

Symbols of Dysfunction, Strategies for Renewal

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Symbols of Dysfunction, Strategies for Renewal

Summary of Thesis Aims and Structure

This thesis attempts to investigate the nature of both the decline and renewal phase of congregational churches. It is based upon the recollections of church members that have experienced significant decline but whose churches now are flourishing and whose present experience is positive. The process involves a qualitative analysis of participant narratives which are then analysed using multiple lenses, both theoretical and theological in nature.

All three analytical lenses presume that much of what drives change of both a negative and positive nature is hidden from the participants either since it concerns respectively, the emotional field and apportionment of anxiety within the family system, the unspoken shared assumptions, or the preconscious object relating and regressive tendencies associated with dysfunctional groups. The first lens has been used extensively by analysts of church communities, the other two have had little traditional application in church life.

Similar dynamics have been analysed in secular organizational settings from the vantage point supplied by various frameworks. These include organizational culture theory and organizational psychology frameworks. Church dysfunctions have a strong history of analysis through family systems theory. This thesis analyses the phenomena by which dysfunctional aspects become entrenched within the culture of these churches, and then goes on to identify the means by which these cultures become revitalised and grow into new periods of group life.

Two subsidiary directions are pursued in the exercise. The first objective to discern which particular framework, or combination of lenses, resonates most closely with the types of experiences recounted in the stories that are told within five volunteer churches. Three of these churches are treated in depth in the thesis, by a succession of readings through each of the three lenses, culture, psychodynamics and family systems.

The second objective is to reflect upon the theological significance of these sorts of dynamics that are highlighted by the interplay of the various lenses. This begins from the point of the introduction of each lens in the early chapters where a survey of the main writers and mentalities associated with the three positions is presented. At this point the features of each theoretical framework are brought into focus through a theological evaluation on the basis of key Biblical perspectives.

The grounded data for the exploration comes from the storytelling of those who have lived in these churches through both decline and renewal over the last decade. From these one is able to ascertain which stories still have currency within the culture as vehicles of interpretation of their church's recent shared history. A common group's 'touchstone' narrative also can be produced from the quality of such stories revealing the dynamics of decline and renewal from an insider perspective. Such a touchstone story enables not only a closer resonance for the reader with the lived experience of the tellers, but also provides a gauge of the power of alternative reading methods.

After reading each narrative through successive theoretical frameworks or lenses, the theoretical indications were then compared, effectively allowing for a parallel reading of these composite narratives. This enables one to discern, firstly, which lenses really resonated with the variations in the overall narrative plot of each church, and then what co-linearities existed between the variants supplied by each perspective.

The third lens highlights the emotional experience of the subjects within the phases of decline and renewal. Reading of story teller's accounts was facilitated by recourse to the discriminations provided by Wilf Bion's 'basic assumption' groups, Kets De Vries' Neurotic Constellations, Gabriel's understanding of the phenomena of leadership charisma and projection, and Hirschhorn and Stapley's application of Object Relations theory to organizational experiences. These perspectives make comparison and contrast possible.

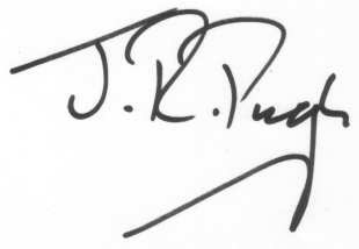
An examination of an interplay of these three lenses across the experience of the three churches enables a rich resonance with the nature of renewal. Each church

now is re-read briefly with all lenses read in parallel. Then the three lenses' read in and contrasts noted. Culture change is associated in each instance with the maturation of the group akin to a psychological development. Renewal was a multi faceted culture change driven from preconscious 'motors' at the deepest level.

This cultural change in human community demands a theological analysis and it was appropriate to found this upon recent discussions regarding the image of the Trinity in Human community, particularly since Moltmann and Volf. It is possible to describe the ideal human community in terms of the revelation of the Divine community using the three frameworks in parallel. From this it was possible to also discern that the direction of the changes in each group correlated with what we would expect were these changes brought about through the influence of the Holy Spirit.

We conclude with a summary of the whole thesis identifying the illumination that can happen through an interplay of the three theoretical lenses and now with good grounds, a weaving in of a thread of theological reflection throughout the whole dynamic of the story. This has ramifications for the role and style of those who would play a catalytic role as interventionists in church renewal.

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. R. Pugh". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "J" and a long, horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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Jeffrey Raymond Pugh, February, 2006