

DO THE WORKS

by Rev. Elaine Poproski

Since January, I've been part of a thing called the Leadership Project.ⁱ The premise for the Project is this:

The world we live in now is different from the world we used to know. It had already started to change before COVID, but COVID sped up the process. We can't go back. We can only go forward. The problem is that all our political, social, economic, and religious institutions that used to work – that used to provide meaning and security for us, no longer fit. And because they were designed for a different kind of world, they are inadequate for addressing the challenges of this world.

The world we used to live in was one in which we generally agreed that life could be lived well without God. That might sound strange to some of us, especially those of us who've been in the church world for years. We might agree that people outside the church believe life can be lived well without God, but not us – not those of us in church world. And yet, perhaps that's not quite accurate.

Consider this: How different is your life from the lives of those who aren't followers of Jesus? I don't mean the superficial things like; you go to church, and they don't, or you watch Christian television, and they don't, or any number of the things you do with your time. I mean life. Are you a better person than them? Is being a good person – a moral person – dependent on God's involvement? Do you have a better family life? A better job? Are you more caring than they are? Are you more socially conscious?

For sure, there are lots of people out there who aren't better people or who have awful families or no job or who aren't caring, but isn't that also true in the church? I look around this neighbourhood to whom our church is called, and I see a lot of people who are giving their time, their money, their resources to things like the Food Bank, community gardens and fridges, helping out neighbours. And a lot of those people have no connection to God at all.

Which raises the question: Do we actually need God in order to be good people – to live a good life? Our world would say, 'no.' And probably, at least some of us would say 'no,' as well. I think it's one of the main reasons we don't prioritize sharing our faith – because other than the whole eternal life / death-isn't-the-end thing, we're not sure it matters if people share our faith. We're not convinced it would benefit them in any real, substantial way.

But the issue isn't just whether or not we believe we need God in this life. There's a second piece to it, which is this: beginning in the early part of the twentieth century, we developed and trained professionals "to manage and control the systems and organizations...they were trained to lead."ⁱⁱ For instance, I was trained to be a professional minister within the local church system. I was trained in things like Biblical studies and preaching, pastoral care, leading teams, and working with boards. People in other institutions were trained to manage and work within those systems. And for the most part, our training was effective. We were effective.

But something changed. It was already changing before COVID, but COVID kind of sped up the change. Or maybe it didn't so much speed it up, as make it apparent and undeniable.

The thing that changed is our world. Our world is vastly different now than it was even a decade ago. And our various institutions, including our religious institutions, are no longer working like they used to. The best trained professionals, try as they might, can't seem to fix those institutions – to make them effective again. But that's not because of the professionals, it's because the world for which our institutions were created no longer exists.

For years churches have thrived beautifully under the leadership of talented, well-trained people. Get a great preacher, great musicians, and some great staff to do things like run vibrant youth groups and children's programs, and voila, you have a great church. You'll be attractive. You'll be exciting. People will leave other churches to join yours. People who haven't gone to church for a long time will start going again. People who've never even been to church will show up at yours. Pour enough money into it and recruit some well-trained professionals – success is almost guaranteed. It's ideal if you do things like pray and practice Spiritual Disciplines, but those things aren't actually necessary to being a successful church.

Except that formula for success isn't working so well these days. Ministry professionals are still great at what they do. And they've been working harder than ever before to try to manage and fix their churches – our religious institutions. But it's just not working like it used to. COVID shone a really bright light on that truth, but it was already true before COVID. And try as we might, no amount of talent or hard work even money is going to fix those institutions because they were designed for a different kind of world.

We still don't know what this new world looks like. We have some ideas, but mostly all we really know is that it's a world we've never seen before. And this new world desperately needs us to let go of our need to manage and fix what's no longer working and instead build something different. This new world needs us to acknowledge all the ways we rely on ourselves instead of on God and to start relying on God instead of ourselves.

You know, when churches talk about mission or about outreach into their neighbourhoods, often what we do is something like this: We begin with prayer, listening for God's direction, though sometimes we skip this step. But even if we don't skip it, once we've heard from God, off we go. We start making it happen. We craft a mission statement and we put together a strategic plan. We might hire a professional or two to help it along – or even if not a professional, at least some workers. In short, we pull out all the old tried-and-true tools in our toolbelts and make it happen. We do it for God. And in many cases, we do it well, even without God's day-to-day involvement. It's like we say, "Thanks for the inspiration – or the vision – God; we've got it from here. We won't bother you again unless we run into trouble."

And that's how the institution works. That's how the institution accomplishes the things it needs to accomplish. And there's no arguing that God has changed peoples lives through the institution and all it's institutional ways. But those ways aren't working anymore. It's not because we aren't any good. It's not because we're failures or lazy or not spiritual enough. It's because the world the institution was designed for no longer exists.

The world in which the professionally run religious institution fit, no longer exists. We have to reimagine what the church is in this new world – a world we haven’t seen before – a world we can’t even quite define yet, looks like. And to do that, we must acknowledge that forming spiritual communities – forming churches – isn’t something we do. It’s something God does. Similarly, forming Christian people – disciples of Jesus – isn’t something we do. It is also something God does. What we do, is we learn to see where God is already at work, not just in the expected places, but in unexpected places as well, like outside our churches and in our neighbourhoods and our workplaces. We learn to listen, not just to God, but to people. And as we recognize where God is at work, we join in.

You know, we aren’t the first people in history to experience the kind of change I’m talking about. All through history there have been disruptions – times when the tried-and-true ways no longer worked, times when people felt lost and disoriented, not quite sure how to fit the new world they found themselves in.

Think about the earliest Christians – the first disciples. Everything they knew about what it meant to be holy, to be a religious person, to be a faithful Jew... it all changed with Jesus. All of a sudden, maintaining one’s purity didn’t matter, showing up at the synagogue and presenting your prescribed sacrifices wasn’t required, food of all kinds could be eaten without restriction, the untouchable became touchable, women became respected equals, humility and servanthood became markers of faithfulness, justice mattered, even at the expense of one’s freedom and life. Everything changed with Jesus. For those who followed him, the world changed. They were now living in a world they hadn’t seen before, except as exemplified by Jesus. I am sure the thought of him leaving them must have been terrifying. It’s one thing to live in this new world with Jesus; but to try to live in it without Jesus? How would that even be possible?

But they weren’t to be left alone. Jesus was going to leave them, yes. But, to quote John 14:18, Jesus was not going to leave them orphaned. In John 14, verse 16 Jesus promised this: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.” And then in verse 26: “the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.”

They didn’t have to understand their new world. They didn’t have to have everything figured out. That was the Holy Spirit’s job. That’s still the Holy Spirit’s job. Their job was to listen, to discern, to focus on God and allow the Holy Spirit to do whatever the Holy Spirit wanted and needed to do, and go with it – go with him. Our job is the same as theirs: to listen, to discern, to focus on God and allow the Holy Spirit to do whatever the Holy Spirit wants and needs to do, and to go with it – to go with him.

You know, in a lot of ways, it’s way easier to depend on ourselves. Even when our tools aren’t working anymore. It’s a lot easier to have control than to give up control. But giving up control is the only way to move forward in this new world in which we find ourselves. Because it’s only when we give up control that there’s room for the Spirit to be in control. For the Spirit to do the Spirit’s work of forming disciples and churches. It doesn’t mean we don’t do anything. It means what we do is different. It means how we do what we do is different.

For me, this brings me to verse 12 of John 14. It's a challenging verse. It's a great verse. It sounds exciting. But then we compare it to our lives and it's maybe not so great anymore. Here's what Jesus said in verse 12: "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father."

Hmmm. Greater works than Jesus? Tell me, when was the last time you did something that was greater than anything Jesus did?

Jesus fed 5,000 people with a couple loaves of bread and some fish. Jesus turned barrels of water into wine – really great wine. Jesus told a paralyzed man to walk, and the man walked. Jesus called to his dead friend to come out of his tomb, and his friend walked out of his tomb, very much alive. Seriously, when was the last time we did anything that was greater than anything Jesus did?

I wonder if perhaps, when we talk about the works Jesus did, we make a mistake by focusing on the miracles – on the signs and wonders. It's not that I don't think signs and wonders might be included in what Jesus was talking about. But I wonder if perhaps he was talking about something else as well. I wonder if the greater works aren't for instance, about feeding 5,000 people with a couple loaves of bread and some fish, but are instead about feeding people day after day after day through food banks and community fridges and free meals. I wonder if the greater works aren't about healing a paralyzed man or even raising a man from the dead, but are about ensuring everyone has access to adequate health care – medicines and doctors and hospitals. I wonder if the greater works aren't about changing water into wine, but are about simply being present and available and known in our neighbourhoods and with our neighbours.

When we talk about Jesus' works, I think we sometimes forget that a lot of what Jesus did wasn't about supernatural miracles. He did things like speak truth to power, even when doing so endangered him. He ignored societal rules about who he should and should not spend time with. He touched people who were untouchable. He healed people even when everyone was certain the person's illness was God's punishment and thus deserved. He voluntarily went to the marginal places and people – Samaritan villages and lepers and sinner's homes. He had compassion for the hungry, the lost, the nobodies and the worthless people. He lived a life of humility, service, and prayer. These are the works Jesus did.

Those who believe in Jesus will do the works he did – that's what it means, in a nutshell, to be a follower of Jesus. But where his life ended and thus so did his works, the disciples' lives continued. And so, they would do greater works than Jesus did. Not better works than Jesus. But more. Because they'd be around longer. Like us. We will do greater works – more works – than Jesus did.

But here's the thing, we aren't doing these greater works in our own power or by our own greatness or competency or training. We do these greater works by the Spirit. The Spirit is already at work. We look for where that is and jump in. We rely on the Spirit who Jesus said abides in us – lives in us – dwells in us just like Jesus dwells in the Father and the Father dwells in him. The Spirit teaches us and reminds us. In Romans 8:16 we're told that the Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and heirs of God.

We don't have to have all the skills and tools to do whatever it is we are going to do. As God's children – God's heirs – God provides everything we need. Jesus said as much when he said to his disciples, in John 14:13 that he will do whatever his disciples ask in his name. Now, of course, when we ask, 'in Jesus' name', we're not talking about using Jesus' name as a kind of magic spell that forces God to do our will. Asking 'in Jesus' name' is about asking for that which is compatible with who Jesus is. It's about asking our brother, through whom we have been adopted into God's family. It's based on the assumption that the Spirit of God lives in us, guiding, teaching, empowering, comforting, healing, etc.

The world we live in has changed. The way our religious institution – which we call the church – fit into that world doesn't work in this new, strange world in which we find ourselves. In our old world, for better or worse, we were pretty confident that we could mostly take care of things on our own. Sometimes we might need some inspiration or a miracle or two, but mostly we could do it on our own. We could run food banks or Sunday School classes or neighbourhood barbecues without too much dependence on God. We could get involved in any number of projects and programs for the betterment of the world and we generally had what we needed for that involvement – maybe because we only committed to what we could do on our own, and didn't need to be dependent on God.

But all our competencies are no longer as effective as they used to be. Now dependence on God is pretty much all we have. No one knows this better, I think, than those of us who call Walmer our church. As one thing after another has been lost or stripped away, we find ourselves more and more and more dependent on God. And if you're anything like me, it can be an uncomfortable place to be. I mean it's one thing to be dependent on God once in a while for specific things. But all the time? For everything?

I have a friend who's also in the Leadership Project. He's a youth pastor. Every week, one of the things they do is break into smaller groups for discussion about something to do with what my friend taught. Usually, this small group time is carefully organized. Discussion questions are thoughtfully prepared, leaders for each group are prepped and trained to facilitate good discussion, my friend works hard to ensure this time is effective and valuable. Then one week he wasn't able to be as organized as he usually likes to be. So he let the kids choose their own groups. He gave them some discussion questions, but there weren't designated leaders in the groups to keep everyone on task or facilitate good discussion. What happened was that the Holy Spirit showed up and it was one of the best youth nights ever. Kids were sharing personal stories and really engaging in the topic. They were so engaged they didn't want to stop. They kept the conversations going even as they waited in the parking lot for their rides home.

My friend decided that maybe he needed to do better at leaving room for the Spirit to be involved. Maybe he could replicate what happened this night, other nights. So the next week he mostly did what he'd done the week before. Except this time, he didn't let the kids totally choose their own groups – something any youth ministry professional would probably have also done. This time he worked to set up the groups in such a way that there was someone with leadership skills in each group as well to balance out various personalities in each group. The previous week's great experience was not replicated. My friend's intentions were great. He wanted to set up an environment that all his training and experience told him would stand the best chance of

great discussion. Except in taking back control of things, there wasn't room for the Spirit to do the Spirit's work again.

My friend continues to work toward dependence on the Spirit at these youth group gatherings. But it's so much harder than it sounds. It's one thing to be dependent on the Spirit when you've got nothing to offer or when what's required is so far outside your own capabilities that you have no choice. But depending on the Spirit when you actually do have something to offer? That feels more like laziness or like not doing your job than it feels like faithful discipleship. Except the things we have to offer don't actually work anymore. Because they belong to an old system.

The new system – this new world we find ourselves living in – is one in which dependence on the Spirit is the job. Making and maintaining room for the Spirit to do the Spirit's work is the requirement. Learning to recognize the Spirit's activity and to join in that activity with the Spirit instead of inviting the Spirit to join us in our activities is the shift we must make if we're to effectively be the church in this new world.

Let me repeat that in a slightly different way: the old way was for us to do stuff and invite the Spirit to join us; the new way is to notice what the Spirit is doing and then to join him. There's a lot we don't know about this world we find ourselves in. But this is something we know. The initiative isn't ours. The initiative belongs to the Spirit. It's not about the Spirit joining us. It's about us joining the Spirit. That is how we will do greater works than Jesus did.

For months I talked about knowing God. I talked about all sorts of different Spiritual Disciplines as tried-and-true tools that put us in a position to know God. But knowing God isn't just for us. Knowing God has a purpose beyond us. I think these words of Jesus from John 14 remind us that the purpose of knowing God – of knowing the Holy Spirit – of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us – is exactly so that we will do greater works than Jesus did. Because all the works Jesus did, and thus all the works we do, are the evidence that Jesus' good news – the gospel – that the Kingdom of God has come near, is true. All the works Jesus did and that we do paint a picture of that Kingdom of God with the hope that other people will also want to know God and be adopted into his family.

This week, what I'd like to encourage you to do is give some thought to where in your life you don't really need God's involvement. Where are you capable on your own? And then I'd like to encourage you to consider what it might look like if you didn't rely on your own competencies. What might that thing in your life look like if you surrendered control and turned it over the Spirit? It's not an easy thing to do. If you're anything like me, every bone in your body will scream at you that you're being irresponsible. But that message is not from God. Surrendering control and turning things over to the Spirit is an act of courage, an act of faith, and exactly what's needed in this new world in which we find ourselves.

ⁱ <https://www.themissionalnetwork.com/leadership-project/>

ⁱⁱ Mark Lau Branson and Alan J. Roxburgh. *Leadership, God's Agency, & Disruptions: Confronting Modernity's Wager*. (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2020), 2.