

Simon Goddard and Nathan McGuire are helping to shape an online Baptist missional community called [transform.church](https://transform.church) – and want to ask deeper questions about what it means to be a church in the digital sphere

*No one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.* Mark 2:22

When your computer begins running slowly, there's a tool in most operating systems that enables you to do some defragmenting. Over time, the hard drive becomes cluttered and the data that makes up files and apps become more difficult to find and connect. Some serious digital housework is necessary before everything grinds to a halt. In the foreword to Alan Hirsch's book *The*

*Forgotten Ways* (written back in 2006, long before Covid) Leonard Sweet suggested that it's the church that needs a defrag, saying: *'we will need to stop doing what we're doing and let this defragger do its work on our minds and ministries'*.

We see this defragging in the words of Jesus in Mark 2 as he challenges the Pharisees about fasting, forcing them to confront the purpose of their rituals and religious observances. The pandemic may well have been an opportunity for us to be similarly challenged – but instead of pausing and reflecting on what it means to 'be church' in the 21st century, many of us simply took the existing models of how we 'do church' and worked out ways to do them online, instead of in a building. While for many people, watching a livestream of a church service was a novel experience, it was nonetheless simply a digital recreation of their normal Sunday morning – without the need to leave the

sofa! Some congregations found new connections with people who preferred watching church remotely without having to cross the threshold. Others, however, lost existing members who realised that church had long since become a spectator sport for them. During Covid, many ministers also began to question what exactly it was that God had called them into.

Somewhere along the line, Sunday services have become an end in themselves – a weekly 'show' to write a script for, to direct and produce. Many of us perhaps have a feeling that something is wrong, and church leaders and the communities they serve may well be asking themselves some deep questions. Has the Sunday service experience itself become a ritual by which, unconsciously, the attendee seeks to elicit the grace, forgiveness of sin, and acceptance of God? By inference, how does this distort the call upon us to engage with the

work of the Spirit in the wider world? Have we reduced our understanding of the 'mission of God' to simply maximising the show's audience and reach. Certainly, if you enquire of any minister who has been 'foolish' enough to suggest cancelling a service to do something outside of the norm, you'll perhaps find out that somehow, we've turned our Sunday mornings into a 'god'!

So, what then is the purpose of church? And if we did want to go back to first principles and 'be' a church fit for the 21st century, what might it look like? That's the journey that we're on as transform.church – a digital expression of Christian community with the purpose of equipping, empowering and releasing a generation of missional disciples committed to kingdom transformation. Each member dwelling deeply in the networks in which they live, work and play; planting the gospel there and seeing what emerges.

Understanding the church to be a 'mission agency', and based around small 'transform group' gatherings (that take place fortnightly, at any time of the week), the focus is upon missional discipleship, and what this looks like practically in each of four dimensions:

- **With God** – following Jesus, doing the will of the Father, living in the power of the Spirit;
- **With people** – loving our neighbours, pursuing justice, embodying grace and mercy;
- **With the planet** – through a generous gratitude for, and good stewardship of, the natural world;
- **With ourselves** – developing our character, discerning our calling, making our unique contribution.

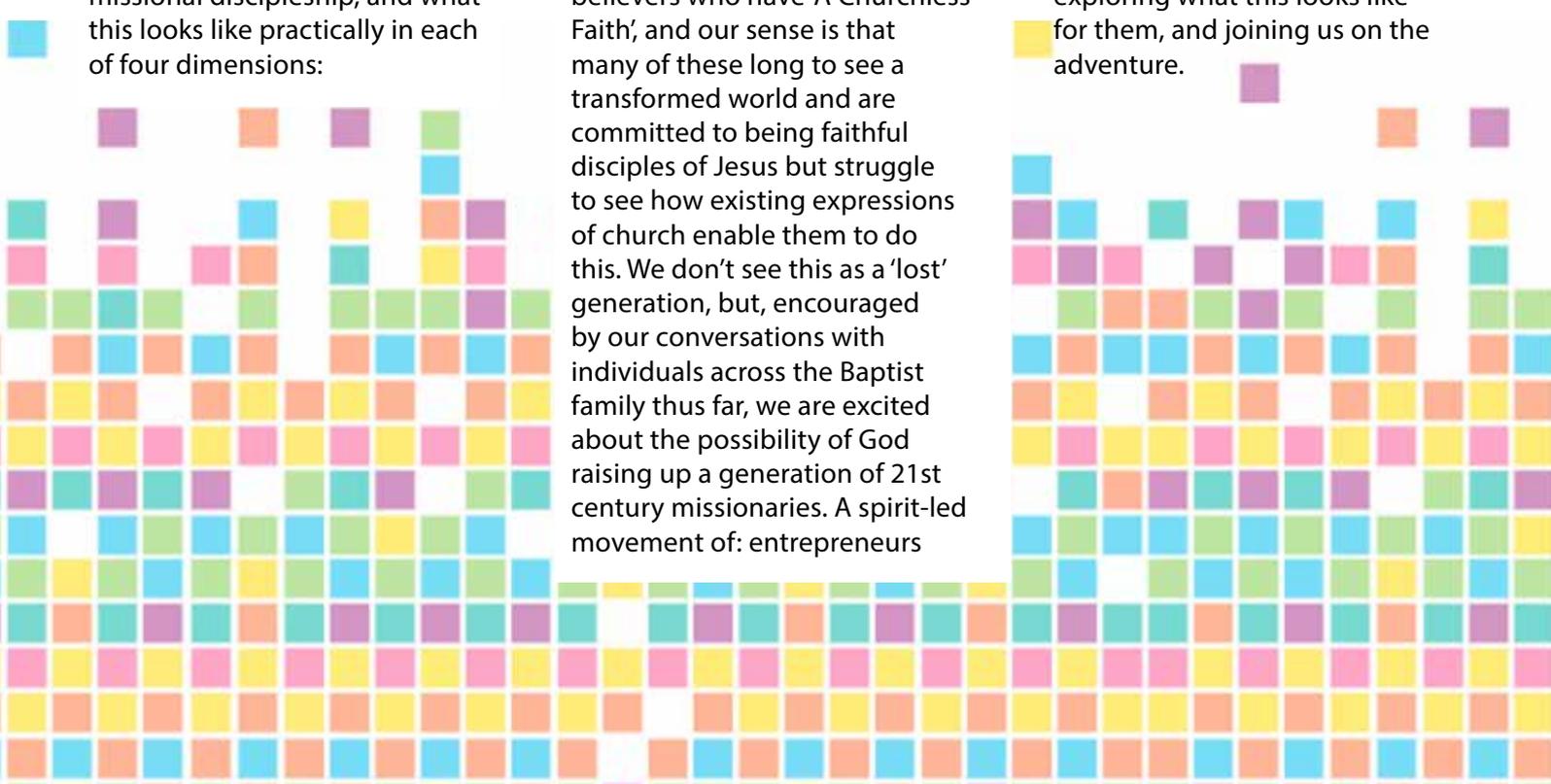
The 'transform group' is a place for encouragement, discernment, prayer and accountability as each member seeks growth in two directions:

- **Inwardly** – personal transformation in each of the four dimensions of following Jesus;
- **Outwardly** – offering transformation to others through opportunities to encounter and follow Jesus.

In his book Alan Jamieson describes a generation of believers who have 'A Churchless Faith', and our sense is that many of these long to see a transformed world and are committed to being faithful disciples of Jesus but struggle to see how existing expressions of church enable them to do this. We don't see this as a 'lost' generation, but, encouraged by our conversations with individuals across the Baptist family thus far, we are excited about the possibility of God raising up a generation of 21st century missionaries. A spirit-led movement of: entrepreneurs

called to start ethical enterprises, public servants called to bring a gospel perspective to local and national politics, young adults willing to drop everything to minister in a place of need or campaign against injustice, and gamers and social media influencers wanting to communicate the reality of Jesus in relevant ways within the digital sphere.

The missional landscape is changing, and the church of the 21st century is likely to be diverse in nature, with no single model working in every context. We do need to engage digitally, and effectively use this new medium that has become available to us in recent years, but before we pour new wine into old wine skins, and simply move what we've always done onto the internet, let's ask some deeper questions and perhaps do a bit of defragging too. We certainly don't see transform.church as the only solution, but just one response to the call of the missional God, and an experiment in renewing the church to fruitfully fulfil his mission. We invite others to rediscover the purpose of church and the rituals we embody, exploring what this looks like for them, and joining us on the adventure.



For more information, and to contact Simon and Nathan, visit:

[transform.church](https://transform.church)

or scan this QR Code



After hosting three #digitalpentecost conversations in the first half of 2023, transform.church now has an expanded trustee body and will be piloting a rhythm of online meetings from September onwards with plans for a public 'launch' in early 2024. It has been registered with the Charity Commission and welcomed into membership of Baptists Together.



Simon Goddard, a former Regional Minister in the Eastern Baptist Association, is Director of RiverTree, which he set up in 2018 to catalyse, cultivate and collaborate in pursuit of fruitfulness in the mission of God. Contact him at: [simon@rivertree.org.uk](mailto:simon@rivertree.org.uk)



Nathan McGuire currently serves as Associate Minister at Streatham Baptist Church and is a Trustee of Restored, where he provides consultation on domestic violence prevention in Christian Communities. Contact him at: [nathan@thegodlyirritant.com](mailto:nathan@thegodlyirritant.com)