

Reflection on Church as we have known it and as it is emerging....

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Church *as we have known it* - clergy-centred, building/place-dominated, Sunday-centric, doctrinal in emphasis, program/activity-based, invitational in style - is not as useful as it once was, and in many settings is on the way out.

Church *as it is emerging* may look more like this -

- loose networks overlapping loose networks, often informal communities affiliated around shared interests or life stages or issues
- the focus will be on supporting each other in our following of the way of Christ.
- One of these networks may still continue to identify itself as a Christian congregation. In some cases they may still continue to have beneficial use of property, and in fewer cases have amongst them an employed ministry agent. And they may continue to serve the functions we currently refer to as worship, witness and service, but the manner in which they do these things may bear little resemblance to our current expressions
- Authenticity and mutual vulnerability will be the measure with which their gatherings will be weighed, not by quality of preaching, liturgy and music.
- And while they will very determinedly remain open to others, their primary goal will not be to win others to themselves. Rather, their reason for existing will be to be present in their wider communities as servants and fellow spiritual companions, seeking to partner with God in all those places in building God's kingdom of grace, hope, compassion and justice. Paradoxically, they may find some are more interested in being part of the congregation when they are not being asked to join the true believers and spiritual elite, but just an ordinary odd-ball collection of folk stumbling along the way with each other's help.
- And what will these congregations of the future be doing when they gather? They will be doing the bare minimum. They will be keeping determinedly 'unbusy', so they have time and energy to be present in these loose networks of affiliations, so that they might receive and give in those contexts, and be spiritual companions there, partnering with God in the work of the kingdom. They will do together *just enough, and no more* to support one another in their ongoing spiritual pilgrimages, and those things that contribute to the kingdom that can only be done together.

So, given these observations and hunches, broadly speaking, **what is the role of clergy today?**

To prepare believers for the end of church as we have known it

To prepare believers for church as it is emerging

in order that we might not be left on the wayside, but participate with God in building God's kingdom on earth as in heaven.

We might think of them as the tasks of deconstruction and reconstruction...

Deconstruction

This sounds a very negative, unhappy and confrontational role. And no doubt in some quarters it will not be well or easily received. However, in other quarters, where believers are well aware that the current model of being church is no longer either working or viable, they will be ready to be given permission to let it go. They will hear confirmation that the way we have always done things and the shape of being church as we have known it is passing as good, liberating news. Continuing to do things that don't work and which create a deep sense of failure and frustration is a kind of madness. And healthy people will celebrate putting those things aside. But they will still need to be provided

with some clarity and understanding as to why things no longer work, in order that they can let themselves off the hook from fearing that it is because they are inadequate. So the minister can point out the cultural shifts, and constantly affirm that no-one is to blame - rather than the guilt-trip drive to demand ever higher levels of commitment.

However, there is a lot of denial out there. And some people are still hanging on to the vapour fumes of an old way, convincing themselves that because they still have a little residual strength in the old model, that it can work again. And they are deeply emotionally invested in these patterns. To abandon them would be to abandon themselves and their forbears. And to complicate matters, there is a case that if old models are still working for sizeable groups of people, then we have a responsibility to continue to use these old models.... Which is a huge dilemma for the minister. How much time and energy to invest in something which has no long term future? And is investing in these old models sending the wrong signals to people? Those who are older may live out their remaining years in some settings within these old models of church, and who are we to turn their 'golden years' into seasons of painful and unwanted change? But what of those who will remain? And what of the wider community who will be left without a viable or relevant expression of church and faith, should we not adequately invest in developing new pathways?

This is the great dilemma facing almost every minister. For while we talk in theory about 'building the new' alongside of 'maintaining the old', in reality, 'maintaining the old' almost always wins out, for that is where the finance comes from, that is where the squeaky wheels make the greatest noise, and being truthful, that is also where we feel most comfortable ourselves. For we know what needs to be done there, but we have next to no clue about how to do the new thing, or even what new thing needs to be done.

In Robert Frost's poem, "The road not taken": we read the portion: "two roads diverged in a wood, and I, I took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference". Perhaps in that there is a response to the dilemma just described.... Not an easy choice by any means: but could it be the one that makes all the difference? For surely the particular calling of clergy is one of holding believers to the task of sharing with God in the building of the kingdom. Ours is a responsibility of faithfulness towards the future, which must surely not be held captive to either the past or the present. It may sound harsh to those with a particularly pastoral demeanour, but is not our priority to service towards the whole world, not our own self-interest or the self-interest of the church? And is not our capacity to be part of what God is doing in the world therefore a primary concern? On that basis I would argue that a strong priority should be placed in 'building the new' over 'maintaining the old', no matter how uncomfortable that may make me feel.

So, assuming that is a given, *what are the tasks of the clergy in deconstruction?*

Gentle subversion. With objective, realistic tone, rather than critical, cynical tone, gently point people's attention at every opportunity to where our current way of being church no longer serves the Kingdom effectively for contemporary generations. The art here is to subvert in a fashion that does not discourage or demean those for whom current practices are still feeding their Christian discipleship. We still want to affirm the value that remains in the old model for some folk, and encourage those for whom it genuinely works to continue to participate. But we do not want to encourage a status quo for those who are simply going through the motions of 'what is expected', or those who are 'grinning and bearing it' out of obligation. The tone of observation must not suggest that we the church have failed, but more truthfully that God is now doing a new thing. Some observers describe what we are living into as a great spiritual awakening.

Question every initiative that presumes that 'tweaking' of the old model will 'fix' it and do not give them any fuel. Eg, the notion that doing things like modernising our worship, revamping our building, etc, will bring people back. Sure, there may still be other very good reasons for doing these things, but do not allow anyone to think for a moment that they will revive church as we have known it.

Encourage into leadership anyone who 'gets it', and back them in the inevitable controversies that will follow.

Reconstruction

This task is not reconstruction, as in rebuilding what was, but building upon the foundations of Jesus and the apostles what has never been. Sure, this is an overstatement, in the sense that there will always be aspects of the expression of church of the future that will be reminiscent of the church of past eras.... inclusion, compassion, community, justice, spiritual growth.... But the form they will take in expression most likely will bear little or no resemblance to past or present.

For instance, one way in which we express community is in church membership and regular gathering for worship in one place at one time. This is unlikely to be the primary way in which community in the church will be expressed for the foreseeable future. People have little or no interest in church membership, and regular attendance at anything is already a pretty foreign concept. But this does not mean that people do not value belonging to a community of spiritual expression, albeit a 'light' belonging to our modernist eyes. This new community will more likely look like loose networks overlapping loose networks, often on the basis of interests or life stages, and sometimes with little or no formal structure. And their existence and development will be utterly reliant on people with skills and a passion for networking and relationship building. Often these networks will not be overtly 'christian' and 'belong' to the church in a formal sense. So we will no longer need 'program leaders' as our core skill set, as in our current model, but 'befrienders', 'networkers' and 'spiritual life companions'.

And we must not fall for the trap of imagining that such networking is for the purpose of bringing people into the fold of our present form of church - that is, our traditional Sunday gatherings, bible studies, etc, or as we often put it, "bums on seats", or even for the purpose of having them follow our carefully mapped pathway. For any hint that this is our agenda, and we will not see these people for dust. Their antennae are finely tuned to pick up any of these signals. We must deeply accept that expressions of future church may be very difficult to identify and quantify, for the boundaries between where faith is to be found and Christian community is expressed will be very blurry indeed - and perhaps as it should be. There will be no membership rolls.

Likewise, a further example is the value of spiritual growth. In our church we have essentially relied on formal worship gatherings (and particularly 'the sermon') and bible study groups as the means of growing disciples. To that we have added optional extras such as camp retreats and bible courses, etc. And so the core skill set we have treasured is that of the 'teacher', and by that description we have essentially meant someone with good presentation skills in a public setting, and someone who has mastered the use of rhetoric and rational persuasion, and who has a strong grounding in biblical scholarship and theology. Thus our emphasis on the iconic 'pastor-teacher' Minister, and thus our attempts to make every lay preacher, Sunday-school teacher, youth leader and bible study group leader in their image.

However, with fewer and fewer people attending formal worship services, with few Sunday Schools and youth groups in existence, and ever fewer bible study groups, the need for this skill set is rapidly declining. Although we might imagine that there will always be some need for people with strong public speaking and presentation skills, it is madness to place any priority on developing this skill set, when the skills we need for growing disciples in the future expressions of church are very different indeed. Sure, we need all believers to be biblically literate and theologically aware. But growth in faith, understanding and discipleship will largely come by other means.

The new skill-set we will require is for people able to influence and model through their practice of spiritual disciplines, and able to speak theologically in the context of informal conversations and relationship. Rather than public-speaking preachers, teachers and leaders (people who will speak *to* us about the things that matter) we need private-conversing friends and mentors and facilitators of

community conversation (people who will assist us to speak *to each other* about the things that matter) as our primary skill set. And even then, we are not imagining some pre-packaged evangelical process, but conversations that are organic and in context with the nature of the relationship or shared interest.

So, taking these examples as illustrative of the need for changed skill sets as well as mindset, what is the role of Clergy in reconstruction?

Modelling, to the extent that is possible, these new skill sets. I say, "to the extent that is possible" because this was not our formation as Ministers, and having been called into a different expression of ministry, it is often not that which is native to our personalities and passions. We are doers, and carers, and teachers and 'fixers'. The relationship-building, community development, spiritual companionship and entrepreneurial dimensions of this new skill-set are not the reason we were originally accepted into Ministry roles. And indeed, the nature of clergy life as we have known it has nurtured isolation and self-reliance. We tend to stand 'apart from', if not 'over', the moment we are ordained, partially driven by our adopted new self-image, and mostly imposed upon us by church culture. So, for various reasons, there may be limits as to how well we can model the new skill set. Nevertheless, if we are to be able to identify and nurture these skills in others, we would do well to attempt to develop and experience them to some degree for ourselves.

Identifying those with the skills of 'befriending', 'networking', community development and 'spiritual companionship', and affirming and encouraging them in giving those gifts full expression.

Creating the space and environment that will allow these new pathways to get clear air.

a) That may mean giving permission, or even actively advocating that some functions and activities within people's lives and congregations be concluded or dramatically simplified, so that time, energy and resources are available to give the new pathways and skill sets first priority. For instance, streamlining leadership processes so that the absolute minimum of time and energy is invested in meetings that simply report or oversee. Or simplifying what we do when we meet and worship - perhaps even reducing the frequency with which we meet.

b) That may mean finding ways to signal that these new skill sets and pathways are of the highest order. This may be done in drawing positive attention to them at every opportunity, or making them our constant focus of community prayer. It may also be reflected in our budgets, by allocating funds to supporting new initiatives and training of our members.

Developing the resilience of our people - both in terms of their capacity to withstand shocks, and more particularly their ability to adapt to changed circumstances. For the constant change and fragmentation of our now very pluralistic communities is only going to continue to accelerate, and any pathways to new expressions of church we discover will shortly thereafter need to yet again change as the world changes.

a) Developing resilience has a deeply spiritual dimension to it - helping people develop a faith and sense of self in relationship to God that stands outside any particular form of Christian community, so that as Church as we have known it is dismantled, they are not undone along with it.

b) Developing resilience also means helping people become reliant not on the presence of designated clergy or leaders, but capable of meeting their needs and the needs of those around them in community with other spiritual companions. For many congregations, we need to prepare them for the time when there will be no congregational minister in placement.