does a minister reconcile the tension of these two elements and ensure both are disciplined well?

Some have said that our fringe people feel more connected: so how can that be grown and how can these people be disciplined? What does discipleship look like when the contact is purely digital? Will we choose to retain our online presence, which perhaps we have known we've needed for ages in order to grow these new disciples? This raises so many questions such as what does community look like online? Is there a difference between a church and a network?

Discipleship in lockdown and moving out of lockdown at present raises more question than answers and probably many more than I have cited here.

As we move forward it is essential to continue to ask the questions and learn and grow together in our understanding. Which leads to the final point.

Discipleship means still listening to God and going deeper with God

When taking into account all of the above, we need courage, vulnerability and honesty moving forward and to continue to ask questions. We need leaders who are prepared to let go and release disciple-making disciples. At the very core of this, is the need to continue to listen to God and to go deeper with God, potentially being taken to the risky places which may be uncomfortable.



One person in our discussions mentioned Jonah's call. Jonah knew where he should be going, he knew what God was asking him to do, but he didn't want to go there. It was going to be uncomfortable and costly to him personally. Does this speak to us and our congregations? We have a sense of what God is asking of us for the

next season, but in order to go there, we as the leaders will need to dig especially deep with God and lead in the way that he directs, which may well be uncomfortable and challenging.



A further passage which was mentioned was the parable of patches on new clothes and old and new wine and wineskins. (Luke 5:33-39). Nick has expanded this theme in a sermon which he has recorded and is taking to a number of churches, it can be found on the EBA Youtube channel.

This is a collation of thoughts and questions from about 50 ministers who met over two Zoom meetings. Some of this will resonate with you, some may challenge you and some may not be at all where you think God is leading. However we would encourage you to keep listening to God and seek to go deeper with Him choosing to move forward with courage and honesty, for the glory of His kingdom.

EBA Regional Team - June 2020