



Editorial

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Editor

I'm a Christian minister as well as a lecturer. As a pastor of a small suburban church, I'm always looking for answers. I want to know what's going on in the world. Specifically, what's going on that affects my life as a Christian and my work as a Christian minister? Where do I find out what God is doing today or about how His servants are "kicking goals" that we can all learn from? More importantly, where do I go to find out whether or not the events, achievements and projects I hear about constantly online, on Facebook or just "on the grapevine" are really as good as they are reported to be, and if so, why are they achieving good things in our world? How can I apply the lessons drawn from such analysis to my life and ministry? Where can I find stimulating responses from my peers about the issues I face? And how do I find the *informed* and *grounded* thinking I need to get out of the rut I sometimes find myself in as a Christian leader?

Busy pastors get news about the latest trends, ideas and methods largely anecdotally or from conferences. When it comes to assessing why some churches and ministries are growing and succeeding and others are failing or declining, we often tend to fall back on one or more of these sources:

- The minister's own interpretation of what's happening: "my church has grown from 200 to 800 in one year because we introduced the ... program from..."
- Denominational traditions: "our movement is growing steadily because we have the right interpretations of Scripture."
- Anecdotal accounts: "this mission is doing great things because the leader spends four hours in prayer every day. That's what I heard."

- Second-hand theories: “every minister that God is using today has embraced a missional approach to church life.”
- Theological rationalisations: “my church split and has never recovered because I made a stand for the Truth and people don’t want to hear it.”
- Historical ignorance: “we’d see great revival today if only we followed the ways of the Puritans.”
- Prejudice: “the only reason *that* church is growing is because they compromise on the gospel.”
- Psychological copouts: “their church is growing because they have a level of ability or personality I could never reach.”
- Generalized accepted wisdom: “Christianity is in decline. Everyone knows that.”

Now of course no one reading this would ever base their ideas on such shallow foundations. But ask yourself, how do I assess ministry performance or church health? For example, to what do you attribute the incredible growth of the Hillsong phenomenon? Check to see if your immediate answer doesn’t fall into one of these categories.

Of course, all the reasons given above *may* be right, at least sometimes. But how would we ever know? How much research is done to find out?

In Kevin Ward’s stimulating book *Losing Our Religion?* (reviewed in this journal), he reports how data from late in the twentieth century challenged the “accepted wisdom” that secularism would inevitably displace religion in the modern world (Ward 2014, p. ix). He also probes the consensus in some circles that conservative churches are growing whereas “liberal” ones are declining, with a study of four different churches in New Zealand. We need to do the hard work in research (quantitative, qualitative, historical, theological, etc) if we want to help ministers, churches and other Christian organisation make well-informed decisions.

In some ways, our challenge is like that of the early empirical scientists. Breaking out from the traditional explanations of the natural world based on Aristotle, Ptolemy or even unreflective readings of Scripture, they went out into the natural world to find out for themselves how it worked. Christian researchers need to have the courage to do the same: to break out of the old paradigms, ask the hard questions, and thus develop new ministry models for the 21st Century.

Harvest Bible College in Australia is highly focused on preparing people for Christian ministry, as reflected in our mission statement “Training Effective Ministry Worldwide to Serve Local Churches.” The College has always insisted on maintaining this ministry focus in its degree programs. At Harvest, we’ve also been steadily building a research culture as we move increasingly into postgraduate courses. We’ve successfully run a Master of Arts in Ministry for 15 years. We’ve hosted a successful ministry research conference for several years. Now we’ve launched a Doctor of Ministry program, fully accredited through the Australian government’s tertiary education agency, TEQSA.

Because of this, I was trawling through the internet and other sources looking for new journals to add to our library, to support the doctoral students as they investigate

questions about real ministry today, and I discovered a real dearth. There are some good journals on Christian Ministry as a broad field, or on the related field of Practical Theology. There are journals with a great historical base. There are some broad-based, interdisciplinary, journals in which great individual articles on contemporary ministry have appeared. There are some good journals on highly specialized forms of ministry such as pastoral care. And of course, there are any number of great journals on theology and biblical studies. But there doesn't appear to be a journal focused primarily on the field of contemporary ministry. Until now, that is.

This new journal seeks to go some way towards filling that gap. It builds on the presentations given at the Harvest Research conferences (though not exclusively) and hopefully provides a new avenue for research on contemporary ministry to be facilitated and broadcast to a wider audience.

Let me unpack what I as the Editor, and our editorial board and team, hope this journal will achieve.

- 1. We hope it will stimulate and report on solid research into aspects of Christian ministry.** We are particularly focusing on the *practice* of ministry, though not neglecting its theological foundations and implications. We will interpret the word "ministry" fairly broadly but normally avoid ministry areas covered by their own specialist journals, such as school education and counselling. We will especially promote various kinds of *empirical* research on ministry.
- 2. We aim to focus on "contemporary" ministry.** We define that not as a particular stream or style of ministry (cool, trendy, emerging, etc) but ministry as it looks and works NOW in whatever contexts or traditions it is found. We want to find out what Christian ministries are doing today for the Kingdom of God, and what they might do even more with the right analysis of their context and methods. I hope this will uncover some aspects of current ministry that are creative, innovative, impacting, unusual, Spirit-inspired and/or effective. We will sometimes explore what hasn't worked (or is somehow flawed) and why, and how it might have been done better, but we aim to have a positive tone throughout.
- 3. We hope it will encourage more people to do research and report on it in a friendly setting.** We will include contributions from serious researchers but also serving ministers and postgraduate students. I hope that these reports and articles will be widely read and will stimulate more thought and more research. I hope that this research will lead to positive changes in how we do ministry.
- 4. We hope it will help create a new kind of discussion about ministry** that is biblically-informed, theologically sharp, spiritually alive *and* empirically grounded. A discussion that helps pastors and others break out of the lazy, shallow patterns of thought I listed above. As a result, I hope we will see a new generation of ministers rise up who have sharp minds, good research skills, an openness to new ideas and Spirit-filled hearts.
- 5. As a result, we aim to provide an excellent resource** for practicing ministers as well as other researchers.

In order to achieve its goals, each issue of this journal will contain:

- Four strongly researched **articles** that have been through a process of “double blind” peer review.
- A **pastoral reflection** by an active Christian minister, one which will be thought-provoking and well informed by reading and praxis.
- A stand-out **essay** by one of our Harvest postgraduate students.
- A great collection of **book reviews**. This journal aims to be the go-to place for anyone looking for books that reflect the latest good thinking and praxis in contemporary ministry.
- A list of **recent theses** in the field of contemporary ministry.
- And maybe something else surprising or unusual.

The material we invite will cover such topics as:

1. Results of empirical research into aspects of contemporary Christian ministry, such as youth ministry, children’s ministry, pastoral leadership, church planting, intercultural ministry, workplace ministry and healing ministries, just to name a few.
2. Theological and biblical reflection on issues that have arisen from the practices of contemporary Christian churches and ministries; for example, manifestations of the Spirit, worship styles, leadership culture, interfaith matters, political and social engagement, and so on.
3. Underlying theological questions that lie behind Christian ministry issues, such as the role of women’s ministry in local churches, ethnic identity, ordination, apostleship and others.
4. Proposals for new expressions or forms of Christian ministry based on social analysis, such as how to reach specific sub-cultures.

We have successfully recruited some great researchers to our Editorial Board, as you can see in ‘About This Journal’. We have also formed an active and enthusiastic working team that is responsible for the production of each issue. More important are those who write for the journal.

This issue’s four leading articles all relate to the question of how the contemporary church operates in the era we now find ourselves in, at least in countries like Australia, an era which is somewhat postmodern, post-Christian, but also post-secular.

Here is a brief introduction to the authors:

Dr Philip Hughes is the senior researcher with the Christian Research Association in Australia and now also the Chief Supervisor for Postgraduate Research at Harvest. He is one of the most experienced researchers on Australian Christianity and its social and cultural context. He is the author of several books and editor of *Pointers*, a regular bulletin on research findings from the work of CRA. Philip’s article explores the connections between the culture of churches and the surrounding social context, both as they are and as they should be. This will help ministers think about how much they should resist and/or embrace the changing culture we find ourselves in.

Dr Juhani Tuovinen is Director of Teaching and Learning and Senior Research Fellow at Graeme Clark Research Institute, Tabor College, Adelaide, Australia. His article

on different ways and understandings of coming to faith draws on two important research data bases associated with the National Church Life Survey. It's a great contribution to an understanding of faith journeys and a good model of research based on existing data. Pastors will find suggestive thoughts about how they might seek to stimulate faith in their own context.

Pastor Graeme Flett is currently a member of the academic staff of Laidlaw College (Auckland campus), New Zealand, involved primarily with the development and implementation of the ministry internship program within their undergraduate degrees. He is studying towards a PhD through Otago University and is a credentialed Pastor with the Elim Churches of New Zealand. His article on "Visual Technologies within a Consumerist Culture" probes behind the image of the "happening" church to investigate how these images are produced. For a pastor, this article raises disturbing questions about how our love of new technologies may have unwanted side-effects.

Pastor Andrew Groza has been a youth and young adults pastor at a large Pentecostal church in Melbourne and is now a VET Trainer and Online Coordinator at Harvest Bible College, Melbourne, with a passion for reaching the younger generations with a relevant Christian message. His article "With the curiosity of a bygone era," explores the work of the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) in the light of the post-Christian context the western church finds itself in. There are some useful thoughts here for pastors as we try to manage the interaction between the gospel and our current cultural settings in the context of the local church.

This Issue's pastoral reflection comes from **Pastor Jeremy Weetman**, who is the pastor of Eikon Community on the Gold Coast, Queensland and currently a DMin student and adjunct lecturer with Harvest. It's a very encouraging appreciation of the work of pastors.

The student essay has been written by **Asanga De Costa**, who recently completed the MA at Harvest and is now back in ministry in Sri Lanka, pastoring a local church and pioneering some new forms of Christian ministry. In his essay, he explores leadership and authority models in Sri Lanka from a cultural and biblical perspective. This essay raises important questions that all Christian leaders should consider.

I commend these articles and the other material in issue Number 1 to you and welcome your feedback via our Journal of Contemporary Ministry forum - <http://journalofcontemporaryministry.blogspot.com.au/>

I would also like to encourage you write for the journal and to present papers at this year's Harvest Research Conference around the theme "Church and Ministry: a Contemporary Voice." You'll find the call for papers in this journal and here is a link to a presentation by Dr Ian Grant on "How to craft your Master's Degree essays into a brilliant conference presentation!"

Part 1 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eyf3LGIWJyQ>

Part 2 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zc5-zlf3Qg>

Enjoy the journey with us into contemporary ministry research!