

# The blank canvas: scary thoughts on how your diminishing PCANZ church can start to open up space for a new beginning (for gentle eyes only)



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This week I've had two separate conversations with churches about what I call 'The blank canvas option.'

"What is the blank canvas option?" I hear you ask.

Well. For some small churches, there comes a time when the question moves from 'Where are the green shoots?' to 'What is the blank canvas?'

HOLD UP! You added a second metaphor!

"What are these green shoots?" I hear you ask.

## Green shoots

Easy. 'The green shoot option' is a way for a church community to be proactively present to Holy Spirit opportunities. It's probably our standard operating procedure.

Where is life springing up? What new ways of connecting are working well? What can we be celebrating in our shared life? What needs can we meet? How can we improve?

A small church community can do very well by paying attention to the green shoot option. In fact, it's a pretty winning way to discern shared action across the Jesus-movement more broadly.

But the green shoots option does take active work, prayer, energy, and coordination. And in some situations, these resources start diminishing fast.

There is a time when diminished church communities need to consider switching from one option to the other. From GREEN SHOOTS to BLANK CANVAS.

## Transitions

The question is... WHEN? When is the right time to switch?

As with green shoots, the blank canvas option also requires significant focus and commitment to execute. Transitioning requires it's own kind of energy.

If you are going to move into the blank canvas option, you DON'T want to leave your run too late. If you leave your run too late, you may end up accidentally executing 'The rest in peace option.' That might not be a bad thing in the bigger picture, after all there is a certain inevitability about death, and death is nothing to be ashamed of.

But you might have a chance to prepare for a better hand-off.

So what is this blank canvas option?

## Blank canvas

Well, it's not too hard.

A church community generally has existed in a neighbourhood, a place. It has a history that has shaped it's identity. It has a spiritual heritage for which is is responsible. It has resources and permissions to steward. It usually has a clear sense of purpose and calling to the community around it, even if those are cloudier than they once were.

The blank canvas strategy invites a diminishing church to be faithful to place, history, resource, calling, and spiritual heritage.

How? By letting go.

It invites churches to recognise that sometimes, not every time but sometimes, the only way, or at maybe the most effective way, to see new life birthed is for there to be a death.

It invites churches to begin a conversation about how to pass on the baton with style. To ask whether there might be other people, another team, who could more faithfully explore the calling that this church was commissioned for.

The blank canvas moves beyond 'augmenting' what we're doing through new initiatives or new people, toward something more akin to an openness to 'replanting.'

It's less like a building program, and more like a phoenix prayer.

## **Naming the time**

This all starts with taking a good hard look at where we are. A reality check moment may begin the process.

It also may be about looking forward a little, just over the horizon, to see not just where we are but where it appears we soon will be.

This part of it is a critical discernment moment, requiring something of an objective look at things, a prayerful assessment of our situation in the cold, hard, winter daylight.

For some churches, attentiveness to such things may awaken a new focus, perhaps with a fresh urgency, for a final sprint past the finish line.

## **The baton pass**

So we're talking about passing on the baton. This is a good metaphor, because we are thinking of a continuity of sorts, a shared sense of purpose and team between past, present, and future.

One way to look at it might be, 'Let the next generation have a go.'

That has its merits but it's not exactly my point for this article. There's more to it than that. There is a spiritual principle here that we're invited to take seriously.

The deeper meaning of the blank canvas is to take a step of faith in the direction of God. It is to take something that is very precious, maybe the most precious thing, and bring it to God, humbly and gratefully. And to thank God for the gift and for the journey that has been the destiny of this church to date. And then to hand it over. To give it back.

("Who too?" I hear you screaming! More on that shortly.)

What are we doing when we give back to God our church and all that it represents? We are enacting the belief that Jesus is the Lord of the church. We are surrendering that which we control, while trusting that it is still in good hands.

## Who?

The 'who to hand it over to' question is an important part of this, but it is not time for that yet.

There are ways to process that question. There are conversations that can open those vistas up.

Putting the WHO question aside in the meantime is an act of faith. If you are seeking direction, if you are discerning truth, if you are considering transitioning to the blank canvas option, you should feel free to DO THE WORK in front of you. We are starting to let go of control right now. This is not the time for controlling all variables.

If you are learning to let go, it's OK to allow some 'unknowns' to exist in the system. Do not fear.

## Painting a picture

Well, there are my thoughts on that.

Maybe you are reading this, and you know that this, or something like this, might be for you and your people.

This is clearly not for every church. This is not a fix-all solution to the problem of church decline.

There is no guarantee that taking up the blank canvas option will 'save' a particular church or ministry. That is precisely not the point.

This is about observing that there does seem to come a time in the life of churches where a choice could be made, if there were enough courage, verve, and venture among the people, that a strong baton pass could be made.

What I am pondering, and what I have pondered in conversation this week, is how do we know when to make the move?

I hope this has been helpful in some way for you. I've been thinking out my thoughts across a few writing periods today, but now it's time for me to end it and put it out there.

If anything I've written has helped you, perplexed you, enraged you, or excited you, please feel free to [shout out](#).

If you want to talk more seriously about how to transition toward a blank canvas strategy, not that I know, then [get in touch](#).

To the blank canvas!

Grace & peace.

Tom

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Published 19 Aug 2021 @ [thomasmepham.com](https://thomasmepham.com)

Contact: [tom@studentsoul.org.nz](mailto:tom@studentsoul.org.nz) / +64 27 337 1703