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How would you characterize the challenges facing the church today? Beside the fact that we are not meeting, but that will be something of the past. Just as full churches are something of the past. There is of course plenty of debate and even more opinions about the causes of our problems and what the solutions might be.

The most obvious is the numerical decline in church attendance. Of little comfort to me is the fact that the church is not the only institution to face such challenges; the rise of individualism and the loss in all areas of life of the value of formal commitments has led to decline in membership of a whole range of organizations.

Some may argue that numbers are irrelevant; if church buildings are there, and pastors and leaders serve their people, doesn't the mission of the Church of God continue?

But allow me to share the following; *"if faith means anything, then numbers matter—because numbers represent people; and encounters with God in prayer and praise, in confession and listening, in word and sacrament, change people and equip them to change the world."* Numbers are not simply a sign of fewer 'bums on seats' but actually fewer people who have and will experience an ongoing life-changing encounter with the living God. Am I saying that meeting with other Christians for the sole purpose of worshiping God in Jesus Christ is important? Yes, I do. Going to a building, a home to meet people in order to worship God in Jesus Christ together in prayer, songs, listening to readings of the word of God, seeing each other, listening to each other and together is something the world needs to experience, to see and hear about. It is in our shared witness, our shared

worship, in our love to each other the gospel becomes concrete in this broken world.

A second, related concern is the decline in the presence of children and young people in our churches. Alternatives to worshipping God together has sneaked into the life of many families. One reason is, I believe, the relentlessness of the demand of work. You get up make breakfast, go to work, stay longer, come home later, go for shopping, clean up from breakfast, brought work home, help the kids with their schoolwork. For many the work week is exhausting, mentally and physically. We need a rest. We, as society as a whole experience the results of some of our life-style choices.

Within a generation or two, we have moved from children's involvement in church or church-related activities being the norm to its being the exception. This has an impact not just on the present but on the future.

A third issue, which I would suggest bridges the first two, is the question of discipleship. It is an issue we can turn our back on, because it involves us. We may want to keep it in a safe area of greater debate: to what extent is discipleship a central idea in the New Testament, and is every Christian called to be a disciple. And how important is it in the life of our church?

It is worth noting here that Scripture is not as fond as we are of using abstract and therefore safe ideas and concepts. The Gospel writers appear to hear the idea of being a disciple, sometimes expressed in the notion of 'following', for the purpose of making fishers of men and women as fairly central in the life and teaching of Jesus. That becomes obvious in his departing words in the Gospel of Matthew, 'Go and make disciples...' Go, follow me and therefore leaving something behind is not offered as a novel idea, like a last minute thought, rather it is a summary of all that has happened in all the preceding chapters. Go (on my behalf) remains the reason for Jesus calling people to himself in the first place. Jesus ministered, taught and led his disciples so that they could and should then do the same for others—and not just for the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matthew 15:24, NRSV) but to the ends of the earth.

Given these three points; What would we give for a way of being God's people that is drawing people, who have not had previous experience with us? What would we give for a way of being God's people that is re-engaging with children and young people, and doing so in the context of worship and teaching for the whole family together? What would we give for an approach that is encouraging discipleship not just in those who attend

but also in all of us? After all, the doors of the church building will not stay closed indefinite. We need to be ready, let's start praying with these desires in mind.

I want to end by saying just two simple things about the Church I hold to be true. First, the people of God are to worship God in Jesus Christ. Second, the Church are to make new disciples of Jesus Christ. Everything else is decoration. Some of it may be very necessary, useful, and wonderful decoration—but whatever we hold dear beside worshiping God in Christ and discipleship, teaching what Jesus taught, it is decoration.

May God bless us and make us a blessing

Your friend Manfred

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