

SEISMIC SHIFT

HOW CHANGE WILL CHANGE US



BY GENE RONCONE

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INTRODUCTION AND INVITATION

The year 2020 has brought wave upon wave of cultural conflict. COVID-19, political polarization, social unrest, riots, unprecedented wilderness fires, and mandated church closures are just of few anomalies that exploded onto the scene of 2020. It is as though social tectonic plates finally slipped and created a new reality. This white paper identifies eight ways 2020 has changed our world and how the church must change without changing our message.

However, the conversation does not have to end here. Please post your own observations, ideas, or related thoughts at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/SeismicConversation>.

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Seismic Shift: How Change Will Change Us

By Gene Roncone

The year 2020 has brought wave upon wave of cultural conflict. COVID-19, political polarization, social unrest, unprecedented wilderness fires, and mandated church closures have transformed our lives and perspectives forever. To better appreciate the magnitude of crisis brought to our lives in just under a year, allow me to list a few.

- **COVID-19 international pandemic.** Over 20 million people infected resulting in over 1.2 million deaths at the time of this writing.
- **Political polarization.** Resulted in the impeachment of an American president and a political climate of gridlock, scorn, and extremism on both sides of the aisle.
- **Market fluctuations.** The Dow Jones industrial average suffered its worst single-day point drop ever on March 9, 2020, only to rebound and fluctuate for months. This economic instability resulted in a short recession, closed businesses, layoffs, and negative impacts on the lower middle class and disadvantaged demographics.
- **Social unrest.** Incidents of police brutality and racial injustice sparked a wave of protests, violent demonstrations, rioting, destruction of property, and tearing down of symbolic monuments nationwide.
- **Wildfires in the West.** Nearly 49,000 forest fires erupted in 11 western states burning 8.6 million acres, killing wildlife, and displacing hundreds of thousands of people.
- **“Murder hornets.”** The Asian giant hornets were introduced to the US and are growing in numbers and wiping out entire bee colonies within hours.
- **Divided nation.** The 2020 presidential election drew the largest turnout in history and yet the nation’s deep division still resulted in a vote distinction of microscopic proportions.
- **Church closures.** Various states and counties nationwide did not consider the church to be an “essential organization” and thus required their closure in the COVID crisis. State and county attendance restrictions were set that closed churches for 3-6 months under the threat of fines, litigation, and even arrest. For the first time in American history, religious freedoms and the right to assemble were denied in the name of public safety.

What is happening? It is as though cultural tectonic plates have finally slipped under unimaginable pressure and created a whole new reality. I would like to address the most significant new realities 2020 has brought to our lives and eight ways our network churches and ministers should respond.

RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION AND HISTORIC RESILIENCY

Over the past few months, I have been asking the Holy Spirit what His purpose is behind this crisis gone viral. Why now? Why 2020? What organizational learning is on the other side of this season that we could not have learned without it? Could God be using Coronavirus to teach us what the future will demand? Are we fading into a new dispensation?

If a godless government finds restricting church meetings to be easier than they imagined, will they develop a greater appetite for control? Will restrictions on building sizes, locations within a city, or the content of preaching also be subject to restrictions in the name of public safety? Will mandates in the name of public good and the suppression of our First Amendment rights become a pattern? Is God preparing the Church for unexpected and confining government restraints? Are we being groomed for persecution?

During the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918, the government suggested social distancing; and most all organizations, including churches, willingly cooperated. However, the COVID-19 crisis was the first time in American history that the church was considered by various states and counties to be a nonessential organization. As a result, attendance restrictions closed churches for 3-6 months under the threat of fines, litigation, and even arrest. For the first time in our nation's history, religious freedoms and the right to assemble were denied on a large scale in the name of public safety. This unique occurrence will undoubtedly entice the appetite of those who despise people and institutions of faith. Intolerance and even resentment of Christianity is intensifying; and religious liberties are being challenged, revoked, and trampled upon in the name of tolerance, equality, and public health. This may include increased discrimination upon conservative Christians, Orthodox Jews, Roman Catholics, and others that reject political correctness. I think it is not unreasonable to also to expect attempts by local, state, and federal agencies to restrict or eliminate churches' 501(c)3 status, exemption from property tax, ministerial housing allowances, and tax-deductible donations.

Most American believers can only respond to these trends with a gasp of unbelief because we can only interpret history in the context of a microscopic window of time; however, my friend and historian, Charlie Self, has a different perspective than most. As a church historian, Charlie has an aerial view of Christian history. He reminds us that the religious freedoms and cultural accommodations Christianity has enjoyed in America are rare in the timeline of human history. In fact, Christians have been persecuted throughout most of religious history. For example, the Church in the Roman empire experienced severe persecution in the 160s, 250s, and 300s. The Persian empires persecuted Christians from the 400s-700s. Islamic persecution of the Church was severe from the 630s all the way to the 1680s. The Japanese severely persecuted Christians in the late 1600s and 1700s resulting in thousands of martyrs. Christians today are being persecuted and martyred in China and the Middle East. From 1900 to the present day, more Christian believers have been martyred for their faith than in all previous centuries combined as a result of communist, fascist, and Islamist efforts.

However, Christians have always thrived, adapted, and flourished the most during times of persecution. American Christianity exists in a very small window of favor. When it comes to church history, Americans have become so accustomed to this unusual exception that we have never developed the gritty faith and perseverance of our predecessors. It would do us well to be reminded that not only has Christianity survived under persecution but has also thrived, grown, and matured in the midst of it.

Churches and wise pastors will need to help God's people develop the spiritual grit needed in these troubled times. This can be done by publicly engaging scriptures that address a biblical perspective of persecution, what God expects of us, and how we can thrive under oppression. A great place to start is Matthew 5:10-11, 44; 2 Corinthians 12:10; 2 Timothy 3:12; John 15:18; Luke 6:22; Romans 8:35; Mark 10:29-30; Romans 12:14; Psalm 31:15; 1 Peter 5:8; Psalm 23:4; and Revelation 2:8-11. Integrating these scriptures through public prayer, preaching, teaching, or small group interaction will help God's people exegete our own culture in light of the Bible. Possible application could include small group discussion questions built around the scriptures listed above. A preaching series on the overlapping principles from these scriptures that celebrates the grittiness and perseverance of Christianity would also be beneficial. In addition, it would be wise to engage your own leadership community in a discussion as to how your church may experience persecution within your own geographic or social context, what capacities you will need to develop, and how you can and will respond.

Again, I am asking myself, "What is the Spirit's long game in all this?" Perhaps 2020 is more about preparing the church to be more resilient? Is our capacity for spontaneous creativity and flexibility being increased as our culture becomes more intolerant of Christ, Christians, and the church? Is this just the random consequences of a fallen and broken world? Or is God shaping us for something deeper, something needed, or something futuristic?

APPLICATION ZONE: Use the space below to write down ideas or promptings the Holy Spirit may be opening your own mind and spirit up to.

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FINANCIAL STAGNATION AND NEW REVENUE

COVID-19 taught us a valuable lesson about stewardship. My own biweekly surveys found that, by and large, the income of most churches increased in the early days of COVID but then gradually stabilized to pre-COVID conditions. The fact that attendance plummeted while giving was relatively unaffected in most churches means our current income streams come from a small group of committed believers. It also means that new money is not coming into the church at the pace that expenses are increasing. Although COVID showed us how financially resilient the church can be, it would be wise for us to leverage this resilience now while we have the time to consider a few important options.

1. The church must begin to wrestle with the fact that religious giving in churches large and small is declining across the board. A recent study by LifeWay Research showed that only 13 percent of pastors said their offerings were improving. Tom Rainer addressed this trending in

a 2016 article entitled *6 Reasons Why Your Church Offerings May Be Declining*. Rainer said that when churchgoers experience job loss, career transitions, or economic instability, their giving falls off or decreases and rarely resumes quickly. Although those born between 1980 and 2000 may volunteer, they are less likely to be consistent donors. In addition to these, charitable giving overall is struggling in all sectors. Rainer also notes that younger generations are not as committed to the discipline of stewardship as the builder generation. They are more likely to give to a tangible cause than to the church's general fund. Also, new tax laws for wealthy individuals do not give full tax credit for charitable giving. However, the number one reason for declining income is that church members are attending church less frequently than they did ten years ago and tend to only give when they are physically present at church.

2. Another influencing factor is the growing intolerance of religious liberties. If the church is to face persecution, it will most likely be of a financial nature. The more godless our politicians become, the more likely attempts will be to restrict or eliminate the churches' 501(c)3 status, exemption from property tax, ministerial housing allowances, and tax benefits for donations to churches. Our people will need to understand that giving should flow from spiritual obedience more than from a potential tax write-off or a way to obligate God to bless them. Wise churches will begin teaching their people how to embrace biblical expectations and more noble motivations for giving.

3. The inevitable convergence of these factors means that pastors and church boards will also need to learn how to broaden the financial base of their church's income. This concept may involve leasing their building and property to appropriate outside groups, starting for-profit and/or nonprofit organizations that subsidize the church's income, opening child care centers and schools, and other creative solutions. The appointment of a progressive Secretary of Education will undoubtedly result in less than desirable curricula, moral standards, and value indoctrination in our public schools. Without a doubt, there will be a greater need and demand for Christian elementary and high schools. Mark DeYmaz's recent book, *The Coming Revolution in Church Economics: Why Tithes and Offerings Are No Longer Enough and What You Can Do About It*, addresses the topic of developing other streams of income in much greater detail. It would be a valuable book study for church boards to do and discuss together.

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WOKE OPTICS AND AUTHENTIC ANOINTING

In recent years, the church has mirrored the marketing, news, and social media strategies commonly used by secular culture. However, the news, polling, and political branding of recent years have once again proven to be biased; exaggerated; manipulative; and, at times, erroneous. At the end of the day, the 2020 election results have proven that most Americans are in the center of most issues. The church will need to strive to be a voice of balance, truth, and accuracy in everything from preaching to advertising and social media efforts. Trying to motivate people by villainizing philosophical, moral, or political adversaries will only invite the skepticism and mistrust of nonbelievers. We must be able to articulate what we are for better than what we are against. The results of the 2020 presidential and house elections have created one uncomfortable question: Why would the nation oust a leader with unprecedented results and at the same time increase that same party's presence in the House of Representatives? Truth can be gleaned on both sides of those facts. I believe the answer lies in two truths: One, no amount of success can compensate for narcissism; and two, extremists get the spotlight, but centrists rule the day.

Like never before, the church will need to part with secularized branding and master the art of speaking and being the truth. We must search the depths of the Spirit to reclaim our message and find a spiritual anointing that may lack bling but breaks the yoke of bondage and supernaturally confirms the message of the gospel.

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MORTAL CITIZENSHIP AND ETERNAL KINGDOM

The church is becoming increasingly secularized and torn by the extremes of nationalism and social justice. We are already seeing the people of God elevating social and political distinctives over their spiritual identity. As a result, they will have conflicting opinions concerning the message of the gospel, the role of the pastor, the mission of the church, and how spiritual resources should be mobilized. Some are best described as patriots first and Christians second and want the church to lead them in political mobilization and conquest. Others are activists first and Christians second and want the church to lead them in social justice. The only thing these two groups have in common is their passion to make earth better instead of heaven more populated. The disunity these two extremes have created unearths one alarming truth: God's people seem to lack a prevailing identity and perspective that enables them to live

out “kingdom first” priorities. Without it, they are powerless to navigate the spiritual realities of a world rotting from the inside out.

Jesus taught us to “seek [ye] first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33 KJV). However, the church appears to lack this single-mindedness. We have allowed our culture of hyperactivism to blur the boundaries between our spiritual identity and our earthly citizenship. As Christ-followers, we are not Republicans, Democrats, or Independents; we are children of the living God and citizens of an eternal Kingdom. Paul declared it best saying, “Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20 ESV).

The times will require the church to engage in “Kingdom casting.” By that I mean our teaching, sermons, blogs, and podcasts must help believers focus more on their spiritual identity as citizens of an eternal Kingdom than on their current political or cause-driven affiliations. We must raise the horizon of our people’s perspective with storytelling and testimonials of Kingdom victories regarding conflict resolution, race relations, collaboration, and community problem solving. As a church, we must shift our themes away from candy-coated subjects and begin emphasizing eternal themes like mission, heaven, the rapture, and the triumph of good over evil. If we are to be effective, we will need to help God’s people more accurately interpret the crisis of our times through the lens of a Kingdom perspective.

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BIG CROWDS AND AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY

Most Americans have grudgingly adapted to social distancing and other COVID inconveniences, but all the adaptation in the world cannot silence the voice of our true nature. After only a few months, both extroverts and introverts know it to be true. We were wired for community, but what has the Coronavirus taught us about our spiritual selves? A few things come to mind.

1. Community is part of our divine design. If you think about it, community has been a part of creation since the beginning. In the creation account, God used plural pronouns in Genesis 1:26 to refer to Himself saying, “Let US make mankind in OUR image, in OUR likeness” (NIV). Then after creating Adam, God said, “It is not good for man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18 NIV). The need for relationship is repeatedly reinforced in the New Testament as well. Even the spiritual giant Paul recognized his own need for community when he wrote, “I long to see you so that . .

. you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith" (Romans 1:11-12 NIV). We are spiritual beings and created by God to exist in community.

2. We also learned we are incomplete when we exist in isolation. That "missing something" we all felt in 2020 is evidence of our incompleteness when deprived of others. If we were made for relationships, then we are most incongruent, inconsistent, and unnatural when we exist in isolation. When we deprive ourselves of relationships, we cannot function as the people God created us to be. I think that is what God meant when He said, "It is not good that man be alone" (Genesis 2:18 NKJV). Paul taught that being part of Christ is inseparable from being a member of the community of faith: "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12 NIV). By this, we know that relationships are the channel God uses to grow and mature us into the people He wants us to be.

3. COVID has also taught us that we heal best in the context of relationship. Your soul is refreshed when you serve, partner, and build relationships with others. Jim Hawkins, family therapist and former pastor, contends that authentic relationships are both preventive medicine and a restorative antidote for a host of emotional wounds and mental illness including depression and addiction. Hawkins says, "Our minds and emotions are healthiest when we maintain strong attachments to people with whom we can be open, honest, and vulnerable." Paul spoke of this when he said, "I was glad when Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus arrived . . . for they refreshed my spirit and yours also" (1 Corinthians 16:17-18 NIV). Proverbs also affirms the value of relationships: "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another" (27:17 NIV). We are our best selves when we are in community; we are our worst selves when we live in isolation. I believe much of the social unrest our nation has experienced is just as much a product of living in COVID isolation than the issues more commonly associated with their cause.

4. Before COVID-19, many introverts saw others as a necessary evil. Extroverts wondered if it was just them that longed for community. Now both know more profoundly that it is an "us thing." Why has it taken the Coronavirus to teach us these things? Because being deprived of something always gives us a greater appreciation for its value. Perhaps it would do us good to rethink the value of faceless crowds, posed hero shots, and concert-like LED fireworks displays. In a way, COVID exposed the artificial and cosmetic facade of contemporary ministry. But now we know. We need each other. We need authenticity and we desperately need authentic community, so let's reconnect with that part of us that can never be fulfilled and happy as just a face in the crowd.

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REACTIVE OUTREACH AND PROPHETIC EVANGELISM

In Acts 11, a prophet named Agabus prophesied that a severe famine would spread over the Roman empire. As a result of that prophecy, the early church began to mobilize relief efforts before the famine ever occurred. When the famine came, they were immediately relevant—not because they were smart, woke, or armed with expertise in famine relief. They were instantly relevant because the Spirit led them to be a preemptive solution. Every crisis has hidden within it a Spirit-driven opportunity for evangelism. How might the Holy Spirit lead us to our own cultural relevance in these troubled times?

A more focused pursuit of a “Kingdom first” perspective can be gained by asking ourselves the following questions about the Spirit’s role in our outreach and evangelistic efforts:

1. What unique opportunities does our culture of social unrest provide for evangelism in our local communities?
2. How might the political gridlock in our nation give Christ-followers an opportunity to make Christianity more inviting to nonbelievers?
3. How can ethnic division and conflict provide an opportunity to present Christianity as a faith that unites rather than divides (Galatians 3:28-29)?
4. We live in a world full of conflict, unrest, and division. How might the peace of God (Philippians 4:7; Romans 5:1) give us an opportunity to make Jesus inviting as the provider of real peace, eternal hope, and true joy?
5. How has Christianity’s history of compassion during pandemics, famines, and suffering given us direction in our current crisis?
6. How can our people’s time, talents, finances, and energy be quantitatively focused on “seeking the Kingdom” one mile from the church meeting place?

The church’s “X Factor” is our spiritual connection with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit can empower us to be God’s prophetic prescription to the needs our culture has and will have in the distant future.

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SMALL CHURCH IN A BIG WAY

One of the positive things we have learned through the COVID-19 crisis is that we are too dependent

upon church buildings. Only after our expensive buildings were sitting empty for months did new and adaptive forms of ministry begin to emerge. The Church of Jesus Christ is one of the most adaptive, resilient, and creative organisms on earth—but unfortunately, usually not until it is forced to be.

When church gatherings were restricted to only ten people, the church defaulted to small groups. When gatherings of over fifty were not permitted, we disciplined people and had prayer meetings and even annual business meetings via Zoom. When restrictions prohibited us to unlock the doors of our mortgaged, insured, and needy buildings, we met in church parking lots, parks, and outdoor venues. Could COVID-19 be the Spirit's way of preparing us for a new future? I think so, but what might that future look like and will our intoxication with normal cause us to miss new and Spirit-driven opportunities?

I believe every church, no matter how small, has both divine purpose and potential; but my role as a district/network superintendent gives me a unique perspective. At times I think we limit opportunities to those we know best. Instead of recognizing the unique opportunities and context of each church, we expect them all to function with a similar structure and model. It would be like failing to recognize the unique purpose of a 4x4 jeep and an Indy race car. As if that were not bad enough, we take it one step further. We not only expect 4x4s to compete in the Indianapolis 500, but we also expect them to win. When they do not, we sprinkle them with shame, guilt, and insignificance. We often do the same thing with churches.

Let me explain. One of the most disappointing enlightenments I had as a new superintendent was witnessing the unnecessary waste of money, energy, and morale that takes place in churches under twenty members. Many of these small works exhaust every last resource they have just trying to pay for a church building or a rented storefront. Twenty people dump nearly every dollar they have renting a storefront they only occupy twice a week. Money that could be spent better by paying a pastor, reaching out to their community, or building ministries is dumped down the black hole we call rent, insurance, maintenance, and upkeep. It is these pastors who often struggle with weekly discouragement and the pressure of unreasonable expectations from nearly everyone they come in contact with. They are forced to compete in an arena that plays to their weaknesses rather than their strengths. Visitors enter their doors and inquire about things like worship teams, nursery, kids church, youth groups, and all the programming that was so proudly showcased at the last church they visited. When they discover these small works cannot provide these things, they move on; and over time, these small works stay small and get smaller.

Hold on, I'm going somewhere. Rhonda and I led a weekly small group for nearly ten years. The group grew and split three times but usually averaged about 25 people. We enjoyed a time of food and fellowship and then split the group for the teaching time. My coleader and I would divide the group in random halves. Ten to twelve would remain upstairs and ten to twelve would go the basement. Then we would join together again and conclude with a time of prayer. Those Thursday nights were some of the most life-giving experiences I had. When you walked up to the door, you could hear the laughter and

loud voices inside. When visitors entered the house, they NEVER asked where the nursery was or even expected a worship team, stage lighting, or traditional programming. The night was a glorious mixture of joy and laughter, teaching and tears, growth and togetherness. The thought dawned on me that we might be wasting valuable resources, emotional energy, and divine opportunity by forcing small communities of believers to carry the burden of a facility.

But what if we added to our arsenal another category of church that met in a home? What if we launched hundreds of house churches that did what no nursery, worship team, or impressive facility could? What if we provided a life-giving community of faith that had all the relational magic and transformational discipleship this world has to offer? What if this new micro-group model was a small community of believers (between 3-20 people) that meet regularly in a home to study God's Word, establish life-giving relationships, build a sense of community, grow in faith, reach their community, and plant other micro-groups? What if this model, born in the fires of COVID, could assist us in building a small presence in communities that will need future churches or provide a low-cost option in smaller rural communities that could never sustain a pastor's salary and facility at the same time? What if we did small in a big way all over Colorado and Utah?

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SEEING SPIRITUAL OPPORTUNITY

Every few weeks I check in with the nearly 600 ministers in our network. I text them a link to a quick survey asking about their physical, emotional, and spiritual health. I am often humbled by their trust, transparency, and forthrightness. I can tell you that our spiritual water carriers are tired, weary, and discouraged. The chaos of the last year has required them to live in a constant state of extemporaneous improvisation, crisis management, and spiritual fatigue. Their people are falling off the radar, weekly attendance is “snow day” low, finances are tight, and they can barely recognize their own ministries. If you are like them, you know that we will win this spiritual war in the end; but you are just so tired of losing so many battles in between.

In times like these, it is easy to allow our view of all that is against us to conceal the power of all that is for us. My prayer for you has been that, like Elisha's servant, God will give you a new vision of the spiritual realm in which you serve. Let me explain.

In 2 Kings 6 we are told that the king of Syria sent horses, chariots, and a great army to seize Elisha and put an end to his annoying prophetic ministry. The overwhelming force arrived at night and surrounded the city where Elisha was staying. The scriptures tell the story much better than I:

When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. “Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?” the servant asked. “Don’t be afraid,” the prophet answered. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” And Elisha prayed, “Open his eyes, LORD, so that he may see.” Then the LORD opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha (2 Kings 6:15-17 NIV).

After I read the biweekly check-ins from our pastors, I find myself whispering that same prayer as warm tears roll down my face, “O Lord, open their eyes and let them see!” If you are a pastor reading this, that is my prayer for you—that the Holy Spirit of the living God would open your eyes to see more than the obstacles of your context. That God would give you spiritual night vision to see the thousands upon thousands of supernatural opportunities that your current crisis offers. That you would see that your heavenly Father has dispatched innumerable heavenly horses and chariots of fire to fortify and empower you in this moment so pregnant with spiritual opportunity. O Lord, open their eyes and let them see! Let them see divine armies, supernatural opportunity, and strength from another world!

These are the days for which you have been born. This is the time for which you were called into the ministry. It is on the other side of the Spirit’s view that we see the spiritual opportunities 2020 has teed up for each of us. Think about it. Chaos, unrest, and disillusionment are renewing people’s interest in a sovereign God. The church is learning anew that the ministry toys and trinkets of recent days are no match for the realities of this spiritual battle. People are feeling it more each and every day. A hunger is growing, and we are needing God more and more each day. God’s people are losing faith in the state, social justice, and social reengineering. Our hearts are turning to heaven; and like the Psalmist, we are learning that our real help comes from the Lord. The local church is needed more than ever before. The hills of your chaos are jammed packed with the horses and chariots of opportunity. Rise up, preacher, and shake off the blinders of fear. The mountains are filled with heaven’s horses and their chariots ride on fire!

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HEALTHY MINISTERS, VIBRANT CHURCHES
AND SPIRIT-DRIVEN RELEVANCE