

Dinghy Church

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Is your passion to impact the lives of lost people for God, so they find and receive the freedom that only salvation in Jesus brings? Mine is. As a member of Kairos Prison Ministries¹ over the past decade, I have been stirred to think about the relevance of our churches to people in our communities. Many times I have witnessed prison inmates speak of the freedom they have found in Jesus. Freedom not bound by prison walls. It is impossible for inmates to come to our 'outside' churches while they are still incarcerated, yet we expect many people in communities surrounding our churches to leave the prisons of their lives to join us. Church must go to them, to their place of incarceration, living the freedom found in relationship with Jesus.

A prison chaplain once described the Church as an armada comprising many vessels of varying size, agility and purpose. Which vessel is best suited to meet the needs of people in our towns, suburbs and high-rise cities? My initial response to the appropriate "vessel" to reach these "prisoners" was a speedboat—extremely agile and responsive and just what is needed in today's fast paced and confusing world—no room for passengers, just committed rescue workers. But speedboats need to return to base or mother ships to refuel and stock with limited provisions. So, enter the *dinghy*. Small, not fast, energised only by the wind but extremely manoeuvrable; it can pull into shore without fanfare and its crew blend with the locals. After all, the dinghy and its small crew come with little and would not be expected to speed away with ill-gotten gains. The environment they will work within is a seismic shift away from the modern era into which many of today's churches were originally planted.

Dinghy churches are little churches whose resources come from the Holy Spirit with their leaders connected with the larger church for accountability and growth. These are little units relying on God, agile and easily reproducible, living out His Kingdom in communities that otherwise would not meet with Him.

Gibbs and Coffey summarise the differences in modern and post-modern worldviews: centralised hierarchies are now replaced by decentralised networks. Predictability is replaced with rapid change requiring rapid planning and action. Confidence in the human ability to manage is replaced by uncertainty in the present and pessimism for the future. Change once initiated centrally now evolves from the periphery.² Dinghy church is well-positioned to navigate its way in such a world.

While Western society wants us to individualise faith, Jesus' teaching demands that

¹ <http://www.kairos.org.au>

² Gibbs, Eddie and Coffey, Ian, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in Christian Ministry*, (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2001) p.30.

Christians as leaders do not withdraw into their safe personal relationships with God. Rather we are to interact with others through care and concern.³ The base for dinghy church must be a shared commitment to authentic leadership which is accountable, from a base of a growing sacrificial spirituality which focuses on Jesus, demonstrated through relationships with others. In the early church this manifested in the making of disciples; something approached with urgency as end times were expected, and missional action followed as a natural outcome.⁴ The empowering love of God frees us from the confines of our self-interest into the fullness of the Kingdom, transformation being an outcome.⁵ Some “crew” would come with raw passion and spiritual insight, while many will seek strengthening and developing of their theology and relationship with God through programs such as the Certificate IV in Christian Ministry.⁶ As people become empowered they need mutual accountability and the humility to accept it, so that the networks formed within the “armada” do not become fragmented and lose sight of the cross.⁷

There are many different communities, some compact, some disparate, some related by interest, and some -- like workplaces -- related by location. All experience a mixture of life and death, good and evil. Members value their community and often see it as something of more significance than “church” or “religion.” In these communities are scattered people who are already members of larger existing churches, who can, in the power of the Holy Spirit, become the dinghy church living out Christ’s Kingdom and inviting people in these communities to experience His life. Dinghy church “crew” may need to spend time living in an anticipatory way, living as *signs* of the Kingdom even if there is little progress and strong opposition.

In our world all people experience unexpected grace⁸ as well as encountering brokenness; indirectly through sickness and sin, and directly through confronting Satan and evil in the world. Whether it is God or Satan, people will tend to be affected by these encounters. The presence of dinghy church in these communities will illuminate what is life and death in these encounters. On many occasions because the dinghy church “crew” are trusted by their community, people won’t feel threatened as they embrace life and leave behind death. “Crew” will make it their business to minister in the power of the Holy Spirit to each other and those around them bringing freedom to people who find themselves imprisoned.

Rick Joyner observes a three phase functional division within the Church. He notes that churches may be involved in one or more phases at any one time:

Phase I: *Rescue and Salvation*. The main goal of this phase is to lead people to Christ and add them to the church.

³ Ibid, 190

⁴ Ibid, 61

⁵ Owen, Hillarie, *In Search of Leaders*, (Chichester: Wiley, 2000) p. 41.

⁶ Certificate IV in Christian Ministry is a vocational program offered in many churches around Australia through the Australian College of Ministries (ACOM) <http://www.acom.edu.au/>

⁷ Gibbs and Coffey, p. 91

⁸ Matthew 5:45 The sun shines on both the good and evil, and the rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Phase II: *Church planting*. The main goal of this phase is to establish and organize the church to help new believers mature and grow strong as the church matures and grows strong.

Phase III: *Bearing fruit and multiplication*. The Lord commanded His people to bear fruit and multiply. This is so important that He even promises to cut off every branch that does not bear fruit (see John 15:2).⁹

Dinghy churches grow out of churches within Phase III but itself works in Phase I requiring people passionate and equipped for the purpose. While some “crew” may stay over time, dinghy church needs to embrace a free flow of people to and from larger churches. They need strong links with the Church—not for resources, for these will come in the main from the Spirit— but for “crew” replenishment and accountability. It is also possible that some dinghy churches will evolve into church plants, but this need not be their aim as many people who were once imprisoned may choose to join with larger churches in their new freedom.

Dinghy church is a walk of faithfulness relying on God’s faithfulness in all circumstances while avoiding distractions, focusing on Jesus, love, and grace. Dinghy church looks toward others, not just other church members or even their community; it works to bring the Kingdom with justice to the wider world.

⁹ Joyner, Rick, *Taking the Land Part XCIII: Word for the Week* (Taking the Land series), MorningStar Ministries, <http://www.morningstarministries.org/Publisher/Article.aspx?id=1000019567>, accessed 29 September 2007.