

# Overview of ReThinking Church in the 21st Century

## ReThinking Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Phase One (5/21—12/21): Background

In light of the national and international turbulence in the life of the Church in 2021, as well as for lack of spaces where the relevant issues about this could be discussed with diversity, honesty, and humility, it seemed urgent to gather some thoughtful Christian men and women for sustained and open conversation, and prayerful discernment.

This [invitation](#) was sent to form two groups of people, U.S. and International, men and women.

- Each was invited to come as themselves, not as representatives of something;
- Each shared a common faith in Jesus Christ, and a love for the Body of Christ;
- Each brought their own diverse background, tradition, ethnicity, Church perspective;
- Each had a strong and passionate voice and perspective, and represented diversity;
- Each committed to participate from May to December 2021;
- Each entered into this as a private, and sacred conversation and discernment process;

**Dr. Mark Labberton**, President of Fuller Theological Seminary, and Bishop Kenneth Ulmer of Faithful Central Bible Church of Los Angeles were co-chairs of the U.S. group. The Co-Chair of the International group was **Dr. Riad Kassis** from the Langham Partnership who resides in Beirut, Lebanon, along with Dr. Labberton.











**Rev. Dr. Nicholas Pearce**, of the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University and Assistant Pastor of the Apostolic Church of God in Chicago, has been a key advisor to this project.














**Rev. Mary Ellen Azada**, pastor and leader, has been the Operations Manager of this project. **Stefanii Ferenczi** of the Langham Partnership has been our international administrative coordinator.

From May to December 2021, the U.S. group and the International group met monthly for 2-3 hours. Our hopes of a retreat were thwarted by Covid-19.




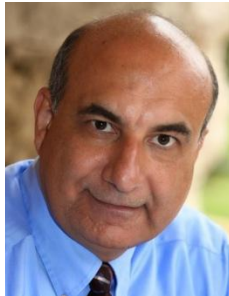







## ReThinking Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Phase One (5/21—12/21): Participants

### US Group

				
Francis Chan Pastor, Author, Speaker California	Robert Chao Romero Professor and Pastor California	Geomon George Dean of the Seminary New York	Willie Jennings Associate Professor and Minister Connecticut	Walter Kim President, National Association of Evangelicals Virginia
				
David Kinnaman President, Barna Group California	Mark Labberton President, Fuller Theological Seminary California	Tara Beth Leach Pastor Illinois	Caleb Maskell Lead Strategist of the Vineyard Education Initiative Colorado	Santiago "Jimmy" Mellado President & CEO Colorado

				
Janette Ok Associate Professor California	Ruth Padilla-DeBorst Theologian, Missiologist, Educator and Story-Teller Costa Rica	Brianna Parker Ordained Minister, Scholar, Author and Researcher Texas	Nicholas Pearce Scholar, Speaker, Entrepreneur, Founder & CEO, Pastor Illinois	Soong-Chan Rah Professor and Author California
				
De'Andre Salter Financial Educator, Entrepreneur and Pastor New Jersey	Alexia Salvatierra Assistant Professor, Ordained Pastor, Author California	Albert Tate Founder, Lead Pastor California	Jemar Tisby Assistant Director Arkansas	Nikki Toyama-Szeto Executive Director Virginia
				
Kenneth Ulmer Bishop and Senior Pastor, Professor California	Kenny Wallace Professor, Hoop Dancer, Bead Worker, Musician, Ethnoarts Specialist Canada	John Witvliet Associate Professor & Director Michigan		

## International Group

				
Milton Acosta Professor, Academic Dean, Editor, and Author Columbia	Antonio Barro Chancellor of South American Theological Seminary Brazil	Qaiser Julius Director Pakistan	Riad Kassis International Director, Langham Scholars Ministry Lebanon	Jonathan Kivatsi Kavusa Researcher, Visiting Scholar Democratic Republic of the Congo
				
Ronald Laldinsuah Pastor, Lecturer, and Academic Dean Myanmar	Otto Lui Associate General Secretary Hong Kong	Alfred Sebahene Priest, Evangelist, and Professor Tanzania	Wojtek Szczerba Rector/President, and Editor-in-Chief Poland	David Tarus Executive Director Kenya
				
Myrto Theocharous Lecturer, Author, and Speaker Greece	Sergiy Tymchenko Founder, Director, and Professor Ukraine			



**General Scope and Depth of the Church in Crisis**

- its cruciform and resurrection identity vs. its sociological and political identity;
- its inadequate, even absent, discipleship formation;
- its understanding, uses, and abuses of power;
- its many and varied divisions;
- its relationships within and between cultures, ethnicities, genders, and religions;
- its inadequate, sometimes alienated, relationship with theological education;
- its multi-generational losses and alienations;
- its economic and structural assumptions and systems;
- its technological disruptions and innovations;
- its declining public witness and credibility;
- its life in the public square related to business, politics, media, arts;
- its post-pandemic imagination, fears, and hopes;
- and more.

**Priority Nodes of the Church in Crisis**

United States	International
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theology (including gospel, salvation, and church's identity and mission)</li> <li>• Authentic Christian Practices Immigration</li> <li>• Repenting of past sins and assumptions (racial injustice, US patriotism, whiteness, inequity, abuses of power, tendency towards colonialism, etc)</li> <li>• Engaging/Reengaging Teenagers and Young Adults</li> <li>• Technology: Faithful Use in the Midst of Ubiquity</li> <li>• Discipleship - New Models</li> <li>• Diversity, Equity and Inclusion for the Church to Lead and Racial Equity</li> <li>• Public Theology and Healthy Political Engagement</li> <li>• Church Leadership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evangelism and Interreligious Dialogue</li> <li>• Internal Displacement/Immigration</li> <li>• Persecution and Suffering</li> <li>• Theology (including gospel, salvation, and church's identity)</li> <li>• Authentic Christian Practices</li> <li>• Engaging/Reengaging Teenagers and Young Adults</li> <li>• Technology: Faithful Use in the Midst of Ubiquity</li> <li>• Discipleship - New Models</li> <li>• Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for the Church to Lead in Gender and Racial Equity</li> <li>• Christian Public Witness for the World: Public Theology and Healthy Political Engagement</li> <li>• Church Leadership</li> <li>• Climate and creation care/Stewardship</li> </ul>

## Prioritized Issues of the Church in Crisis

United States	International
<p><b>Theology (including gospel, salvation, and church's identity and mission) and Church Leadership</b></p> <p>In a world of singularities and diversities [and competing narratives and an array of cultural and social identities], how do we affirm our diversities while claiming to live our life in relationship to one Lord, one faith, one baptism? How do we share a Gospel center that avoids a collapse into relativism [and the centering of "Americanity"], on the one hand, and knows/lives/embodies what it means to be knit together as the body of Christ, on the other? What makes the members of the Church, made up of every tribe, nation, and tongue, belong to one another? How can we have more elastic ecclesiologies that enable us to move dynamically from the micro to the macro, the local to the global while maintaining our cruciform shape?</p>	<p><b>Suffering and Persecution</b></p> <p>One of the struggles is the prosperity gospel. The cross is not presented—the church is becoming a business. People are not prepared for persecution. We have not been disciplined this way, and we are promised everything else but the cross. We must prepare the church for that and teach them how to suffer. Perhaps all suffering is a tool through which God reveals himself. It used to be that suffering was considered normal and joy was found in the midst of suffering. The church has shifted to a theology of joy and suffering is viewed as an unfortunate exception. We don't see value in suffering so we seek only what is comfortable. The main challenge that the church is facing is that we are not prepared to respond or react to persecution. There is also confusion about what persecution is—if there is no physical threat, is it still persecution? We have identified as a group the lack of resources, teaching, and curricula in our churches and theological colleges on how believers should think about and face the problem of persecution and suffering. Identifying this lack highlights the need for all of us to come together to work towards developing a theology of persecution and suffering in order to help the church in each context live in the challenging situations of contemporary suffering.</p>
<p><b>Authentic Christian Practice and Discipleship</b></p> <p>We do not have the kind of discipleship that we should because:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We are choked by the "weeds" of Americanity (spectator/consumer, individualism, emphasis on belief over practice, settling for comfort and accepting injustice, lack of grace --- forms that</li> </ul>	<p><b>Theology/Identity of the Church</b></p> <p>Christian identity has become confused with national, tribal, or political identities with little understanding of what it means to truly be a follower of Christ. Our contexts have overtaken the Gospel, leaving the Church in confusion and division. Our work is to help Christians everywhere remember and embody</p>

<p>support all of this such as the charismatic senior pastor leadership)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● We are divided in ways that serve to obscure our blending of culture with apprenticeship to Jesus.</li> <li>● We do not have access to communities of mutual discipleship in which we are seen, known, and loved so that we have deep accountability with grace, and we are not learning from people who are doing this.</li> <li>● We live in an anxious world where people are afraid of being known. There is safety in a one-way relationship.</li> <li>● We have not clearly communicated what “discipleship” is. (Biblical illiteracy and lack of application to culture).</li> </ul>	<p>our identity in the communion of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and thereby in communion with those who seek to live the Jesus Way. The church is in need of knowing exactly who we are and why and how we do the things we do. We also need to know who we want to reach. We need to learn and to teach how theology has an impact on day-to-day life.</p>
<p><b>Engaging/Re-engaging Teenagers and Young Adults</b></p> <p>The current vitality and future viability of the Church are at risk if we don’t embrace, develop, and release resilient, authentic disciples under the age of 30. (We see this as effectively engaging young Christians and reaching young non-Christians, from all backgrounds and identities). Many gaps exist, including: transforming experiences of the Spirit, bifurcations of the head and heart, not fitting into identity and expectations of the American Church, and so on. We believe better solutions and approaches to welcome them (back) and to empower them are necessary so they can contribute today and ensure the future strength of the Church and its witness in the world.</p>	<p><b>Public Witness of the Church</b></p> <p>How can the church be present in the world without becoming of the world? In areas where Christianity is the minority, there is little political power and politics are viewed with suspicion. Christians are hesitant to engage in public issues and so there is little societal impact. In other areas, Christianity has become synonymous with political power. In both cases, true Gospel Christianity is compromised. The church is either being persecuted or used. We do not agree as a collective group of Christians on what our public witness should look like. We all agree that there should be a public witness but we don’t agree on how because we don’t agree on the theological foundation for that public witness. We need to redefine the mission of the church and its role in public witness, as well as what the boundaries are.</p>
<p><b>Christian Public Witness</b></p> <p>The US church has lost its moral authority and its credibility for public witness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Because of its hypocrisy (as exhibited by its embrace of secular political power at the cost of biblical truth and authentic Christian practice)</li> </ul>	

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Because of a domination of Trumpism in our churches that confused Christian faithfulness with a political ideology</li> <li>● Because in the name of “non-partisan” or false “fairness” the church yielded its prophetic voice to create moral equivalencies</li> <li>● Because of a lack of examination of its theocratic ambitions</li> <li>● Because it hasn’t examined its complicity and propagation of worship of empire, of racism, of capitalism</li> <li>● Because it has lost its orientation to King Jesus</li> <li>● Because of theological limitations, to interpret and help us understand the times</li> <li>● The church confuses “pastoral accessibility” and neutrality when it ought to be taking clear and definitive stands</li> <li>● Because churches have used political positions to signal belonging (home or family); that disunity is repulsive (instead of drawing people in).</li> <li>● Lost its ability to bear witness ...Bearing witness would be an alternative, clear, authentic healing alternative to what the world offers and an embodiment of God’s heart for the common good.</li> </ul> |  |
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**Table Project:** Develop a **6wk - 6 month curriculum/liturgy** for essential conversations (around issues of Christian identity, communion when issues and experience divides us, public square issues) that take place around the communion table, with the Lord's Table as the centerpiece by which the discussions unfold and conclude with the Lord's Table at each session.

**Topic Oriented Resources:** After more research, developing **resources targeting 3 of the prioritized topics** for sustained, multi-part consideration, using all the necessary resource modalities primarily for pastors, small groups, church leaders, or congregations and networks.

**Readers:** Develop **sets of short readers** that collect best resources already written or produced for this project around the top tier of themes and projects.

**Discipleship/Formation:** Assuming the overarching need is discipling people in churches who may or may not realize they are under-formed or malformed as disciples, **creating a discipleship program** for adults to "start again" as disciples. It would be 1-2 years long.

**Pastor conversation groups:** Developing **resources for diverse pastors** in a town, city or region to meet monthly for sustained conversation, guided by a trained pastoral mentor and using resources for such gatherings. This could be a partnership with Fuller Formation groups, or something quite separate.

**Seminars:** Holding in urban centers the kind of diverse gatherings of pastors as a taste and an example of the crisis and how to find pastoral support and encouragement in this time. The seminar lays out some of the concerns and invites pastors into some kind of **ongoing in-person or online interaction with other pastors** for encouragement and constructive conversation for them and for their congregations.

**Alliances/Broader gatherings:** Discerning and cultivating **broader associations and partnerships** with pastors, networks, congregations, denominations, and organizations as participants in the ReThinking Church Initiative and to use its resources in appropriate formats and strategies.

## ReThinking Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

### Phase Two (1/22—6/22): Research, Resource Development, & Testing

**Group Composition:** Continuity with Phase One and some additional people

**Audiences for research and resources:** Pastors and the Christian public

**Partners in this work:** Fuller, Langham, and possibly others

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#### Steps of Research to Resources

- Refinement of needs/explanations/resources
  - Biblical
  - Historical
  - Theological
  - Contextual
  - Audiences/frame/language
- Selective 1-1 interviews and possible survey instruments

- Designing/Writing/Producing resources
- Testing with select audiences with feedback and edits
- Distribution/Development of influencers

**ReThinking Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**  
**Phase 3 (9/22—6/23): Testing/Revisions/Soft-Launch**

**Group Composition**

- Audiences:** Pastors and lay people  
**Partners:** Fuller, Langham, and possibilities of others  
**Alliances:** Pastors, Networks, Denominations, Organizations

**The Table Project (6-weeks - 6 months)**

- Tested
- Evaluated
- Modified/retested

**Mid-size gatherings (by invitation, 50-100 participants)**

- Discipleship/identity
- Experience-based
- Spiritual disciplines
- Art/reframing
- Taste of the original groups

**Partnerships and Alliances**

- Regular congregations
- Denominations
- Networks
- Urban and rural
- Organizations

**Phase 1: \$150,000**

- Staff
- Honoraria
- Operating Expenses

**Phase 2: \$300,000**

- Staff
- Research and writing team
- Honoraria
- Writing retreats
- Group Retreats
- Video productions of resources

**Phase 3: To be Determined**