

# Making and Deepening Disciples in France Today

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In April 2019 images of Notre-Dame de Paris engulfed in flames spread quickly around the world, causing great emotion far beyond France's borders. I too stood stunned in front of my television screen. The French response reflects the nation's post-Christian society: the French people mourned the destruction of Notre-Dame de Paris less as a symbol of living faith than as a symbol of our history, our architectural heritage, a relic of the past. The challenge of Christian discipleship in France today is to form witnesses to a living, relevant gospel rather than adherents to the vestige of a shared past.

I serve two ministries in France, one local and one national. I pastor a church of about one hundred fifty people in Toulouse, in the south of France. Since 2011 I have also served as president of the national board of France's Union des Églises Évangéliques Libres (UEEL, Union of Free Evangelical Churches). The UEEL is comprised of about fifty local churches throughout the country, with about 2,700 members and as many friends. Created in 1849 influenced by the Geneva Revival, the UEEL incorporated both Reformed and independent evangelical congregations, resulting in a dual theological legacy that persists in the culture of the union. As president I lead the national board in managing the union and developing our vision and strategy. As the official representative of the union, I liaise between local churches and pastors concerning the life of the union. My role is central to the coordination of the work of the commissions and ministries serving the UEEL and the implementation of our vision.

## A Post-Christian Society

The French context is not only postmodern but also post-Christian. Though there are no official statistics on religious affiliation in France—this is legally forbidden—some polls suggest the French population can be divided roughly into even thirds: believers (of any religion), atheists, and undecided. Though the vast majority of French people self-identify as Catholic, for most this is only a cultural legacy unaccompanied by active religious practice. According to a recent poll, only fourteen percent of the French population actively practices any religion at all at least once per month.<sup>1</sup> In fact, a classical paradox in a post-Christian context is that people can self-identify as both Christian and atheist—Christian unbelievers! As Christianity continues to lose influence in France, even this nominal Catholic identity is less prevalent. This is somewhat less true for evangelical churches. The number of evangelicals in France is growing, though at a slow rate. Evangelical Christians are a very small minority, comprising only about one percent of the total French population.

France is characterized by a strong secularization. Religious concerns are increasingly restricted to the private sphere, and any public manifestation of faith may be considered suspect. Today in France, many people, including political leaders, believe religion should be excluded from the public sphere. Contrary to the alarmist messages of some populist discourses, immigration has not caused a “Muslim invasion,” though the Muslim population in France is increasing. An estimated five to six million Muslims live in France (8–9 percent of the population), only a portion of which are practicing Muslims.

## Post-Christian Discipleship

The reality of a post-Christian context is not necessarily bad news for the gospel, but we must be aware of the challenges and opportunities it presents to the church’s mission. I would like to highlight a few of these challenges and propose how the church can utilize the corresponding opportunities they open for Christian discipleship.

Religions are no exception to the general distrust institutions face today. In France this distrust is a legacy of Catholic hegemony. Though the Roman Catholic Church was disestablished in France in 1905, its long history of collusion with political power has discredited it for many—and by extension has discredited all Christian confessions. The evan-

<sup>1</sup> “Rapport des français à la religion et aux convictions: chiffres clés,” Gouvernement Français, <https://www.gouvernement.fr/rapport-des-francais-a-la-religion-et-aux-convictions-chiffres-cles>, accessed June 5, 2020.

gical churches have a somewhat better reputation (though they are not immune from the general societal distrust); however, they are sometimes associated instead with sectarian excess, likely derived from their ultra-minority status.

It is important to recognize that *spirituality* does not share the negative reputation of institutional religion in France. The marketplace of do-it-yourself spiritualities—religious, philosophical, ecological—is flourishing. This presents the evangelical churches with an opportunity. By embodying the gospel in a more relational (versus institutional) way, churches accept the broader culture's distrust of institutions without contributing to its consumerist logic of spirituality. On the whole, the evangelical churches are quite successful with this, as they are commonly perceived as convivial and relational. However, we must remain vigilant about the risk of sectarianism, which is becoming a new form of institutionalism. Postmodernism and post-Christianity are not necessarily disadvantages for the evangelical churches as long as they know how to be innovative and a little adventurous.

A second aspect of France's post-Christian legacy is disappointment with a Christianity in name only that does not also impact life. As the influence of Christianity weakens, many who have identified as Catholic by baptism and family tradition no longer consider it necessary to attach themselves to this heritage. Christianity is seen as a legacy of the past, irrelevant in today's world. The challenge for the church is to demonstrate the relevance of faith for everyday life. And it is really a challenge! One of the central areas of work the PULSE diagnosis<sup>2</sup> revealed in my own church was the poor impact of the Sunday service on the daily life of church members. People were happy to attend the service and hear preaching, but what they heard and did during the service had no concrete consequences in their everyday life. The challenge is, how does the preached word impact the life of believers, not only on Sunday but also Monday through Saturday? One of the reasons evangelical churches fare better in a post-Christian and postmodern context may be their believer's church ecclesiology, based on personal adherence rather than birth or family tradition. However, the evangelical insistence on conversion and personal faith is not sufficient to demonstrate the relevance of the gospel today. We must work on it! We must demonstrate through our behavior

<sup>2</sup> The PULSE vitality assessment tool "Provides awareness of current reality, Updates progress every two years, Links the church more closely with the mission and message of Jesus, Suggests next steps, [and] Encourages spiritual discernment." See <https://covchurch.org/vitality/pulse/>.

that the gospel has actually changed our lives.

This is why our neighbors also demand consistency of those who do claim to be committed Christians. Recent cases of pedophilia in the French Roman Catholic Church have done great harm to the collective consciousness. On a smaller scale, the contradictions we accept in our daily lives undermine the relevance of the Christian faith in the eyes of our contemporaries. People can see them. There is no other way to deal with that than by working for better coherence between our words and our behavior, between our confessions of faith and our everyday life. In a post-Christian context, nonverbal testimony plays a central role because people no longer know anything about the gospel. The most beautiful words can be meaningless to them, but acts of solidarity and compassion, authentic love of neighbor, and enduring life's difficulties in peace express our faith and our hope concretely.

A final challenge derives from a deeply held French tradition of rationalism, deriving particularly from the Enlightenment, a tradition that has often taken an anticlerical turn. This is evident in the ever-renewed debate on laicity. The principle of laicity guarantees every person freedom to believe or not to believe; there is no single official religion, and the state does not recognize or subsidize any religion. In France the separation between church and state has often been experienced in conflict. Today this is often exacerbated by the fear of Islamic terrorism or sectarian excesses. This is why laicity “French style” is often understood as a rejection of religions. Rationalism is evident popularly in the French tendency to criticize, contest, mock, and debate for hours—often around a well-stocked table.

This opens an opportunity for Christian apologetics, a rational defense of faith. But this takes time, sharpened arguments, and a willingness to take some hits. One of the reasons the Alpha Course has been so successful in France is undoubtedly linked to this French value for free, convivial discussion around a good meal. That can be done very simply too, by inviting non-Christian friends to a meal and allowing discussion to move naturally to religious or existential topics. In France we love to talk and debate when we eat!

## **A Work in Progress**

In light of the realities of this post-Christian context, the Union of Free Evangelical Churches is in a process of change. We recently identified church planting and growth as a renewed priority. Though not an entirely new concern, we named this as an intentional commitment because it is

the most effective means to reach those who do not yet know Christ. We have been stimulated here by the Congregational Vitality approach of the ECC, which we have benefitted from since 2013.<sup>3</sup> In 2017 we created departments of church revitalization and church planting to support this priority and hired permanent staff to lead these two new departments.

However, we quickly realized that what we needed was not simply a new structure but a new culture. Structures may favor or accompany cultural change, but it is finally the people who must change—or rather who must let themselves be changed by God. We recently redefined our vision in these words: “We want to be a Union of healthy missional churches, following Jesus Christ, feeding themselves with the Word of God and witnessing the Gospel around them, in order to accomplish the mission that Jesus Christ gave to his Church.” We are in an ongoing process of cultural change to foster churches that are centered on present and future disciples and that truly and fully welcome all people.

UEEL congregations tend to be very focused on pastors. It is often difficult for a congregation to accept being without a pastor—so much so that for some churches seeking to survive, the only project becomes having a pastor! In our church culture, the ultimate goal is to become financially autonomous...in order to pay a pastor. Rather than seeking to become autonomous churches, the Congregational Vitality process pushes us instead to be healthy missional churches. This shifts the focus to believers in the church and unbelievers outside the church. We must become churches centered on disciples, present and future. The challenge is not new: it goes back to the words of Jesus sending his disciples (Matthew 28:19–20). Similarly, we must move the center of gravity of our churches outward. Our task is to make and deepen disciples, but it is imperative that we keep in mind both current disciples inside our churches as well as future disciples of Christ who are currently outside the church.

The concept of a dispersed church is also essential. The church is dispersed for the majority of the week, and church members should not consider themselves disciples only when they are gathered in church. The church’s first responsibility to its members is to train and equip them for their mission as disciples in the dispersed church. This requires cultural change for both pastors and church members: pastors may have to change their focus in ministry and church members may have to change their

<sup>3</sup> For a summary of the ECC’s Congregational Vitality initiative, see <http://covchurch.org/vitality/> as well as John Wenrich, “The Holy Spirit and Congregational Vitality,” *Covenant Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (2016): 3–15.

expectations about their pastor. In France, usually each congregation has only one pastor; therefore, he or she has to be a generalist. Churches centered on disciples need both pastors who are focused on the mission of God and disciples who carry out that mission in the world as the dispersed church.

A church centered on disciples, present and future, will encounter challenge in the ethical sphere. In France's post-Christian context, the ethical norms of society tend to deviate more and more from those usually advocated by Christians. This can be disturbing for Christians, who rightly want to remain faithful to biblical teaching. This concern can tempt the church to a reflexive reaction that ascribes an undue importance to ethical norms, but it is important that a church that wants to present Christ to everybody prioritizes openness and unconditional acceptance. We must maintain the unconditional acceptance of all, for the gospel's sake, which requires an absence of judgment and a refusal to impose an overly restrictive framework. But it is also necessary, for the gospel's sake, to promote the spiritual growth of the believers, their transformation into the image of Christ.

This requires wisdom regarding boundaries and balance. I suspect the greater danger among the evangelical church in France is imbalance toward excessive focus on ethical issues to the detriment of openness. One recent example is the energy expended by Christians to protest the legalization of same-sex marriage. Even if we believe this to be unbiblical, in the French context where the state defines and guarantees the conditions of marriage, Christian opposition has been widely perceived as homophobic and can divert an entire LGBTQ or LGBTQ-friendly population from the church. I wonder why the primary evangelical markers today are often specific ethical positions. Should not the principal evangelical markers be attachment to the person of Christ as presented to us in Scripture and the insistence on the need for a personal encounter with the resurrected Christ? We are called to make disciples of Christ—not disciples of our church, our belief system, or our ethical standards. Unquestionably it is the church's task to form ethical Christians. But even more fundamentally the church provides men and women the opportunity to meet Christ personally. And it is Christ who forms and transforms his disciples.

The challenge of welcoming is also multicultural in France. There is an ever-increasing proportion of immigrant populations in our churches, especially from Africa. The way we manage this in our churches is an indication of our ability (or indeed our difficulty!) to reach those who are different. This question is particularly important because, in a post-

Christian society, cultural gaps exist not only between people from different countries, but often between Christians and non-Christians who were born in the same country, even when they have attended the same schools and watched the same television shows.

### **Conclusion: Less Institutional, More Relational**

Post-Christian society presents the church with obvious challenges, but it also offers opportunities. In a post-Christian world, traditional answers are no longer heard and religious institutions are no longer a point of reference. It is a real temptation for Christians to lament this loss, but that response is a sure path to discouragement. It is better to take society and the people we live with as they are and not as we think they should be. We should not expect them to change in order to receive the gospel. We can be confident in God who can touch the heart of anyone in any context. It is his job to change people, not ours.

A post-Christian world is not a world without spiritual thirst. This is an opportunity for the churches to refocus on the essential, to understand and live the gospel in new ways. We have to remember that the church is not primarily an institution; it is the spiritual body of Jesus Christ. It is people connected to the living Christ. The post-Christian world offers Christ's body the opportunity to be, as individual Christian and as church, less institutional and more relational. As Christians, our mission is not to invite people to join a religious institution but to meet Jesus Christ. And to do this we do have to show them Christ living in us.