

*Full outline of the 70 minute conversation with Richard Black considering where church members and leaders are in the wake of the ongoing Covid experience and how to now respond well.*

The Scene in July 2022:

Q: What's happened?

A: For church leaders it's carnage because the usual ways of being have been disrupted.

There are additional pressure points as people feel drained and dispondent.

Some in ministry say: "This is not what I signed up for." We find ourselves as Christians despised for being on the wrong side of every issue of the day, eg: 'Gay Conversion Therapy'.

It's not just the Pandemic. There has been shifting in our culture since 1960s. The Anglican Church certainly feels brunt of that. Many church leaders want to get back to ministry as they know it and normality. It has not yet settled, the new normal is still in state of flux which is disconcerting to many people.

Q: What is all this doing to people?

A: There are increases in despondency, frustration, weariness, anxiety - especially despondency and disillusionment about being on the wrong side of everybody which cuts people who like or need to be appreciated.

Q: What has it been like for the church in general?

A: Highly disruptive – the usual rhythms are disrupted.

But also watching on line is an option taken up which can drift to consumerism.

Faith suffers from disconnection with other people more consumerist than discipleship with Jesus.

Q: What does it say that consumerism is now operating? What is the discipleship challenge now?

A: There is a wonderful discipleship challenge in this season. Less discipleship being rediscovered than lack of discipleship being exposed. Emotionally we have typically settled for something like: It's important to be a Christian, so come to church on Sunday, a midweek meeting as well so we can fill your head with the knowledge of God. We want to shake you up and down to transform you to live as a Christian.

Q: The national experience seems to have been diverse. What can you say from your contacts around the nation?

A: Much in common, variations across denominations. More intense in Auckland. What is common across country is lack of emotional resilience. There is weariness and frustration to point of leaders leaving their church or giving up ministry all together. Self-questioning on the ability to lead? Am I really a leader or should I join another's church or get a regular job?

Q: Does this point to a lack of role clarity?

A: In part yes, but several factors cause emotional drain and people don't know how to recover. Do I cope by simply pushing through?

Rather than role being unclear, there is a lack of clarity of calling.

Many church leaders over identify with the role and the key markers of success they run with such as numbers, church income etc. But what happens when markers are not met, due to covid and lockdowns? Some question and conclude their calling is false!

Q: Is this performance focus a distinctly male issue?

A: Not necessarily – women work with double burden needing to prove themselves as well.

Q: There is for many a fork in the road, do I push through on as before to reinstate the existing normal or do I accept the collapse to then build fresh and new? Could you evaluate and advise?

A: We often have a fixed sense of what success looks like. Despite our theology, leaders have emotional need for numeric growth. This was evident in Christchurch after the earthquakes. Some saw the situation positively as bringing opportunities to get into people's lives with support and service.

When we focus our goals on our unconscious emotional definitions of success that will never lead us to a good place. Even though they seem as godly things.

So do I push through? OK but at what cost?

Are you sure your ladder is up against the right fence?

To the despondent: In this liminal time this is NOT the time to be despondent because God will not be mocked in this to see his church fall.

Hope

Q: What are germs of hope you see springing for people, leaders and those wanting to live as Christians?

A: Leaders need to be re-examining what they are capable of. Typically, this involves self-care and lowering performance aspirations to match this.

We need to be willing to reconsider what ministry is really all about. Have we been captivated by the 'what we do' instead of 'why we do it'? This leads to despondency.

Consider St Paul, called to reach Gentiles and is then imprisoned for last 5 years of his life. He is put into lock-down where he evangelised the prison and takes to writing letters - and perhaps his greatest lasting impact.

Q: I hear you saying we need to shift.

A: YES, we have long known this but not know how to do this? Then we don't want to change until it hurts enough.

Q: People typically want community, family, rhythm etc. This has been ruffled and disturbed. Add winter to that and people's bonds of connection are diluted. Can you speak into that?

A: Connection and belonging are central which is both a strength and weakness.

In one part the disruption of our community and our belonging if it provokes us to expression of aspects of our faith that have been under expressed. We need to draw on Jesus' stories to inspire departures from what has been?

Q: What might that look like today?

A: Ask: Where are there opportunities to give expressions of love to those we would normally not love? Allow community to expand beyond those who feel comfortable to us?

Q: Covid uncorked much more than what we would expect? Please Comment:

A: We have narrative that world is soaked in a pandemic in a world in recession which is all pervasive gloom eating into people's happiness.

By the way, we are in the disorientation phase stage 2 of 3 - Orientation, Disorientation, Reorientation.

Disorientation engages the most scary thing: The unknown. So continual change as our new norm is highly disruptive.

Do I have resources, is my future predictable? NO!

The desire is to go back to orientation? But we cannot. We may relate to: "How can we sing the Lord's song in this strange land?" What do I do with this?

Some Chat Questions:

Q: How do we (ourselves) respond to the uncertainty and anxiety

Q: How do we minister to people isolated and undervalued?

Q: What if you are still in the nasty part of Disorientation

Q: How might we help people in Disorientation?

A: Take care of the basics,

1. Eat and sleep well.
2. Find anchor points such as family, friends, job, faith, rhythm reading scripture, God's purpose, continuity of being in same city.

In the anxiety level of disorientation our mind takes us to worst case scenario. Imagine that our brain and treats it as if its real. So we need to readjust focus. Help our mind to focus on the good things.

Find new anchor points: What is still good – dwell on these things.

Q: How do we support young people in this time?

A: Youth have gone through a continual expression of mental health and anxiety issues. But you are also showing themselves more adept at living in a changing world. It's the older people finding the change more distressing.

Q: What does discipleship look like in this season as opposed to filling our head with knowledge?

A: What do I do out of duty verse what increases my closeness to the Lord? What do I hear the Spirit saying to me that gives a sense of his Kingdom? Renewing a sense of love to the community around us in love and service.

Q: What are signs children are not coping?

A: It's usually obvious with children. Look for variations from the child's normal baseline behaviour? Any shift says something is emotionally disruptive. If so draw them aside to engage.

Q: Is there a new normal?

A: Always a new normal! Key is ability to help ourselves through this.

With pressure church leaders and others have been going through this has taken more energy than we are used to. The body's system for providing more energy is the adrenal system which acts like a credit card drawing on tomorrow's energy today. We need to listen to our body about how this is.

Seek things that genuinely top us up and pay back the energy drained – balance up.

Church leaders and those in ministry have a double whammy with changes in society and caring for those in our churches.

This must come before we reimagine who and how we can transform as a church.

Q: Rural congregations?

A: Being a faith community is sustainable anywhere but our expectations need to be sustainable.

Finally:

Q: What would you say about pastoring amidst conspiracy theories?

A: Our focus needs to be focused not on what the enemy is doing but what God is doing. Eg 3 men in the Babylonian Fire who would not bow down in to the idol. If Jesus were walking with us would he want us to join the dots towards a conspiracy theory at work around us or to focus on the needs for now before us? Bring focus back to a faith focus and what fulfils.