

WE'VE NEVER BEEN HERE BEFORE

Following Jesus When the Terrain Has Changed

Tim Keller once observed:

“In 2000 years, we’ve never learned how to do mission in a place that was post-Christian rather than pre-Christian. If you’re in ministry, it’s going to take all of your life to help the church figure out how to do this.”

I keep coming back to that because Keller wasn’t criticizing the Church. He was naming the terrain.



For much of Christian history, missionaries have carried the gospel into places that were pre-Christian. People may not have known Jesus. They may not have understood the gospel. They may have practiced another religion or no religion at all. But Christianity wasn’t something they had already encountered, evaluated, experienced, rejected, or assumed they understood.

A post-Christian harvest is different. Many of the people around us already have a story about Christianity. They have impressions of church, opinions about Christians, experiences with religion, assumptions about the Bible, and memories of things Christians have said or done. They may associate Christianity with politics, morality, hypocrisy, judgment, kindness, childhood, grandparents, scandal, beauty, pain, or all of those things at once.

And somewhere underneath all of that is Jesus. Sometimes barely recognizable.

That creates a missionary challenge the Church has rarely faced quite like this before.

The Terrain Has Changed

I think this distinction matters because it changes the way we talk about the Church. I’m increasingly convinced that we don’t need to convince people that the Church is broken. We need to help people recognize that the terrain has changed.

Those are very different conversations. There are pastors and church leaders who have faithfully given their lives to Jesus and His Church. They love people. They preach Scripture. They pray. They serve. They carry burdens most people will never see. The answer isn’t to tell them everything they’ve been doing is wrong.

And we don’t have to diminish what God has done in previous generations in order to recognize what is happening in this one. Some of our maps were drawn for different terrain. That’s not an accusation. It’s an invitation to look again.

When the terrain changes, one of the most important questions isn't, "What are we doing wrong?" It's, "Where are we now?"

That question leads us into the harvest. Who are the actual people around us? What do they believe about Jesus? What experiences have shaped those beliefs? What do their words and behaviors reveal? What are they hoping for? What disappointments are they carrying? Where are they finding belonging? What are they afraid of? What makes them curious? Where might the Kingdom already be appearing in their lives before anyone has given them religious vocabulary for it?

This is why Harvest Forward begins with EXPLORE. We don't begin with an answer. We begin with Holy Curiosity. We look through two lenses: Kingdom and Harvest. We seek the Kingdom Jesus said was near, and we pay attention to the harvest He said was plentiful.

This is Kingdom Reconnaissance: entering the actual lives and places around us with curiosity, looking for clues of where Jesus is already at work. We aren't studying the harvest from a distance. We're getting to know people, listening to their stories, noticing what matters to them, and learning to recognize the Kingdom in places we might otherwise have missed. Then we start looking for what we couldn't see before.

Don't Throw Away the Old Map Yet

There is another danger here. Once we recognize that the terrain has changed, it's tempting to swing hard in the opposite direction. Throw out the old. Replace the programs. Abandon the structures. Invent something new.

I've felt that pull myself.

But that can become another version of the very assumption we're trying to escape. Because if we decide beforehand that the old expressions cannot belong in the new terrain, we're still deciding what the harvest needs before we've encountered the harvest. We've just exchanged one predetermined answer for another.

The goal isn't to replace the old because it's old. It's to resist deciding the new before we've encountered the harvest.

Some familiar expressions may still be incredibly fruitful. Others may need to change. Some may disappear. Some may take on completely different forms. And some expressions of the Kingdom may emerge that none of us could have designed beforehand. We won't know if we decide the answer before meeting the people.

This is why EXPLORE isn't a preliminary step we hurry through so we can get to the real work. Exploring is part of the work. We listen. We notice. We ask questions. We build relationships. We learn the language of the harvest. We look for Jesus.

Then, from what we're discovering, we EXPRESS the Kingdom through the sacred work of relationship, and we EXPERIMENT. We try things. We assess. We adjust. We advance. Not because truth changes. Not because Jesus changes. But because the terrain does.

The gospel doesn't need reinventing. Our expressions of it sometimes do.

An Uncharted Future

Maybe the uncertainty many of us feel isn't evidence that we've lost our way. Maybe we're simply standing in territory for which our familiar maps were never drawn.

If Keller was right, we shouldn't expect someone to hand us the definitive model for mission in a post-Christian world. We may spend the rest of our lives learning. I find that incredibly hopeful because it means we don't have to have everything figured out.

We can become explorers again. We can walk into the plentiful harvest with our eyes open, our assumptions loosened, our questions ready, and our attention fixed on Jesus.

We don't need to panic because we've never been here before. We need to learn how to see here.

Be radical about the paradigm. Be curious about the expression.