

***“Together we ask, listen, discern,
plan, serve, and ask again...”***

"Hey! We hear you've done some research!"

Don't we all wish it could be said of us that, like the sons of Issachar, we "understood the times" (I Chronicles 12:32)?! Perhaps every generation of Christ followers has considered their particular moment in history to be unique. We certainly do: a mutating pandemic, delicate global inter-dependencies, wars of a sort that most believed would never again happen in our time, and so much more. We make Solomon's words our own: "Oh, God, give me an understanding heart." 1 Kings 3:9

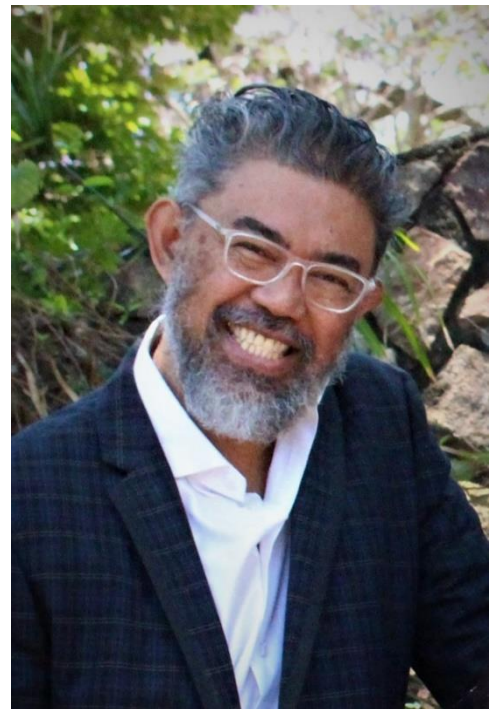
In this Spring 2022 edition of the OC Research Link, Paul Siaki describes the research he did to gain a current understanding of the perceptions of church leaders in South Africa regarding post-pandemic ministry. We trust you will consider his findings interesting and useful. Here's Paul's story:

[GRT] Hi Paul! We hear you did some research. What were the questions you were trying to answer?

[PS] I was not an unbiased researcher when I went looking. I knew where I wanted to end up and the answers I found only solidified my assumption of where God was leading the Church. I entertained the answers from people, laity and clergy, not so much as the "answer" but more along the lines of helping them feel that COVID was a shared experience of problems and challenges – get them nodding their heads and saying, "Yes" and feeling like I was with them. Then I basically told them that maybe God was saying we should throw it all out—and get back to our ultimate and first duty of making disciple-making disciples.

Two questions: Did they think the Church was going back to pre-Pandemic normality? Or, would it "Reset" and become something different.

Very few people were asking the high road, "Why" question. There was the inevitable, muddy "Why this pandemic God?" But not really a search for Truth behind it all. I began to think, "Yeah, why are we going



through this pandemic at this point in time?” I got excited when I realized that the Spanish Flu was 1918-1920—almost a 100 years ago by a year. Maybe God had a plan to shake up the world and the Church every 100 years or so? What if that’s what was going on?

[GRT] Why was this important?

[PS] Fellow OC missionary, David Bulger, tells a story of being in an online breakout room of a conference and hearing an African bishop say that he just wanted things to go back to the way they were. David said the silence and awkwardness was deafening. No one had the heart to tell the bishop things were never going to be the same again.

Without exception, every interviewed clergyman spoke outwardly of needing something new, agreeing with me on a need for a “Reset”. As I asked more questions, I could tell they really didn’t want that. They quickly realized the prevailing mood was that we were entering a “new normal” so they outwardly expressed support—but inwardly and in their other responses and actions within their churches, they showed that their worldview still demanded a pre-Pandemic Church. They were stuck in the box.

Imagine you’re a pastor with two years to go until retirement. Would you be keen to do something “new” (that is really something very old)? Or would you rather settle for whomever returns to church and whatever shape it morphs into, and hope your pension is still covered?

[GRT] What did you do?

[PS] I am an Anglican priest, so I have long had inroads to the mainline churches because I have legitimate credentials. I have also spoken or preached in many other denominations through seminars, workshops, or conferences. This has been helped by numerous articles I’ve written and an earlier book on radical church planting. So the sample group was easily attainable.

I guest lecture at the Theology Dept of the University of Pretoria and used the students to take questionnaires into their communities (if they wanted a good grade!).

Years ago, I was Chairman of the Johannesburg Transformation Movement (the city-reaching initiative) which gave me special access to the very large charismatic and Pentecostal churches.

And I talked with a few South African futurists and a few rare missiologists like myself. I also spent a small fortune buying any book that came out about the future of life after COVID, and scoured the internet for any resources and attended a lot of Zoom webinars.

[GRT] What went right?

[PS] When the idea first germinated within my fevered mind, I was reticent to actually tell people I was writing a book on this subject. I dreaded a “Who are you?” response. Most of the early research was simple conversations on the future of the church and attending quite a few talks by pastors on their ideas about what to do.

It was only when I spent two weeks in quarantine in New Zealand (not allowed to leave my room) and wrote 80% of the book, that I was more confident as I gathered data and interacted with more church groups. Everyone was keen to discuss what the future might hold.

[GRT] What went wrong?

[PS] There is a paucity of available research in Africa. You would think South Africa would be ahead of other nations, but they are not. So, my sample size was small, in essence, the circle of my influence. I was unable to

do a proper sampling throughout the nation and different religious bodies and had to rely more on a person's opinion than any certain fact.

My surveys and questionnaires had as many "Do not understand the question", as answered questions. Or, as the joke goes, the answer is "Jesus" (the answer is always "Jesus"). And, for the most part, the input I received from the laity were not overly helpful as they didn't fully understand the inner workings of how complex an established church really is.

[GRT] What did you learn?

[PS] Truthfully, I re-learned the lesson that when one writes a book they cannot "waffle," but rather they kind of fake it till they make it. I learned that if I lined up a 100 people and asked them what the future of the Church after COVID would be, I'd get 100 different answers. And I'd be lucky if one of them said we need to go back to God's original mandate and make disciples.

[GRT] Is there anything else you'd like us to know?

[PS] The Amazon Kindle e-book is more expensive than the actual printed hard copy (which is only sold in South Africa)—go figure.

[GRT] Well done, Paul! We're glad and grateful that your hard work will benefit so many people in so many places. Thank you!!

If you'd like to read Paul's book in its entirety, click here:

<https://www.amazon.com.au/Church-Interrupted-Reset-What-Post-Covid-ebook/dp/B09SBPWZDG>

Paul and Barbara joined OC in 1995 and have been serving in South Africa with the Southern Africa Regional Team since 1998. They live in Johannesburg with their three grown children. Paul is an Anglican Priest and has planted three churches. He is also a guest lecturer at the University of Pretoria. Prior to life in South Africa, Paul and Barbara worked in the Southern California area and were both MK's in the Philippines, graduates of Faith Academy. Paul's parents were with Philippine Challenge and Barbara's parents were with Wycliff. They are both hoping to retire in South Africa.

Questions or Comments?

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