

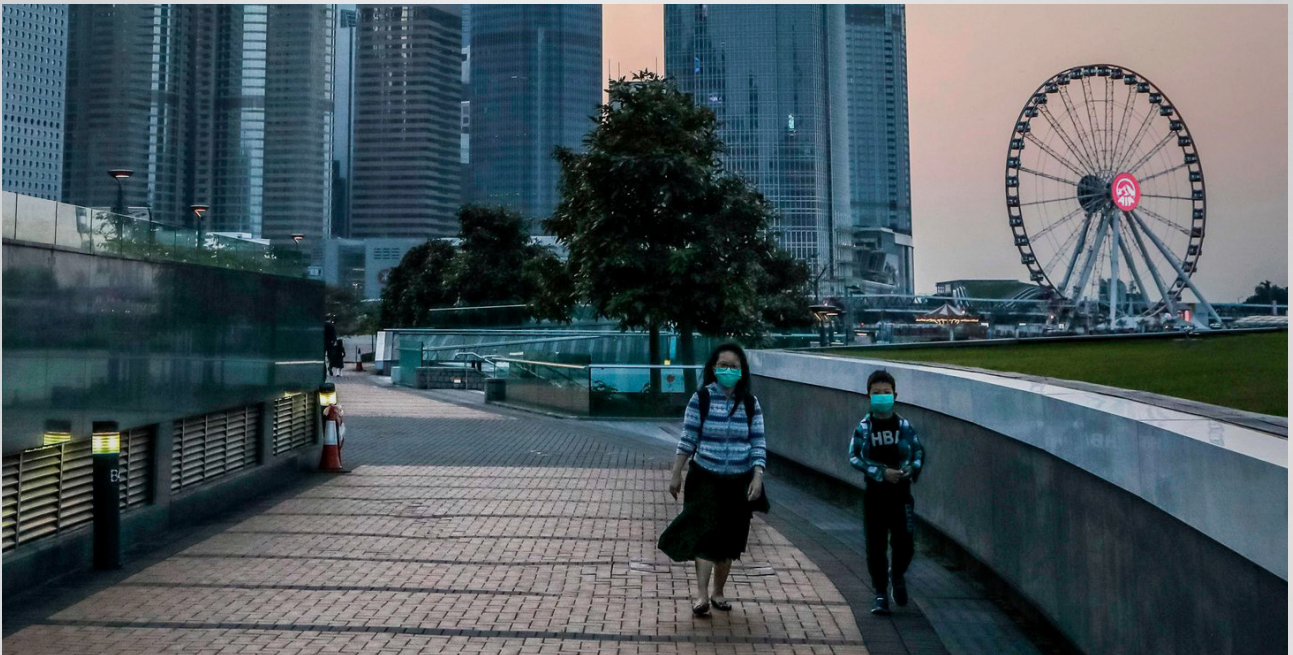
JIM'S THOUGHTS

to the vine church



Not so long ago life for a follower of Jesus in Hong Kong was fairly predictable. Christians gathered on Sunday for worship. Hong Kong ticked along as a vibrant and safe city, notwithstanding questions about its future. Meals were shared with family and friends on weeknights and weekends, after work or weekly worship. Life was comfortingly predictable.

That has changed.



a crisis or an opportunity?

Many months of protest over weighty social and political matters, accompanied by violence and power abuse, has shattered any sense of safety and predictability, not to mention public trust and prosperity. And now the coronavirus; an invisible threat and social anxiety coming hot on the heels of the protests. Normality and predictability are luxuries we just lost.

Christians know of course not to place their faith in prosperity or social harmony or political freedom or any other blessing we may have in good times. We know that the only thing that cannot be shaken in this life is the immovable God, our rock in whom we trust. Yet it still unnerves us when the ground beneath our feet moves and shakes. We want to know if God is still in control, and if so what is he doing? Why has he allowed such disruption? It's interesting that we enquire less often as to God's whereabouts and sovereign purposes while life is normal. That's why Jesus warned that it is in ordinary times that we are most at risk of losing our faith and being overtaken by the cares of this world (Mark 4), as we blithely buy and sell and work and marry (Matt 24-25), oblivious to the urgency of his return.

What do we think God is calling us to when he speaks of learning to value forms of community other than what we enjoy on Sundays, and exploring new ways of gathering throughout Hong Kong?

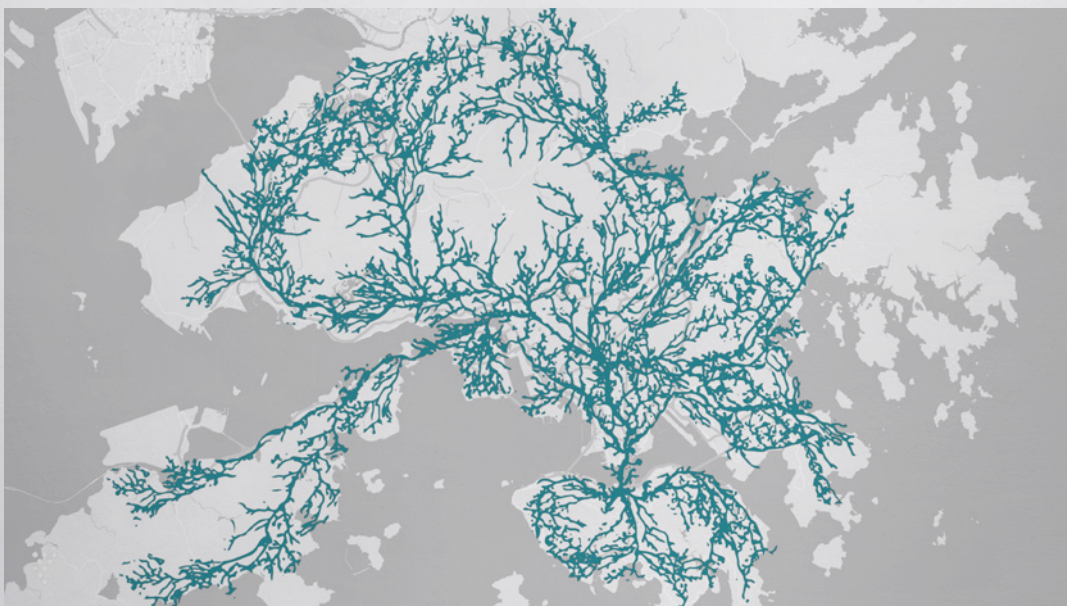
Unstable times may therefore be a gift to us. When the world warps in front of us and it won't stop moving long enough for us to steady ourselves, we have a precious opportunity to reach out and take hold again of the only thing that doesn't distort and warp while familiar things around us do: God. What does it mean then for us to take hold of God as the normality of Sundays is disrupted? How are we supposed to sustain our faith when meeting together for worship just got harder? Is this a cosmic joke? HELLO GOD, don't you see that we were only just picking ourselves up after the season of protests, and now this – a public health crisis? Right when

we needed one another, when we needed to meet to express unity in a divided city, we can't easily gather. Why God have you allowed one unsettling thing after another?

I don't presume to have full answers to these questions, but, I do see some encouraging signs that God has not forgotten his people, and that though we may have been caught off guard by recent events, he hasn't been. At the risk of oversimplifying things, I propose aligning some things God has spoken to The Vine over the past few years, with where we find ourselves today, and where we may be heading in the future.

It is precisely familiarity and predictability that God is inviting us to let go of as he calls us into new expressions of Christian community and new connections within our city.

Not long before Hong Kong erupted into protest Pastor Andrew released to The Vine a vision of a church that branched throughout Hong Kong like a *River* system, fitting the contours of different communities, even meeting for worship in diverse ways. That vision followed our Call to Community; a church culture shift that invited us from 2018 onwards to walk with one another in a more committed and authentic way. Both visions—the call to authentic community, and the organic church spread throughout the city—make sense given the challenges that Hong Kong faces today, let alone what we may face tomorrow.



Public protests and a public health crisis have made it hard to gather in the way we always have. Familiarity and predictability elude us. But then what do we think God was calling us to when he spoke of learning to value forms of community other than what we enjoy on Sundays, and exploring new ways of gathering for worship throughout Hong Kong? It was precisely familiarity and predictability that God was inviting us to let go of as he called us into new expressions of Christian community and new connections within our city.

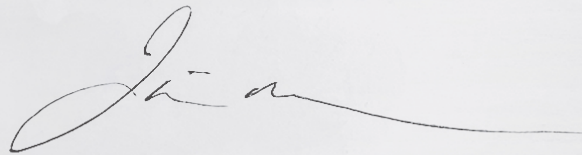
God surely knew what would unfold in Hong Kong, and he released vision to equip us to stand strong in a time of disruption. What's more, the Call to Community and River Model visions are surely not only for the unstable times of 2019 and 2020. This virus may pass, and by the grace of God Hong Kong may mercifully be spared further political turmoil this year, but it is just as likely that challenging times lie ahead. God may be wanting to teach us now how to truly strengthen one another, worship wherever we happen to be, and boldly witness while those around us who don't know him tremble at all that is changing in their beloved city.

The present trials may simply be a taste of what's to come. To offer a hint of what the future may hold, consider the recent central government appointment of Xia Baolong to head the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office. Xia has a history of closing churches in Eastern China and acting as a hard-line enforcer of central government policy. Although it is likely that believers in Hong Kong will be free to meet for many years to come because religious freedom is still the norm here and is protected by the Basic Law, Xia's appointment does not send a comforting message to Christians. Neither does it assure the general public in Hong Kong that the freedoms they currently hold dear will be respected in the future.



In the early days of the Christian church the followers of Jesus went from having “the good will of all the people” (Acts 2:47) to being persecuted and forced to flee Jerusalem (Acts 7-8). Their world turned upside down. They must have wondered why God allowed them to suffer so much. Was he not sovereign over all the powers, both seen and unseen? Little did they know at the time that the persecution of the church in Jerusalem, and the scattering of believers that resulted, would spread the faith throughout the Roman Empire. Nor could they have imagined that the man who initiated that persecution (Saul) would found countless churches as an apostle to the gentiles (Paul).

We don't know yet how God intends to glorify himself through the church in Hong Kong and China. We don't see how he may use the darkest of days, in the present and in the future, to accomplish his sovereign purposes. What if the protests, followed by COVID-19, followed by whatever happens next, truly shakes Hong Kong to such an extent that its people lose faith in the idols that have long held sway in this city (prosperity, education, career success, to name a few)? Perhaps the church will then reap a harvest of disenchanted souls? “I will build my church,” says Jesus (Matt. 16:18). He has spoken to us of the kind of church he wants to mould us into. Can we hear him? Will we trust him? And will we recognise the present challenges as an opportunity to become the people he wants us to be?

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jim', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

PASTOR JIM MCINNES