

Will Gompertz (BBC arts editor) recently reflected on one of E. M. Forster's less well known novels *"The Machine Stops."* It describes a world where people are isolated in their own homes, communicating through a video interface which we might recognise as WhatsApp, Zoom or Skype; public gatherings have been abandoned and life continues in a detached way.

One of the characters Kuno wants his mother to visit: *"But I can see you!"* she exclaimed. *"What more do you want?"*

"I want to see you not through the Machine," said Kuno. *"I want to speak to you not through the wearisome machine."*

We can all identify with that sentiment! Oh, to see people not just through computer screens.

These last 8 months have definitely not been what I was expecting for my first year of being your new vicar.

Some of you probably feel frustrated that you don't yet know me. We haven't had the chance necessarily to meet personally. It's been frustrating for us as well as Mary and I haven't been able to offer the hospitality we would normally have offered. 5 months of learning names...and then 8 months of forgetting them!!

I hope that you'll feel I have tried to give you a little window onto something of my authentic self in my weekly vicar's messages.

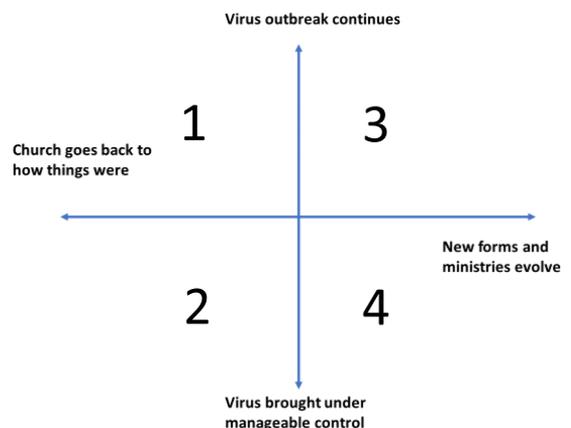
After such strange times, it would be natural if some of you were feeling a sense of disconnection from church. We're made for relationship. **Life with Jesus is supposed to be a life with and for others. How do we give this expression in pandemic times?**

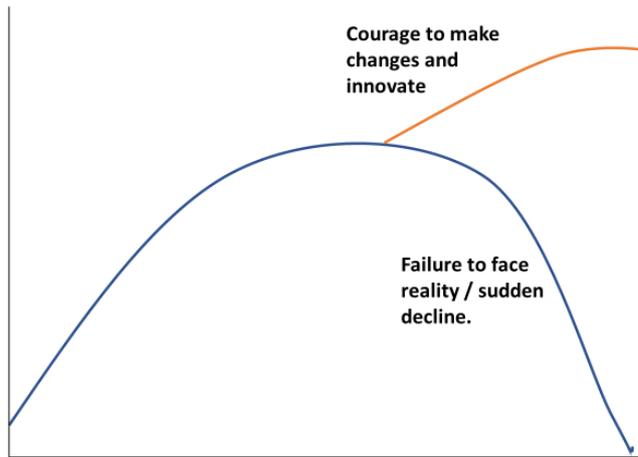
One of the things we're going to start trialling is a monthly opportunity to join breakout groups on Zoom for coffee and chat after the morning live streamed service. We recognise that it's a human need to feel noticed.

We must recognise that the Christian faith is never meant to be about "just Jesus and me." How are we connecting with others? They may be tiresome, but we need to go on taking advantage of phone calls and Zoom and What's app calls.

As we think about the future it's helpful to think of 4 different scenarios.

Much as we might crave the security of the past, I **have a feeling that there will be no going back simply to how things were.** This virus is a hinge point in helping us face reality about our life as a church.





We can either feel comfortable on the plateau, or see that this is precisely the time to be innovating and making changes to avoid declining.
If we don't grow our 40 and below section, we face stagnation and decline. (The story we're telling ourselves is not accurate)

We're risking a cycle of decline (whilst overall our numbers seem healthy)
 We don't tend to like facing the truth as Henri Nouwen once wrote,
"There's a real danger we might live the whole of our life as one long defence against the reality of our condition."

Someone wrote to me giving their prayerful prophetic church,

"Let this be written for a future generation that a people not yet created may praise the Lord."

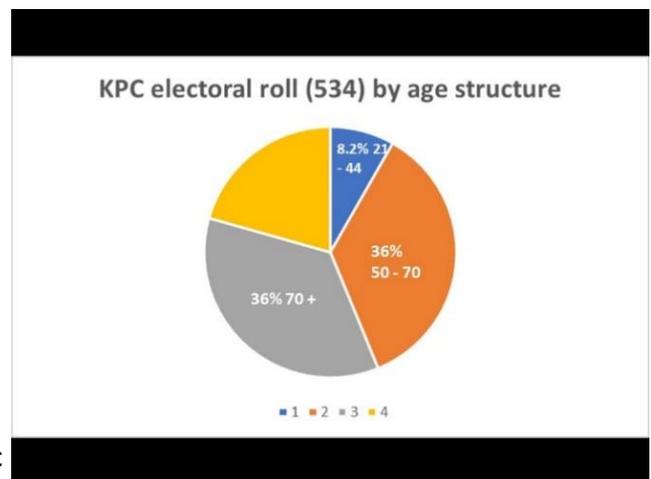
I believe our urgent priority has to be investing in capacity and innovation with younger adults, families, youth and children.

That's why the new Associate Minister will have clearly delineated areas of responsibility (as well as commonly shared areas of pastoral ministry.) helping KPC to grow, particularly in its younger end with families and young adults and develop our evangelistic and missional ministry in innovative and imaginative ways. This person will need to respond to the challenge of making more of the opportunities we have through our existing connections to young families.

Before coming to Knowle, the Lord spoke to me through the image of a tree stump. A tree stump is made up of old rings that reveal the rich history of the tree. But these cells are inactive. Growth in the diameter of the tree happens because it manufactures new cells around its circumference. The outer layer of cells constitute an annual growth ring.

So, growth doesn't come because the old cells get larger, but because of the new cells.

To me this speaks of the need for us to be paying attention to what the Lord is saying and doing now. What is he calling us to be? What needs to change so that we can grow organically?



Let me consider 1 more introspective spiritual dimension before looking briefly at 7 pointers for change.

I believe that God is leading us into a season of reflection which will be a preparation for future growth. As we've been thinking in our sermon series on Gideon, we sometimes allow a whole host of other concerns and interests to become our gods. **We can easily be exchanging the glory of God for idols.** In our hearts we can be setting up idols all the time. Remember, an idol can be anything or anyone to which we become so attached that they begin to usurp the rightful place of God in our lives. Anything which fills our horizons so much...that we come to depend on so much that God's position as king begins to be eclipsed.

We in the church need to ask ourselves: What is it that we're pouring our time, energies and ambitions into? **All of us are going to have to search our hearts to reflect honestly on where idols of the heart in our individual and church life may need to be identified and demoted.**

Pointers for change:

1) **Going forward, we cannot simply rely on attracting people into our building.**

Back in October, I sensed God ask me *"What would happen if I took your building away?"* In a sense, that's what we've been faced with. **Our confidence cannot simply be in our building or in 600 years of history.**

This Christmas, we're not going to be able to draw 2,500 into our Christmas services as usual. **So, we're planning how we can be more visible as a church this year in our community** (drive in carol service, advent trail, outside Christmas eve late night service etc). Pennys has been another important sign of this centrifugal quality to our mission (going out)

A verse that was important to me thinking about applying to Knowle was *"Let your light shine before men that they see your good deeds and praise your father in heaven."*

We mustn't hide our light, or keep it to ourselves. The light of the world is to be shared. What we have is life-giving for our community. We want our church to be a beating heart. We tell ourselves that we've been at the heart of community for 600 years, but **we want to be a beating heart that pumps blood round the arteries of our parish, bringing spiritual oxygen and life to our networks.**

This means that mission doesn't have to look church shaped. We all have a mission. How are we living out our faith in plain sight at work and in our leisure networks in such a way that we gently provoke spiritual questioning?

Faith sharing and discipleship more often happen through natural encounters. **This pandemic has reminded us it's not about a technique or a programme, but a culture and a mindset.**

In St. Paul writes *'so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well'* (1 Thess. 2:8).

How do we build relationships of depth with those who don't yet belong? Again, these times have led to more conversations with neighbours and a greater sense for many of knowing who they live amongst.

2) We can't sustain the same level of complexity in the number of worship services. Lockdown and restrictions have forced us to simplify what we do.

I don't believe the 5 congregations under one roof model is sustainable (*most cathedrals and large churches only have 4 services on a Sunday as a maximum.*)

5 services carries with it the danger of consumerism. Are we making disciples here or consumers who consume our product? The danger of the mindset of "*give everybody what they want*" is that it leaves people in their own worship silos.

Perhaps God has been saying to us during these last 8 months "***Come out of your trenches.***"

We've all been forced to learn to compromise when it comes to corporate worship.

3) Our mission and evangelism have to be owned by everyone.

It's not enough for us to say "*isn't it great that that particular mission activity is happening over there in that corner.*" **We all have a stake in what others are doing in mission.** Everything is inter-connected. Everyone needs to own our mission.

4) Our building feels tired and unwieldy in places.

(Family who came for a burial of ashes who got married at KPC 40 years ago. "*It feels exactly the same.*")

We have a wonderful building, but is it time to look with professional eyes at how the architecture could better serve our purpose? Are there things we could do to freshen up the feel of the interior? What could aid the experience of worship groups and leaders? How could the building feel more hospitable and slightly less gloomy?

5) We lack a truly global vision.

We need to be caring more about what God is doing around the world.

We need to be creating a culture where people are called to see their own frontlines as mission contexts, but where people are also being called to use their gifts to serve God nationally and internationally. It's why we're working on a new mission policy.

6) Our Leadership pipeline is blocked (not growing new leaders).

At all levels of church life, the challenge is to be bringing new leaders on so that the younger generations have their place with those who've been in place for longer. If we want to be a resource for other churches, if we want to plant new congregations in the future, we're going to need more trained leaders.

... **SO** ...

We cannot go back to the old ways of doing things. Rather than being a source of grief simply, this is an opportunity.

Online presence and streaming helps us make new connections (last weeks' first live stream service has had 913 views)– **Mixed economy will be required.**

We must continue making imaginative use of the internet and social media. We need to learn to be comfortable being online inviters. Those who may be curious don't have to face the awkwardness of coming into a building they don't know.

We're just about to start with a new PCC. One of our first tasks is to begin discerning together what our vision is as a church. What's the big picture trajectory that will capture of imagination and speak of who we see ourselves being for the next 10 years?

I don't have a complete answer. It wouldn't be right for me answer the solution. **However, I can say that I have this sense we are being called to be a "House of light" to use the image of the lighthouse (casting light that cannot be kept to itself, but must be lived and shared out before others.)**

Please pray with us as we embark on this journey of prayer. Whatever the future holds, I've sensed that these verses from Ephesians 4 are very important for us.

7 But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. 8 This is why it says:

*'When he ascended on high,
he took many captives
and gave gifts to his people.'*

we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

The picture is of Jesus delivering people from bondage to sin and everything that holds them captive. I felt God saying to us – he's given us all the gifts we need to fulfil our mission (even in these unusual times). **But our gifts are meant to be integrated into a co-ordinated unit.**

We need to be working in obedience to the head. We don't want to be unco-ordinated and independent of Christ's central control.

Our goal is to all be pulling in the same direction under a united, common vision. Our aim is the building up of the body of Christ. The factor that will lead to growth is love.

Geoff Lanham
14th October 2020