

Beyond Denomination – The Networked Church

By John Edmiston

Why Are Denominations Being Ignored?

Why do governments and industry prefer local area networks of churches to denominations? Why are missionary candidates often wary about joining denominational missions? Why are Christian schools and hospitals increasingly choosing to associate in interdenominational networks rather than along denominational lines? Here are a few of the more obvious reasons:

The Bible clearly promotes unity over disunity and denominations are increasingly being seen as an inferior way of being Christian. This perception is held by Christians and non-Christians alike. Cooperation is the preferred metaphor and mode of being. Denominations in Australia mainly have their origins in ancient disputes in England, Europe or America. Disputes that happened before Australia was founded and which we want no part of. The “walls” between denominations are artificial to most Australians. Unfortunately strong minded individuals and groups within the church perpetuate old disputes and kept sectarianism alive.

Government and industry do not understand or appreciate theological differences and are puzzled by them and the obstacles to constructive action they represent. They want to deal with everyone at once and not to have to factor into the equation something they don't understand. People outside of church circles, and even some in them, are bewildered by the denominational titles and have no idea who to go to and what to do. If they can bypass this confusing state of affairs they do. Clergy tend to have a wide range of administrative abilities from brilliant to woeful. This creates uncertain expectations in those dealing with them. Outside organisations tend to remember the bad experiences with the less administratively competent clergy and would prefer to deal with a theologically informed and administratively competent layperson.

Related to this most people, even Christians, question “clergy interference” in the administration of schools, colleges, hospitals and universities and they are being dropped from the boards of such organisations in favour of theologically informed and administratively competent laypersons.

Layers of administration and representation are being rapidly decreased in restructurings in both the public and private sectors. This has two effects (a) the desire to deal with as few layers as possible and to go straight to the local church or Christian school. (b) Denominations are made to look overly hierarchical by their structures and thus the idea that they are “outdated” and behind the times is confirmed in the minds of the observer.

The evident gender bias of denominations makes them unacceptable to many in the community particularly women who would prefer to deal with other powerful and informed women. Women occupy many of the key positions in the public sector that churches deal with and so they endeavour to bypass the “unacceptable” denominational structures.

Women probably give more financially to the church than men given that they predominate in the church and are increasingly present in the workforce. Their giving is not going to go to structures that they perceive as robbing them of opportunities to express their faith and they will support local churches leaving male-stream denominational structures.

Ordination is increasingly coming under fire as outdated, sexist, unscriptural or as the province more and more of the local church. Increasingly a Bachelor of Theology is being seen as just as good a passport to ministry as the laying on of hands of a bishop. Ordination is also being eroded by ministries outside of denominational structures such as Campus Crusade For Christ where non-ordained people are making a very significant impact for God through things such as the Jesus Film. Also functions such as conducting marriage ceremonies are no longer the province of ordained ministers of the gospel. Ordination is looking shaky although is the one of the main powers that denominations have. More on ordination later in the book.

Christians find they like each other no matter what church the other person comes from. "Church Hopping" has had one good effect in removing many of the myths about other churches. It has thus eroded denominational identity. People feel they are Christians first and Baptists, Lutherans or Pentecostals etc. second. Many local churches are in a significant amount of theological, financial or administrative tension with their denominational structures and feel they would be better off without them. For instance the homosexuality debate and the possible ordination of homosexuals has caused a number of Uniting Churches of an evangelical or charismatic flavour to become independent of their denomination here in Australia. While many others struggle with the compromise they perceive in their denomination.

The churches that have departed and become independent have not notably suffered as a result. Their "liberation" has been evident to others still in the system particularly those that feel they are paying an overly large portion of the denominational dues and which have the strength to be independent themselves.

How Long Has This Been Going On For?

The movements for Christian unity began late last century were given impetus by John Mott and David Du Plessis and gathered momentum after World War 2 when the Billy Graham Crusades got churches working together for a common cause and Christians learned how much they had in common. In my home state of Queensland the Brethren, Churches of Christ and Baptist churches have been at the forefront of inter-denominational missions. Their denominational structures of networked autonomous local congregations have certainly contributed to the easy adoption of inter-denominational practices. Strict, creedal, formal denominationalism was eroded and this wave ended in mergers of similar but struggling denominations the largest of which was the formation of the Uniting Church from the combined Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational churches. Still the denominational metaphor was intact, the denominations did not dissolve into networks they combined into new and "more sensible" denominations. This first wave was based on the interpretation of John 17 (Jesus prayer for unity) as being organic and structural unity. The second wave disputed this and saw unity as "koinonia" rowing a boat together, the common cause.

The "second wave" that I observed was "cautious networking" and was three fold. Firstly came the formation of the inter-denominational Brisbane College of Theology where most denominations have their clergy trained through the same body albeit with denominational distinctives intact. Secondly churches in small country towns were combining for evening services and occasional mission projects. And thirdly the Churches Working Together initiative of the mainline denominations brought pulpit sharing and the occasional combined service to Catholic, Anglican, Uniting and Lutheran churches. It also saw cooperation in local area networks to achieve goals in pastoral care, education and social services. The denominational metaphor was being replaced by the metaphor of local area network of believers in a very cautious fashion.

This was helped along by a “theology of the city” which saw the city/local area as the organising unit. This theology can get quite complex and to explain it simply it is based partly on the fact that the epistles of Paul were written to local areas not individual churches or denominations.

The “third wave” I observed came from two sources. Firstly the Vineyard movement with its network of independent churches seeking God in a particularly appealing way for many. It had a new and attractive flavour about it and while it did not catch on in a very big way in Australia it created a hunger for a similar way of being Christian here. The Crosslinks network of independent churches seems to have its genesis at least partly in the Vineyard movement and the gentle management philosophy of the late John Wimber. Secondly the task of churches reaching youth created a crisis that has had three remarkable expressions. Firstly Scripture Union came up with the idea of placing church funded chaplains in government high schools. To get this past the State Education Department which did not want denominationally biased chaplains Local Chaplaincy Committees had to be formed representing all the churches around a given high school. They then funded the worker in the school who was recruited by Scripture Union and approved by the LCC on negotiated guidelines that were also approved by the Education Department. So far in Queensland over 70 such chaplaincies have been formed and this is increasing at a fast rate. Churches are working together in local area networks and funding a common worker. While this is still quite peripheral to church life in Queensland it has required much negotiation and cooperation so that the process of chaplaincy formation has been a huge exercise in trust building between local churches. The second youth-related issue has been Religious Education in schools which used to be denominationally based with each denomination for instruction. Commonly smaller denominations banded together as “Other Protestant Denominations.” With women RE teachers entering the workforce and increasingly busy local clergy it became impossible to find enough teachers so denominations did the sensible thing and started grouping together a bit.

Eventually the idea of a common curriculum emerged negotiated between churches in the local areas such as Townsville West. Initially denominational distrust was at a high level and it took 6 months or more for these agreements to be put together. Last month a new Townsville West agreement was put together in a single meeting. The third youth related development was an outcome of the Youth For Christ combined youth rallies of the 70’s and 80’s and the Youth Alive rallies in Pentecostal circles. Youth who met at these rallies networked along the lines of affinity and friendship and not along the lines of doctrine. Youth began to move around each other’s churches at such a speed that all youth ministry has become essentially inter-denominational. Youth pastors are now getting together regularly and networking frequently partly to keep track of their charges and partly to organise combined events. Denominations have little meaning in the world of youth work. In fact they come close to being nonsensical. It’s one huge youth network – at least here in Townsville.

Other factors have certainly contributed to the collapse of the Berlin Wall of denominationalism. These factors include ridicule and persecution where Christians have suffered together in the face of a hostile world. Even the mild anti-Christian stance of the media has been a force making Christians feel that they are more together than apart. Christian bookstores, common books, commentaries and lexicons and Bibles, Christian radio and common Christian music have all been factors. Few denominations realise how close they have become. I lecture at two bible colleges one very Baptist and non-charismatic and the other very Pentecostal. They are under the impression that they are “totally different”. Yet my lecture notes on Hebrews or Church History at the Pentecostal college would be perfectly acceptable at the Baptist college since both colleges use exactly the same

references, notes and textbooks. If I changed the title page of the notes no-one would be the wiser.

When Will The Battle For The Denominations Begin?

In management literature they have gone from being future-ists to “present-ists’ and are asking “what unperceived change has already occurred that will define the future?” The collapse of denominations is such a change. It’s happened. The battle is over. This book is in the past tense. It examples are from yesterday. I am not predicting anything I am rather describing what is now and trying to find the way forward. There will be no “battle for the denominations”, no rearguard action to preserve the past; the troops have moved on – and in droves. So my question at the head of this section is (deliberately) misleading. The discourse of cooperation has been normalised and the discourse of denominationalism has been marginalised. In other words when people talk in denominational terms now they sound weird and behind the times. It is no longer normal to be denominational any more than it is normal to be racist. Increasingly denominationalism is being viewed as undesirable and even pathological within Christian circles. It is certainly no longer the favoured way of being Christian.

What Has Replaced/Will Replace Denominations As The Means of Organising The Faith and Life Of The Churches?

Local area networks of churches will help us find faith and fellowship and task focused associations will organise our schools, hospitals, missionary societies and theological colleges. Larger networks will exist in matters of doctrine and styles of worship and even higher level organisations will co-ordinate the efforts of the schools, missionary societies etc. This has largely happened but is still happening hence the time ambiguity in the header.

But Surely Some Tasks Will Still Belong To Denominational Structures Like The Training, Ordaining & Appointment of Clergy.

1. The training of clergy is already being done inter-denominationally in all major denominations and a B.Th. from any one college will be accepted by the other denominations. Candidates moving between denominations generally only have to take a few subjects on denominational distinctives.
2. The appointment of clergy. Many Baptist churches and all independent churches simply advertise in the Christian newspapers and magazines when a pastor is needed or promote an elder in the church. Such appointments are just as functional as those made by denominational panels and in many cases even better as the participating church has more say and thus greater “ownership” of the decision.
3. Ordination is under fire and being seen as officious meddling in many cases. It is either never instituted (Churches of Christ) diminished in significance (many Third Wave churches) or relegated to the local church. Independent churches ordain simply by the laying on of hands of the elders in the congregation. Pastors so ordained seem to function just as well as those ordained by a bishop.
4. Discipline of errant churches is another supposedly denominational function. However it is simply not being done by the denominations and when it is done it is often done poorly. Even this can be done by networks. A successful restoration of a church in error was achieved when a network of pastors who prayed together helped one of their number back on track. No

denominational “heavies” were involved and in fact they were remarkably absent from the process. Friends can help each other be accountable and to stay on track as “iron sharpens iron” and networked clergy are far less likely to fall than often isolated denominational clergy. Similarly correction of doctrine is being done more by Christian authors and Christian media than by pronouncements from denominational HQ. Creeds have become minimalist nine point affairs and something of the magnitude of the Westminster Confession would not be contemplated by any denomination today. Even in Catholic circles canon law is being increasingly resisted or ignored.

5. The sense of continuity, history and belonging that denominations provide is being replaced by allegiance to the Scriptures and to personal experiences of God. Allegiance can be to the local area network or the task focused organisation just as much as it can to a denomination. I find many people who describe themselves as YWAM-ers for instance and find their allegiance there rather than in events in Europe’s past. Many Australians find it awkward to have an allegiance to a denomination like the Lutherans where the history is that of Germany in the 1500’s. Perhaps that is why the Lutheran church in Australia has barely spread beyond the German sub-culture.

6. There is thus no function of denominational structures that I can think of that cannot be done as well or better by local area networks of churches or task focused associations. Hierarchical denominational structures are simply unnecessary.

Ok John, Back Off, You Are Sounding A Bit Too Hostile Here... Denominations Have Performed A Very Important Role And Will Well Into The Forseeable Future and Besides Thousands of People Have Died Fighting For Those Denominational Distinctives and Ways of Being Christian...

I thought you would say that! Lets deal with the “martyrs” argument first. People have died fighting over all sorts of things. People have died fighting over their favourite football team. Probably someone has died fighting over a bus ticket. This just indicates the presence of a vicious tribalism that is prepared to kill those who believe and live differently. It says nothing about the rightness or wrongness of those so killed or the structures they used to organise themselves. That is not to say that such deaths were unworthy or in vain. However they should not dictate how Christians organise themselves today. The structures we use should be the best possible structures that help us with the following top priority tasks amongst others:

1. Loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.
2. Loving our neighbours as ourselves.
3. Developing a vital Christian community that lives the abundant victorious Christian life together in peace.
4. Fulfilling God’s calling to make disciples of all nations.
5. Undertaking ministries of mercy and compassion to a hurting world.

Local area networks of churches undertook the first three of those tasks very capably during the first century AD and roving task focused missionary bands such as the one Paul led were responsible for evangelism, mission and the collection for the starving saints in Jerusalem – the

last two tasks on our list. Denominations were not needed then and these five tasks were done as well or better than they have been done since. Denominational structures were never put in place by the apostles who were ‘network hubs’ rather than archbishops and popes.

Denominational ways of being are a mixed blessing promoting stability on one hand and allowing tribalism in the body of Christ in the other. Their effect in stifling the more unusual but sometimes more vital aspects of the faith has been a high price to pay for order. When God orders nature it is with great variety and a harmony between the species. He did not plant all trees in rows or say “I like petunias therefore all flowers will be petunias”. The animals are not filed from A-Z or kept isolated from each other. God’s order is “beyond bureaucracy”. Therefore if the Church is to reflect God’s order it will be “beyond bureaucracy” and the traditional forms of denominational structures.

Denominations are often half of the solution, an expedient structure created during a revival or reformation. There are better ways of organizing ourselves that we can move towards. We now need to take the next step into new ways of being Christian that go beyond denominations.

Chapter Two – Local Area Networks

Do Local Area Networks Of Churches Exist In Scripture?

Most exponents of early church history such as Robert Banks argue that the early church met in houses and these houses were linked together in city-wide networks. I see it as a bit broader than that. I find (at least) four kinds of networks of local churches & Christians in the New Testament.

1. Ethnic networks such as those that emerged in the Jerusalem church between the Hellenistic Jewish Christians and the Hebrew speaking Jewish Christians and between Jewish and Gentile networks in Rome. These strong family-based ethnic networks were a threat to the unity of the local church. These networks exist in two types networks within the local church such as at Jerusalem and Rome and networks larger than any local church such as the Jewish Christian diaspora addressed in Hebrews. A modern day example would be the network of overseas Chinese Christians that is international and influential today. They are a network with a distinct way of being Christian but are not formalised as a denomination.

2. City-wide house church networks where believers “met from home to home, with breaking of bread and prayer..” There are references to “the church that meets in your house..” etc. With the persecution of churches believers mainly met in homes or catacombs or in the woods and such groups networked with each other passing along Scriptures “make sure this is read by the Laodecians..etc”. The city seems to be the defining unit here with epistles being addressed to the networks in Colossae, Phillipi, Rome and Ephesus. The church in country towns such as Charters Towers has largely taken this form with the churches seeing themselves as somewhat merged and often holding joint meetings or combined evening services. While they largely maintain their denominational distinctives their “way of being” is as a community not as separate churches.

3. Regional and national networks such as Northern Galatia (Galatians), Crete (Titus) and in Asia Minor (Revelation) where city churches were networked together and addressed as a whole. Hebrews may sneak in here or as a sub-category of number 1 depending on your theory about its recipients. In Revelation each individual city network is addressed in the first three chapters and then the remainder is addressed to them as a regional network as a whole. “The house-churches in China” is probably the prime example today of networks operating across a region or nation.

4. The entire network of believers which is referred to in Paul’s phrase “as in all the churches” and is possibly the real target of the epistle to Philemon. If you read the greetings at the end of Philemon it includes many of the heavyweights of the early church including some of the main authors of Scripture such as Mark, Luke, and Paul. It’s a letter signed by representative heavyweights right across the church and tactfully intended for a very wide audience using the literary ploy of addressing one man’s particular situation to reason towards general principles. The Internet acts as a tool for Christian discussion right across the entire world and creates international communities of believers around common networked themes.

What are some of the advantages/disadvantages of local area and other networks of churches?

Advantages

Independent churches in a network are still in fellowship with other churches and can receive financial contributions (2 Corinthians 8&9) and theological instruction (the epistles) from them and share itinerant ministers (such as Paul and Luke). They are not lone, unresourced mavericks.

It's a natural way to organise things that can be grasped by the average Christian.

Believers in local area networks share a common locality, go to the same schools, witness to the same community and feel many of the same local pressures thus it makes sense to work together.

Networks tend to have more openings for lay ministry than denominational structures and more points of entry to the body of Christ.

Basic common theology such as the Apostles Creed can be affirmed at meetings of the network and act as a basis for fellowship. The first Universal Creeds were formulated without the existence of denominations or much in the way of formal structure.

They facilitate church planting and evangelism by giving an accurate picture of the state of the church in a given area.

They are capable of surviving financial hardship and persecution and depending on your end-times theology we might just need them in the not-too-distant future.

If run properly they act as a point for building trust and unity between churches in a given locality.

Greater energy, creativity and adaptability to change.

Disadvantages

Networks tend not to be very good at organising missions, hospitals and schools. Denominations or task focused organisations are needed here.

The theological diversity within local area networks tends to mitigate against the process of complex theological formulations being achieved and agreed on.

Networks if run badly or if dominated by a single local church can be quite dysfunctional. Though that probably applies to whatever organisational structure is chosen.

Networks allow a diversity of doctrine and practice which can be difficult to bring into line without an authoritarian structure e.g. the problems at Corinth and some of the problems experienced within the Vineyard Fellowship.

Lack of a career path for ministers.

Networks are untidy and awkward. There tends to be a lack of things such as agendas and minutes. They require believers to trust each other and be vulnerable to each other.

Christians will tend to move from church to church more often within a network.

Churches that derive a great deal of their identity from being different from other churches will be unable to join in networks constructively but able to organise their own denominations well.

They are much less competitive and remove one of the driving forces in church growth – inter-church rivalry.

Why Not?

Is there any good Scriptural reason why Spirit-filled, bible-believing churches in a local area should not cooperate together and network together for the common good? I cannot think of one. Even if we don't abandon denominations we should at least form local area networks that go beyond an occasional ministers fraternal meeting.

But aren't hierarchical structures the Scriptural model?

Many people see an episcopal structure in Scripture of deacons, elders, pastors and bishops governed by apostles in a strict hierarchy. There is a lot wrong with this view as I will show and I think that it may have arisen in part because up until now we have lacked the terminology to describe or model networks. To describe an apostle as a "hub" and a local church as a "node" would have made little sense until the Information technology revolution made networking terms common parlance. We simply haven't had the mental models to fit these terms into a non-hierarchical structure. Our only main alternative has been "democracy" and congregational government which is still denominational and hierarchical and to my mind just as bad as an episcopal structure.

Jesus forbade hierarchy in the Church

(Mark 10:41-45 NASB) And hearing this, the ten began to feel indignant with James and John. {42} And calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. {43} "But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; {44} and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. {45} "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

(Matthew 23:5-12 NASB) "But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries, and lengthen the tassels of their garments. {6} "And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, {7} and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi. {8} "But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. {9} "And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. {10} "And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. {11} "But the greatest among you shall be your servant. {12} "And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.

There Were Multiple Loci of Authority For Each Congregation

Congregations were not ruled over by one man who was accountable to just one other etc. They seem to be ruled over by a plurality of elders, a number of visiting apostles and prophets and accepted directions in letters and via messengers. While Peter and James and John had pre-eminence it was not in a line management sense and they did not give direct orders on controversial issues without meeting with others in council such as in Acts 15. Paul, though not one of the Twelve could say that "I am not the least inferior to the most pre-eminent of the apostles." (2 Corinthians 11:5, 12:11) which would be an impossible statement in a line management culture.

The construction of a leadership network is similar to but not at all the same as construction of a hierarchy.

When Titus is instructed to appoint leaders (plural) in all the churches in Crete he is actually setting up a leadership network then moving on. After he departs the elders are presumably to network together and govern the churches. The Cretans were a depressed community noted for a rather laid-back lifestyle to say the least. This seems to have meant that some outside intervention by Titus was needed if leadership was to be set in place. It was also common practice after evangelising a new region. (Acts 13). What are some of the differences between constructing a viable and workable leadership network and constructing a hierarchy?

The apostle moves on after setting up the network and while he/she may visit it to encourage it and help its life and growth the apostle does not run its day to day operations in a line management style. There is no indication of a regular reporting relationship between the elders and Paul or Titus. Such relationships are essential to hierarchy. The role of elders is the edification and growth of the network not "lording it over them" which is expressly forbidden. (1 Peter 4:10).

Paul describes his authority as being given "for building up not tearing down" and it comes from the manifest calling and gifting of God not from ordination or a position appointed by another human being. In fact he makes it very clear that he did NOT derive his apostleship or his gospel from any other human being. (Galatians 1).

Thus I see the appointing of elders being a recognition of the Spirit's work in placing calling, character and competence to lead into certain Christians lives. Such appointments are the construction of a dynamic, Spirit-filled network not a human and man-made bureaucracy.

Would you please clarify the difference between a network and a hierarchy. It hasn't quite clicked for me yet?

A network is like the Internet which functions quite well despite having now owner and no organisation running it. A hierarchy is like the military which has a clear vertical chain of command.

Networks have important points within them like the system engineers who helped design the structure of the Internet and who decide on its configuration such as the recent decision not to allow a capability to eavesdrop on Internet communications to be built in to the Internet. However you can hook up to the Internet without having to consult them at all and what you put on the Internet is your business. No-one owns the Internet and no-one runs it and no-one is Mr. Internet and says what will and won't happen. However it functions very well indeed. People

make their contributions to the network if and when they please and according to their varying degrees of expertise. In a hierarchy people make contributions as they are “allowed to”.

Ok that helps but how can the Church be a network, it doesn't fit with my idea of the Church at all.

Let's look at some of the metaphors that Scripture uses to describe the Church

The Body – various parts linked through a central nervous system and where each has its part in the system as a whole. There is variety, freedom and co-ordination. The co-ordination is by the Spirit not a central HQ. The parts of the body are neither independent from each other or inferior to each other. There is no rank order of body parts. Eyes are not higher than feet as a general is to a corporal for instance. There is equality between the parts. A Temple of Living Stones – each part of the holy structure is alive and living and contributes to the whole. The key phrase is “you are being built together”.

The Bride of Christ – speaks of the Church's relationship with Jesus as a beautiful, pure organic whole.

The Pillar and Support of the Truth - (1 Timothy 3:15 NASB) but in case I am delayed, I write so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth. This metaphor certainly suggests an ordered rigid structure and even a bureaucracy but does not describe the internal operation of the Church. Rather it's a description of its ontological relationship to other heavenly realities. The church as a whole is solid. It is its faithfulness to Scripture and the holy lives of the believers that give it this quality not a system of church government.

The Olive Tree – Here branches are grafted in or out according to their faith. The Olive Tree is a living network of believers. The Kingdom – While this is undoubtedly a hierarchical metaphor its overtones of privilege and place were constantly played down by Jesus who emphasized servanthood in the Kingdom and rebuked James and John for wanting high places. Places in the Kingdom are not assigned by man or by committees but by God . The degree to which the Church and the Kingdom overlap is quite an area of debate among theologians. The Kingdom is not a bureaucracy.

The Leaven – In this parable the Church is seen as infiltrating and transforming society from within the culture. The leaven makes its way right throughout the dough. It does not sit in a lump by itself it is a good picture of an incarnated network.

While only a few of the metaphors of the Church directly suggest networks – the Body, The Leaven and the Olive Tree particularly, none of them are hierarchical or bureaucratic. The vision of the Church in the New Testament is a far cry from today's formal denominational structures.

Networks and The Church In Revival

The church in revival in the New Testament was a highly networked gathering of called out believers living under the direct impetus of the Holy Spirit. Since then one of the precursors to revival most commented on in the literature is fervent united prayer by believers of differing denominations in a local area. In Ed Silvano's excellent book “That None Should Perish” he describes how such a strategy won the city of Resistencia for Christ. In other words revival seems to depend on believers in a local area forming a network that at least prays together.

Further evidence for this can be found in studies on revival such as "Praying The Price" by Stuart Robinson and "Informed Intercession" by George Otis (Jr.). Those who kept revival going for a long time seem to have always used networked small groups as the basic structure. Paul Yonggi Cho has used this to build the largest church in the world with a dynamic prayer ministry at Yoido Gospel Church in Seoul Korea.

Sometimes, such as in the Reformation and the Methodist revivals the revival continued up until the point that the network became a denomination. While the Methodists were primarily a well organised network of cell groups under John Wesley the revival was powerful. When it was systematised after his death it lost its way. When the Reformation spread across Europe from place to place and small group to small group and community to community it was dynamic. Once the organisations and denominations were created it moved out of revival power. This is such a phenomenon that many have described the "institutionalisation" of the revival movements with the comments such as "who wants to live in an institution"? Who indeed?

Does Denominationalism Hinder Revival?

When believers in a given local area are so disunited that they refuse to cooperate across denominational boundaries then revival is undoubtedly hindered. Denominational structures encourage disunity between believers in a local area and to the extent that they do so then revival is hindered. On the other hand the formation of a vital local area network of believers loving each other, praying together and cooperating in the spread of the gospel is a very good sign of an effective church.

Are You Saying That Networks Are More In Tune With The Holy Spirit Than Denominations?

If I wanted to start a fight among children I would have only one chocolate and wave it around enticingly. Hierarchical structures are restricted in their opportunities. They are like the "one chocolate" and by their nature combined with human nature, they start fights. What I am saying is that the hierarchical structure of denominations easily aligns with "the flesh" and its desire for power and promotes division and competition between local churches. Networks don't allow quite as much room for the flesh. They also tend to promote cooperation and some spiritual virtues a bit better. Networks can still go bad and have sinful people in them. They are not a panacea. But they don't automatically cause division the way denominations do. For instance no-one is fighting for control of the Internet – though it seems Microsoft would like to.

All that is well and good but how would such networks work in practice? What might they look like?

There would be a wide diversity of local churches within the network catering for different kinds of Christians. Some churches would be traditional, some would be contemporary, some would be ethnic churches, others would be churches for drug addicts or gang members. There would be churches that believed in infant baptism and churches that believed in believers baptism. There would be small churches and large churches and cell churches and house churches and even Christian campsites and campus groups and varying ministries to people. Various events would bring the network together as one voice – a city-wide crusade, a local tragedy, a night of prayer and fasting or even a contentious political issue on which the church in the city needed to have a voice. In between all these churches would be people that everyone knew and who could pull the pastors together in unity. Christians would see each other as brothers and sisters, not as rivals.

On the front of the church building would be Townsville District Baptist Church a member of the Townsville Christian Network - or words to that effect. The churches would share resources and itinerant ministries and when one was in need, say after a fire, the others would help out. They would be committed to one another. Their primary allegiance would be to the other churches of the community - not to a denominational office overseas or a thousand miles away.

Has that ever happened?

The church at Antioch seems to have consisted of two networks – a Jewish network and a Gentile network which overlapped and to some extent shared resources. It seems to have produced a major and remarkably healthy church. The early Quakers were a dynamic and persecuted network as were the early Methodists and the house churches in China today. Believers learn of each other's needs along these grapevines and pray for each other and even supply financial and other help. The networks between missionaries are very close though informal and many missionaries feel more a part of "the missionary culture" than their own local church. Millions of dollars flow along the Overseas Chinese Christian network and speakers and even pastors are shared. In Charters Towers the churches meet together for a combined evening service once a month and two of the small churches share a pastor. There is such close fellowship between the Baptist, Churches of Christ and Uniting Churches that they are for all intents and purposes the one fellowship.

In Townsville the youth groups of the Uniting, Baptist, Churches of Christ and Presbyterian churches are very close and members seem to go from one church to the other almost interchangeably. The youth have said quite openly to me that "brands are irrelevant". Where Ed Silvoso and the prayer house strategy has been implemented whole cities have changed their church signs to read like the example in the paragraph above or eliminated the denominational tag entirely. Local area networks are not just a pipe-dream they are here and they are helping people to find unity in the Spirit.

Chapter Three – Task Focused Christian Organisations

Denominations have failed at many of the core tasks of the Church – at least compared to task focused Christian organisations.

Bible Translation – the core task of making sure the Scriptures are translated into the heart language of the people. A task beyond most local churches and surely a denominational task? However most Bible translations into other languages have been done by either individuals such as Tyndale or Luther or by task focused Christian organisations such as the Bible Societies or Wycliffe Bible Translators or the various missionary society Bible translation efforts. I cannot think of an occasion when the Bible has been translated into a new language by a denomination though I think some denominations may have produced English versions of the Bible such as the Jerusalem Bible.

Overseas Mission – was initiated by individuals such as Paul, Christian communities such as the Moravians or task focused Christian organisations such as WEC and OMF. Where denominational missionary societies have been involved at mission they have generally been set up quite independently from the denominational structure and are in effect task focused Christian organisations. The few times that denominations as such have attempted involvement in missions have been disastrous and caused many of the “colonial missionary” horror stories.

Evangelism & Revival – The most effective evangelistic organisation today is probably Campus Crusade for Christ with the Jesus Film and the Four Spiritual Laws (now Knowing God Personally). The best known is probably the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. The vast bulk of good evangelism is done by gifted individuals or by task focused Christian organisations. Youth evangelism is being done by organisations such as Scripture Union, YWAM, and Students for Christ but hardly at all by denominational evangelistic efforts. Denominational structures talk about evangelism endlessly but rarely accomplish it on any significant scale. The most effective recent evangelistic effort in Townsville was when many of the churches got together in a mini-network to distribute the Jesus Film.

Again denominational hierarchy was cut out of the actual process and it was a local church effort. Denominations should be actively involved in the renewal of their churches however seldom has a denominational official from headquarters started a revival as a deliberate denominational initiative. When revival comes it comes from the difficult people – the small task focused Christian organisations within the churches and from outsiders and from inter-denominational and inter-church efforts such as the revival in Resistencia.

Church Planting – This surely is a denominational activity. Many denominations now have a “church planting strategy” and have officials that take seminars on “church planting” and some even train their theological students in “church planting”. What happens in reality though is that this has killed church planting! Joe Zealous the church planter now goes to his denomination to plant a church in the new housing estate down the road and is told a) It isn't a priority on our strategy b) He will have to go to church planting school and c) it's important to cool down and 'wait for the Lord's timing". So the Mormons move into the estate instead! In reality church planting is being done by gifted individuals such as Joe Zealous, by individual local churches

wishing to expand and by movements and networks such as AD 2000 and Beyond that co-ordinate the efforts of task focused Christian organisations (let's call them TF's from now on). Denominational based church planting has been made into such a bureaucratic and complicated exercise that it simply cannot get off the ground and achieve anything.

Christian Education – here is a story of institutionalisation and eventual renewal. Protestant Christian education was born out of revival, was taken over by the denominations and then stultified to produce institutions with “a saint on the gate and sinners inside”. They became often marginally Christian at best. Then came the Christian schools movement –generally organised as a TF on an inter-denominational basis or run by individual local churches and definitely not denominational structures. It has renewed the whole arena of Christian education with many more people now sending their children to Christian schools. Even the denominational schools are benefiting and some are revamping their curriculum to put more of an emphasis on the Bible.

I think my point is now clear. Not only are denominations an inferior way of being Christian they are also a very inefficient way of doing Christian ministry. Why have we put up with them?

Why Are Denominations Almost Completely Useless?

Because they are too slow moving, too complex and too political by their very nature and design. No-one founding a denomination and very, very few in the denominations themselves want to create slow moving, complex and political structure. Except for a few diehards of the old school everyone in a bureaucracy is frustrated by it. However every time you create a bureaucracy you end up with a slow moving, complex and political structure. It comes with the turf. Why it comes with the turf is the province of areas such as organisational behaviour, systems theory and management. It's a hot topic at the moment and has lead to a lot of the “restructuring for synergies” that you have probably heard about and seen go nowhere. No matter how you try to configure or restructure a bureaucracy while it remains a bureaucracy it's a hopeless mess. *Managing The New Organisation* by Limerick, Cunnington and Crowther is a reasonable primer on this topic.

There may be a physiological reason contributing to why bureaucracies such as denominations stagnate. It has to do with the selective attention mechanism in the reticular formation (a part of the brain). It limits the amount of information we can process and selects what we will and won't attend to on the basis of importance and urgency. It can be fairly easily overwhelmed when there are a) too many urgent things to pay attention to or b) what you have to pay attention to is very complex. That is why people suffering stress burn-out are asked “Are you doing too much?” and “Is what you are doing too complex?”. If you have ever had a horribly overwhelming day and then walked into a crowded shopping centre to do late-night shopping and felt like leaving on the spot – that overwhelmed feeling is the reticular formation hitting the overload switch and pulling you out of there. We have a limit to the complexity that we can cope with.

That is why people who reduce complexity by setting priorities tend to get a lot more done. Now denominations are so complex that by the time you have handled the internal complexity of the bureaucracy your reticular formation doesn't have a whole lot of room for all the complexities of actually doing ministry and the complexities of implementation. It's all “too much”. So the complex pressing demands of HQ get attended to and getting into the field gets more and more remote. Every new initiative which of course “adds complexity” is automatically resisted by people whose complexity plate is full. As field work and new initiatives fail to happen a creeping sense of failure begins to take hold. As people realise that they are not accomplishing what they

should be accomplishing they add “self-justification” to the lists of tasks to be done and it becomes mission critical because their survival now depends on it. Soon everyone in the bureaucracy becomes an expert in self-justification and a failure at ministry. Yet they are right. It’s NOT their fault, they are trying hard and they are doing their best. It’s just that they are in a system of such inherent complexity that they physiologically cannot handle all that is asked of them or go anywhere near achieving their job description. When bureaucracies are demolished people say they feel “liberated” and “now I can get on with my job” – and they do. The transformation of MLC by the dynamic management team at Lend Lease who turned a stodgy 120 year old bureaucracy into a dynamic and fulfilled system of networked project teams is a recent Australian example of this at its very best.

Has A Major Bureaucracy Ever Been Transformed Into A Network or Task Focused Organisation?

The Australian Government used to have the Commonwealth Employment Service or CES which was supposed to match unemployed people with jobs. As a bureaucracy it was horribly unsuccessful in doing so. It was rather clumsily transformed into the Job Network where private providers formed a network and provided the job matching services. It was also backed up with a powerful website and database at www.jobsearch.gov.au. The results were spectacular. Costs dropped from \$250 million to \$150 million and people placed in jobs rose from 170,000 to between 300,000 to 400,000 (Bulletin Oct 12th 1999 p52). Twice the productivity for just over half the cost. Now the Job Network is by no means an ideal network as its components are in competition with each other and there are few synergies of cooperation and the network is still run by DEWRSB (Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business). As non-ideal as this network is it is still a HUGE improvement over its performance when it was a bureaucracy. I believe we will see improvements as big as this – or even greater – when denominations are transformed into cooperating local area networks and spin off their tasks into single task focused organisations especially if the TF’s can be networked and supplied with appropriate information technology.

Denominations, Disintermediation and the Demise of Vertical Integration

Back in the Industrial era mammoth organizations that were vertically integrated and controlled everything from the coal to the iron ore to the steel production and the milling lathes were thought to be successful due to “economies of scale”. However as the world became more complex these huge vertically integrated behemoths became unmanageable by the board.

Divisions were formed and then sub-divisions, then the least profitable areas were “spun-off” and other areas were “outsourced” and now executives speak of “fast companies” and “core values” and “sticking to our knitting”. As appealing as vertical integration is on paper and to the ego, it creates unmanageably large and complex organizations that are “unresponsive”. The reticular formation of their executives is on overload and they just cannot adapt the organisation to the rapid changes that are always taking place in our day. Layers of management are scrapped and intermediaries such as “middle men”, some suppliers and middle management are done away with. The chain of command is made as short as possible. This process is known as dis-intermediation that is getting rid of intermediaries.

Now a denomination is a religious version of the industrial behemoth. It is the vertical integration of the Church’s tasks and on the human level it is just as bedeviled (what a metaphor) by complexity as any corporation. And on the human level denominations need to take many of the

same simplifying steps that many corporations have, not because the world is right or better but because simplicity is necessary and there are not too many easy ways to achieve it.

That Might Be Good Management Theory – However Are TF’s Scriptural?

The missiologist Ralph Winter wrote a paper about “sodalities and modalities” in Scripture and pointed out that much of the evangelism and mission in the New Testament was done by “roving missionary bands” while the local church looked after the worship, pastoral care and much of the teaching needs of the congregation. This concept of dual structures within the church is I think borne out by a look at the book of Acts. Mission there is done by people on the move – Peter at Joppa, Phillip out in the desert with the Ethiopian eunuch, Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey etc. Mission in the NT is not by committees in the local church or by the denominational hierarchy at HQ. In fact after Peter’s visit to Joppa it was the Judaisers at HQ that wanted to put a stop to reaching the Gentiles (Acts 11) and after Paul and Barnabas’ missionary journey they again tried to bring some “order and control” into the new churches by requiring converts to be circumcised (Acts 15).

Right from the beginning there was a tension between the Spirit-led mobile missionaries on the cutting edge of ministry and the traditionalists with a bureaucratic mindset. There always has been and always will be a need for Spirit-led people with a focus on a particular task which they believe God wants them to accomplish, and which local churches and denominational hierarchy are ill-equipped to do, or reluctant to do, or both. Call it what you want – a roving missionary band, a TF, or a project team, clear focus empowered by God’s Spirit brings real Kingdom results that cannot be achieved in any other way. These people are not generalists or pastors in the traditional sense. They are passionate, goal oriented achievers. They would probably be very annoying in a local church and “troublemakers” in a bureaucracy but in the field they do a great job.

Evangelism, Mission and Bible Translation Are Complex Tasks

Many of the tasks done by TF’s are complex tasks that required dedicated specialists and unique organisational structures to support them. Tasks such as bible translation, mission and evangelism are more complex than most people realise. They require deep study of people groups, languages and cultures and the best methods of communicating the gospel. To do them well requires total focus and concentration so they are generally best done by called, equipped and motivated specialists. Such specialists require special structures to facilitate their ministry. The structure of a crusade evangelism organization will be very different from that of a missionary society which will in turn be different from the structure needed to serve linguists. It would be surprising if one denominational structure can understand and facilitate such a diverse range of ministries.

The Leaven Of The Scribes and The Pharisees

(Matthew 16:6-12 NASB) And Jesus said to them, "Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." {7} And they began to discuss among themselves, saying, "It is because we took no bread." {8} But Jesus, aware of this, said, "You men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread? {9} "Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets you took up? {10} "Or the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many large baskets you took up? {11} "How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the

leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." {12} Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The love of hierarchy, and of places of honour and control of others creeps into TFs and para-church ministries and can turn them into clones of the worst offending denominations if we are not careful. The task focus of such groups tends to keep this from happening as "its results that count". However it is no guarantee of it and some missions are pompous, controlling and frankly evil in their structures. I have heard phrases such as "the decisions of the mission board are the will of God for your life." when an obviously wrong decision has been questioned. However because missions have no guaranteed existence and rely heavily on supporters and the recruitment of new missionaries who have choices about where to put their money and their service such stodginess and control soon leads to the decline of the mission. The decline often sparks some soul-searching and the organisation renews itself. If it is ignored the mission slowly fades from the scene wondering what happened. While TF's can go wrong – and go badly wrong the decline does not last as long, affect as many people or go as far as denominational decline does. Meanwhile while I advocate spinning off denominational functions to TF's I add the rider that the organisation must be consciously anti-bureaucratic and task – focused. This is why I have largely avoided the term "para-church organisation" as some of those have as deep a sense of entitlement and as ghastly a bureaucratic mindset as the denominations do. Only organisations that keep their task clearly in focus under God can help renew His church. If we just change the mindset but do not change the structures we will just end up frustrated. Telstra tried that in the 80's and failed. Structures support and reinforce mindsets. So we need an active mission-minded, anti-bureaucratic, empowering mindset and the structures that help us express it easily and freely and which empower us to achieve the results we want to achieve.

How Can We Spin Off The Components of Denominational Ministry to Task Focused Christian Organisations?

1. Find a fairly large number (e.g. 20) of doctrinally and philosophically compatible high quality Christian TF's with which a "common spirit" can be shared. Select these with great care. They have got to be able to catch the vision, value the vision and implement the vision you have. They must not take on the ministries you pass on to them for mercenary reasons and they must not be bureaucratic themselves.
2. Call a meeting at which ALL of these TF's are present and share how you want to turn over the operations of the denomination to them. Let THEM decide on which agency will do which tasks.
3. Decide on a 3-6 month handover period and at least fortnightly meetings of all parties to thrash out common problems and "keep the fire burning".
4. Keep handing more and more functions over. Even functions like the placement of clergy can be handed over to Christian employment agencies. Evangelism, mission, hospitals, aged care and schools are obvious candidates that can be done better by TF's.
5. Do not hand over functions that affect the core philosophy of the denomination until the very end of the process and then only after much consultation with a carefully selected agency. The training and mentoring of clergy would be one such function.

6. Close the doors of denominational HQ and go home. It may well be a sad moment but it will not be a bad moment. Your sacrifice will have helped the renewal of God's precious Church.

What will the churches do then?

Preach, teach, exhort, encourage, support and counsel believers, They will administer the sacraments, pray for the sick and be the light of the world. Life will go on without HQ. The above process should happen in parallel with exhortations to form local area networks of churches and to build unity with other churches around them. As the denomination fades out, local area networks and TF's should fade in.

Isn't unity dangerous?

I first had to wrestle with this as a University chaplain in PNG when I had to relate to 6 other chaplains – Roman Catholic, Anglican, Independent Baptist, Baptist, SDA and United if I remember rightly. I represented the 23 Evangelical Alliance denominations. I asked for guidance from God and he gave me the following passage from Hebrews which has stood by me since. (Hebrews 12:14 NASB) Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.

We are to actively pursue peace with "all men" – that is everyone. We are to be peacemakers and relationship builders. We are not to be Pharisees which means "separatists". The spirit of separation and the spirit of incarnation are opposites and the spirit of incarnation is the one I'm following! However our peace-making is not to be compromising. We are to be holy and if there is a clash between the two then holiness must win because without it we cannot see the Lord. My solution at the time was to be friendly with everyone but be very cautious with the SDA chaplain as he thought that Sunday worship was the "mark of the beast". If my memory is correct the Catholic chaplain was hardly ever around and so was not a problem for me at the time. Since then I have had good fellowship with Catholics from the renewal stream and Ray Benjamin the godly Catholic bishop of Townsville.

I am still very cautious about Seventh Day Adventists though I am aware that large differences exist and that evangelical SDA's who are brothers in Christ exist in reasonable numbers. I pursue peace with everyone that adheres to the "universal creeds of Christendom" – the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, the formula of Chalcedon and the Athanasian creed. That is I actively fellowship with those who believe in the Trinity, virgin birth, historicity of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and that He is God, and in the return of the Lord. The very basic Christian beliefs that all main denominations have held for all time and which everyone from Pentecostals such as me to Baptists and Catholics believe. I find this a useful basis for unity and for inter-denominational work. I do not build any ministry alliances with cults such as Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses. As we spin off ministries to theologically compatible TF's and form local area networks of churches it must be within the bounds of Scripture and the faith that was once delivered to the saints. Never fellowship outside of the truth or in such a way as to compromise core beliefs or to fall into sin.

Are you really saying that we can eventually get rid of denominations altogether and still maintain theological purity and get the job of world evangelisation done?

Yes I am.

Please explain a bit more.

All the functions that we use a bureaucratic denominational structure for can be better achieved by unified local area networks of churches doing the teaching, preaching, caring and fellowship bit and task focused Christian organisations doing the missions, evangelism, recruitment, education, aged care, and medical ministries etc. bit. Theological purity will be maintained by good faithful pastors and elders, theological colleges, bible teachers, Christian authors and by reference to already existing materials and even by using the universal creeds mentioned earlier.

Chapter 4 – Implementation – General Principles

Wanting a change is one thing, making it happen in a peaceful and wise and effective way is another. I have no intention of hitting denominations over the head and saying “go away” and leaving it at that. That’s not a revolution – that’s abuse or just silly irresponsible pot-stirring. We need some good methods and a lot of patience if we are to make the transition beyond bureaucracy and denominationalism into a better way of being Christian.

Who Can We Get To Help Us With The Change – After All There Is Only One of You?

That’s just not true. There are probably thousands of good Christian businessmen, managers and consultants who if shown this book would immediately know what should be done to help you and your organisation and most of them would do a better job than I would.

You need people that have implemented change in an organisation and who are sensitive to the pain that organisational change can cause. HR managers are a good starting point. They need to be committed Christians who love the church and who want to see it grow. You don’t want anarchists or mavericks or people who have been badly burned by the church and now want their moment of revenge and you definitely don’t want people who aren’t Christians. You need people who love the mission of the church and believe in evangelism, missionary work, Christian education etc but who hate, loath and detest church politics, bureaucracy and pointless memos from HQ. You need someone who loves you and who is theologically compatible with you and shares your vision but is prepared to be brutal with the accumulated rubbish of denominational life. You need your mother! (grin) A word of warning – be very careful about academics testing their theories on you! Academics live in bureaucracies and breathe its air and bring those germs with them. Few have implemented serious high level organisational change and most like creating complexity whereas the whole idea is to get rid of it. We don’t need academic level complexity clogging up our reticular formations.

How can we make this a model change?

No! No! No! No! No! No! Never make a major change a “model change”. Not only do you have the complexity of the actual change (which should be consuming all your brain space and energy) you also have the complexity of arguing about the model and the complexity of being a model and the terrible fear of failure if it isn’t quite right. Making a “model” out of a change especially if theological values get involved raises the complexity level through the roof and guarantees failure of the actual mission itself. That’s why intentionally created Christian Utopias often get horribly unstuck. Keep it slow and simple.

But shouldn’t we always be an example?

The best way to be an example is to do a good job. It’s one of those paradoxes that seem to abound in the Christian life. The more you think about “being an example” the more neurotic and anxious and prideful you end up because of the pressure and urgency it creates. It’s truly overwhelming – ask any young pastor or youth leader who is struggling to “be an example to the flock” in a very conscious sort of way. It nearly kills them. We “old fogies” learn to tuck the “being an example” bit away on a bit of a back-burner. It’s there but it doesn’t dominate life. We get on with

the job, still conscious of our lumps and bumps but in a spirit of self-acceptance and reality knowing our best is all we can offer and that perfection will have to wait until Glory. Trying to build “model organisations” or “model communities” is a recipe for disaster. It's also unrealistic and a bit proud assuming that you can do it better than everyone else and be a light to the other poor suckers out there. Just do your very best and if that turns out to be an example to others then well and good. Just do a very professional, good, balanced and wise changeover and people will love it, God's work will be done and good will come of it. Ninety percent of you will still try to make it a “model changeover” and you will have ten times the stress as a result.

One last plea – God loves people not structures. This is not a big deal to Him and it will only be a very minor blip in church life. Sermons will be preached, people will be baptised, married and buried and the changeover will be a distant memory in five years time. It doesn't deserve to become another crusade for idealists and I sure as anything don't want it to.

Sustainability

You are probably familiar with this term in an environmental context such as making sure a tourist park isn't ruined by too many visitors and can keep on being beautiful. Or “sustainable development” asking the question how can we develop areas without ruining their environmental values or running out of resources. If you are really up with things you may have heard about “the sustainable organisation” – an organisation that realises that it can't go on ripping off people forever or it will lose goodwill and go out of business. Shell has made an amazing and deep turnaround on this matter after environmentalists attacked it in Europe over the way it was disposing of an oil platform. Other organizations are discovering they are part of a community and have both social and environmental responsibilities. The old term “social obligations” is not out of place in this debate.

Change also has to be sustainable. If change is too chaotic, unfair or sudden it can be unbearable. Before we inflict organisational change on God's people we should be cognizant that God's people deserve to be treated the way Jesus would treat them. Now Jesus does not molly-coddle us and He does ask to change. Often He asks us to change a bit more than we want and on issues we resist change on. So change is not a bad thing. And even somewhat painful change is not necessarily a bad thing.

However Jesus-style change is paced to our frame and He knows that we are but dust. He does not set up an unrealistic, idealistic model of change and then jam us all into it.

A sustainable, godly, Jesus-style change will be well thought out in advance and well communicated to those it will most affect. It will not be rushed at a gallop. Denominational officials being made redundant will not be made to feel that they are unwanted and unloved. They will be given proper farewells with all dignity and their years of service will be properly appreciated and honoured. Where possible the Christian network will be called on to find jobs for them. They will be given career guidance and job search advice should they want it and even funded to retrain at University or TAFE if that is necessary. Their packages will be generous enough to ensure they do not have to face immediate hardship. They will be seen as the heroes of the change.

The changeover will be brought in as local area networks are strengthened and reinforced so that people do not have a “crisis of belonging”. People need to know that while their denomination is going out of business they have, in their local area network of churches, something even better that they can belong to. People will not be left in a void.

Go slowly, communicate often and about everything and don't assume that people will know what is going on from the grapevine or by osmosis. You may even want to e-mail this small book around to those who want to understand the change or make it freely available on your website. That's fine by me just drop me an e-mail asking permission before you do – I don't want it on cult websites for instance. My e-mail is johnedmiston@jed.org.au. Whatever it takes to get people to understand and accept the change – just do it. Communicate in four layers – to denominational HQ and clergy, to the main lay leaders on denominational committees, to the denomination as a whole and to the society around you. It's important to get people to realize that though the HQ structure has closed down the churches are still open, growing and flourishing. It's not "the church" that's going out of business, it's just changing shape a bit that's all.

What Is Changing and What Is Not Changing?

The same pastors will preach the same sermons in the same churches to the same people. The local church will hardly notice the transition except that a) there will be no more visits from the bishop for confirmation and ordination b) they will get to know other Christians from other local churches a lot more. At the start Baptists will still immerse their converts, Pentecostals will speak in tongues and Catholics will celebrate Mass. After a while it will be Christians in that church baptise their converts, and in that one they speak in tongues and in the other one over there they celebrate Mass. Over time the labels will drop off. It will be understood that all Christians share a common core theology but just choose to express it in varying ways and with different emphasis on certain doctrines. There will still be vigorous theological debate but it will be from a position of unity rather than from a position of disunity and that will make all the difference.

Post-denominationalism is not a threat to what we really believe at all. It is a threat to institutions and hierarchy and bureaucracy. It is not a threat to the Bible or your local church pastor. The Bible will remain intact, the creeds won't change and your pastor can stay on without being moved around by the bishop. You can even build a cathedral if you want to.

What will change will be bishops, archbishops, cardinals, popes, canons, and inquisitors who will be out of jobs. Denominational boards and committees and endless synods will vanish. Resolutions, minutes, agendas and Robert's Rules of Order will be silenced. Churches will just get on with the job of being Christian in a sensible fashion. In case you think all that order and control is necessary – the Internet – which you are using to read this small book – functions very well without all of the above. We will look at issues of network management and the keeping of high standards in another chapter.

Helping Congregations and Clergy To Move Towards Local Area Networks

Where this has worked there has first been a willingness to do two things a) to pray together and occasionally worship together and b) to be vulnerable to one another's strengths. I'll explain the last bit first as it is probably the less understood of the two. Unity doesn't happen if you think that other churches have nothing to offer you. If you, like the church in Laodecia say "I am rich and I have need of nothing" then you are truly "poor and blind and wretched and naked.." (see Revelation 3:14-22) because we all need our brothers and sisters in Christ and what they have to offer us. We need the social action of the Salvation Army, the moderation and theology of the Anglicans, the devotion of the Catholics, the bible knowledge of the Baptists and the fire and zeal and pragmatism of the Pentecostals. None of us have got it all right and our brothers and

sisters in other denominations are not all wrong about everything either. They have strengths and we need to acknowledge that and be vulnerable to it.

Christian businessman Max De Pree has written a wonderful little book called *Leadership Is An Art* and it expounds being vulnerable to the strengths of others at great length – get a copy! Basically if I am putting together a rescue ministry for alcoholics I should have the humility to go to my Salvationist friends and ask their advice and if I am running a city-wide crusade perhaps the Baptists and Pentecostals might know a thing or two about evangelism. Once we reach the position that our friends in other churches are smart people with good ideas who can help us then we are open to unity and to local area networks.

This process can be greatly assisted by certain ministries that seem to have the gift of peace-making and building unity. There are three such outstanding ministries that I know of. Scripture Union, Ellel Ministries and Ed Silvoso's Harvest Evangelism organisation. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association gets an honourable mention as well. These first three ministries seem to have an "anointing" or special gift in the area of building unity between local churches and they get a lot of flak from Satan for it too! People discover the strengths of the church next door when they get involved in the ministries of these organisations.

The other way of building unity within the local church network is through praying together and occasionally worshipping together and through "pulpit exchanges" among the clergy. Things like the Jesus marches, evangelistic rallies and local causes and crises that get believers praying together are a start at building unity and trust. The "neighbourhood prayer house" strategy is another method. Such trust building takes time, tact and tenacity. Things go wrong, misunderstandings arise and the Devil tells lies. Unity is seldom built in a day though it can be destroyed in one. When unity reaches a certain level confession takes place - confession of sin, of division and of criticism between the churches and the clergy and lay leaders takes place. This is an important milestone. Finally you know unity is on its way when people put their money into a common pool to employ a chaplain or fund a Crusade. In our materialistic culture commitment is financial as well as personal.

In this process you need to act with above average honesty and integrity. For instance when you advertise an event as "interdenominational" it must not mean that it is an XYZ event with an XYZ committee and XYZ speakers who will preach XYZ doctrines and that others are merely welcome to attend (where XYZ is a single denomination). Interdenominational events must have an interdenominational board and be theologically sensitive to a diverse audience and where possible have the participants on stage from an obvious variety of churches. Trust comes from integrity observed over time and has two basic components – your character and your competence. People will not trust dishonest people or careless people. You must be honest, caring and competent if people are to trust you and bond with you.

Rumours of War – How We Freak Each Other Out

"The Pentecostals have just said that unless you speak in tongues you don't have the Holy Spirit and the Catholics are going to make Mary a part of the Trinity and the Baptists says that unless you a baptised by immersion as an adult you aren't saved and the Anglicans are about to vote on not having to believe in the resurrection." Every one of those statements is a lie! And I have heard them all! Any Christian would be upset if they heard nonsense like that. They are the sort of statements that send Christians into battle with each other and they are based on distortions and half truths. Yes there are a few Anglican bishops who have expressed doubts about the resurrection but some of those have been severely reprimanded for it. Yes there is a

Catholic movement called the Magnificat Meal Movement which wants to declare Mary the Mediator of all graces but it has been officially reprimanded by the Vatican and is considered as nutty as a fruitcake. Some misguided Pentecostals may say that unless you speak in tongues you do not have the Holy Spirit but this is certainly not the official position of the Assemblies of God or the AOG Bible college I lecture at. And while the Baptists do see a lot of significance in baptism they definitely maintain that it is not necessary for salvation (I was trained at a Baptist Theological College). Before we go to war with other believers on the basis of a rumour it pays to check it out very carefully first. The Devil is the accuser of the brethren and he knows full well how to use isolated incidents, half-truths, misunderstood terminology and false reports to create enormous amounts of acrimony and division. Satan is the Enemy not the church down the road. As a rule of thumb Satan accuses us in four ways:

- 1.Satan accuses us to God (Zechariah 3, Job 1&2)
- 2.Satan accuses God to us.
- 3.Satan accuses us to each other
- 4.Satan accuses us to ourselves

The biblical injunction (1 Timothy 5:19 NASB) Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses is a very sound one to operate by. We need to “remove the finger of pointing from your midst..” Isaiah 58.

OK So We Stop The Bunfights and Rumours and Start Liking Each Other – How Does That Then Turn Into A Network?

By a deliberate effort at building communication and defining the network identity. This can include some or all of the following:

Monthly pulpit exchanges amongst the clergy.

Weekly prayer meetings by clergy and lay people from different churches.

A network website or newsletter.

Church signs altered to have “a member of the Birdsville Christian Network” or whatever.

Common celebrations such as sunrise services at Easter or midnight mass on New Year's Eve.

Inter-denominational worship events and even shared evening services.

Teaching on cults so the average church member becomes aware of who is and who isn't with us in the journey.

Encouraging Christian meeting places, noticeboards, radio stations and bookstores so that people naturally hear about each other and what is going on in the various churches.

Sharing facilities, camp-sites, barbeques and even things like tents and trailers among the churches. Helping each other out.

A de-emphasising of denominational labels and a reinforcing of local labels such as Birdsville Christians etc.

Publish a book of local Christian poetry and songs that people from the network have written.

Teaching people that salvation is individual and quite different from membership in a denomination. Teaching that in any given church on any given Sunday there will be those who are participating in salvation in Jesus Christ and those who couldn't care less and that it's their heart not the label on the door that is making the difference.

What Problems/Resistances Can Churches Expect To Encounter?

That depends on whether the devolving of the denominational functions to local area networks and TF's is voluntary or whether local churches decide to go it alone.

If a local church suddenly decides to withdraw from the denomination it may find that the church property and all the insurance policies etc are held in the denominations name and that considerable legal work is involved. Such churches tend to leave the building to the denomination and set up in a hall somewhere. It's far from ideal. I want to avoid that option. That's part of the reason I'm writing this book – to help denominational structures see that it's time to hand over and to show them how to do it. If done from the top down and carefully there should be very little resistance. I sense that this is an idea whose time has come and that the demise of denominations will happen. It's just a matter of how it will happen – in a controlled and orderly and planned fashion or in a messy and emotional revolution.

Creating Pictures of Calm

In a situation like this we can either create pictures of crisis or we can create pictures of calm. We can picture a bitter revolution opposed by diehard denominationalists or we can see a quiet sensible nodding of the head by the godly men and women of the denominational hierarchies who love the church more than they love their own prestige.

This second picture is by far the picture I prefer. The picture of a calm decision by honourable men and women and a calm, well communicated and well planned transition into the post-denominational era.

I would like the transition to the post-denominational era to be an un-revolution, a complete flop as a media event and dead boring. I would like us to picture it as a calm rational well thought out business decision to free up the processes of the in-the-field ministries. That is a big part of the reason why I am distributing this as an e-book. If I eventually found a print publisher they would want a sub-title like "the post-denominational revolution" have a cover of crumbling cathedrals and create a contentious media beat-up based on conflict to boost sales. My ideas would be dead in the water in the eyes of most denominational officials before they even picked up a copy.

If you talk about this book with friends please honour my intent by creating pictures of calm, use words like sensible and liberating and well-thought out and practical to describe the book (if you think those terms fit). I want us to move toward the post-denominational world in a calm, godly, loving and terribly orderly fashion because our God is like that and because I believe it's the Christian way to do things.

Chapter Five – Implementation – Practical Considerations

Are We Going To Go Broke As A Result?

Local churches will set their own budgets and pay their own pastors without denominational levies. Pastors will probably be paid the same and as part of the transition a wages agreement could be drawn up to protect independent clergy. Revenues to local churches may even slightly increase as people will have a more personal sense of ownership of their local church and those burned by “denominationalism” return to the fold.

Costs will drop dramatically as overheads due to duplication of ministries between churches in the same area are cut to the bone. The synergies of cooperation should be even greater than those generated by the Job Network example earlier. In that example we saw twice the output for just over half the cost. In the post-denominational era given good cooperation between churches I think we could easily double that in most areas and do twice the ministry for a quarter of the cost. Just take aged care as an example. If in one local area there are say ten aged care homes run by seven denominations with seven different administrative structures and they are all brought under one umbrella – then the savings should be immense.

What About Rural Churches and Denominationally Subsidised Ministries?

Living as I do in North Queensland I know to some extent how people in the bush feel about being abandoned by capital city based denominational HQ and how sensitive any withdrawal of service from rural areas is – particularly the withdrawal of clergy. I have also encouraged, trained and lectured to many of the rural clergy in NQ from a variety of denominations. Now the situation is not all of one piece. Some of the crisis in the bush is their own fault. Some rural communities are deeply divided along religious lines with say three churches in one very small town each of which will have nothing to do with the other and none of which can afford a minister on their own. The demise of denominationalism can only do a power of good in such communities. Mergers between small rural churches based on local area networks would be a good and godly move. The end of denominationalism may see a partial end to divisiveness and some more real ministry happening in rural areas.

Then there is the more genuine side of things where people are truly isolated and really want a visit from the clergy who roam the outback in four wheel drives and in small planes. Many of these are already on “team support” and supported as missionaries by churches in the cities. Others are denominationally funded but largely through churches in Townsville or Cairns which would still continue the support even if the denomination ceased. Some are worker-pastors and self-funded. There is also a renewal of interest in outback ministry by groups such as YWAM, Scripture Union and Calvary AOG. Now I only have a partial knowledge of my patch and no knowledge of the rest of Australia but from what I can see most rural ministries would remain. And if funds are freed up by the end of duplication of ministries between the denominations then more Christian sponsorship may be able to be released into the bush. Also the generation of large powerful city-wide networks of churches that can care pastorally for the regions they belong to may actually be a boon for rural areas.

Other denominationally subsidised ministries such as missionary societies may choose to go on the team support model or to merge with other groups. Some may choose to go out of existence but I think these will be few in a well planned change. Worthy ones may be able to find a powerful urban network or coalition of local churches to help sustain them. If the “spinning off” (see chapter 3) is done well and theologically and philosophically compatible partners are chosen then this should not be too massive a problem. There will certainly be a coalescing of ministries and a certain amount of pain as say 15 denominational women’s ministries combine into a nation-wide force for Christian women but I think the outcome will be much better.

What About Denominational Based Perks Such As Leasing Equipment And Vehicles?

The leased vehicles that pastors drive are based on churches with educational or practical ministries not paying sales tax on the vehicle and being able to resell the vehicle for what they paid for it so it is essentially free. It needs the church to have a school or bible college or similar activity. So it's not denominationally based at all – its ministry based and non-denominational ministries also enjoy this privilege. My understanding is that this will end with the introduction of the GST anyway as there will be no sales tax just a 10% GST on cars and ministries will not be GST exempt anyway. The loophole will be closed – now I’m no accountant and I get muddled on such things but that’s what I’ve been led to believe. So a) it's coming to an end anyway b) it wasn't denominationally based to begin with.

Why Local Area Networks? Why Can't We Just Turn Our Denomination Into A Network?

This is a great temptation because it means we can keep a bit of control and a lot of our denominational identity. It's the easy road. It's the WRONG road. It is just division by another name. Its repackaging instead of repenting. If you go down this road the Christian community in a given local area will still be divided and still the rivalries (this time between networks) will exist.

The revival power that comes from love and unity in a local area will be lost. The church will be seriously weakened spiritually by such a move. Evangelism and church life would make a small gain but the true large gain would be lost. It would be half-right but all wrong. On the practical level the simplicity of local association and the economic synergies of cooperation would be lost.

Jesus founded the church on geographical unity amidst theological and cultural diversity and that's the way it's meant to be. In nearly every local church that Paul wrote to there was considerable theological diversity and cultural diversity yet they remained united in local areas and this unity was a real witness to God. Local area networks are a much more powerful witness to the community as they demonstrate openly how we Christians love one another despite our differences. Multitudes of semi-denominational networks in the same local area would not be a witness at all.

What About Networking In A Local Area With Denominations That Are Compatible And Ignoring The Others?

Again it's close to repackaging instead of repenting but it's a lot better than creating denominational networks and it is as far as many churches will be able to go at first. In Townsville there are effectively three networks – Mainline, Evangelical and Charismatic/Pentecostal and overcoming the rivalries within those networks will be the first huge step, bringing them together as one network will be an absolutely massive step in God. There have been a few steps in this direction including some public repentance of the bitter attitudes

that have flowed between Mainline and Pentecostal churches. There is still a long way to go but God is at work.

Will These Major Denominational Blocs Ever Merge?

Even when one local area network is finally created some churches will naturally network more with others. I don't ever envisage people of Pentecostal theology being terribly happy in a High Mass or vice-versa. That is fine. We can treasure that diversity. Churches of similar theology and mindset will "click" better than those that are very different. However if the Catholic church is burned down because of an electrical fault I hope that the Pentecostals as well as the Anglicans and Baptists would all see themselves as brothers and sisters and pitch in and help out. I think the denominational blocs can merge to a quite significant extent and we can love each other in the Lord and put the emphasis on our commonalities – "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all", to quote Paul. When the emphasis is put of being Christian first and being different second then we will begin to merge the major blocs within Christianity.

But How Do We Deal With The Past?

We forgive and we forgive in public.

What About Our Old Folk Who Have Strong Denominational Loyalties?

Your "old folk" are probably not as unspiritual or inflexible as you think. The biggest radical I know is over 80! They pray for the church and grieve for the church and on the whole are as fed up with division, bureaucracy and "brands" as many of the younger folk. In fact even more so. The only denominational zealots I have met lately have been young people who have had little exposure to other Christians and who have picked up a bundle of prejudices from their home church. A little bit of life and a lot of prayer generally knocks this out of people. Older folk are loyal to denominational events such as synods and conferences. They do enjoy them and will miss them. However if we have equivalent events where the local churches get together and our older folk feel important and valued many will soon make the change.

There Seems To Be So Much To Undo And So Many Words To Be Unsaid I Just Feel The Situation Is Beyond Restoration.

Hopelessness is of the Devil. Faith, love and hope are from Jesus who can do more than you can ask or think or expect. When towns have turned to God and churches have "buried the hatchet" it has often happened quickly. There is a surprise, a pleasant shock, that things can and do change overnight when God is at work. Old traditional enmities that seemed immovable can end in a day. This is not "sight" its faith. You need to replace pictures of failure with pictures of faith. God is God and the status quo isn't God. By the way I take a lot of encouragement from Zechariah 4 and the moving of mountains by the Spirit of God with shouts of "Grace, Grace to the topmost stone..". (Zechariah 4:6-7 NASB) Then he answered and said to me, "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel saying, 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the LORD of hosts. {7} 'What are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become a plain; and he will bring forth the top stone with shouts of "Grace, grace to it!" Do not be discouraged or be dismayed, be strong and courageous and do the work of God!

Stop Preaching And Tell Us How To Do It!

I've given you a few clues in the previous chapter with that list of points on building community. However every place is different and you will have to get together with the pastors and lay leaders in your city and fast and pray and seek God for the right steps to take. The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord and the order is important. The first step may be apologising to an ethnic church or to the Catholics. It may be as drastic as that. Or it may be having a combined church camp among all the churches and building community that way. I don't know the exact spiritual dynamics of your community and I won't even pretend to be the voice of the Lord to you or to give you sixteen steps that inevitably lead to revival. You wouldn't believe me if I did. The first step is being willing to do it. If you have read this far it's a good sign.

But Won't Our Young People Marry People From Other Churches Then And We Will Lose Them?

There are three answers to this question:

1. Young people are not finding suitable people to marry in their own church so they are marrying unbelievers as the alternative and we are losing them not just to the church but sometimes from God as well. Marrying people from other churches has got to be better than that.

2. There is only one Church in reality, one Flock, you are just a holding pen. If they move to another holding pen but remain in the Flock that is no great catastrophe.

3. They might just come to your church as a result – you can gain as well as lose.

Do We All Have To Become The Same?

God is a God of great diversity in both the natural and the spiritual realms. He has called you to be a certain type of church. Keep being that. My favourite analogy is that all fish are not the same size. A shark the size of a sardine is a failure and a sardine the size of a shark is a monstrosity. Churches don't have to all be big churches or all be small churches or all have stained glass windows etc. God loves and cherishes and has created your diversity (I hope you believe that). I am not asking you to lose that or leave that. I am asking you to respect the diversity of others and to love them in the Lord.

But If We All Become One Big Local Area Network Won't Everyone Go Church-Hopping And This Will Lead To An Unstable Church Where We Have No Idea Who Is Going To Turn Up Or Who We Can Reliably Call On?

That may happen for the first two or three months as the network starts up but I do not see it as a long-term problem because:

People still prefer their style of worship and won't go too far from it. Most Christians are basically fairly responsible and know they need to settle somewhere. People are creatures of habit.

There will still be some who wish to float from church to church, however pastors who network together can "gang up on them" and tell them to pick one and settle down. This even happens now.

What If People Pick Up Wrong Teaching From The Other Churches?

This has potential to become a real problem unless we emphasise bible study and sticking to the Scriptures diligently. As part of moving to a network we need to teach our people to be "Bereans" and to search the Scriptures diligently to see if these things are true.

As creedal and denominational authority in matters of doctrine vanishes three other forms of authority may replace it:

1. The authority of a pastor's personality or group of elders.
2. The authority of Scripture alone.
3. The authority of big name leaders in the Christian community and Christians with a high media profile.

Now options 1 & 3 divorced from Scripture are increasingly popular because they do not involve much work for the believer. However they are disastrous for their growth in faith. Movement to a network will absolutely require a renewed emphasis on the Bible.

What About Handling Church Splits and Doctrinally Errant Churches Don't We Need The Denominational Hierarchy For That?

You need some means of authority and sanity that is external to that particular church and its pastor. This can be done through a prominent, well accepted Christian leader or through a group of other churches in the network. The person does not have to be a bishop to do this. As a bible college lecturer and so-called cults expert I get to take this role occasionally as do many others in the Christian community. You just need a good consultant from within the Christian community.

Ok You Have Been Promising To Deal With The Question Of Ordination It's About Time You Did!

Denominational ordination and clergy placement has become a disaster with local churches fearful of having homosexual clergy imposed on them or someone of a totally different theology e.g. a liberal in an evangelical parish or vice versa. The imposition of clergy on parishes and the politics of selection committees are perhaps the very worst aspects of denominational life. On the other hand we don't want an ordination "free for all" like there is in the USA. There are a number of ways to deal with this:

1. Form an inter-denominational Australia wide "Clergy Professional Association" similar to the AMA or CPA or similar professional bodies that admits clergy, checks their qualifications and helps negotiate with churches about salary and conditions and which helps them should they want to gain accreditation to minister overseas. It could also keep a database of churches and vacancies and what kind of person and theological orientation the local church wanted.
2. Membership of the clergy association would not just be on academic grounds alone but on calling from God and demonstrated ability in ministry say after a 1 or 2 year supervision period.
3. Have local church ordination for those unwilling to belong to the professional association perhaps because they see it as an unspiritual way to do things. Such clergy would only be ordained to minister in that particular church.

4. Perhaps have local area network wide ordination ceremonies where the network is strong enough and united enough to do this.
5. Clergy would not be appointed by any external body but called and appointed by the local church. Individual churches would be able to set requirements for clergy according to their understanding of Scripture and not have someone of a different theology or way of life imposed on them by a denomination.
6. Churches would seek out their minister or advertise for one in the Christian media as well as checking out the associations database which may be a web database and accessible from a PC in the church office.
7. Under this scheme female clergy would only go to churches that would accept them. The controversy about the ordination of women would thus lose much of its sting since they could not be imposed on churches that did not share that view. Ministers who have been divorced likewise would only want to go to a church where this was not an issue.
8. This scheme would also prevent the "black marking" of certain clergy by denominational "powers that be". These personal dislikes of powerful people have ruined the ministry of many good members of the clergy.

Clergy can be trained, selected for ministry and properly accredited without any denominational hierarchy being involved in the process and the outcome would be better for all involved.

You Haven't Mentioned Confirmation By The Bishop

For churches that have confirmation it could be done, like baptism and weddings and funerals, by the local clergy. In some smaller rural networks where all the churches are mainline churches (that have confirmation) it could be a network wide ceremony. I see no theological reason in Scripture why you need to have a bishop to hear a person's confession that they believe the faith, or to impart the laying on of hands. Admittedly I am not of that stream of theology myself and perhaps I have missed something. The Presbyterians don't have bishops and they manage to confirm people. A hierarchical denominational structure is not needed for individual Christians to publicly confirm their faith in Christ.

What About A Career Path For Clergy?

The ratio of bishops to clergy at any one time is about 50 + clergy to one bishop so at best you have a 2% chance of a career path anyway. This will be exchanged for a 0% chance of a career path though some may become "fellows" or senior ministers. Most professionals are in the same boat. I, as a careers consultant can get bigger and better contracts or build a bigger and better firm but no-one is going to promote me - or your GP or most other professionals. The idea of a career path where Joe Bloggs joins Big Company and remains there for 50 years, becomes senior and gets a gold watch, is almost obsolete. The average person now has 8-10 job changes and 3-4 entirely different careers in a lifetime. Career consultants now talk about a person's "lifestream" and see career as something you largely assemble for yourself to suit your goals and objectives in life. You will have to be satisfied with your calling in God.

But I Love The Politics and The Committees

The Army is recruiting! To be serious – there will still be plenty of bureaucracy for you to join in local clubs, some areas of the public service, the Defense forces and in large traditional firms etc. If this is a major factor for you then you will need to find another job.

Can I Still Wear My Robes?

Yes, of course. They will still have theological significance though they will no longer have denominational “brand” significance.

What About Prayer Books?

The local church will be free to choose its own style of worship so there will still be a place for prayer books, hymn books and traditional forms of worship should that congregation so choose and I’m sure there will be sufficient demand to ensure that prayer books and hymn books are published and enough people with an interest in this area to compile them.

Won’t This Lead To Chaos With All These Churches Worshipping However Suits Them?

There is already a huge number of worship styles in the body of Christ and the full range of variety is already present. Christians aren’t anarchists and won’t tolerate disorder for too long – they know God better than that. It will actually allow some churches to specialise in being conservative instead of having to please everyone and mix in choruses with hymns. It will result in each local church serving a “niche” in the local Christian community.

What Do You Mean By a Niche?

To be slightly humorous you can arrange churches in order of how loud they like their worship with Quakers and Trappists liking silence and Catholics and High Anglicans liking muted reverent tones, Presbyterians like a firm strong voice but not too much amplification, Baptists have modest sound systems and loud preachers and Pentecostals have the sound system from a U2 concert in a tin shed with an extrovert for a preacher. Now you can’t have all of them at the same time in the same church. Each congregation has to worship in the way that God is leading it to. That style can be very particular and will end up suiting a particular kind of worshipper. That particular style that suits a particular kind of worshipper is what I am calling a “niche”.

How Will That Improve Things?

Well at the moment you have a lot of generic “Home Brand” style family services with every church trying to capture the middle of the “market” and not trying to alienate the young people or upset the old people at the same time. Worship becomes an exercise in conflict management in many churches today. It’s a bit like the joke about the animal that could fly, run, hop, swim etc all at once. I have noticed that it is the churches that have the courage to go in the opposite direction to this and to definitely define themselves as Traditional or Contemporary or “River Churches” or “University Churches” or whatever that are growing. People seem to prefer to go to a church that suits them as a worshipper to one that tries to suit everyone. By ending denominational duplication and allowing local churches to be whatever God has called them to be you will get a better variety of churches some of which will take on small niches that no-one else wants but which are still very much needed such as outreach to youth gangs. They would

be acknowledged as the church that does this and supported in that role by the rest of the network. One the church was seen as the whole area network by Christians it would help stamp out the complaints that go “the church never does... social justice, evangelism, healing etc.” No one church would be burdened by having to do it all but the network as a whole would and it would become “the city set on a hill” that was seen by the world because at last it would effectively meet the needs of the community.

Hey I Like That Idea!

So do I let's do it!

Chapter Six – Getting from Here To There

Ok I'm Convinced. Now How Do We Start The Revolution?

There are two ways – the "English" way or the "French" way. The "French" way involves guillotines and attacks on the Bastille and is very messy and is to my mind ungodly. The "English" way is slow and reasonable and thoughtful and kind. It's the way I prefer. Revolutions don't have to be awful, the Information Revolution has been fairly peaceful in fact.

Now I don't think you can just march up to denominational HQ and yell "down with the denomination" and expect much joy at all. That's immature and silly. What you can do is to tell them about this book and give them the URL so if they are interested they can get a copy. Please don't email it to them as an unsolicited attachment please. Christian leaders get all sorts of huge unsolicited attachments in their e-mail from all sorts of strange people with bizarre notions and it clogs up the downloads and just gets deleted. Besides they might end up with 200 e-mail copies of the book from various well-intentioned members of their denomination. A brief e-mail saying why you like the book with the URL is all that is needed. If they want it they can go get it.

The six chapters of the book might make a good 6 week study for a home group or evening service and even if it doesn't start a revolution it will at least get people talking and thinking about the nature and function of the local church and there is no harm in that.

Talk to pastors, lay leaders and denominational officials about the concepts in the book. Start building unity yourself and start praying for and with other churches. Introduce people of different denominations to each other and do all you can to build a climate of acceptance. Pray, pray, and pray! I believe God is in this. Unless He is it will not work.

Do You Honestly Think You Will Change Things?

It's absolutely impossible to say what will happen. At this stage I could end up with 5 downloads and a big waste of time or like the 95 theses on the door of the church in Wittenburg it could set the world on fire. Odds are it will be somewhere between the two!

Other Than Pray And Pass The Book Around What Should We Do?

Study the Scriptures until you get a burning vision for what God's church should be like in love and unity and truth. Study it until you NEED to do something or you will explode. Study it until you are absolutely convinced that change is needed and needed "today".

God will have a special place for you in His plan to restore the Church to unity, purity and truth and to complete the Great Commission. Only you know the turf in your area. Only you can get His will as it applies to you in your situation. That might sound trite but it's where we all have to start under God and His Word in the particulars of our own situation.

Are There Some Things We Need To Stop Doing?

I covered a bit of that in the “rumours of wars” section. We need to think about what we are doing that hurts unity and trust and eliminate it. Some of these things are subtle like denominational “tunnel vision” so that only our things matter to us. George Otis Jr. talks about Kingdom vision “seeing the spaces between the churches” the unministered to bits of our society. I like that. We have to have a bigger picture that’s beyond our own backyards.

We need to stop having a vision of the Church and the Kingdom that is like a battle between fast food chains or supermarkets. We are not the world and we need not behave like the world and we are capable of much greater, better and more diverse things than a plastic, branded, consumerised Christianity. Fast food chains rely on creating exactly the same experience for each customer in each restaurant no matter where you go in the world. If that philosophy is applied to the church it becomes Satanic. It is boring, lifeless, plastic and not like God at all. We don’t want cookie cutter copies of consumer churches. We don’t want to be fighting for “market share”. We don’t want to be clones of the Market. The “bottom line” for God’s Church is holiness not the budget.

Paul says it well in Galatians (Galatians 5:15 NASB) But if you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed by one another. We need a Church community that is the exact opposite from the takeover, eat each other up, voracious consumer society and we will not achieve this while we live as competing denominations in the one local area.

We need to stop having panic attacks over “not our business” stuff like disputes in other churches or what deacon X said to deaconess Y last Sunday at church Z. Gossip could be a huge problem in a network . Other people will make different mistakes from the mistakes we make. Let them grow up by making their mistakes and let them leave us alone when we make ours while we maintain our love and acceptance of each other. Give other people the dignity that you would want under the same circumstances and unless there is a lot of evidence to the contrary it pays to believe that they are sincerely seeking God’s will just as you are and that they will sort things out just as you would.

We need to put the fences in the right place and pull them down if they are in the wrong place. If I wanted to kill a lot of people and get away with it I would build a fence at the top of a mountain ten metres from the edge of the highest cliff. People would want to get closer to the edge and hop the fence, walk right up to the real and now unguarded edge of the cliff and some would slip off and fall. But “it wouldn’t be my fault I put a fence up”. If I wanted to save lives I would put the fence right on the edge of the cliff and people would say ‘I’m glad that fence is there otherwise someone might fall off” and no-one would hope it and no-one would be killed because the danger is obvious and the fence is in the correct place. Eve had her fences in the wrong place when Satan tempted her she said “and if we eat it or even touch it we will die” so when she touched it and nothing happened she was made bold to eat it and you know the rest of the story. Young people are sometimes told that dancing is wicked. They soon find that its pleasurable and harmless. So they are emboldened to go further and further until they end up in real sin. So it is with the churches. We have fences keeping people away from other denominations when they should be keeping them away from worldliness and compromise. We need to decide where the real danger is and put the fences in the right place and tear down all the fences that are in the wrong place.

The Importance Of Connections

How could a matchstick pull over a ten tone truck? Well if you go to the edge of a precipice and connect the matchstick to a matchbox with a long thread and the matchbox to a biro and the biro to a small book on its edge by a string and connect the book to a larger volume and the big book to a baseball bat and the base ball bat to a bicycle balanced on its edge and the bicycle to a motorbike on its wheels and the motor bike to a small car connected to a larger car connected to a light truck, connected to the ten tonne truck...and you push the matchstick off the edge it will take the matchbox with it which will take the biro over the edge with it which will take the books which will take the baseball bat and as it whizzes to the end of its string it will pull down the bicycle which will upset the motorbike which will tug the small car over and as it flies down and jerks on its rope the big car will topple off the cliff, followed by the light truck followed eventually by the big ten tonne truck

Lesson: An unstable system on the brink of disaster can be brought down by a very small thing if that small thing is connected to bigger things which are connected to even bigger things etc. (e.g. domino effects and the Asian economic crisis etc)

The denominational system is on the edge of falling over. You are like the matchstick in the story and you are connected to someone who is connected to someone else who may be influential in your denomination. Connect with someone one notch higher than you in the pecking order and then ask them to do likewise once they are convinced of the need for change - and so on. Build the connections then jump! You may start the dominos falling and soon a seemingly immense system may start the process of transformation.

Please note that the analogy does not imply I want denominations to plummet to some terrible destructive doom. I will say it again - I want a slow sane, planned, deliberate and godly changeover.

Now may the God of peace be with you as you build the Church of God.

The New Apostolic Reformation

C. Peter Wagner the church growth historian has identified a new movement in the church which he has called the "New Apostolic Reformation". He sees churches networked together and run by apostles in a new format that pursues holiness and mobilizes the church for mission. This has made many people nervous (including me) as the danger of false and presumptive apostles seems not to be adequately covered. At the same time I see a need for the charismatic and Pentecostal movements to mature under strong leadership. I find the basis for this is the epistle of 2 Corinthians. It is interesting to note the increasing maturity and accountability as one moves from 1 Corinthians to 2 Corinthians. I believe the church in the immoral and pagan West today is a "Corinthian" church and while we are Spirit-filled and gifted we have a lot of maturing to do. We need to "move from 1 Corinthians to 2 Corinthians" and to do that we need the raising up of leadership. Some of the issues are canvassed below.

Body To Bride

1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians are connected epistles. 1 Corinthians is the "primer" where Paul laid down his prescriptions for the church in pagan Corinth. Now in 2 Corinthians he is coming to enforce those prescriptions and set the church the right way up. In 1 Corinthians the church is the body that had to function in a coordinated manner, now the body is becoming a bride - purified for the return of Christ. I see this as occurring in the church today. Over the last twenty years we have seen enormous emphasis on "body life" and gifts and being the body of Christ. We have heard many sermons from 1 Corinthians and become an organized and coordinated church. Now God is moving the body to become a bride - He is calling for purity. He will soon raise up apostles who will press for holiness in the body. There will also be false apostles trying to ensnare us thus 2 Corinthians is very relevant for where the Church is at today.

Internal Focus To External Focus

In 1 Corinthians Paul deals with issues such as morality, marriage, spiritual gifts, divisions, pride, the Lord's Supper, ethics, idols and love. All mainly internal church issues. In 2 Corinthians he moves on to consider the nature of true and false apostles, the basis for church discipline and the nature of relationships between the church and visiting apostles and the church and other churches - particularly those churches overseas (in Jerusalem) that were in financial need. The issues of 1 Corinthians are still there and immorality is still a concern but it is within the context of church discipline overall. Paul is trying to get the Corinthian church, now that much of the mess has been fixed up, to look outward to its responsibilities to other churches, to promises it has made and to discipline itself for holiness. He is striving to make it a grown up church - discerning, wise, and providing for the needs of others. He wants them to think of "regions beyond". Paul as a true apostle does not go into other people's areas but is constantly trying to go into "regions beyond". He has an external focus - he does not go to the nice churches to collect big offerings (as the false apostles do) but to places where there are no churches and supports himself with his own hands. I see this as saying a few things to today's church:

We need to go beyond getting gifts to using gifts. That the focus of a mature church is beyond its four walls. That churches exist in relationship to other churches and in networks of believers. That we need to consider the needs of poverty stricken Christians overseas (2 Corinthians Chapters 8&9). That leaders should focus on ministering to "regions beyond" rather than just

ministering to rich, attractive Western churches. That churches need to be discerning in how they build external relationships but still do it.

True and False Apostles

2 Corinthians deals a great deal with the distinction between true apostles such as Paul and the Satanic counterfeit "super-apostles" with their greedy deceptive boasting.

The word apostle is Greek for "sent one/messenger" and means the same as the Latin "missionary" from "missio - I send". Apostles are ones sent by God to lay the foundations of the church. As noted below there are four main types of apostles. Jesus who is the Chief Apostle (Hebrews 3:1) and who was sent from the Father. The Twelve who were called and sent by Jesus Christ (Matthew 3:2, Luke 6:13-16) and the Post-Ascension Apostles who were sent as Jesus' gifts to the church until it was fully matured (which has not yet happened) and who are part of the five-fold ministry of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers - for the equipping of the saints. These post-ascension apostles were a result of Jesus ascending into heaven (Eph 4:1-11) and therefore are NOT the Twelve who were selected before this time. They include Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Epaphroditus, Junia, James the Lord's brother, Apollos, Andronicus, Matthias and two "unnamed apostles".

Thus missionaries today who plant churches and establish new works of God and have authority over a number of churches may technically be considered "apostles". This however is such a confusing term to the majority of believers that it is probably best substituted with "church planter" "founder" or "overseer". Or similar appropriate term. Signs, wonders and miracles are seen as the "signs" of an apostle (2 Cor 12:12).

False "sent out ones" range from Mormons on bicycles to slick presenters of alternative gospels. True apostles are characterised by right doctrine, laying no other foundation other than Christ Jesus, the enduring of suffering, financial integrity, the testimony of Christ even in weakness - and signs, wonders and miracles done through their hands.

Notes on Apostles Today - possibly 4 main types of apostles:

1. Jesus - the Apostle and High Priest of our confession. (Sent by the Father)
2. The Twelve (Sent by Jesus Christ)
3. Post-Ascension Apostles - Ephesians 4:11 (Sent by the Holy Spirit)
 - (a) Founders: Paul, James the Lord's brother.
 - (b) Those that follow the founders: Titus, Barnabas
 - (c) Church based apostles: Andronicus and Junia, Priscilla & Aquila
4. False apostles

Names of apostles in Scripture (from "All The Apostles In The Bible" by Herbert Lockyer):

Those designated as being an "apostolos" are:

1. The Lord Jesus Christ (Hebrews 3:1)
2. Andrew, Bartholomew, James the son of Alpheus, James the son of Zebedee, John, Judas Iscariot, Matthew, Peter, Phillip, Simon the Canaanite/Zealot, Thaddeus, Thomas (Matthew 3:2, Luke 6:13-16)
3. Andronicus (Romans 16:7), Apollos (1 Cor 4:6-9), Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25-30) James the Lord's brother (Galatians 1:19), Junias or Junia (Romans 16:7), Matthias (Acts 1:13-26), Paul (2 Cor 1:1), Silas & Timothy (1 Thess. 1:1, 2:6 2 Thess 1:1), Two Unnamed Apostles (2 Cor 8:18-23)

Themes From 2 Corinthians

The following are some themes from 2 Corinthians that I believe are tremendously relevant to the state of the church today as the New Apostolic Reformation unfolds.

The paragraphs are brief to keep this chapter short so please look up the Scripture references as you do so for an even deeper understanding.

1. True apostles and suffering. Treasure in earthen vessels. Strength in weakness. (2 Corinthians 1:3-11, 4:7-11, 16-18, 11: 16-33, 12:7-10) Power - (2 Corinthians 4:7, 6:7, 12:9, 13:4)

True apostles do the "hard yards" for Jesus and are prepared to go to poor places and unknown regions to preach the gospel to regions beyond. They feel their frailty acutely are "exhibited last of all" (1 Cor 4:9) and have their treasures in earthen vessels so that the glory may be not from man but from God.

Power is perfected not in riches, glamour or high status but "in weakness". In fact on all four of the occasions when the word power is used in 2 Corinthians it is used in association with the idea of power in weakness. The true apostle has no confidence in themselves or their human abilities but great confidence in God.

2. False apostles and greed. Deception. Boastfulness. Externals as credentials. Competent "in themselves". Appearances. "Performers". (2 Corinthians 2:17, 11:13-21, 10:7-18, 4:2, 12:11-13)

The false apostles come along to existing works of God and preach new things - a different Christ, a different gospel and a different Holy Spirit (11:13-21). They distort the truth in cunning and deceptive ways and use secret and shameful strategies (4:2). They do so mainly for financial gain "peddling the word of God for profit" (2:17). They create churches that love the externals of good oratory and polished performance and which sneered on the "unimpressive" Paul as a result. (10:10-11). They are a financial burden on the church - which Paul was not.

3. The Corinthians past history as a church with a blotched copybook (2 Cor. 12:21, 1 Cor. Chap. 5,6,10,11, 15)

Corinth was a new church plant in a pagan and debauched city and the lifestyle of its members was only slowly changing into a Christlikeness that few understood. In 1 Corinthians Paul chastised the church for disunity, factions, spiritual pride, tolerating incest, having sex with prostitutes, getting drunk at communion, being disorderly during worship and major doctrinal errors such as believing that there was no resurrection from the dead. It was a church with a very blotched copybook that Paul was trying to turn into the very bride of Christ. (2 Cor 11:2)

4.A church rebuked. (2 Corinthians 1:23-2:11, 10:1-6, 11:1-6, 12:20-13:10)

Paul gives them the understanding about what is wrong in 1 Corinthians and comes in 2 Corinthians to set things right one and for all. Here Paul is enforcing what he has told them. His words are strong and forceful "I will spare no-one" etc. 2 Corinthians is an ultimatum to consider holiness and get in line with God's standards. I believe God is at the point of giving the church in the West just such an ultimatum - he is coming soon and will not spare those who have been immoral or divisive.

5.Paul's love and confidence in the Corinthians despite their blotched copybook. (2 Corinthians 2:3-4, 7:4, 7:14-16, 8:22-24, 9:2-4, 11:11, 12:15)

Paul does not just threaten however. He also repeats his great love and total confidence in them. He opens wide his heart to them that they may appropriate Christ and asks that they may also open wide their hearts to Paul.

6.Holiness and church discipline. The call to a fully Christ-like life. (2 Corinthians 2:14-16, 3:16-18, 5:9-10, 5:16-6:2, 6:14-7:1, 12:20-13:10)

Paul calls the church to be separate from the surrounding Corinthian culture which was so debauched that "to play the Corinthian" meant "to commit sexual immorality". Up on the hill in Corinth was the temple of Aphrodite with its 1000 prostitutes for pagan sexual rites. Corinth was a port city where sailors took their recreation. Many of the congregation had lived this lifestyle before becoming Christians. Paul calls them to separate themselves to Christ and be holy and "counter-cultural". To "come out from among them" and then God would bless and call the sons and daughters of the most high. Every call to separation from the world in the Bible is also a call to more intimate fellowship with the Father.

7.The place of spiritual authority – building up not tearing down. Apostolic validation. (2 Corinthians 1:23-24, 10:8, 12:12, 13:10)

Paul said his authority was "for building you up, not tearing you down". In the past church discipline has often been severe and destructive and so it is seldom practised today. People were disfellowshipped for trivial reasons such as talking to the wrong person or cosmetics. It often became an exercise of power by a dominating and manipulative pastor or elder. However the proper use of church discipline is to get people to become like Jesus Christ. Just as a football team may discipline an errant athlete with the aim of bringing them on track so that they eventually become winners so the church should discipline people for holiness. Also if we are disciplined by others now it saves us from being disciplined by God later. (1 Corinthians 11:31-32 NASB) But if we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged. {32} But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord in order that we may not be condemned along with the world.

8. The Church as the Betrothed. (2 Corinthians 11:1-3)

Paul says that he has promised them to Christ as a "pure virgin" in other words as a perfected and undefiled church. The Church is the bride of Christ that Jesus died to redeem just as Hosea bought back Gomer from a life of degradation. The possibility of the Corinthians being pure seems remote by human calculation but the blood of Christ is powerful enough to accomplish even this and so Paul made it his aim in ministry. Apostles are interested in the ongoing quality of the church - not just its mere establishment or the numbers baptised.

9. Apostles moving into "Regions Beyond". (2 Corinthians 10:13-18)

Paul says that his great desire is to preach the gospel in "regions beyond you" (2 Cor 10:16). The apostolic vision is for an international church that reaches Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth. As the church moves into maturity it will be concerned with much more than just the four walls of the local church or the surrounding parish boundaries. It will find ways of reaching out to "regions beyond". As noted before 2 Corinthians has an external focus. The apostolic move will see the church planted in difficult areas where it has never been planted before. As someone has said "There is no such thing as a closed country, you can go into any country as long as you are prepared to not come out". Paul was prepared to take the gospel anywhere – no matter what the cost.

10. Networked churches - churches together (2 Corinthians 1:12-17, chaps 8&9)

In 2 Corinthians Christian networks are very much in evidence. The Macedonians (just north on the Corinthians and the "hillbillies" compared to the sophisticated city dwellers of Corinth) are often extolled for their generosity and for the support of Paul's ministry. To be sure there is a bit of playing on the rivalry between the regions in order to get them to follow Jesus more fully but it is hardly subtle and both the Corinthian and Macedonian Christians seem to buy into it with gusto. Then there is the collection for the poverty stricken church in Jerusalem. There is further evidence of networking in Paul's search for Titus, the composition of the team that handled the collection and the planning behind Paul's visit to Corinth. It is evident that the Corinthian church a) received ministry from other churches and visiting apostles b) gave financially to other churches and some of the visiting apostles c) was involved in famine relief. It was connected into a network which was vital for its church discipline, ministry and Christian activity. The insulated and self-contained modern local church is thus very possibly contrary to the pattern of the New Testament church.

11. Giving to Christian aid organizations which demonstrate financial integrity. (2 Corinthians chap. 8 & 9)

The church in Jerusalem was experiencing persecution from both the Jews and the Romans and also the famine predicted by Agabus. Their possessions has been seized and that had been imprisoned and exposed to public insult and persecution - and apparently endured it joyfully at least at first (Hebrews 10:32-34) "knowing that you yourselves has a better and more lasting possession". They were now in need of aid from other churches and Paul was collecting an offering from the Gentiles to relieve their poverty and also to help build unity between the Jewish and Gentile Christians. People of high and well known integrity were selected to handle the offering. (2 Cor 8:16-21) There was demonstrated accountability and integrity in this first Christian aid organisation. "(2 Corinthians 8:20 NASB) taking precaution that no one should discredit us in our administration of this generous gift."

Chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Corinthians are often used to preach weekly generous giving to the local church. In fact that are the opposite - they are exhorting weekly generous giving from the local church to Christians in distress overseas. The cash flow is outward not inward! The motive is not that the programs of the local church may run but that "there may be equality" between churches in the body of Christ. (2 Corinthians 8:13-15 NASB) For this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality-- {14} at this present time your abundance being a supply for their want, that their abundance also may become a supply for your want, that there may be equality; {15} as it is written, "HE WHO gathered MUCH DID NOT HAVE TOO MUCH, AND HE WHO gathered LITTLE HAD NO LACK."

As networks develop among churches blessing will flow to those churches that bless their poorer brethren financially. Support of new works in rural areas is one form that this is still practised today. However we still need to go one step further and provide financial relief, with integrity, to deserving churches in nations afflicted by drought, famine and poverty. God wants financial equality between brothers and sister churches in the body of Christ.

12. Spiritual warfare and Satan's schemes to destroy the church through deception, false teaching, immorality, persecution, division and accusation. (2 Corinthians 1:8-11, 2:5-11, 4:4, 10:3-5, 11:3-6; 11:13-21)

Satan is an ever-present foe in 2 Corinthians. From the opening chapters where Paul is fighting wild beasts at Ephesus and despairing of life itself through to chapter 11 on false apostles, divisive emissaries of Satan masquerading as servants of righteousness. Satan is called the "prince of this world", shown as the one that blinds those that are perishing to the truths of the gospel and the originator of ideas and pretensions that are set up against the knowledge of God. Paul seems to have had some first-hand experience of Satan because he says that he "masquerades as an angel of light" - perhaps Paul or someone close to him found this out through an encounter with an "angel" that went horribly wrong. Satan's plan for the average Christian is outlined in 2:5-11 - tempt them into sin, then expose them to judgment, have them overwhelmed by the outcome, ensure that they are not forgiven or restored but treated legalistically then drive them far from God. To ensure this plan fails Paul says for the church to restore the person subjected to church discipline as soon as they have repented "lest Satan outwit us -for we are not unaware of his schemes". (2 Corinthians 2:11) The apostolic is opposed at every turn by the Satanic. He will attempt to destroy those that emerge as apostles and to discredit the ministry by the scheme shown above - or as in Paul's case by portraying the apostle as dowdy, unimpressive and not a top notch performer on stage so that people turn to the more glamorous false apostles. These false apostles will perform false miracles and nine clear warnings are given in Scripture about them and their attempt to deceive the elect. (e.g 2Thess 2:5-11, Matt 24:24, Mark 13:22)

13. True and false revelation. The danger of pride. (2 Corinthians 11:1-6, 12:1-10, 10:1,2)

Paul received such an abundance of revelations that God gave him an affliction a "thorn in the flesh" - possibly a persecutor such as Alexander the coppersmith, so that he had to be content with insults and persecutions and to find that "My grace is sufficient for you" (12:1-10). Thus, in the apostolic, even true revelation can be intoxicating and spiritually dangerous if not accompanied by humility. False revelation such as that outlined in chapter 11 - where Paul speaks of another gospel, another Christ and another Holy Spirit is even worse. It leads people into captivity to false apostles who are servants of Satan. Thus a mature apostolic church needs first of all to be a discerning church believing only true revelation from God and able to tell true from false. In Hebrews maturity and deep revelation is imparted to those who have learned to tell good from evil. (Hebrews 5:14 NASB) But solid food is for the mature, who because of

practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil. Secondly the apostolic church needs to humble in the way it handles the truth and not puffed up with pride. Thus we need to have faith without gullibility and vision without deception.

For this to happen we need to develop...

- a) a deep knowledge of the Word especially in the elders and leaders of the church.
- b) a solid character that is humble and practised in discerning good from evil.
- c) the ability to wait on a revelation to see whether it is from God and to test it – so that we are not blown about by every wind of doctrine and every new fad.
- d) an intimacy with God so that we know the Presence of the Truth and can thus be sensitive to the intrusion of evil.
- e) the development of the anointing of the Holy Spirit so that we may be led by Him into "all truth" (John 14:26, 1 John 2:20,27, 1 Cor 2:9-16)

14. The desired future of the church –unity and purity - a discerning, disciplined and dynamic witness to the glory of the New Covenant in Christ Jesus. (2 Corinthians 2:12-5:21)

All this time, throughout the epistle, Paul is nudging the Corinthians towards Christ-likeness, towards being the pure Bride of Christ. In the early chapters of 2 Corinthians Paul frequently refers to the glory of the New Covenant and to the vast privilege of being ambassadors for Christ with a message of reconciliation. The church, when right with God, is a dynamic witness to the glory of God in the face of Christ and is being transformed from glory to glory by the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Cor 3) Thus the church is to both reflect God's glory and to be constantly transformed into it through the operation of the Holy Spirit. Glorification involves purification as one component and purification involves a separation from the world and from false doctrine and thus requires discernment and maturity. It is also impossible to have a glorious church if it is divided or disrupted so that unity and discipline under apostolic authority are key aspects of a church reflecting the glory of God. Thus as the church moves from body to bride and from immaturity to maturity it will become a united, pure, discerning and dynamic witness to the glory of the New Covenant under the discipline of true apostolic leadership.

Apostles And Church Discipline

The Management of Sin and Sinners In The First Century AD

by John Edmiston

This connects with the rest of Beyond Denominations in showing how a local area network can manage church discipline and in particular how such a local area network might function if the office of apostle was restored as C. Peter Wagner predicts.]

Over the past few years people I know have been involved in adultery, prostitution, credit-card fraud and paedophilia with little or no church discipline. Two of these cases have been public in the courts. We seem unable to manage major sin in the church. Either we react swiftly in condemnation or we counsel the sinner with a minor slap over the wrist. Sin is no longer strongly rebuked and sin, especially sexual immorality is now rampant in even the most conservative and Spirit-filled churches. I feel that this is grieving our God -who is holy and has called us to be holy as He is holy. While reading and studying 2 Corinthians I noticed how stern Paul's tone was and how he was obviously coming to set up some kind of court in the church (1 Cor 12:20-13:10). This prompted a wider study on how the apostles regarded sin and how the apostles managed the problem of sin and sinners in the New Testament church and these are the startling conclusions.

1. Sin was not absent in the early church particularly among the pagan converts. The Corinthians were tolerating incest (1 Cor 5:1ff), visiting prostitutes (1 Cor 6:15-17), being drunk at communion (1 Cor 11:21) , engaging in sexual immorality (1 Cor chaps 6&7), visiting idols temples (1 Cor chaps 8 & 10), compromising their faith (1 Cor 10:18-22) and following false apostles (2 Cor 11:1-15), and the recipients of James' epistle were quarreling, fighting and committing murder (James 4:2). Many churches were divisive or legalistic (Galatia) and embroiled in what we would call "New Age" teachings (Colossae and perhaps Ephesus). John had to warn his readers to flee from idolatry (1 John 5:21)
2. The sinners were called "saints" or holy ones even in Corinth. (1 Cor 1:1-3)
3. The sin was condemned and the sinners were sternly rebuked. (2 Cor 13:1-3)
4. The sinners were tried by the apostles in church courts. (Acts 5:11, 1 Corinthians 6:1-11, 2 Corinthians 12:20 ff). Having these trials adjudicated by itinerant apostles may have been a very wise move as they a) had the authority and b) were external to the fellowship and thus perceived as objective.
5. There were proper standards of evidence. Hearsay and gossip were not admissible. (2 Cor 13:1)
6. Punishable sins included: Strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances, impurity, immorality and sensuality (1 Cor 12:20,21) as well as numerous others such as those listed under point 1 and spiritual sins such as "lying to the Holy Spirit" (Acts 5:11) and being a wayward prophetess (Rev s2:20-24).

7. The penalties included death (Ananias and Sapphira Acts 5:1-11, Jezebels children Rev 2:20-24, those who were disorderly during the Lord's supper 1 Corinthians 11:30), illness (1 Cor 11:30, Rev 2:20-24) and the mysterious "being handed over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh" (1 Cor 5:5) as well as being banned from fellowship (1 Cor 5:11).

8. Christians were exhorted not to associate with immoral Christians. (1 Cor 5:1-11)

9. Heretics were not even to be given the time of day. (2 John 10,11)

10. Churches were warned in advance of the arrival of an apostle and were given time to repent. Titus was thus "received with fear and trembling". (2 Cor 7:14,15) and Paul gave advance warning of his visit to Corinth to set things right in the church (2 Cor 12:20-13:10).

11. If the person had not repented of their sin they were not spared. (2 Cor 13:1-4)

12. Once they had repented then loving restoration was in order. (2 Corinthians 2:5-11)

Forbidden Approaches To Church Discipline

Judging outsiders. Christians are only to judge Christians. (1 Cor 5:9-13)

Failing to reconcile and forgive after repentance. (Matthew 18:15-35, 1 Cor 2:5-11, Galatians 6:1)

Tolerating false teaching, idolatry or immorality. (2 John 10,11, 2 Cor 11:4, 1 Cor 5:1-13, Rev 2:20)

Taking matters to non-Christian courts. (1 Corinthians 6:1-11)

Taking minor matters of personal defrauding and cheating to court. (1 Cor 6::7,8)

Being hasty to judge others and not following a proces likely to lead to reconciliation. (Matthew 5:25,26 18:15-35)

Pastoral Applications Of The Above

1. The Church is to be holy, the pure Bride of Christ. (2 Cor 11:2).

2. Sin is serious and sin is wrong and unrepentant sin should be punished.

3. It is appropriate for Christians to set up proper courts with proper standards of evidence and preferably the presiding judge should be someone of authority from outside the fellowship. If apostles are raised up soon as some predict then this could be one of their functions.

4. The evident purposes of church discipline are: 1) The purity of the Church which will be presented to Christ as His body and His bride. 2) To make people fear God and grow in Christian maturity 3) To keep Christians from being contaminated and defiled by sin. 4) To get the sinner to repent. 5) To prevent future judgment by God. (1 Cor 11:30-32)

5. There are right and wrong ways to go about church discipline as outlined above. Church discipline flows from integrity and is never manipulative. (2 Cor 4:2) It is not there to get people

obedient to the pastor or to the church or to the organisation but only to be obedient to Christ Jesus. (2 Cor 10:1-6)

6. Forgiveness and restoration can only follow true repentance. Refusal to repent leads to judgment.

7. There needs to be an urgent restoration of church discipline obviously preceded by educating the congregation as to the correct approach and the proper standards of holiness for the Christian life.

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