

Where have we been and where are we going?

December 2015 we were accepted onto the Path of Renewal process. One of 23 congregations in the pilot process. It was to run for 3 years and so, as it officially ends, I want to take the opportunity to look back – and forward.

The process was based on work by William Bridges. Organisations have different phases in their lives

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

Between stages 6 and 7 there is the possibility of taking a different way – the Path of Renewal.

But why would we need to do that? Why do we need to change? **Show figures.**

We can simply go on making up our own facts and believing that everything will be ok. We don't need to change. I can't change at my age!

Running the church rather than making disciples.

So many of the things we do are about keeping the organisation going – even things that should have stopped years ago are kept going because it would be a 'failure' to stop it – even although you can't get volunteers, and those that are there are knackered. Of course you need to organise things, prepare things and manage properly. We can't give up on our young people.

Path of renewal is about making disciples – encouraging and equipping people to learn what it means, and how to put into practice, living in a way that honours Jesus.

Being people led rather than Spirit led.

There are two aspects to this: the first is that it is too easy for ministers, elders and leaders to push their own agenda – even to use the charisma and natural ability they have to shape the direction of the congregation.

The second is the opposite – sometimes things are done so that we don't offend. We don't act through fear of what Mrs McGlumpha will say or think. Or sometimes it is even that we are frightened to take a step of faith.

Participating in mission projects without having a mission

It's back to we've always done it this way but perhaps what we've done in the past is not right for now, or the future. As a congregation we have done the Discovery Process with Tearfund and the knitting group, coffee buddies etc came from that.

We stopped the Gathering because it was not fulfilling the purpose we had for it and, instead, we are trying times of praise and prayer.

Maintaining rather than renewing

All over Scotland, churches have spent so much time, energy and money on maintaining what was there – at the expense of generations of people. Please hear this! I'm not saying there are no good things in the life of the church in or of Scotland. There are lots of good initiatives, needs are being met, lives are being changed, the gospel is being proclaimed. But it's too little and it may be too late to save the structures of the Church of Scotland. But this is only called the Church of Scotland – actually we are part of the church of Jesus, and that can never die. The CofS may disappear but the church never will.

On POR we read and talked about the book *Canoeing the Mountains* by Tod Bolsinger. He uses the analogy of Lewis and Clark who were sent out by Thomas Jefferson to explore and find a practical route across the western half of the continent. The group set out along the Missouri river expecting that they would find another river running East-West which they would follow to the coast. Of course they reached a point in the journey where they had no proper maps and they didn't know about the Rockies! Adapt.....

Most church members using an old map of how things used to be – children, stayed in church....

Children went away but came back

Children went away and never came back.

Church used to be at the centre of community but now, at best, it is at the margins. Again, I'm speaking generally because there are some good examples of congregations that have adapted and now find themselves integral to their community. Ask yourself this question: if we closed our doors today, apart from ourselves and the groups that use our halls, who would notice? Are we really serving our community? Are we really making a difference? Or, are we, in fact, doing what we've always done?

A number of people in the congregation have been involved in the POR group locally and, in some ways, it has been difficult. When we do things like this in congregations we usually look for a specific outcome – we take on a project so that we end up with a 'thing' at the end of it. That was never the point of POR.

In POR we were expected to learn to listen to God, to grow in faith, to support and encourage each other, to take opportunities to do things that stretched us, to read and pray with and for each other – in essence, to learn to be disciples of Jesus: people who learn what Jesus did and do the same.

Ministers from the congregations that were involved received training throughout the year and shared that in their local groups. What we found was that the local groups benefitted from that process and different congregations made changes that were appropriate to their context as a result. However, being part of a pilot process means that some things may not work as well as expected and, I think, this last year has not progressed as well as the previous years. The people running POR were also running the second stage of the process for the church and their focus was split. That's not a criticism and we only realised it as we got together to reflect on the process. The new congregations have been on the process since January and they are learning from the feedback they have received from us.

Locally, we started the Growing with God groups and we're meeting tomorrow night to reflect on how that's going and where we are with that. But we also feel that loss of impetus and focus because we have not been meeting together as a group as regularly as we did.

So, what have I learnt from all this? There is a huge surge across the West today in teaching about making and being disciples and books, sermons and sermons on the APEs – the Apostles, Prophets and Evangelists from our reading. The thinking is that over the last 150 years the church in the West has focussed on ministers as pastor/ teachers. Parish profiles are still looking for a minister who is brilliant at everything – often who is expected to do everything – to lead everything and be responsible for everything.

This passage tells a different story. God gave gifts to his people and there are: some who see the big picture, who can make connections and drive things forward, who are willing to take risks; some who listen to God and see God at work in the world in ways that others don't, who are not afraid to bring challenge to God's people and the wider world as they speak words from God; some who are able to talk about and lead others to Jesus in a really natural way; some who have a real burden for people – not just members – and can support, encourage and build them up; some who love God's word and can explain it in a way that people not only understand it but develop a passion for it.

God has given these people to the church for a specific task – “to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” and become like Jesus.

When our POR group met together every two weeks we had done our homework, we held each other to account, we supported and encouraged each other, we spent time listening for God and our faith grew. We were building

each other up. When we started meeting less frequently it was much more difficult to do that. Take that into any congregation where although we meet in a large group once a week, but there is no accountability for the rest of the week, we don't really share our struggles or hopes, where support is limited and we don't really spend time waiting on God. How can we expect faith to grow? Again, please understand that I believe God does speak in these times, there can be challenge and encouragement and it is important to meet together. But it is much harder for meaningful change to take place in that context if that is all you do each week.

I believe that the church will continue to decline until God's people get serious about meeting together regularly, and specifically, for support, encouragement and prayer so that they are equipped to go and live for Jesus in the world.

If the church is to continue we have to change in our thinking, our behaviour, our practice and that only happens if we commit to spending time individually and with others seeking God and allowing him to renew our minds and hearts.