

Last week we were thinking about the fact that our lives move in the direction of our strongest thoughts. Because of that it is vital that we train ourselves to spend time thinking about Jesus, studying the bible and praying.

This week I want to go over some of the basics of Path of Renewal, to try and explain what it is and why we're doing it. I'm conscious that most of this week is looking at decline and forecasting doom but there will also be some positive news and next week we'll look more at how we move on together. I also want to make it clear that when I talk about the congregation I'm thinking about a generic congregation, not us. It is up to you to reflect on where you think we are.

Path of Renewal is based on work by William Bridges who is an expert on change management. He says there are certain stages every organisation goes through and it is possible to identify them and their characteristics within the life of an organisation. He identifies the stages as:

1. *Dream the dream*
2. *Launch the Venture*
3. *Getting Organised*
4. *Making It*
5. *Becoming an Institution*
6. *Closing In*
7. *Dying*

The first three stages are like childhood. **Stage 1** is fairly obvious, it's where you have the initial idea for your organisation. **Stage 2** is equally obvious, it is where the organisation is started and the main concern is survival. At this stage things are chaotic and there is a lack of organisation but it is compensated for by total dedication from the small team involved at the start. **Stage 3** is when the organisation has grown, perhaps taking on staff, but now needs a structure and people need to have specific roles.

**Stages 4 and 5** the organisation is doing what it set out to do but then there is a subtle change from doing to being, where making an impression is more important than what was achieved. **Stage 6** is the 1<sup>st</sup> part of decline where the organisation focuses on internal dynamics and is unwilling to respond and make significant changes. The focus is on trivial internal issues such as roles and status rather than on the core purpose for which the organisation was set up. **Stage 7** is perhaps the most obvious.

Instead of an organisation I want to look at these in terms of the church, although there are many similarities.

**Stage 1** would be with people wanting to meet together in a community that nurtures their faith. These people really believe that developing a relationship with God through Jesus can make a tremendous difference in their lives and, through them, in the world.

**Stage 2** is when they decide to get together to form a church, perhaps even building somewhere of their own. There was a decision about which denomination you were going to be and you understood that you were taking on some institutional baggage.

**Stage 3** is when they begin to ask questions such as “Who are we?” “Who is our neighbour?” “Why are we here?” “What will we do?” The focus is outward, on the impact they want to have on the wider world. As the people create together, they experience energy and grow in faith, both as individuals and as a community. At this stage, everything is 1<sup>st</sup>; no one says, “we’ve never done it like this before.” It is an exciting and dynamic time. God’s presence is felt. Drawn to the congregation’s energy and joy, people come and join with the members and find their lives changed in positive ways. The people have a common passion and are working together to achieve a common aim.

**Stage 4** is where patterns develop and norms are set. Life becomes more predictable, and the church moves into a period marked by both outward extension and inner stability. The congregation is successful

both in introducing people to Christian discipleship and in supporting them in their ongoing development. Typically, at this stage in its life the congregation has sufficient human and financial resources to create a highly rewarding communal life in addition to supporting its primary work of making disciples. The congregation, in this stage of its life, still maintains a distinctive outward focus. At the same time, the congregation finds more of its time and energy being taken up by administrative and building related demands.

Over time, the congregation experiences internal change. Key leaders move away. Newcomers arrive with new passions and new gifts. Most significant, the majority of people drawn to the congregation stay because the church serves their needs. This motive is in marked contrast to what attracted the earliest church members which was to help create a place that served the spiritual needs of others. The congregations mission shifts from creating a place for others to maintaining a place for its own members and this shift is a key factor in Congregational decline.

**Stage 5** is protective maintenance. Members feel protective towards the culture and the programs that are provided. Everything is working, so why change it? But slowly, perhaps over a long number of years people begin to drift away, society changed and the questions become, “How do we get back to what we had?”, “How do we get people to come to us?”, and congregations begin to tinker at the edges. Change the style of music, shorter and shorter sermons, or make them less challenging, let’s use projectors etc People are encouraged to try harder, to do more. People are truly proud of the church and take pleasure in sharing with visitors. Church members like the difference that church involvement makes in their life, however, the majority of members can’t readily explain what that difference is. Instead, they point to features or activities they appreciate and, in fact, they end up sharing their church rather than their faith.

**Stage 6** is a time of crisis and confusion, leading to the death of a congregation or denomination.

In a business setting, the employees make the goods the management tell them to make. As long as the goods are made and the customers buy them, the business does fine. The management may wish the employees were dedicated to the purpose and values of the company because positive attitudes enhance efficiency and make for a better working environment, But in the end, the goods can be produced regardless of the employee attitudes. That is not true for the church.

The members do the work in a church but the final ‘product’ is supposed to be a community that embodies the mind and heart of Christ, and you cannot do that if there is gossip, bitterness, anger, dissension or if people simply do not display Christian behaviour and attitudes. Congregational decline is a reflection of a congregation’s abandoning its fundamental purpose of being a community that brings people into a loving, life-giving, transformational relationship with God, with each other and the world.

There are five markers of a declining church:

- **Growing the church rather than witnessing to faith**
  - Members are out of touch with their own faith stories and how their lives have been, and are being, changed. If you were to ask what difference God was making in their life they would not be able to tell you. They don’t know how to talk about God and faith. They view people ‘outside’ more in terms of what they can bring than in terms of the life-changing difference the church can make for them.
- **Running the church rather than making disciples**
  - The congregation is focussed on maintaining what is there already. People attend meeting because they’re on the calendar, and what the church needs to keep it running takes precedence over what the people need to grow as disciples.
  - Leaders spend time and energy enticing and motivating people to take on tasks, rather than creating opportunities and venues for their development as followers of Jesus.
- **Being people led rather than Spirit led**

- People are confident in their ability to run things and don't think of turning to God for guidance. Meetings are for business – there may be a token prayer or reading but there is no focus on prayer and listening for God.
- **Participating in mission projects without having a mission**
  - The mission committee is active but the projects simply reinforce the congregation's self-image of being mission minded. These projects often reflect the interests of the individuals or groups arranging them. **WHAT IS OUR MISSION STATEMENT?** There may be a mission statement printed on the notices or website but it is not used to align human and financial resources and it doesn't drive planning. There is no shared and compelling sense of purpose underlying congregational life and ministry.
- **Maintaining rather than renewing**
  - The member's strongest desire is to feel comfortable in the church. When issues arise people view them as problems to be solved so that things can 'get back to normal'. They feel most comfortable replicating what has been done before.
  - In a declining church, leaders strive to keep people happy rather than lead them in faithful living. Leaders are wary of taking risks and making mistakes.

I think we have reached a situation in the West like that of Paul in Athens. He was totally amazed at the culture he found himself in and, if we're honest, we are too. When the Press Secretary of the President can stand up and talk rubbish without any sense of embarrassment or guilt, and have it called 'alternative facts', we know we're in trouble. People are famous for doing nothing other than taking their clothes off for a camera. So many spend hours watching 'reality tv' – there's nothing 'real' about it. Our age is now called 'post truth' because people spend so much time on social media interacting with people like them that they never hear a different perspective or, if they do, it is met with ridicule or worse.

The good news is that there is a way to change the future but lots of people aren't going to like it. It involves change. We can't just do what we've always done. In the cycle of an organisation it is possible to go back to the start rather than continuing to death.

Part of that is preparing leaders who not only want to lead through change but have the capacity to do it. It involves preparing people to do new things, in new ways and understand that church may not look the same a few years from now. It will involve conflict – every book and article on church transition says so, and so does our experience.

Lasting change happens as people are drawn forward by purpose, vision, and values, deciding for themselves that the shift is beneficial and worthwhile. The truth is that most congregations end up staying on their original path, even if they start out wanting renewal. I'll talk a little about that next week.

What has been shown to work is when congregations find themselves hungry for personal and communal time with God. Congregational renewal cannot progress without the congregation becoming, and staying, anchored in what God desires for them and the community.

It's all to do with the people – the leaders help, but not enough on their own or even in a small group – it comes down to how much the people want a new future and whether they're willing to take responsibility for it. Paul was able to show how God had been involved in Athens in the past and that he was still involved. That's what we have to do together and for our community.

I want to ask you a question – can you think of a time in your experience when you remember the church really 'being church'? Now dream of the difference it would make to you, and for others, if that memory described the normal state of this congregation. Renewal happens as you make a habit of living that new life. Don't ever underestimate your power to affect change. Change happens one member at a time as people live it out in their lives.