

Getting started

Intentionally living the 'Great Commission' in our parishes today



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JHAG—Jesus’ holy, audacious goal: to reach all nations—every man, woman and child—with the saving life and love of Jesus

Before he ascended, Jesus gave us his vision for the church: ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you’ (Matthew 28:19–20). This ‘Great Commission’ was given to a group of people who had no influence in the business, religious or political circles of the time, and who were feeling demoralised and uncertain about their future. It was an inauspicious beginning.

Start with the end before you begin

The American investor Warren Buffet once famously said that ‘Someone’s sitting in the shade today because someone planted a tree a long time ago.’ As parishes, we are working extremely hard to meet the ever-increasing needs of our congregations. We can be so busy maintaining the garden that we never quite get around to planting trees.

Modern businesses often have a ‘BHAG’—a ‘big hairy audacious goal’—a clear, compelling, ‘unifying focal point of effort’ for engaging and energising people (see Jim Collins, [‘BHAG—Big, hairy, audacious goal’](#)). Jesus’ commission to go to the ends of the earth was perhaps the biggest BHAG in history. Maybe we can name Jesus’ BHAG (the ‘Great Commission’) ‘JHAG’: ‘Jesus’ holy audacious goal’. Since every parish is called to ‘go and make disciples’, our vision is JHAG—to reach every man, woman and child with the saving life and love of Jesus. Each parish will articulate this vision in its own way, but our end point, the thing we are planning towards, is JHAG.

The bus

The big, red London bus is a useful analogy for our parishes. The bus is at the kerb and is full of people who are sitting inside chatting, enjoying the comfortable seats and the view from the window. The bus driver entertains them by speaking about the wonderful places buses can go. The passengers

appreciate the excellent service the driver provides as he listens and cares for them and distributes food and drink.

One day, the bus driver goes to the front of the bus, puts up a sign showing the destination of the bus and then gets in the driver’s seat, starts the engine and leaves the kerb! The passengers are horrified. They didn’t expect the bus to actually move anywhere; they are not sure they want to go to the signed destination, and besides, they were perfectly happy sitting at the kerb. Why should things change?

The passengers loudly protest the driver’s actions. There are demands that he stop the bus so that people can get off, and also that he take the bus back to the kerb so things can go back to ‘normal’.

Why the bus stays at the kerb

The thing is, buses are designed to go places, and so are our parishes. We have a great vision—JHAG is the greatest vision on earth. So what stops our parishes from having a concerted tilt at JHAG? Why don’t we get out Google Maps, choose a route and get the bus moving? Dale Sellers, in [‘5 reasons churches avoid developing a strategy’](#), looks at the reasons why parishes view planning and strategy with suspicion:

- 1. Planning ignores the Holy Spirit.** While it is possible to be so over-structured that there is no room to spontaneously respond to the ‘winds of the Holy Spirit’, this is not a reason to abandon planning altogether. In the Bible, we see God’s gentle yet insistent revelatory plan; we see a deep purpose for our own lives and for everything around us. Our God has an end in mind, and we are being inexorably drawn towards it. Our parishes can, and should, plan to work with God on JHAG.
- 2. Secular strategies are ‘unspiritual’.** The secular and spiritual realms are not necessarily opposed to each other. God’s goodness permeates every aspect of creation. Pastoral leaders can learn from the business world. Parishes that articulate an impelling vision and then develop a bold and well-resourced strategy are successfully making disciples and making inroads into JHAG. This is not ‘unspiritual’; it is exactly what we have been asked to do.
- 3. We avoid the mirror.** Developing a strategy requires taking a frank reality check. That’s painful, because often what we see in the mirror isn’t pretty.

As an organisation, we can be attached to the obsolete—the things that should have worked but did not, or the things that once were productive and no longer are. We are working hard with little real outcome. And we're more tired than we would like to admit. As Pope Francis notes in *Evangelii Gaudium* §85, 'One of the more serious temptations which stifles boldness and zeal is a defeatism which turns us into querulous and disillusioned pessimists, "sourpusses".'

- 4. Our comfort zone is, well, comfortable.** In Matthew 16:24, Jesus said, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' Carrying a cross is, by definition, uncomfortable. Jesus was a lot of things, but he was not a cosy or comfortable person to be around. He robustly challenged religious leaders, secular rulers and his prevailing culture. Taking up our cross and really living JHAG in our parishes will make a lot of people uncomfortable and angry. JHAG takes courage, prayer, bold planning—and a thick skin—as any parish priest who has attempted to change a Mass time will tell you!
- 5. A plan on the wall is open to all.** Sometimes we don't want to be pinned down to a commitment, but a written strategic plan brings accountability. Developing a strategic plan for JHAG and then communicating it to our community does two things: it lets our people know where we are going and why, and it makes us accountable to what we have said we are going to do. People, millennials in particular, are attracted to communities with an engaging vision and a strong plan for realising it.

Getting the bus moving

Getting going towards JHAG means getting the bus moving. Here are a few first steps:

- 1. Ask yourselves, 'Where's the bus going?'** The destination is JHAG. Keep your focus sharp by articulating it in a short, compelling statement so that everyone is clear about where you're going. For example, St Benedict's in Burwood aims 'to be a nurturing community of faith, growing together in the life, love and mission of Jesus', and St Christopher's in Syndal identifies itself as 'a missionary parish of intentional disciples, passionate about being Christ to all, through our witness of God's love in action.'

- 2. Check the bus is roadworthy.** Conduct an audit of your [five systems](#). If the bus hasn't gone anywhere for a while, some of its systems might need repair. For example, the doors (evangelisation) might be stuck closed, or the fuel tank (prayer and worship) might need cleaning and topping up.
- 3. Fill the bus with fuel.** Pray, pray, pray. Develop an intentional strategy of prayer for renewal of your parish.
- 4. Identify who is in the bus already.** Understand who your parishioners are. There are people in your bus who have gifts you need: look out for them and call them forward. Have a strategy for how you will identify and collect more passengers along the way—people who are not in your parish yet. Get the census data for your parish [here](#) to assist in your planning.
- 5. Plan your route.** Create a plan to get moving, focusing initially on one or two key systems. Initially, articulating a common vision and actually starting to move are more urgent than deep detail. A common error is leaving the bus at the kerb during protracted discussion about the route. If you agree JHAG is your destination, then you can get started towards it and refine your route as you go.
- 6. Expect detours.** During this pandemic year, we are acutely aware that unexpected things happen! Parishes that are focusing on JHAG and that have their bus moving already have momentum. They are able to change course quickly when needed. Successfully navigating detours requires both a great bus driver (leadership) and a team who can assist with route options without needing to stop the bus.

On that mountain over two thousand years ago, Jesus gave us a holy and audacious destination—the whole world—and he sent us, insignificant and unprepared though we might be. At Pentecost, we received the Holy Spirit, the fuel we need for the journey. The Holy Spirit sent the apostles—and us—outwards. Let's go, therefore, and make disciples. May we be, in *this* place and in *this* time, Jesus' holy and audacious people.

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The Archdiocesan Animation Team is available to discuss strategies with you and/or your team and to facilitate sessions (remotely) on many topics and issues. Just ask!

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