

What exactly is the new normal?

Exploring and explaining the new ministry context with which we're now faced

This is a pretentious title. Who knows what exactly the new normal is? I've tried to read some different people on this and collate their insights but it's not going to be definitive.

But we do need to try to get some kind of grip on the new ministry context. Because we do sense things are not as they were 2 years ago.

"I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore"¹

Same basics, same direction, different landscape

Our job description as pastor-planters is remains the same:

- Preaching the Word - feeding people with biblical truth
- Praying to God – depending on him
- Planning the Programme
- Providing Personal Care – loving people
- Preparing the Saints – equipping the whole church for every member ministry
- Proclaiming the Gospel – doing the work of an evangelist (2 Tim. 4:5)
- Passing the Baton – developing the next generation of leaders (2 Tim. 2:2)

Our aim remains the same:

- To see Totally Disinterested Unbelievers → Fully Devoted Disciples
- We will all have our favourite verse that crystallises this for us:
 - Col. 1:28 – He [Christ] is the one we proclaim... so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.
 - Phil. 1:25 – for your progress and joy in the faith
 - Matt. 28 – make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

All this stays the same but the times have changed and that will modify how we do all these things. E.g. Spurgeon and all the greats of the past were doing these things but the way we do them now will probably not look like the Metropolitan Tabernacle of the 19th century. The basic work and the aim (the compass) are the same but the landscape has shifted. The terrain. The hills and valleys and settlements. So we need some kind of map.

Caveats:

- This is going to have to work in generalisations. Things will be very different in different contexts and cultures and even parts of the same borough.
- No one has the perfect fix on how things are right now – it'll probably be a 100 years before we can look back and see more clearly what's happening right now.

¹ As Dorothy said in *The Wizard of Oz*.

- And no one knows (except God) how things are going to develop going forward. I'll try to group things into short term impacts, medium term and longer term shifts but really we have no idea which is which and how long any of these effects will last

Short term

So – short term impacts – maybe a few months – might be a lot longer than that for particular individuals² but overall, corporately, these are not likely to be long term shifts - but they are intense right now

Can group these roughly as society and church:

Society:

- **Languishing** – has been called the 'dominant emotion of 2021'³ – the sense that everything is on hold, stagnant, the sense of inertia, weariness, emptiness, lack of energy and enthusiasm, not depression but it's hard to get excited about anything
- Closely related to that is – **Short termism** – we can see it at a national level and a personal level and a church level – what's the point in planning for next year when we don't know what's going to happen in a month's time [or if I'll have the fuel to get there]
- **Stoicism → Epicureanism** – this is something that John Stevens⁴ and [Glen Scrivener have talked about](#) – usually, when times are good, our societal default is Epicureanism (pursue happiness, self-first), when times of plague and disaster our societal go-to is Stoicism (pursue virtue, society-first). So in March last year we swung as a nation from Epicureanism into hard Stoicism and the national discourse was all about responsibility and civic-mindedness and against selfish party animals. We need to be alert, controlled. It's striking that there needed to be a campaign to 'Eat out to help out.' So even eating out (you would think a classically Epicurean thing) was turned into a Stoic duty, a civic-minded virtue! But, as we release from lockdown we're likely to swing back to hedonism.
- **Trauma** – especially thinking here of medical workers at the sharp end of the pandemic, **suppressed grief** - especially those who lost loved ones in the first lockdown and were not able to be at their bedside – and John Stevens and others have talked about the **pressure cooker** – through lockdown a lot of domestic issues go worse because of that containment and actually the most dangerous moment is when you take the lid off a pressure cooker and the steam explodes – so we shouldn't be surprised when that happens now and the divorces get filed and the addictions boil over.

All that impacts and overlaps the church but thinking more specifically of the church...

Church:

- **Atrophy of service** – Andy Hunter and others have talked about this – that as opportunities to serve were closed down during lockdown (e.g. hospitality or kids work), every-member-

² E.g. effects of trauma, long Covid, domestic violence or breakdown, job loss, severe mental health problems.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/well/mind/covid-mental-health-languishing.html>.

⁴ [Common COVID experiences and lessons](#), LGP conference Feb 2021.

ministry muscles have weakened and may need a 'couch to 5k'-style approach to get people back into serving⁵

- **Erratic church attendance** is still an issue – partly through the atrophy thing, partly still some nervousness to return, partly through people catching up with missed holidays and weddings and friends and family at weekends and missing church.
- **Danger of pastoral burnout** – is a real one that John Stevens and others have warned us of – that after working flat out for 18 months, having to tear up plans and reinvent things every five minutes, not having a particularly good summer holiday – a lot of you are very tired
- **Opportunity for change but...** – There's clearly a significant window right now to review things, cut programmes, decide not to reintroduce programmes, reboot things – and a significant number of churches are taking that opportunity to go back to basics, rethink, re-align, rebrand – but the problem is we've got the languishing thing and pastors are tired and church members are tired so it's not ideal conditions for rethinking and changing everything

Medium term / unknown length

This is the category of things that could be longer than just short term impacts – often we just don't know

- **Rediscovery of society?** – Margaret Thatcher said there's no such thing as a society but in the pandemic we stood on our doorsteps clapping the NHS and Merton Council started sending me a weekly email and there was a huge upswell of community action. It could be that that will all fade – that it was a Stoicism thing or a wartime mentality thing – but perhaps it could have shifted things slightly more in a society / community action direction.
- **Rediscovery of the local?** – Kristi Mair has talked about this⁶ - you certainly saw in lockdown how our world got much smaller and people went out for their daily exercise and met neighbours they'd never met and discovered local parks they never knew existed and coffee vans and crepe vans popped up and we started using local businesses more.⁷ Again, that might shift back – I've noticed some of the pop up coffee and crepe vans have disappeared – but if there is a re-appreciation of locality that is a very significant thing for churches to key into.
- **Economic shocks** – business failures, job loses, a lot of people considering a change of job⁸ but there are also short and medium term **boosts** – with a significant proportion of people having more disposable income. I was speaking to a director of a mission organisation who was saying that their income has gone up 30% in the last two years and that he'd heard similar figures from other mission directors. And **instability** – the supply chain issue – all the headlines – instability in supply of pretty much everything.
- **Home working** – could go back to pre-Covid levels - but 68% of UK workers would like to work at least 2 days at home per week⁹ – those are just aspirations and a lot of employers want people back at work but if there *is* a longer term impact of this then it would be a massive change (basically a reversal of industrialisation which separated home and workplace) but also with the danger that you end up with an 'industrialisation of the home'

⁵ <https://fiec.org.uk/resources/how-to-help-church-members-back-into-ministry>.

⁶ Kristi Mair, Understanding the City, London Project Conference, May 2021.

⁷ Particularly noticeable in middle class areas. In more working class areas there may well have been more localism and community to start with.

⁸ A quarter of all US workers likely to leave their current jobs in the next 6 months, mostly due to stress from work - [Momentive Study: Return to work and mental health](#).

⁹ [Social Distancing Review Report](#) (gov.uk, July 2021).

– where you workers are always online, always available, always monitored and – like some of the guys in my small group who are working 14 hours every day in front of screen. Can go the other way – to laziness and unaccountability and there's also an association with increased drug abuse.

- **Less social contacts** – that's associated with home working but also seems to be wider social change affecting non-working people as well – some research in late June 2021, after the ending of legal restrictions – found that average social contacts between adults were still only 5-6 per day versus 11 per day pre-Covid.¹⁰ That could recover but it's a significant short term shift that could be longer term.

Accelerating long term trends

Then there are long term trends – which are not new (they've been around at least the last 20 years) but as John Steven's has said¹¹ - Covid has been an accelerator for these trends.

1. **Big Tech & Tele-everything**¹²

- a. Tele-everything = Remote delivery of services – whether education, medicine, entertainment
- b. Increased streaming, increased time online
- c. Video conferencing has risen 535% on 2019¹³
- d. Video becoming the indispensable communication medium
- e. Upsides – accessibility, inclusion, resource sharing, reduced travel¹⁴
- f. Downsides – Zoom-fatigue;¹⁵ lack of physical presence and touch and eating together; multi-tasking leading to ever-reducing attention span and concentration difficulties

2. **Big State**

- a. Who would have guessed that under a Conservative government, 30% of UK workforce would be paid by state - at height of furlough scheme. Or that there would be absolutely vast injections of government spending.¹⁶
- b. Also increased legislation covering every area of life – concerns about Authoritarianism
- c. This connects with Big Tech – increasing Surveillance, Algorithms, Facial recognition, Media compliance with promotion of government messaging and silencing¹⁷

3. **Polarisation**

- a. Of society
 - i. Widely differing experiences of Covid – regionally, class, age, ethnicity
 - ii. Increased economic disparities

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ John Stevens, [Common COVID experiences and lessons](#), LGP conference Feb 2021.

¹² Pew Research, [Experts on New Normal](#), Feb 2021.

¹³ Zoom app was downloaded over 2 million times on 23 March 2020 (<https://digitalintheround.com/video-conferencing-statistics/>).

¹⁴ [The future of conferences](#) (Nine Thirty Eight).

¹⁵ <https://www.psychiatristtimes.com/view/psychological-exploration-zoom-fatigue>.

¹⁶ £261 billion so far on Covid measures according to [National Audit Office tracker](#).

¹⁷ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/05/14/scientists-admit-totalitarian-use-fear-control-behaviour-covid/>.

- iii. Digital divide¹⁸
- b. Of debate
 - i. Brexit, Covid, BLM – may not actually be polarised but presented or perceived as and there is polarising behaviour¹⁹
 - ii. Truth wars, conspiracy theories and silencing
 - iii. In the church – esp. on culture and politics

4. Mental Health breakdown

- a. Again an existing trend of increased recognition and incidence and intensity – ramped up by pandemic
- b. 10-15% of people may never return to pre-pandemic mental health²⁰

All these strongly inter-relate (Big Tech, Big State, Polarisation, Mental Health)

Deeper Issues

At a deeper level what could be going on here?

- 5. Fear
 - a. Of Death
 - b. Of the other – distancing leads to fear and suspicion, everyone is a potential threat, their mere presence could contaminate
 - c. Conspiracy theories – more common, more widely held, more powerful – born out of fear and a desire to find coherence in the face of exposure (through live news) to an impossibly complex and threatening world – amplifying our fears
- 6. Idolatries
 - a. NHS – many visitors to the UK notice something strange in our national devotion to the institution – something beyond just gratitude²¹
 - b. Science – we follow the science where it goes, we wait for the word of the scientists, we look to them for truth and salvation
 - c. News – why do hit refresh so many times a day?
- 7. New morality²²
 - a. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*,²³ discusses a shift in moral taste buds to three pre-eminent current moral intuitions and with each of these you can see how they have been massively ramped up in the last 18 months:
 - i. care/harm – safety = good; good = safety; risk is always bad; this has become the dominant discourse²⁴
 - ii. fairness/discrimination – clearly seen in the BLM debate but also in the exam grading debate of summer 2020
 - iii. liberty/oppression – cf. LGBT+

¹⁸ Pew Research, [Experts on New Normal](#), Feb 2021.

¹⁹ Duncan Forbes, [Today's debates aren't simply two-sided](#), EN, Dec 2020.

²⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20201021-coronavirus-the-possible-long-term-mental-health-impacts>.

²¹ <https://unherd.com/2020/12/the-toxic-british-worship-of-the-nhs/>.

²² <https://conversationmagazine.org/2017/09/19/the-new-morality/>.

²³ [Summarised by Sam Allberry](#) at the LGP conference 2021.

²⁴ Niv Lobo has [written about](#) how we need to hear again the words of Mr Beaver about Aslan: "Course he isn't safe. But he's good." – to open up an imaginative space for something to be good and not safe.

- b. Gracelessness²⁵
- 8. New truth²⁶
 - a. Truth as data – Scientism, Atomised

You can see how these four roots all intertwine (Fear, Idols, Morality, Truth) and they seem to support the more visible fruit of Big Tech, Big State, Polarisation etc.

What's beneath?

What's beneath all of this?

The providence of God – and more specifically, the rule of Christ – the lamb who was slain sitting on the throne of the universe.

Read

- Revelation 1:12-20 – the man who is God, places his hand on John, do not be afraid
- Revelation 5:5-6 – the lion = the lamb – good but not safe
- Revelation 6:1 – he is the one unleashing everything that we see around us in the new normal

Further resource:

- Andy Hunter (FIEC Scotland director) [Life beyond lockdown](#)

²⁵ Tim Keller, [The Fading of Forgiveness](#).

²⁶ <https://conversationmagazine.org/2017/09/16/the-new-truth/>.