

'THE WAY'



In Christ | With Christ | For Christ

Why a review of our service pattern?

What is the problem?

We have seen in the sermon series on Colossians, that Paul speaks of being a healthy, happy and authentic church. He has five marks of such a church.

1. Rooted and established in Christ; Christ at the centre of all we do.
2. Growing in our knowledge of God.
3. Living as disciples of Jesus; individually modelling our lives after his.
4. Living as Jesus' family, the Body of Christ, corporately as brothers and sisters.
5. Living with good news to share; living a Jesus-centred life in which we engage with the mission of God.

In order to apply these five marks at St. John's, there is an issue we cannot ignore. I need to tell you the story of 'the four minutes', which I told in my sermon on July 30th.

It was early in my time here; on one of those precious five normal Sunday mornings I experienced before the pandemic struck. On one of those Sundays I preached for four minutes too long at the 8am service.

It had been made clear to me: having services at 8am, 9:15am and 11am means there is no room to manoeuvre, so sermons must be to the minute. So I set the stopwatch on my phone. But... I got carried away. My notes slipped over the phone. I finished and looked at the time: I had preached for 12 minutes instead of 8. How did that happen?! But it's only four minutes, I thought. We'll get that time back...

But we didn't... and I realised with increasing horror that with those 4 extras minutes I had created, armed and detonated a 'stress neutron bomb,' that spread out and irradiated with stress an ever increasing number of people for the rest of the morning.

As we finished the 8am service, I saw musicians and the sound desk team anxiously peering through the glass window. The service finished and in they dashed. One could observe some members of the early congregation feeling somewhat 'rushed out.'

I then observed as the 9.15 service began that there had not been the time to properly set up the musicians with the sound desk, which we could all tell as the feedback rang out. The stress was palpable, not helped as a large number of people looked at the sound desk person in a mutual plea, that silently yelled 'stop that feedback.'

I then observed items of the service being cut as we ran out of time at the 9.15am, too. It was one of those Sundays with lots of announcements.

As the 9.15am service ended I noted Kobie looking anxiously through the glass window and rushing in as soon as the announcements were over. The 9:15 congregation headed towards the back and downstairs to coffee, while outside in the doorways were the members of the 11am service waiting to come in. The tradition of that service is to have a time of quiet reflection at the start. It didn't happen.

The service started late, and I remember dashing to the loo — there wasn't time after the 8am service due to those four minutes — and rushing to catch up to the choir processing in.

I put many people under stress that day, for which I apologise.

Four minutes...

It was last summer when we began to discuss this in our vestry meetings. I shared with them the story of the four minutes and I put it to them like this: I am an engineer by background. It seems to me that, when we cannot absorb four minutes, we have engineered something with such fine tolerances that it's a 'friction generator' and when you have anything that generates friction, you have to manage the heat.

At the vestry and in many other conversations since then, stories have been shared indicating that 'stress neutron bombs' have gone off regularly and over a long period of time. I've heard stories of volunteers and others being on the receiving end of angry words due to services finishing late, or the sound system creating feed back, even people being sworn at. I heard stories of songs being regularly cut out of the 9.15am service so that the 11am could not be delayed. I have heard experience after experience, in some cases going back nearly two decades.

And here's the rub! We have people among us who still carry the hurt of the way they have been spoken to and treated, and they carry the scars of that.

Also, I have noticed a reluctance to discuss and decide upon some issues, for fear of getting hurt again.

So at the very least, as we look forward to our post-pandemic future, we need a little more time to breathe in our services if we are to be happy, healthy and authentic, as we have seen in our Colossians series. As we live out that fourth mark: "living as Jesus' family, the Body of Christ, corporately as brothers and sisters" we need to be willing to make room for each other and honour each other.

These then are the reasons for the review.

I will be writing again shortly to outline how every one of us can participate in this review and by what means we hope to capture your reflections so that the vestry can prayerfully discern and decide. We pray that God will lead us.

With love, prayers and gratitude for you.

Richard