

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ZOOM

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ANDREW OLLERTON CONSIDERS HOW LOCKDOWN IS CHANGING DISCIPLESHIP FOR GOOD

The other week, my wife and I were on a zoom call with a small group. We were deep in conversation when one of our sons came running in laughing, quickly followed by our other son who was crying. 'You idiot!' he roared, as he slammed the door and stormed off upstairs. Fortunately, my microphone was muted. But the video was on so the rest of the participants enjoyed the drama unfolding behind me, though out of politeness no one said anything. I imagine I am not the only one who has been humbled to the point of embarrassment as real life domestic scenes become the new backdrop for discipleship. This sort of scenario should now be known as the Elephant in the Zoom!

The recent lockdown has compressed into a few weeks the sort of digital revolution that would otherwise take decades. Back in January, if I told you I was conducting a Bible study over zoom you would have assumed that I was part of an impressive global organisation or a hipster urban church on the cutting edge. Now every parish has been pushed down the digital canal and out into a brave new world: Sunday services on YouTube and Facebook, small groups on platforms like zoom, ministers functioning like digital DJs in

their own homes. We are even getting used to hanging out in online chat rooms - who would have thought that could sound respectable? Thanks to the lockdown, we are all digital natives now.

Of course this transition has not been seamless. Indeed, there have been considerable stresses and strains for church leaders, children & youth workers, pastoral teams etc. Heroic efforts have been made to create agile and innovative responses. Yet in the face of the challenges, it can still feel frustrating and inadequate. Those of us who attempted a lockdown haircut on ourselves or a loved one know the feeling. It is pretty stressful and we may feel disappointed with the outcome. But it is still better to have a go than do nothing. That sums up the challenge of discipleship during this online overhaul. So whilst acknowledging very real stresses and strains, let us consider how we can realise the opportunities that are emerging and reimagine the future of discipleship.

CULTIVATE THE RIGHT POSTURE

Before we consider specific practices or resources, good leadership is first about adopting the right posture. Amidst great losses and an unfolding tragedy, as Christians we need to embody a robust and resilient hope. The resurrection of Christ gives the vital assurance that all will be well in the end. In the meantime, we are to live and lead with confidence. Whilst avoiding triumphalism and sheer opportunism, our theological convictions should cultivate gratitude

and expectancy. As Paul wrote to the hard-pressed Thessalonians: 'Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus' (1 Thessalonians. 5:18). When it comes to discipleship today, let us give thanks for the digital infrastructure that we do have to hand. If this lockdown happened just ten years ago, we would not have had the online platforms and channels that are keeping us so well connected today. As Roman roads carried the gospel far and wide in the first century, so digital infrastructure is a missional opportunity in the twenty first century. So let us give thanks for Zoom, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp and consider how best to use what providence has provided.

When Paul was in lockdown in a Roman prison cell, he adopted a posture of expectancy based on an underlying conviction that God would work the challenges for good. Writing to the Philippians from jail he declared: 'Now I want you to know that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel' (Philippians 1:12). We will not realise the opportunities for digital discipleship until we adopt a similar posture. Instead of embracing a nostalgia that wants to go back, we must move forwards with courage. We must become what Nicholas Wolterstoff termed 'aching visionaries', standing on tip toe, peering forwards to embrace opportunities on the horizon. As Paul urged in one of his other lockdown letters: 'make the most of every opportunity' (Ephesians. 5:16).

WELCOME NEW FACES IN THE ZOOM

With the right posture, we can assess where opportunities lie for digital discipleship. One obvious point is that online attendance seems to be higher. Many churches are reporting that Sunday services, small groups, courses and prayer meetings are seeing a boost in numbers as more people feel able to turn up on Zoom than previously would have made it in the room. Some of this is sheer practicalities. As a married couple with three kids, my wife and I are able to attend small groups online without needing baby sitters etc. Even as lockdown lifts, we should consider how to harness these positives. Online platforms are no long term substitute for meeting in person. However, we could establish new rhythms that enable both on-line and on-the-ground meetings that complement each other. Someone on a recent Zoom call sighed: 'I can't wait when this is all over and no more Zoom'. I understand the sentiment but it misses the point. A flat return to old ways will not harness the learning of the past few months. We need to embrace the new normal.

An even more intriguing trend is that audiences who may not feel comfortable turning up in person are tuning in online. Recent articles in the Sunday papers suggest that one in four adults had tuned in to online services at some point since lockdown. This national crisis seems to be causing the sort of boost in numbers we might expect at Christmas and Easter. So, as we hear the 'ding-dong' noise of people entering the Zoom, we should expect new faces. Even more so for platforms such as YouTube that allow people to tune in anonymously. In order to include them in our discipleship pathways, we need to get to know these audiences, recognising that their questions, concerns, desires and fears will be different to more established Christians. Bible Society recently invested in a significant piece of research to assess the attitudes of the UK population to the Bible (You can explore the results at: lumino.bible). What seems to be happening as a result of the COVID-19 crisis is that audiences who are warm to the Bible but not regular at Church (e.g. Bible Conflicted, Bible Nostalgic) are now tuning in to online services and courses in a bid to find some spiritual confidence at a time of loss and uncertainty. This is a great opportunity for mission, a window that is open for the time being at least.

So how can discipleship approaches and resources welcome new faces in the Zoom? Along with courses like Alpha, many churches are plugging in The Bible Course as a resource that is relevant to the regular church and those looking in. This eight session group-based resource gives a tour through the Bible narrative, Genesis to Revelation, and shows how it makes sense of our lives. It presumes no prior knowledge and therefore gives an accessible way to introduce everyone to the Bible. So, as churches throw the digital front door wide open and run The Bible Course online they tap into a desire for deeper meaning and hope that resonates with audiences outside the faithful. Bible Society have made the course available in digital format so a small group can watch the videos and discuss together online (search The Bible Course, Bible Society). During this crisis, some retailers are reporting sales of Bibles are up 50% - perhaps only inflatable Hot Tubs are in greater demand! Just as Philip discovered an Ethiopian Eunuch reading Israel's Scriptures on the way home, so we may be surprised who is reading our book right now. It's a wakeup call and reminder to the church: the Bible is not our book - it's public truth for the world, and the Bible is a potent mission resource - especially during this time of national crisis. Let's pray that the church like Philip will have the confidence to lead many to Christ through the Scriptures.

ENCOURAGE A CULTURE OF SELF-FEEDING

As a result of lockdown, we have all had to do things for the first time: haircutting, home-schooling, DIY-ing, video editing, Zooming... the list goes on. Among the dizzying array of first-timers are things normally sorted by churches and ministers. How many of us have led family prayers and devotionals, read the Bible and had mealtime discussions in a whole new way as a result of lockdown. If we truly believe in the priesthood of all believers, this is long overdue and should be encouraged. Imagine if one of the outcomes of lockdown is that the laity are empowered to become self-feeders at a whole new level.

We would not choose these times but we cannot change them. Digital discipleship is now the elephant in the Zoom for every church, minister, family and believer. So how can we make the most of every opportunity?

- Adopt the right posture: Let us be grateful for the opportunities and expect new avenues for the gospel and discipleship
- Welcome new faces in the Zoom: Let us continue to use online platforms and resources like The Bible Course to disciple broader audiences
- Cultivate a culture of self-feeding: Let us empower everyday believers to be DIY ministers in their own backyards

Dr Andrew Ollerton is an ordained minister with experience of leading churches and a theologian who enjoys making complex things simple. Andrew works with Bible Society and is author of The Bible Course, a popular resource that provides an accessible way into the Bible.



ENDORSEMENTS FOR THE BIBLE COURSE

'The Bible Course is an excellent resource to help all Christians grapple with the big story of scripture and understand how the books of the Bible fit together. I would recommend every church does it!'

Andy Frost - Share Jesus International

'I personally love the simplicity of the video presentations that leaves space for deeper exploration. The liveliness of the discussion also grabbed their interest. We are now on week 6 and people are appreciating the course immensely. For some it is a welcome refresher and for others it is all new.'

Phil & Carole Challis - Methodist Superintendent Ministers, Vale of Glamorgan