

## RELIGIOUS LIFE FOR A WORLD OF TRANSITION

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The impulse to write this essay emerged while sitting at the lunch table of a newly transformed retreat centre, the proud project of a congregation I'd worked with in recent years. I had been invited to visit. It was a social event, a time to reconnect and see a dream realised and the place was buzzing with activity as another congregation entered the final days of its Chapter. That very morning they had elected their new leader and she stopped by our table to greet old friends. Later in my journal, I wrote:

She seems tired. Two weeks is a long time for a group to struggle with itself. (I have deep reservations about the whole Chapter model and how useful it is today.) But it's more than tiredness, I think. This woman seems burdened. She receives their congratulations with a smile that is tight and anxious ... she is accepting the job as a kind of sacrifice - giving up a community she speaks of with deep affection to travel to a new country for a new role about which she seems to have mixed feelings. On the other hand, the people around her look lighthearted to me. Their job is done. The new team has been chosen. But can they see the human cost? When will they realise that their desire to overcome the historical us-and-them of religious hierarchy and share leadership has practical implications, both for those who 'lead' and those who follow? Surely it can't be right for the many to skip lightly out the door leaving the burden of leadership to the few This can't be what's meant by sharing leadership, can it? After all the fuss and talk of change in religious life, what has really changed?

In my work with organisations facing change, I've found myself listening to and supporting a number of religious communities in recent years as they struggle to find their way into the future. The lens I bring to this work is the lens of living systems and it is radically different from the conventional mechanistic way of approaching organisation that dominates western culture and underpins almost every profession and institution you care to name.

When you're familiar with the nature of living systems and how life works, it's easy to see the elements that lead to decline and ultimately system collapse, and the relationships between phenomena that on the surface may seem separate but deep down are part of the same pattern. It also helps to identify the unhelpful patterns that must be disturbed and the conditions needed to make deep change possible. In this article I'd like to use the lens of living systems to offer a perspective on both the decline of the Church and the task of renewal.

### SYSTEM FAILURE

Living systems are self-generating networks of relationship that produce life. Whether the system is a single cell, a human body, a forest, an institution or a city, life is the emergent result of the system of relationships rather than a property of any of its individual parts.

Healthy living systems exist in a state of dynamic balance in which the parts make the system as they serve each others' needs. The web of relationship is based on service: the bee serves the flower, the flower serves the bee. At the opposite end of the spectrum of relationship lies control, and if service is the essence of life then control sounds the death knell because any element in a living system that becomes overly dominant or exercises excessive power kills the system and ultimately destroys itself.

In a modern context, the world's financial and banking system is an example of debilitating control. When the banks forgot that their role is to facilitate the exchange of goods and services and became players at the table using their power to distort the rules of the game, they set in train a process that would inevitably lead to widespread system collapse. Their current stay of execution is just that: a respite — because banking as we know it will have to change to survive..

The Church forgot its founding role too. While many individual religious dedicated their lives to the people they serve, the Church as institution seems more interested in bureaucracy and power. Add to this an unhealthy relationship between Church and state and an attitude of denial in relation to many pernicious issues and we begin to see an unravelling of relationship with the people, the main constituents in the living system that is 'the Church'.

Hierarchical structures and inherent conservatism rendered the Church unable to adapt to a changing world. Bearers of bad news were silenced. Instead of nurturing progressive conversations about how it could evolve it became even more rigid and therefore resistant to the kind of corrective feedback - from within and without — that is the wellspring of newness and life in living systems. Demands for uniformity dampen down the expression of diversity that is essential to all life on earth. But you can't keep diversity down in living systems. We humans like to use conformity, uniformity and control to keep things the same but life is relentlessly diverse, and in a permanent state of change. Control may look like it's working but it ultimately endangers the system because it becomes unable to survive sudden shocks in its environment — just as the branch on a tree will break if it cannot bend to the wind.

In my view, the collapse of public trust in our key political, commercial, social and religious institutions, the meltdown of the financial system and the more subtle but more serious weakening of the ecological web of life are part of the same pattern and share the same root cause: a mismatch between the way we work and the way life works. And we need to accept that such imbalance is the forerunner of big system failure.

Industrial civilisation is founded on assumptions that are not true and fundamentals that are not sound. Perhaps the prophetic role of the Church at this critical moment in human evolution is to teach us about system failure by standing as a beacon to mankind of what happens when an institution that appears to be so robust and invincible loses its way.

## BREAKING THE RULES

Human beings and human communities are complex, self-organising living systems which sustain themselves according to the same principles by which all of life organises and sustains itself. However

the way we organise our institutions and our way of life contravenes nature's principles, and there are penalties for breaking the rules.

We organise ourselves in hierarchies, the more 'important' people sitting atop the various bureaucratic pyramids with 'lesser' mortals on the rungs of the ladder somewhere down below: government and people, managers and staff, teachers and students, doctors and patients, leaders and congregations, priests and laity ... the clear suggestion is that those 'on top' have the answers, know where we're going and know how to get there. All the others have to do, is follow.

We struggle to work through layers of hierarchy but living systems — and all our organisations and institutions are living systems — are nested inside each other like Russian dolls. Me inside my family, my family inside our community, our community inside our nation, our nation inside a global community which lives inside the earth community, which in turn is inside the universe. That's the natural order of things.

We tend to break things up so we can understand and manage them. We break education into subjects, companies into departments, society into sectors. Religious congregations are broken into regions, each with its own hierarchy of course, all in the name of working more efficiently and measuring progress and outcomes.

But the real real world isn't boxed off in this way and organisations aren't the separate stove-piped structures we believe them to be but webs of interdependent relationships in which everything is connected to everything else.

Because we know in our hearts that the world is inherently unpredictable and unmanageable, we work hard to create the illusion of control with regulation and prescription. But living systems don't respond well to controls. Whether it's a crop-field or a chicken or a leaving cert student or a religious community, whenever you treat a living thing like a machine you quietly drain it of life and extinguish qualities that are essential to its health and sustainability.

To survive uncertainty living systems must be free to respond and adapt to a changing context. And whether or not an organisation is able to respond depends on the quality of its relationships, both internally between its constituents and externally with the outside world. The more dense the relational web, the more likely it is to endure.

It's a simple but profound truth that applies equally to a meadow, an ocean or the earth itself. Relationship is the central organising principle of life.

Religious organisation sometimes seems like a case study in how not to do things. In my experience, religious communities find the lens of living systems helpful because it provides a practical framework for their spiritual quest, and helps make sense of what has happened and how they might renew. As one leader said: 'To see the world with all its potential and possibility through the "systems lens" is a breath of fresh air and deeply connected with spirituality. And to see the organisation to which I belong as a part of this wonderful world is both challenging and powerful.'

Experience has also taught me that while the principles can be easily understood they pose a practical challenge to almost everything we do. In particular, seeing and working systemically challenges long-cherished but unhelpful concepts of organising and organisation, leading and leadership, and ideas of what 'change' looks like. We have a lot to unlearn.

#### BOTTOM-UP AND OUTSIDE-IN

People who have spent their lives inside congregational structures know those structures are standing in their way, but they seem so solid and unyielding it's hard to see past them. But Social 'structures' are just relational processes that have taken physical form. They're not inevitable, but they won't change — indeed can't change — until the patterns of relationship that hold them in place are disturbed.

I find it helpful to replace the noun organisation with the verb organising, because it suggests that an organisation is something we do, not something we're in. Natural systems are living laboratories of more intelligent ways of organising and their principles should be at the heart of organising human endeavour.

Religious congregations are organised top-down and inside-out. A small number of people make the key decisions. They might consult the wider membership but in the end they hold the balance of power. Though greater democracy and wider participation in setting policy and direction is the clear intention of the Chapter process, and in theory at least distinguishes religious life from other forms of organisation, in practice this is frequently undermined by a cocktail of paternalistic leadership, poorly designed engagement processes, lengthy gaps between key policy-making assemblies, vagueness of congregational purpose and weak accountability. Accountability is a persistent issue because other than top-down censure there are almost no ways for people to call each other to account, no processes to ensure that everyone is in sync and on track, and no ways to evaluate progress. And people don't get fired!

For participative democracy to really work, maximum decision-making power must be ceded to those who do the work and in return for autonomy, responsibility and accountability should be designed-in to congregational processes. But this doesn't happen. Chapter after Chapter can describe aspirational futures without ever really demanding that members earn their place in the community and access to its resources by taking personal responsibility for creating that future. When it's possible to talk the talk but not walk the walk, dreams easily become wishful thinking, everyone travels at the speed of the slowest and those with energy and drive are quietly worn down. Before long, the drift between 'say' and 'do' erodes the sense of shared purpose and meaning that is essential for any group to feel coherent.

A similar drift has happened in the relationship between the core purpose of religious congregations and the needs of the wider system in which they're embedded. In an interdependent world the question of relevance can never be self-serving or based on habits and routines that have run their course. The organisation that serves contemporary and emerging needs is the organisation that will endure. Do you know what those needs are and how to meet them in ways that are relevant and meaningful? Or are you working with assumptions that no longer hold true?

People sometimes think that the only practical way to change is for a small group 'at the top' to decide what to do and then tell everyone else. From a systems perspective, change is about a diverse group with a stake in a shared future creating that future together, as equals. The future is a question, not an answer and answering the question is the process of change. If we could accept this, then congregations and their lay colleagues would engage as learning communities to figure out how to be Church in a world in transition, and build their internal capacity to create their own future. This is what bottom-up, self-directed change looks like.

#### LEADING AND PARTICIPATING IN NEW WAYS

To change cultural patterns you have to risk doing different things, and doing things differently. Working systemically, the role of leader changes too — from making change happen to helping change to happen.

This poses a practical challenge to those in positions of influence and power in congregations and in parishes and communities. Are you willing to devolve decision-making to those who do the work or are affected by it? Are you willing to redefine your role and purpose in a system that is self-organising and self-determining? Are you willing to accept that deep change is not about managing and controlling but experimenting and learning? Are you willing to really let go and allow something new to emerge?

For some, greater participation is a challenge to let go, for others it's a challenge to step up and share responsibility, and none of this is easy. The Church has a long history of authoritarianism to overcome and just wanting it to be different won't make it so. I've witnessed the confidence-sapping effects of religious hierarchy and seen how hard it is for people to rekindle their capacity to take responsibility even when the opportunity to do so is offered. Kurt Lewin's social experiments with boys and girls clubs in the 1940s demonstrated just how quickly authoritarianism breaks the human spirit and how long it takes for democracy to re-establish itself.

Hierarchy infantilises people, weakens their ability to self-regulate and diminishes their confidence and sense of responsibility - the very capacities that make social systems vibrant and healthy. That's why the ambition for greater participation and shared leadership must be underpinned by a solid programme of support and development. People need space and time in which to rediscover their power and responsibility, and that is true not only of religious themselves but of the wider communities with whom they must now collaborate if they are to refund and renew.

#### CHANGING THE WAY WE CHANGE

Perhaps one of the most disabling consequences of a top-down model which created the illusion that it's possible to control our world is that it cultivated a fear of real change which is unpredictable, unknowable and unmanageable in conventional terms. Indeed, trying to get to the future in a planned or controlled way is almost certain to recreate the past. If you're going to create something new then moving into unknown territory is essential and there will inevitably be a period of uncertainty and 'not knowing' - even chaos - before the new begins to emerge.

One religious leader said: 'People want to plan it out beforehand and don't want the chaos and confusion. We've tried that before and it doesn't work. Chaos and disturbance is an integral part of change - we have to learn to be tolerant with it because it's part of the process. You have to trust the process'. It turns out that human evolution is all about faith!

I've seen people struggle with this, precisely because deep change is not about letting go of superficial things or making incremental changes that can be reversed if necessary. Deep change is discontinuous with the past and usually irreversible. I've seen the cultural immune system slap down people willing to experiment with something genuinely new. I've seen congregational leaders try to keep the peace between evolutionary outriders and those who fear the unknown, and worse still, call these embryonic experiments to heel because they couldn't quite hold their nerve in the midst of the chaos. They would serve their congregations and the future better by fanning the flames of change, nurturing and supporting these experimental 'niches' which are the kindergartens of the future, and protecting them from the demands of the existing culture which will hamper and even crush them.

Living systems don't change in theory. They change in practice. Through trial and error — or more accurately, trial and feedback — life learns what works and does more of that, and stops doing what doesn't work. This combination of accidental discovery and keeping what works produces ecological systems in which the constituents are so well fitted to each other and their environment it's hard to imagine they weren't designed that way deliberately. But they aren't the product of a plan, they're the result of a way of working together.

If we want to bring about deep change, organisations must learn to work and change together in a new emergent way. Institutional and cultural change never results from paper-based planning. It happens as people engage with each other and with their context in new ways for new purposes. And it doesn't happen from the top down, but from the bottom up, as everyone who makes the web of relationship changes their behavioural pattern and over time transforms the wider cultural pattern.

#### CHANGING OURSELVES, CHANGING OUR WORLD

The Church is nested in a wider context, and that wider context is in crisis. What we're living through is not just recession that can be 'fixed' but a civilisation-wide transition to an entirely different way of working and living based on a new understanding of the world and our place in it.

Public discourse is replete with justifiable anger but no evidence that people appreciate this deeper shift. There's no way to channel their energy into the kind of productive action that would help our culture to transform because our lives continue to be mediated by the powerful interests that created our current system and maintain the status quo.

My question — indeed my challenge — to the Church is this: why are you not more vocal and uncompromising in decrying the economic model that is destroying life on earth and trapping people in a system of modern slavery that not only robs them of their freedom to live expansive lives but erodes their sense of meaning in life? If this kind of radical critique isn't the role of the Church, then what is its role? The ecological signals from our Earth home are now unequivocal: massive change is inevitable.

What isn't clear is whether we will move quickly enough to restructure our way of life before civilisation itself begins to unravel.

Lester Brown, groundbreaking author and founder of Worldwatch and the Earth Policy Institute, poses a question I'm convinced must become central to how every institution on earth proceeds: 'What if three years from now scientists announce that we have waited too long to cut carbon emissions and that the melting of the Greenland ice sheet is inevitable? How would the realisation that we are responsible for a coming 23 foot rise in sea level and hundreds of millions of refugees from rising seas affect us? How would it affect our sense of self, our sense of who we are? How will we respond to our children when they ask, *'How could you do this to us? How could you leave us facing such chaos?'*

There are no answers to this question, of course, and the Church certainly can't answer it, but it has spaces in which answers could be explored. They're called churches. As people struggle to come to terms with the consequences of our economic model and widespread failure of governance in our institutions they'll need unmediated spaces in which they can come to their own senses about what is happening and how to respond.

If I were a priest in parish life today and conscious of my role in a world in transition, I'd replace some of the church pews with round tables and coffee pots and create a space for new conversations in which people meet each other and confront these truths. With the wisdom of Christian thought as a backdrop, I'd put current issues centre-stage to focus people's attention on the world they live in and the part they play in it. Money and debt, climate change and resource depletion, war and infringements of human rights are all contemporary moral issues urgently deserving our attention, not as consumers of media but as engaged citizens with a moral duty to act.

I'd broaden the range of voices by inviting religious sisters and lay people to offer their perspectives and experiences to the congregation, and I'd facilitate a conversation in which ordinary people make sense of these ideas. In this way, the patriarchal and largely one-way Mass would become a ritualised communal space in which people rediscover their power to shape their context.

I'd open church grounds to farmers' markets, to facilitate a reconnection between people and place — a commercial expression, if you like, of the systemic fact of life: that we live in each others' shadow and that our resilience to withstand the shocks ahead depends on our web of relationship and our strength of community.

By putting the real real world at the heart of Church, the institution would reconnect with people in the most relevant way and on entirely new terms: as equals, learning together how to restore community and renew our culture. This is what it means to refound - to put a new purpose at the heart of Church and give life to it with new processes and practices. Church can become a place in which people grow to understand their world more fully, recover their sense of purpose and meaning, and rediscover their confidence and capacity to shape their own lives.