

Understanding the Life Cycle of Churches and Church Leaders for the Sake of the Gospel

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We have the perspective of nearly two thousand years of Church history. We have a time horizon that stretches to eternity. We live in the tension of the now and not yet. We grapple with the reality of short-term time horizons: poor church finances, aging buildings, aging clergy and the continual aging of the Anglican denomination. But in light of the Cross and eternity, all is not what it seems. To be at an end is to be at a beginning.

Prof. Jurgens Hendricks in his book, *Studying Congregations in Africa* (2004), writes that churches have a life cycle. A church in its Birth is characterised by imaginative vision and a few enthusiastic members. Next comes Infancy, with high energy and inclusive membership. Adolescence is focussed on creating a place to call one's own and experimenting with new activities. The church consolidates these advancements in its Prime, often resulting in creative conflict within leadership and programmes, which when worked through can lead to Maturity. Next a form of Aristocracy emerges where there is the increasing dominance of the church as an institution. While there still is a high degree of efficiency and life, the church may give way to a Bureaucracy, which sustained by good memories, finally faces the prospect of its Death - institutional demise and disintegration. Thankfully Death cannot prevail against the Church as the Kingdom of God advances through mission and ministry. To be at an end is also to be at a beginning.

The cycle of birth and death and rebirth of churches has happened over and over again. Some branches of the Church have died out. Some denominations now are in terminal decline. Yet others are being born, or are still in their infancy, and experiencing rapid growth with much evangelistic activity. Churches have a life cycle too.

Given that my denomination is by no stretch of the imagination a new church movement bursting forth with evangelistic energy and idealism, we must settle for being in the latter stages of the life-cycle. The twin temptations to aristocracy and bureaucracy ever loom over our shoulder. But with age can come a gracious, humble, wisdom and surrendered reliance on the grace of God. (Triumphalism tends not to be Anglicanism's Achilles' heel at this life-stage.) To be at an end is also to be at a beginning.

In the Anglican Church of Southern Africa (ACSA) we are seeing new dioceses being formed at a rate that was last seen when pioneering Anglican missionary bishops and missionaries first came to these shores on the back of colonial expansion. New parishes are being formed. Churches are being planted. Fresh expressions of Anglicanism are being engaged with for the sake of communicating the Gospel to a new generation. New dreams are being dreamed about the difference we can make in society.

The ongoing challenge facing the leadership of my denomination (and other main-line churches) is twofold in respect to the aging of the denomination and the aging of its own leaders. Where is our denomination in the life-cycle of growth and decline? What overarching characteristics are associated with our churches? Flexibility or rigidity? Risk-taking or risk aversion initiatives? Energy and enthusiasm or slog-work and conformity? The type of leadership required depends on where we are as a denomination. But leaders are people too. Leaders have a life cycle to journey through from birth to death and thankfully, resurrection re-birth.

Young leaders have the energy, the zeal, the idealism and the dreams that can lead to the re-birth of churches within a denomination and a re-connection with evangelism imperatives. Older leaders can walk behind the young leaders to call out about impending hazards and advise on a course of

action. Older leaders can have the wisdom to channel this enthusiasm and not quench it. But...even those who are young can grow weak. Young people can fall exhausted (Isaiah 40v30-31).

Get a group of youth pastors together and they will joke about the number of times they have faced burnout. The punch-line in the Isaiah passage is not that we soar and keep on soaring on wings as eagles, that we run and then sprint, but that we mature to a walk that keeps on going (to infinity and beyond!). How many older leaders are facing burnout because we expect them to keep on going and growing the church at a running pace? Slowing down can be seen as reaching your sell-by date as a church leader.

But in every branch of the Church a sufficient body of young leaders is needed to bring the unchanging gospel of God to a new generation in a rapidly changing society. There needs to be a large cohort of young leaders waiting in the shadow of their elders to take up the challenge of pastoring and growing churches. Is this the case in my denomination? The figures are not in the public domain of the number of clergy and their ages, but the answer is probably ?no? ? the age profile of our leaders is leaning to the latter stages of the life-cycle! A lot of our most experienced clergy will retire in the next decade, leaving a glaring wisdom-gap and a break-down of much needed mentoring.

What do I get from this? The churches that Paul planted in Corinth and Galatia and Ephesus and Caesarea-Philippi are no more, being nothing more than ruins. So God is not obliged to keep any church or any denomination going for its own sake. That?s the bad news. The good news is that the Gospel of God is alive and well and being transmitted to new generations of unreached people in various ways. God is committed to seeing the Gospel go forward in every generation in word and deed to bring the hope of Jesus, abundant life and sacrificial love to the world.

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