



Hope in expression

AFCNA has a motto, *'Faith in action, **Hope in expression**, Love in motion'* so what do we mean when we say FCNs and pastoral health and care workers are hope in expression?

A few years ago I went to speak to the senior mental health social worker at the Department of Health in my state. I asked him how churches might effectively support people living with severe and persistent mental illness. His response was "People living with persisting mental illness have often lost hope about a better future. Their families have lost hope and they say their community holds little hope for them. If there was one thing I would ask of the church it would be to become purveyors of hope!" Wow I thought. If Christians don't have a message of hope for our community, then who does? But perhaps more to the point was why are people in our nation not hearing or experiencing that hope from Christians and from churches?

What is a 'purveyor'?

It got me thinking exactly what does it mean to be a 'purveyor'? A quick check of the thesaurus revealed a purveyor is a person who supplies, brings, is a vendor, or source of a supply, which in our case is HOPE. A purveyor is someone who tells, tattlers, spreads, transmits, whispers, and even gossips HOPE! I had the mind picture of someone who takes every opportunity to bring a message of hope through stories, chit chat, a quiet whisper when things are difficult, a person who cannot stop sharing messages of hope to another.

I was reminded of the lyrics of a vibrant Christian song by Irish Christian band Rend Collective, which contains the line *"We are your church, we are the hope on earth!"* ¹ It's up to all of us as Christians to be the purveyors of hope in our community! So how can we be effective chatterers, tattlers, whisperers, suppliers and bringers of hope in a world that craves real hope?

What is 'hope'?

The dictionary says hope can be a noun or a verb. As a noun it is the expectation that a particular thing will happen, and as a verb it is defined as wanting something to happen.² In Scripture hope is used the same way, as a confident expectation that God will fulfill His promises³ which inspires hope within us, and as a desire about things we want to happen when we trust in God. Biblical hope is grounded in a promise-keeping God, so we can have complete confidence and trust that God will keep His promises. In this way Christian hope is built on our faith in Jesus, which concurrently strengthens our faith in Jesus.



Lee Strobel, atheist journalist turned Christian apologist, describes Jesus as a ‘hope dispenser’ in ‘The Case for Hope.’⁴ He writes, “[Jesus] lived a life that instilled in His followers the hope that they could find greater meaning and purpose in their lives. He spread tangible hope as He healed the broken hearts and diseased bodies of countless people. He embodies hope for our earthly lives and promises a hope-filled existence in heaven for eternity to those who would trust and follow Him.”⁵

Jesus ushered in the kingdom of God so it would be here “on earth, as it is in heaven.” The kingdom of God is not just about our individual salvation and entry to heaven when we die, the kingdom of God has come in Jesus Christ, and as followers of Jesus we demonstrate the kingdom of God here and now to the people with whom we commune. We have an individual role to fulfil and a collective purpose as God’s church to build God’s kingdom here and now. Christians are called to be the purveyors of His hope on earth!

Here’s two ways Christians can be purveyors of hope

1. Be a loving community that fosters inclusive relationships

Loneliness and social isolation are harmful to mental, physical and social health. Loneliness is linked to mental health concerns such as low self-esteem, suicide and depression, and it increases the risk of cardiovascular disease, with a recent UK study finding a 30% greater chance of heart attack or stroke in people who are lonely⁶. Loneliness is one of the social plagues of our time in Australia. In a survey by Lifeline Australia in 2016, about 60% of 3,100 respondents said they “often felt lonely”, and 82.5% said they felt “loneliness was increasing in our society”, with a third of respondents stating they have “no-one to confide in”⁷. Research shows lack of social connections is just as damaging to your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day!⁸

Humans were created for relationship and our churches need to be places where people are welcomed, accepted and included, regardless of their skills, abilities and health conditions. Social isolation is not confined to people living alone. Many people living as a couple say they are lonely. A 2017 RUOK survey found “Australians spend an average of 46 hours a week (outside of work hours) looking at various screens, from smartphones to televisions”.⁹ This compared to only 6 hours spent engaging with family and friends. Social networks and friendships reduce the risk of becoming ill and help people recover when they are sick. Our churches need to consider the many ways they can continue to encourage and promote relationships of all kinds in churches, because this brings hope to people and it enables people to ‘tattle’ hope to one another in the small talk, and bring hope intentionally in the deeper discussions of daily life.

God’s kingdom includes everyone, but especially the most vulnerable, so churches needs to be inclusive communities that genuinely demonstrate love for one another, intentionally connecting



people on the margins, raising those who are oppressed, and offering a community of acceptance, participation and belonging for ALL.

God instructs us to meet together regularly, and to not give up on doing this. In Australian society the church is the only group that meets voluntarily and regularly, for the long haul, with diverse people across the lifespan, from different social, cultural and economic backgrounds. This is all a part of God's plan for our personal and community health. As Christians we may take for granted the hope and strength we receive from living in a healthy, loving faith community, but we need to make sure we continue to invite others into this community to share the hope, experience the love and develop the faith, with the many people in our community who don't have any opportunity to experience it.

2. Be full of hope

Hope is ignited between people via relationships. Hope is contagious. When you have hope it quickly fans into flame the hope in another person who may be hopeless. Studies show that hopefulness of health professionals directly impacts their patient's hopefulness.¹⁰ We ignite hope in another when we can help them look forward and see a meaningful future. This allows a person to envision possibilities that they may not be able to see on their own. It requires encouragement, and willingness to journey alongside another through their valley experience. The healing and hope-giving power of a friend is not to be underestimated. We have witnessed it in 'Share', a social group commenced in the Adelaide Hills by faith community nurse and registered mental health nurse, Millie Davey. In 2011 Millie started working with churches in the Adelaide hills in South Australia to develop a friendship program that partnered with local churches and the community mental health service. People were recruited and invited to join 'Share', where they were buddied with a friend, and connected into a social group that shared life together regularly. These were everyday people having fun, laughing, sharing a meal and generally doing life together as an informal community.

People with severe mental illness learnt how to 'have a friend' and 'be a friend' and later how to give back to others in their community. Almost all the participants have improved their mental dramatically and very few have experienced relapses. Their hope for a better future was ignited in friendships. Just being with genuine people, who smile, have fun, listen to each other, accept each other, give one another time, allow everyone to participate when they can and if they want to, show concern for what is happening in their life, speak positively, encourage abundantly, share hopeful visions of what is possible... This is the healing power of community and demonstrates the healing love of God's Kingdom on earth.

As FCNs and followers of Jesus, we need to be hope in expression, in our gestures, our actions, our suggestions, our chit chats which should all signal that we are 'purveyors of hope'!



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