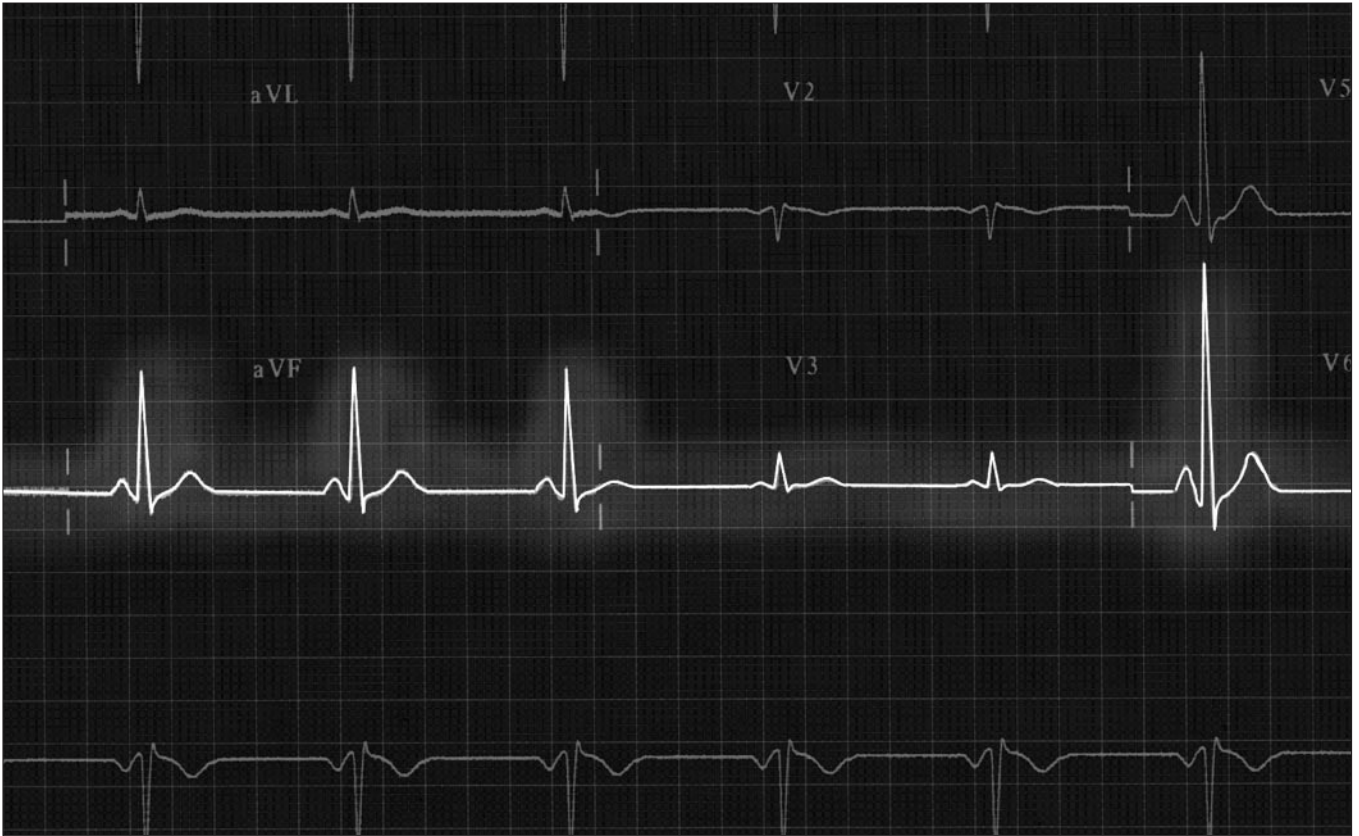


A healthy church

How the congregation becomes – and stays – healthy.



Dr Mark E. Dever serves as the senior pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC. Since his ordination to the ministry in 1985, Dr Dever has served on the pastoral staffs of four churches, the second being a church he planted in Massachusetts. Prior to moving to Washington in 1994, Dr Dever taught for the faculty of Divinity at Cambridge University while serving two years as an associate pastor of Eden Baptist Church.

In an effort to build biblically faithful churches in America, Dr Dever serves as the executive director for 9 Marks (formerly The Center for Church Reform, CCR) in Washington, D.C. 9 Marks encourages pastors of local churches to look to the Bible for instruction on how to organise and lead their churches. He has also taught at a number of seminaries. Dr Dever's scholarly interests include Puritanism and ecclesiology.

Dr Dever has written several books including the booklet, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (CCR, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001), and a full-length book of the same title (Crossway, 2000, 2nd ed., 2004). He



Mark Dever
talks to
Peter Hastie

and his wife Connie live and minister with their son, Nathan, on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. His ministry website can be found at www.9marks.org.

Mark, many of us have been to the church growth conferences and heard the successful pastors preach. A lot of it is based on the assumption that bigger is better. Are only big churches successful? What are the marks of real success in church life?

Bigger is not necessarily better. There are many examples of things getting big that aren't good. Look at how Communism, Nazism and Mormonism experienced enormous growth at different times. Is anyone seriously suggesting that these movements were good? So there's no doubt things that are erroneous can grow. Indeed, it shouldn't surprise us as Christians. We believe in the sinfulness of

the human race. If people are appealed to on a mass level and they respond on a mass level, it's certainly possible that they may be responding because their sinfulness has not been adequately represented to them. They may not have been called to repentance and change. So there's always the possibility that growth may be attributable to human sinfulness.

However, I need to qualify this by saying, "big is not necessarily bad". Growth is a normal thing in the human life. And I think growth is to be a normal thing in the Christian life. Of course, the growth we see is not always numerical. God in His sovereignty knows when He calls Adoniram Judson to Burma for seven years that there will only be one convert. Nevertheless, I think it is the normal experience that when the Word of God goes forth there is obvious fruit.

Okay, if size is not the measure of success, what is?

Faithfulness to Scripture!

You are not critical of small churches, only unhealthy ones. What do you

actually mean by an unhealthy church?

I don't mean a false church – a “synagogue of Satan”. I mean a church which may seem like a faithful, evangelical church but where the impact of the Word is not really observed in the way it should be.

A church can be a true church, in the sense that the Word of God is rightly preached, at least when it comes to the gospel. And it can practise the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper properly, even allowing for the disagreement that we have had over the last 500 years about whether that includes infants.

However, even assuming that we have the Word preached and the sacraments faithfully observed, we have to go one step further and see that a healthy church is going to be one in which the Word of God is obviously being lived out in people's lives. And you can see that in the love of the community and the fruitfulness of the individuals. In a healthy church people will be committed disciples, their lives will have an impact on others – both within and beyond the church – they will be fruitful in evangelism and will give generously for world missions.

For example, compared to the world around them, every Christian church will be marked by love. However, if we see an obvious lack of love in a church where the Word seems to be correctly presented and people are being baptised and receiving the Lord's Supper properly, then we shouldn't be surprised that there may be some attitudes that are signs of unhealthiness. In a healthy church the Spirit's presence will be obvious in a corporate sense by the expression of love. According to Jesus in John 13, Christians are going to be marked by love – the same love that He showed us will be typical for the Christian community. This means that healthy churches are going to be marked by that kind of love for God and for others. An unhealthy church may have some signs of love, but to a far lesser degree.

In what ways do unhealthy churches affect Christians, particularly Christians who may not be very strong?

First, let me say again that I am not talking about the distinction between a true church and a false one. I am talking about the distinctions among true churches. Some are healthier than others.

What happens, I think, when a Christian goes along to an unhealthy but true church? The problem is that they are

not challenged and shaped formatively as they should be by Scripture. In these congregations the Bible seems disconnected from life. The result is that people are left stunted in their discipleship because they are not fully called to follow Christ as should happen in a normal healthy congregation.

You have written a book called *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. The Protestant reformers spoke only about two, or at the most, three. Why nine?

I deal with that exact question in the book's introduction where I talk about the history of the two marks of the churches – the right preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments. My nine marks are practical out-workings of those two.

The first mark that I draw attention to is actually the first mark that the reformers talked about. I'm more specific in that I am talking about expositional preaching. And then, in marks two and three, where I speak about biblical theology and a biblical understanding of the gospel, I am simply tightening up what “right” preaching is. So, my first three marks are really expansions of the first mark that the reformers referred to – the right preaching of the Word of God.

Then marks four to nine are really expansions of that second mark, the right administration of the sacraments. How is it that the church is distinguished from the world? The signs that set the church apart from the world are water baptism and the continual participation of the congregation in the Lord's Supper. This is what distinguishes the church from the world, in a formal sense. What does that look like in our daily lives? Those are the things I talk about in marks four to nine.

What is expositional preaching? And why do you insist that it is absolutely essential to the health of the church?

God has always created His people by His Word. As Peter says: “You have been born again ...through the living and enduring Word of God” (1 Peter 1:23). God's Spirit accompanies His Word and He has told us that He will bless the faith-

ful preaching of it. We, as ministers of the Word, must realise that if we are to serve God by serving His people, we must expound God's Word to God's people. When we go into the pulpit, the main thing we should do is to make sure that the 60 to 600 people sitting before us receive a faithful presentation of God's will in His Word. Whatever God has said, whether it is in the book of Exodus, or Deuteronomy, or 1 Timothy, or 1 John, it must be faithfully and passionately communicated. And if we do that, I have no reason to believe from Scripture that God will do anything other than bless us.

Why expository preaching as opposed to topical preaching?

I think expository preaching should be the normal style of preaching in the church because it's the Bible that feeds God's people. It is how God instructs us; it is His Word written that we can read and see. I think topical preaching can be useful, but I would only do it occasionally and for special reasons. I think it's very important that believers are able to see how a preacher reaches his conclusions in the sermon.

Again, expository preaching tends to be more faithful to the context of a book. And context is an important aspect in determining the meaning of a passage. If you or I got up to preach on a passage to our congregation on money, or on prayer, or on use of time, or on missions, we can find lots of good verses and string them together in compelling ways that are true. But sadly, it's also possible for us to string things together and say things that aren't true. And I think we will encourage the church to be more Berean in searching the Scriptures if we take them through portions or books of the Bible. When we do this, we are operating less with our own agenda and more with God's.

We can understand the difference between topical and expository preaching if we can appreciate the difference between apologetics and evangelism. I would equate apologetics with topical preaching and evangelism with expository preaching. We do apologetics when we are answering questions. Evangelism occurs when we expound God's Word. I don't think apologetics is illegitimate; I think it can be very helpful. In the same way, I think topical preaching can be very helpful. However, I also understand that non-Christians and immature Christians will tend to prefer topical preaching because of its more immediate relevance. Therefore, I have to be extra careful when

using topical preaching. It's like giving sugar to children; I know they are going to like it, but since I know that too much may not be good for them, I will give it to them sparingly. What I am really aiming for is to put them on a healthier and more balanced diet of expository preaching.

You've made the claim that the core content of Christianity is not religion; it's news. You've said a proper response to the gospel involves a response to news. What do you mean by that?

I said that because I want people to understand the fundamental difference between Christianity and other religions. Christianity is not essentially about a series of religious practices. That may be the way that the anthropology departments in the USA, Macquarie and Sydney Universities represent Christianity. However, if that's the way they present it they have missed something essential. Christianity is distinct from all other religions because its message is fundamentally different. And that message, that news, is about particular events that have happened.

The problem is that most people think of religion as a set of devotional practices; and they treat Christianity that way. Well, you might be able to describe Islam or Hinduism that way. But you can't do that with Christianity. Christianity is completely nonsensical apart from the meaning of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension into heaven and His own teaching about the significance of those deeds. So apart from these actions in space and time which are unique, we Christians have nothing to say of any worth to anybody. We're not fundamentally teaching people how to lower their stress, or to be a better parent. Of course, we may be able to show them how to overcome stress or to be a better parent if they follow Christ. On the other hand, their stress may continue and they may die at a young age as a missionary or evangelist. So I would be very careful about how Christianity is presented. It is not simply another world religion, though I understand why anthropologists look at it that way.

Is there a danger in thinking that we have evangelised people if we run successful programs that bring people to the church?

Definitely. The Christian gospel demands a response of genuine repentance towards God and faith in Christ. Faithful evangelism shouldn't be confused

with running programs that are successful in attracting crowds. The problem today is that we think people are being evangelised and converted when they are doing nothing more than responding to a well-marketed program. The problem is that if we misunderstand evangelism as the results of evangelism, then we end up thinking that we are healthy when we are not. And that happens very easily when lots of people are responding to well-run programs.

I guess another problem for Christians is the misunderstanding of evangelism as testimony. When we simply share what

We think people are being evangelised and converted when they are merely responding to a well-marketed program.



Jesus has done in our lives we need to realise that a lot of people do not feel challenged by that. Their attitude is, "That's great for you", but they don't see any implications for their own lives. That's why we have to explain the news of the gospel; it demands a response. They need to know they are sinners under God's wrath and in need of a Saviour. Otherwise, they haven't been evangelised.

In a recent book, *The Compromised Church*, you said that the famous American theologian Jonathan Edwards was kicked out of his church in North Hampton because he insisted that members of his church were converted, particularly those taking the Lord's Supper. What is the difference between conversion, church attendance and church membership?

People can attend church without truly being converted. People can attend church regularly and be serving themselves rather than God. People can attend churches regularly who have never truly confessed their sins. People can attend church for all sorts of reasons. I had a non-Christian friend in England who was moving up to Scotland and I asked him what he did with his weekend and he said, "Going to church". I said, "Why go to church – you

are not a Christian?" He said, "I always go to church when I move to a new area. I like going to church because you meet the nicest people at church." There are a lot of reasons to attend church; they don't necessarily mean that you are converted.

Do you think there is a difference, for example, between being a church member and, say, a disciple of Christ?

Yes. It is quite possible to be a church member and not be a disciple of Christ. But the difference is hard to discern in a church. On the other hand, it is quite possible to be a disciple and not be a church member. For instance, you may be living in a place where there is no church, or you've been ill-taught as a disciple. There are definite differences between "church members" and disciples. However, you should not be a church member unless you are a disciple. And if you are a disciple, and can get to church, then you should also be a church member.

Why should disciples become church members? What is wrong with people who go to a variety of places looking for spiritual truth?

When people wander all over the place but aren't committed to any one church, I think they are simply saying, "I will manage my own spiritual portfolio. I don't want anybody else overseeing me". Sadly, that kind of individualism doesn't smell of what God has called us to in Christ. If you look at John 13, it seems that the love we have for one another is the means by which the world knows that we are his disciples. It seems that 1 John 4 says that if we say we love God whom we haven't seen, but we don't love our brother whom we have seen, then we lie and deceive ourselves. And if the people we love are just our friends anyway, then we are doing nothing different from the average pagan.

So what church membership does is to make us take our responsibility seriously to love others. We will commit ourselves to love a certain group of sinners and we will work for their good, their edification and their benefit. I think in doing that, it helps to make clear to the world the difference between Christian and non-Christian love. For example in 1 Corinthians 5, the man who was sleeping with his father's wife thought himself to be a Christian. But it was only because he was a church member that the church could call him to account for his sin. And he had a choice to make. And if it is the same person that Paul refers to in 2 Corinthians 2, then he made the right

choice and he repented. The point I want to make is this: if the man had not been a member of the church, he could never have been challenged about his behaviour and rescued from his sin. He would have gone on with some mental delusion as to what it means to follow Jesus, while all the time he was committing incest. Church membership, in his case, helped him. It also helped the world to better understand the gospel, and it helps us as Christians to see what it means to grow as a Christian and to be mature.

The problem with being church shoppers is that they never want to be inconvenienced. There's no real giving or loving if you are a church-shopper; you are a user. It's really no different from self-interested consumerism.

How should Christians evangelise today? Is it simply more than living a consistent Christian lifestyle, demonstrating through your life and vocation that you belong to God?

Yes, it is all of those things added to evangelism. Evangelism is essentially about words. It is a message, it is a good message – you have to speak it. It is a message of grace, hope and forgiveness to those who are struggling to justify themselves by their own works. They may be very virtuous people – a dear Roman Catholic lady, a liberal Protestant who has a heart for the poor, maybe a good Mormon, maybe a very content Buddhist. But if their hope is not in Christ alone for their salvation, then their lives are actually bearing witness to a falsehood. So we must raise these issues in conversation and share the gospel with our words.

In a book, *Democratic Religion*, it is claimed that prior to the Civil War in America the Southern Baptists excommunicated 2% of their membership each year. The church practised discipline and yet it still grew. Is there some connection between godly church discipline and spiritual growth in a church?

I think so. I think the analogy of pruning the rose bush is useful – it's part of the process of good growth. I think all of us in our Christian lives have experienced corrective discipline as a means to God's grace for further growth. Well, it is true corporately as well. In a local congregation, if people begin to say, "We don't think Jesus is really a sacrifice; he's just an example", they need to be instructed. And if they don't follow that instruction, then they need to be corrected. If, as some-

times happens, people refuse to be corrected, then they need to be put out or excommunicated from the congregation. Of course, that's not the end of it; the leaders and members of the church need to pray for their restoration and repentance.

How important is it to hold people accountable as church members, and in what ways?

It is very important. Each congregation needs to sort the matter out for themselves. We've done that with our own statement of faith and church covenant. And according to that, if someone in our congregation is involved in a sin from which they refuse to repent, then we believe that Matthew 18 requires us to put them out of the church.

Now how that works out in each church will vary from situation to situation, from culture to culture, and will depend on many factors such as the gifts and standing of the pastor, the spiritual authority of the elders in the church, the humility and

teachability of a congregation, and many other factors too. I can well imagine a church being too lackadaisical or too controlling. I suspect that there are few churches which are too controlling in our day. Most are too lackadaisical.

The challenge for every church in this area is to think about how it can practise restorative discipline better. Our congregation is a Southern Baptist church, so we try to make our membership mean something. We are reasonably strict about who become members. We have 492 members, but we have probably 600 or 700 people attending on a Sunday morning.

I should qualify what I have said about the conditions of membership. Membership does not mean surrendering your right to make all kinds of other choices in life. Our elders don't seek to get involved in people's personal lives to the extent that if they want to buy a car or something, they have to get our approval. There are some groups like that but we certainly have steered clear of anything like the "heavy shepherding" movement or the controlling practices of the charis-

matic movement in the 1970s.

We do believe in the importance of discipling. The Navigators' material is useful here, but we prefer to use it with several people rather than one-on-one. What we try to encourage is the importance of taking the initiative to help each other grow in Christ, to love each other, to get to know each other, and to be of assistance to each other.

How crucial is the role of elders in church?

Elders play a very important role in congregational life. If a church doesn't have elders, then it is missing the New Testament pattern that is set forth. As a pastor, I was the minister of this church for four years before we had elders, and in the last seven years the elders have been so very helpful to me. They have certainly helped the congregation to mature.

When we have elders we are not only following Paul's teaching in 1 Timothy and Titus, but we are following the example of the New Testament churches in the book of Acts. Elders are incredibly helpful to ministers because they round out our gifts and make up for our limitations. They also help to ensure that our decisions are well thought-out and spiritually mature.

In your mind, according to the New Testament, what are the qualities to look for in elders?

You certainly have to go for the biblical qualities laid out in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Every single one of those virtues that is spoken of there is said of Christians elsewhere. They should be men who command respect. Paul is talking about public virtues that would commend elders to the world. That is the agenda.

Beyond that, in our own congregation, what I look for are men who have a better understanding of the gospel and crucial aspects of theology than others. I don't want them to have questions about things like the sovereignty of God or the distinctive roles of men and women. If we are talking about elders in the Presbyterian Church, I would also want them to have a good understanding of why they are Presbyterians and of their own doctrinal distinctives. I expect that of our Baptist elders. We do lots of work with other churches, including Presbyterians, and I would like them to know why we are not joining these churches more fully. For instance, Capitol Hill Baptist is not a charismatic church, though we love our charismatic brothers. We just agree to dis-

agree on a number of matters. Likewise, with our Arminian friends. So elders need to be particularly aware of why they hold a different position from other evangelical Christians.

There is another issue that I have already alluded to which is not only a theological one; it is a cultural one as well. I am referring to gender roles. If we have someone in our church who believes women should be elders, I believe they can be a Christian; I believe they can also be an evangelical Christian; I believe they can also be a more mature Christian than me in many ways, and I can learn from them; but we won't be able to do church together.

Why do I say this? My own view is that you need to make some very serious hermeneutical mistakes in order to come up with that position, given Paul's line of argument in 1 Timothy and 1 Corinthians 11 & 14. So, I want to make sure on those kinds of cultural pressure points that the whole eldership is united in its view of biblical interpretation. We can't afford to have a diversity of views on crucial matters affecting family life and church life in

the eldership; it just won't serve the church well.

The other issue that is important is attendance. Does an elder come to as many services and meetings as he can with a mind to serve others? People who are here on a bare minimum are unsuitable for eldership. They are not likely to bring added fruitfulness to the congregation. I

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like to ask, is the potential elder someone to whom members of the congregation go for help in understanding the Scriptures? Do they counsel wisely from the Bible? They may be able to do this

in a variety of ways – writing, sermons, talks, or small group Bible studies, or one-on-one discipling. Are you someone who has shown yourself to be fruitful in the congregation?

Some people who read your book may be tempted to engage in a process of church reform which might lead to bitter controversy. Do you have any tips for young players on how to do it peacefully?

Bringing about church reform peacefully is a good goal to have. If possible, we don't want quarrelling and conflict. Some people may be called to be like Luther, who stared his opponents down. But you want to avoid that sort of situation if you can. It will not be helpful. God in His sovereignty may put us in situations like that, but we must not seek them.

I think we need to realise that the ordinary means of grace are the way forward for the reformer of the church. And that means that we don't look for somebody extraordinary, outstanding, or spectacular. We simply look for good, faithful preaching. We want to give ourselves to the preaching of God's word. We realise that it's God's Word that will shape the congregation, so we give ourselves day in, day out, to that. Sir Fred Catherwood gave me some very good advice when I first came to Capitol Hill. He was an elder with me at Eden Baptist in Cambridge, UK, and he said, "Mark, you need to remember when you go to that church, and you are starting out, it is not your church. It is the last man's church. Preach for one or two years. Then it will be your church in the sense that people will have come to know and understand you

through your preaching ministry." Now, obviously the church is always Christ's church. It doesn't belong to any minister, but I could understand what he meant by that. It was very helpful for me to keep that in mind. I needed to keep my head down and keep preaching faithfully.

The reason I mention expositional preaching is that the church needs to see quite plainly that I am not pushing my agenda, but God's agenda. And then a minister needs to pray that he will fulfil God's plans for the congregation. When I first came to Capitol Hill I had an older man who was our denominational leader in the region come to speak to me. He asked: "Mark, what's your vision for Capitol Hill?" I replied: "I don't have a personal vision for this church. I just want to be faithful in preaching the Word and God will make it clear to us in time."

When I first arrived our congregation was quite elderly. It looked like it might not last very long; it had been in decline for the last forty years. So I said to the people: "You need to know that I, as the pastor of this church, believe that the church of Jesus Christ is victorious. Christ founded it; He will build it; and He will also bring it to completion. So I am not starting my ministry among you with a 'back against the wall' mentality. This congregation could have been closed down. God could have called me to shepherd his saints elsewhere. But He hasn't." I think ministers need to be prayerful that the congregation where they serve is God's pleasure. And they need to pray that God will make the ministry of the Word bear fruit.

Another thing that I want to stress is that ministers need to be prudent in building personal relationships with their people. People need to know that they are genuinely cared for and loved. I tried to take out every older man in the congregation to lunch when I first came here. And I asked them about their memories of the former pastors that they had seen in the church. I tried to find out what they thought was good and what was not so good. Well, I learnt a lot from doing that. It was like taking a core sample in geology and pulling it up and learning something. It was useful and they were listened to and they saw themselves as being listened to. Finally, let me remind us all of the need to be patient. It takes time. I try to keep the four Ps always in mind: preaching God's Word, personal relationships, prayerful dependence, and being patient.

Peter Hastie is issues editor of AP.

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Part Time Assistant Minister



Penrith Presbyterian Church is seeking to employ a part-time assistant minister to be involved in leading our youth work, and to help plan outreach to young families, leading towards the commencement of a contemporary service in the future. We are looking for someone who preferably has theological training and is seeking ordination within the Presbyterian Church of Australia.

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 Rev William Morrow
 (02) 4721 2440 or 0415 255 472
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 williammorrow@penrithpresbyterian.com