

# *Perspectives*

*explorations in theology and practice*

**Understanding Transitions**

**Volume 2 (April 2023)**

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**Perspectives: explorations in theology and practice** continue in the theme of the 'explorations' series of books. On a given subject they are designed to provoke thought as well as presenting a perspective.

This second volume is a response to transitions, both at a personal and corporate level. The timing of transitions are not in our control but how we align ourselves to make the change in a fruitful way is a great challenge. I consider what I have written lays out the steps we can anticipate.

Biblical texts quoted are from The New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition, unless noted otherwise.

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## Introduction: Responding to Transition

All of life contains transition. From the womb to the end of life we will all experience transitions. It can be summed up in the phrase, 'constant change is here to stay', but we need to add another phrase to that, namely, 'but not all change takes place at a constant pace'. Some transitions take place without us almost noticing as we drift from one phase to another, but there are other transitions that mark a very distinct 'before' and 'after'.

Understanding what takes place during such transitions and how we respond is important for a number of reasons:

1. Transition is key as we can often miss our way at that time, and it can be very difficult to get back on track if we miss the signs that we are in transition.
2. Transition usually occurs when we are in a season of beginning to discover new fields or being more strongly established in a current one. If it is the latter it can be harder to move to the next phase.
3. At a time of change there are often a number of opportunities that open up and finding how to position ourselves to embrace one (or more) of those can be challenging.

When we face a significant personal transition these are some of the aspects that we are commonly involved:

- Transition will come before we are ready for it.
- There will be aspects that will bring it into our sight of vision sooner than we expected or before we wanted to be considering change.
- Transition will come before we have finished everything we had anticipated completing in the current phase and setting.
- If it is a larger transition it will be marked by a measure of crisis.
- There will be an element of grief that is experienced as we embrace the transition. Letting go will be an element, and it is important to let grief do its work, that work being one of cleansing.
- And finally how one leaves the last setting will be a key element in how well we enter the next one.

## **Issues of timing**

When personal transition is on the horizon we will notice that there are some prior 'warnings' - those warnings will differ for each individual, but God knows how to stir our nest, our personal comfort, and unsettle us. We will become aware that changes are coming. An uncertainty about the future can easily cause insecurity to quickly arise, but we must not allow uncertainty about the future to make us shrink back. Some of the warnings might include a general restlessness and also a number of dreams at night might well indicate change is coming, those dreams might not all be future related but could be dreams concerning the past, even childhood, as there are always internal factors that will be adjusted at a transition

time. There might be prophetic words that one receives that indicate a time of change. Sometimes those prophetic words might contain some measure of projectionism from the one giving it, so take any word both seriously and hold them lightly at the same time.

When transition is imminent I like to compare it to the wind blowing, doors will shake and rattle, attracting our attention; many times, though, the doors that rattle are not the ones that will open. It is good to push (gently) on those doors and see what lies behind them, but to do so without making a premature response. Transition is a time when doors that we thought would open actually either close (or prove to have never been open to us) as well as others that open. Not every door that rattles will open - but we take heart as this indicates that doors will open.

The major factor to discern in transition is to do with the timing. We are not to jump prematurely but the error that is often made is of staying too long. The first three points I wrote above indicate why it is so easy to stay too long:

- transition comes **before** we are ready for it
- it comes **sooner** than we expected it
- it comes **before we have finished** everything we had anticipated completing.

Unless one has an over-inflated view of oneself we will normally feel that we are not ready for the next phase. When the transition is even of a greater level the measure of stepping into the unknown will be greater. 'Just give me some more time', might well be our response, but in that time an opportunity can be missed to make the transition.

*[In writing that I do not intend to give the impression that we must get everything right, but I am aware that windows of opportunity open but do not stay open indefinitely.]*

The last of the three points ('before we have finished everything') is a major one to understand. If we have a vision for something to be accomplished and we have only discharged something like 80% of it that still means there is a lot more in our hearts to do. This factor is why many people hold on too long, and as they hold on they normally sadly discover that their fruitfulness diminishes as they try to outwork everything they had held on to. In certain situations there can even be an undoing of what was a positive prior input, and there will also be a missed opportunity for personal change. The window for transition does not remain open forever.

It seems to me that God allows us not to finish everything for at least two reasons:

- To deal with self-preservation (internal application)

Every level of moving on means that there has to be a blow to self-preservation. Abraham (father of faith) faced a very big challenge when he believed he had to offer up the very one that God had given him. That is important as new levels of life come from death; new levels of authority come from new levels of submission; new levels of revelation from the response to God in the darkness. We must resist holding on - to position, reputation, anticipation of reward / honour etc... and then there can also be the little thing of money involved. (Little thing?)

- To allow seed to go in the ground (external application)

Seed has to be sown and nature tells us that it disappears... Seed is sown in the hope of harvest. Any true vision that dies in this phase is like seed sown in the ground. If we see everything fulfilled then we will find it hard to sow for the next season. Sowing in that way is not necessarily joyful but is necessary, and later when we look back we can see the necessity of the pathway that we have walked.

Transition is personally disturbing and perhaps even threatening, and if we add that a common context for transition is that of crisis, we realise that even when we look forward to new possibilities they are unlikely to come without some measure of challenge and even trauma.

## **Crisis and transitions**

Larger transitions are often marked by a measure of crisis, and this is a very key factor to understand. Crisis (and crisis might result in chaos) is not something that sits easily with us. It is very natural to try and avoid crises and to seek to bring order to chaos.

The kind of crises that arise are often very natural ones. A meeting where something is presented to us and we feel it is unfair as it presents us in a wrong light; funding that dries up; opportunities that cease to come through; a relationship that ends or is forced into a new shape; a dream that dies; the list could go on.

The crises are normally external and beyond our control, sometimes as a result of some strange choices made by others that directly impact us. The effect of the crises is of narrowing us down - some old options are no longer there, and there does not seem to be the possibility of as much fruit in the (hoped-for) coming phase.

It is at this time that the Lord is working in us:

- what he does in us he can then do through us.
- authority is established in us through how we respond at the low points.

At a later stage we might well look back and see how the Lord was in the crises. (Here we can think of Joseph who later all but said the brothers were innocent as the Lord put them up to it! That being an emotional not a theological response by Joseph; we should not amplify our feelings to the level of theological truth. God does work in and through all things for a good outcome - that is clearly a theological truth and takes the pressure off us to get everything right.) The process of walking through any crisis is one of learning to trust God at a deeper level and in that process faith is developed ready for the sphere that we are being brought into.

The pathway to the future is through a restricting doorway and this is where there is a temptation to avoid the restriction and simply find another solution. The end of a phase is usually marked by a narrowing down before something new opens up. This inevitably leads to a grieving process - we look at that next.

## **The experience of Grief in the process**

I noted above that there will be an element of grief and it is important to let that work its cleansing power.

Grief is, of course, something no-one wants to go through, but transition means leaving something behind, the closing of doors and it means losing in order to gain. I believe in the process of transition



(and of course the greater the transition the greater the level of potential grief... and for the presence of one of grief's partners: regret).

There are typical emotions that are triggered by grief:

- **Shock and anger**

The level of shock will be in proportion to how quickly the ending of the phase came, but regardless of how quickly the ending took place, a common experience is one of anger. A heart-felt response of 'oh no' (or where the word 'no' is spelt with a 'sh' at the beginning and a 't' at the end!). This is no bad thing and it acts as a measure of emergency first-aid. The anger of course is often aimed at the system, the people or even at God. An anger that is suppressed is more dangerous than an anger that is expressed.

- **Denial**

There then can often come a period of denial, with a belief that something is not going to end, that things will simply continue as they have always been (again I am describing the larger transitions here). The denial acts as an anaesthetic to help with the pain of what is taking place. However, the denial phase has to be worked through in order to come out the other side. Denial by itself will hold the person in place with a false hope - and such hope stifles the ability to find real hope for a fresh future.

- **Memories**

The memories that surface are to help us learn - taking the best of

what has been and leaving behind what we need to. We will never have yesterday again, but those days were intended to prepare us for what is to come.

- **Vacuum**

This tends to happen at the same time as the memories. 'What now?' type questions. Pondering on 'what could have been / should have been' is when the power of regret can overwhelm. But in this period there is the potential for faith and vision to grow... in the vacuum this can fluctuate between emptiness, regret, amazement, silence and fresh vision.

So the grieving process of leaving behind something that is not completely finished (leaving amidst crisis) is a very real experience. During this time the Lord is doing a work inside us of cleansing us from the past, even from the good elements of the past that will not be the guiding factor in the future, and he is encouraging fresh faith to rise.

## **Leaving and entering**

Grief is painful but necessary, being the pathway that will enable us to leave well. Leaving well is important, for how we exit will in part determine how well we enter the subsequent phase. This is true at many levels - the old adage that is often spoken in the context of marriage that: 'there has to be a leaving in order for there to be a cleaving' is very true. It is not that the old setting was intrinsically wrong, simply that there has to be a wholehearted embracing of any new phase in life. There might even be an element of this that lies behind Jesus' instruction to the disciples to shake the dust from their

shoes if they were not received. It acts as a symbolic statement of judgement on that town, but also gives the disciples a new direction without the encumbrances of the previous situation.

With a large transition the crisis, leading to grief, forces us to prepare for the separation that will be necessary. It is vital that there can become a wholehearted connection with the new situation, that any level of regret ('if only...') is dealt with.

The first element is to try and ensure that the previous situation is left well. This involves thankfulness for all that has been done, for all the lessons that have been learned. It is not wise to leave a situation saying - 'I wish I had never been there / done that', unless of course it was clearly a wrong place to be. The Lord is with us in every situation and that becomes an element we have to embrace. To leave saying, 'thank you, Lord, for all that I have experienced' is a wonderful dynamic and gives a good platform for what comes after. To leave with only criticism of the old scenario is not a mature position to take, and often if we do so we will find that response repeats with yet again criticism of the next situation. Eventually a lack of thankfulness will lead to a measure of cynicism.

Arriving at the position of thankfulness can take time, and if there is an overwhelming sense of regret that can be very difficult, but simply burying one's head in the sand and denying what took place is not helpful.

Likewise if there are painful experiences that we had that need to be learned from, or even if there are apologies to be made then as far as possible this needs to be embraced. Leaving well, even if it is not

possible to reconcile all aspects, is important.

Entering the new phase requires faith. God is a God who is always looking forward, he is a redemptive Lord and we can enter a new phase positively. In each phase we should expect a greater level of effectiveness. This might not mean increasing outward success or greater profile simply greater effectiveness. *[Life in the new covenant is defined not by what happens in us, but what is taking place through us.]*

Once we realise that effectiveness is never measured by fame and fortune but the effect of our choices and lives on the wider world we can gladly look for that to increase as we mature. Effectiveness, visible and measurable, or hidden, can be connected to what I term 'time-lines'.

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## Time Lines

The idea behind the concept of time lines is that we develop in who we are as we allow the Lord to work in us, and that this takes place across certain phases of our lives. Maturity is related to how we respond to what the Lord asks us at any given phase. It would therefore be possible to be a more mature younger person and then to become less mature later in life. It can be that we end up with the Christian community where those older appear to be more mature but in reality are less mature and end up holding back the work of the Spirit.

- It is very difficult to put exact ages on what takes place at a

given phase but I will put a rough guideline below.

- In what I write there are aspects that are probably highly subjective, but I hope the rough outline might act as some kind of hazy roadmap.
- And for many (probably all) of us we will not establish everything in our lives that could have been, so we have to also look to the Lord to redeem ‘the years that the locusts have eaten’.

I am going to use the following analogy as a grid - (remember the ages are ever-so approximate):

- A phase when we **run** (age 15-33)
- A phase when we **walk** (33-55)
- A phase when we **sit** (55-?)

(I do not mean that when one is ‘running’ there will be no walking or sitting, but that in each phase the activity mentioned is what is the central aspect.)

We can add to the above a prior phase, one in which we have little say over: our birth, family, schooling, early upbringing. This we can call a sovereign / coincidental / accidental / ‘just what it was’ phase (dependent on one’s theology!). Regardless of how we entitle the phase, the aspect that we recognise is that much of what takes place in this phase is not as a result of our choices, but God is not absent. And perhaps there is a phase that could lie beyond the sitting phase - though I consider that it is probably simply an extension of that sitting phase.

## An 'accidental' phase

I begin with this phase, taking place from birth (and pre-birth as the generational inheritance also has a bearing) through to somewhere in the mid-teenage years.

The sovereign phase will be summed up with 'I had / did not have a happy childhood' and then the details of family background, economic setting, educational experience, peer-level childhood experiences and the like will be added to that statement. These are all experiences over which we had little, or even no, choice but they are experiences that shape who we are and our future world-views.

It is later in life that we will come to terms with those aspects, and they can either become major blockages, or major building blocks for the future. God is a redeemer and often as we receive healing and a fresh perspective on those early times that those very events become releasers of the life of God through us for others.

Moses' childhood experiences (name meaning 'drawn out of water') are connected to his later anointing which manifests as under God he is able to draw many people through the water of the Red Sea. This example might be very dramatic but illustrates how later life and how the earliest of phases can relate together.

There are of course events in later life that we had no control over and those also are events that we need to learn how to respond to at the time. They can either make us or hinder us - dependent on our responses. All such events become the potential building blocks for one's life.

## A running phase

Let me put a rough age on this of around 15-33 years of age.

- **Tests** that are faced are integrity ones

At the heart of integrity is honesty. Honesty with ourselves and speaking and living in such a way that we do not communicate falsehoods. The downfall of Judas was that he could never own up to his love for money. This eventually led him to the place where he betrayed his Lord (although the power of the cross is that he was delivered of his life-long addiction before he committed suicide).

Obedience and tests over basic areas of compromise will also feature. Those basic areas will test our response to issues sexual, financial and the desire for reputation.

- The spirit of **independence** will be dealt with

We will learn how to serve the vision of others, not simply our own. This can, and often does, bring us to a place where we are frustrated that we are not being released to pursue our own vision.

We will learn to say 'yes' in response to putting ourselves in the place where we can serve others. This is not a 'yes' to abusive requests, but the self-independent attitude that 'no-one will tell me what to do' will be challenged.

- Our **identity** is going to be established as a daughter / son

As we go through this phase we will learn that our identity is not tied

up in what we do and our achievements, but in who we are in relationship to God as Father. Performance will not be our foundation but we will find security in the acceptance of heaven.

- **Faith** will be developed

We will learn that the gap between what we aspire for will accommodate doubt, disappointment and failure, but we will also discover that faith can build a bridge across that gap. The faith in this phase will be expressed in terms of calling for God's purposes. There will be a growing unwillingness to accept compromise, and an unwillingness to accept explanations as to why something has not come to pass.

Taking a risk and displaying courage will be two elements that manifest in our walk.

- We will be **inspired** by the message of others and will repeat their words

Sometimes we might not have embodied those messages ourselves, certainly many of them we will not have truly lived through, but in finding heroes we will embrace what they teach. We will be tested with regard to what we seek to embrace, but the messages we resonate with will relate to the direction we are moving toward.

- **Finances** are often tight

In this phase we will learn the power of sacrifice and will begin to learn how to handle money so that it does not control us. This is a



vital aspect that will determine how far one can advance.

In this phase we will run, sometimes run up the wrong mountain, but will be ready to run up the next one. Mistakes are a vital part of the learning process. We will be frustrated with those who are walking, often viewing them as having settled down. Our adventures will tend not to allow much self-reflection so we can develop an arrogance that will have to be dealt with at some stage.

## **A walking phase**

Let me put a rough age on this of around 33-55.

In the running phase the tests are ones of integrity, now the primary tests are ones that are relational.

- **Relational tests**

We will learn the value of reconciliation and how to listen to others... but we will also learn the painful area of drawing a line on certain issues that cannot be resolved, learning how to live at peace with all 'as far as is possible'. Though unresolved areas relationally will not be how we want it to be, we will learn that situations that are beyond our control we have to live with.

Relationally we will also learn now how to say 'no'. Having had the spirit of independence dealt with we will now have a greater right to say 'no, I cannot walk that path'. Our obedience to the Lord above all other relationships will come to the fore. A 'no' at a human level will increase our ability to say 'yes' to the divine level.

We will also learn in this phase the power of apology and how to take the pathway of humility, similar to Abraham when he faced the relational challenge from Lot. He did not insist on what was right but offered Lot choice and distance.

In the walking phase it will not be simply serving the vision of others as serving will move to supporting, with an ability to influence and challenge those visions.

- We learn how to respond to **failure and disappointment**

A rich lesson that we will learn is that we do not know as much as we once thought we knew. We will embrace the fact that not everything works out the way we expect. In this phase we will accept the reality of our own weaknesses more readily.

- **Faith** that is developed will include restful trust

Faith to overcome all things will not be the only expression but an ability to trust even when there are no answers will grow; aggressive faith will yield to a restful (but not passive) trust. Rest and peace are to become our companions. Thankfulness in the face of (apparent) unanswered prayer becomes a very powerful element that the Lord adds to our lives.

- We will learn how to **influence** others and to **support** them

This phase is when we will develop more partners to walk with on the path. There will be a lot of mutual-encouragement. And there will be the opportunity to mentor others. One of the challenges that arise is whether this mentoring / influencing releases those people or we

use them to begin to build a power base. We have to learn the power also of creating vacuums for others to develop. Absence as well as presence will have to become our 'mode' of being.

- Success is now less personal and **more corporate**

The importance of 'I' will diminish and when others move forward there will be a rejoicing that others ('we') have made a difference.

- We begin to develop many messages that are our **own**

(By message I do not mean sermons, but life-messages that we pass on to others.) We will begin to discover that through our life-experiences there is a measure of wisdom that God is depositing in us. We identify that though we might not have 'silver and gold' that we do have something that is personal to ourselves.

- Financially we learn to **steward**

We learn how to sow strategically in order to make a difference. We will learn how to handle money (though this does not mean we will have a lot) and there will be training for us, so that as we handle finances well, we begin to develop a stewardship of spiritual things.

In this phase we will walk, sometimes we will walk in the wrong direction, but that will not be so common. We will have an ability to reverse direction fairly easily. The real key to this phase is finding the walking partners with whom we become mutual-encouragers. We will be ready to stand in the gap between those who run and those who sit. An ability to self-reflect will grow and our mouths will become a little smaller and our ears a little larger. A big danger,

though, is of passivity setting in and living with the status quo, passively accepting things as they are.

## A Sitting phase

Rough age frame: 55-?

A sitting phase is not retirement into either a vacuum or into self-absorption. It is not about an abandonment from life but is about a change of phase. It will mean less visibility but becoming a greater resource to others: to those running and those walking.

In the sitting phase the tests are ones of finding a new place in relationship to others. It will be very demanding particularly with a measure of muteness when seeing the mistakes (and potential mistakes) of others and also then standing with them once they have made mistakes as well as becoming part of the solution for them. Abraham not only gave way to Lot and took the humble pathway, he was there to rescue him when he found himself in trouble.

In this phase there is tremendous opportunity to connect people and effective connections are made when we are often simply the catalyst in the mix.

- We learn how to **strengthen** those who have walked into failure and disappointment

We will have discovered new resources to believe in people. We will believe that those who have failed but have allowed the spirit of humility to cover them that they can not only be strengthened and restored but they can become a resource to others.

- The faith that is developed is expressed as **resilience**

We will become more able to communicate the big sweep of God at work in history. We will understand that the work of God has wonderful inbreakings and increases, but that with or without those inbreakings we carry a long-term trans-generational understanding that we are all here to play our (small) part and commit to the 'long haul'.

This big picture faith means we are willing increasingly to act small. To find the few to give to them what we have without any strings attached. The work we are involved in becomes truly God's work not ours and we will be very content to influence the few, understanding that a few influencing a few can lead to multiplication.

- **Success** moves beyond the immediate context

'I' has given way to 'we' but now in this phase it is being shaped as a legacy for the future and that legacy is not one that has to carry our name on it. Anonymity becomes easier to embrace.

- We carry **one message** that has many expressions

The days of being influenced by many become less, the streams of influence now flow more as a river, and in one sense there will not be a lot more change to take place. Of course continual changes of attitude, growth of humility, etc., but by this phase we have become the person we essentially are.

It is not unusual for there to be a strategic shift at this stage into a new situation that releases the person we are. (Or there can be an

opposite shift due to the tiredness of the previous years - we need to be careful at this stage that tiredness does not dictate such shifts, though a new situation where we are refreshed to be an active support can come together.)

In this phase we will sit, rejoicing when we see others go much further than we do. Our words to criticise will be few, likewise there will be few words of correction - we will have learned that the Holy Spirit requires our silence more than our speech. The key to this phase is allowing those coming up to be the ones who change the furniture and the 'decor' of the house. Connecting to the few and many times only on a few occasions will be understood as investing in the future.

The weakness that will try and grip us in this phase is of either trying to hold on to what has been or to slow everything down through our 'wisdom'. I think this can be the least visible phase, but by the grace of God the most influential.

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The likelihood is that all of us will have missed some important steps and through it all as we cultivate humility and dependence on God we can look for the years that the locusts have eaten to be restored.

In facing the tests along the way it is easy to see that if we do not deal with the internal tests in the running phase we will find it hard to deal with the relational tests of the walking phase, and the call toward (public) anonymity in the sitting phase. If we fudge issues then we will be trying to move on but will find that we are being dragged back.

Genuine repentance accompanied by humility is very powerful, and so we can rely on the grace of God to restore what we were unable to hold on to. If there are tests that we should have overcome in a previous phase we will normally face them later but in a shorter period of time we can win through. In months we can deal with what might have taken years for us to deal with at an earlier stage.

In using the running, walking, sitting analogy I am aware that life does not compartmentalise itself in nice neat portions. In each phase we can mature, yet in a very real sense maturity is relative. I might be more mature now as a 52 year old than when I was 22 - that should be obvious for all to see; however I might have been a more mature 22 year old than a mature 52 year old. Potentials that were obvious might not have been realised.

In community life we should consider who should make the adjustments? The younger or the older? Hezekiah messed it up for the future when he failed to adjust for future generations. Should it not be that as we get older that as we realise that we are graciously allowed to connect to those younger, that we are the ones who are allowed to be inconvenienced, and as a result find that even we are being renewed.

Here's to a rising generation of runners, walkers and sitters. Three generations in maturity, not judging one another, but moving together.

## Corporate Transitions

Personal transitions can be challenging but often corporate transitions are even more so. In these decades there are probably many necessary corporate transitions that need to be embraced as dominant cultures can no longer hold that central dominant position. Styles of leadership, the purpose of being in community and how that is expressed are rightly coming under pressure. Christian wise in the West we are truly in a post-Christendom phase, and even where Christendom still reigns it seems to me that the demise of that will be speedy. I shed no tears over that, although the insecurities that are raised are many. We are being called to a journey that has many pitfalls.

I have often thought about how can we change the church - and of course the language is wrong - only God can do that. (I write initially about the church, but the application is wider - to all corporate bodies of people.) Laying the language on one side, there are two main convictions that have grown within me:

1) we need to emphasise the release of the body. Rather than say 'the church is the body of Christ' it will be helpful to begin to say 'the body of Christ is the church'. This will help us start not with what we think we understand, but give our energies to the release of God's people and only when they are released do we have the church.

It seems to me that much of what is termed 'mission-shaped church' is still a central organisation that encourages mission. Surely mission-shaped is where the body of Christ is permissioned and encouraged to live life purposefully where it is, rather than



somewhere else.

2) the second aspect is to consider what I have termed 'double conversions'. Peter or Cornelius, who is converted? The Bible is very provocative to evangelicals for Peter says that prior to Cornelius' receiving the Jesus message that he was already accepted by God; thus indicating that maybe the narrative is more about Peter's conversion - three times he has the vision of the sheet coming down from heaven and then is confronted by three visitors on the doorstep; the number 3 being a major marker in Peter's spiritual journey.

So the second way in which there will be a change is when the church is converted by what God is doing in the world. The world needs Jesus, but the church needs the world.

The only constant is that there will be constant change. A theory such as chaos theory is both challenging: we do not like chaos; and comforting: chaos can produce an order all of itself (and without our help) that is life- and releasing-focused. When we decide that we are going on a journey to a place called 'there' the one thing we know is that 'there' is not 'here'. We might always be 'here' but are always going away from 'here' to 'there'! That much can be clear.

Maybe I am using language that sounds confusing but perhaps the language is helpful because I am seeking to say that we have to be real and not ideal. We will always be where we are - accept it thankfully, and humbly; we will never 'arrive'. Yet we must not lose sight of a vision of a new scenario rising. God is a God who answers prayer - I am so optimistic that there will be a shift in the Western

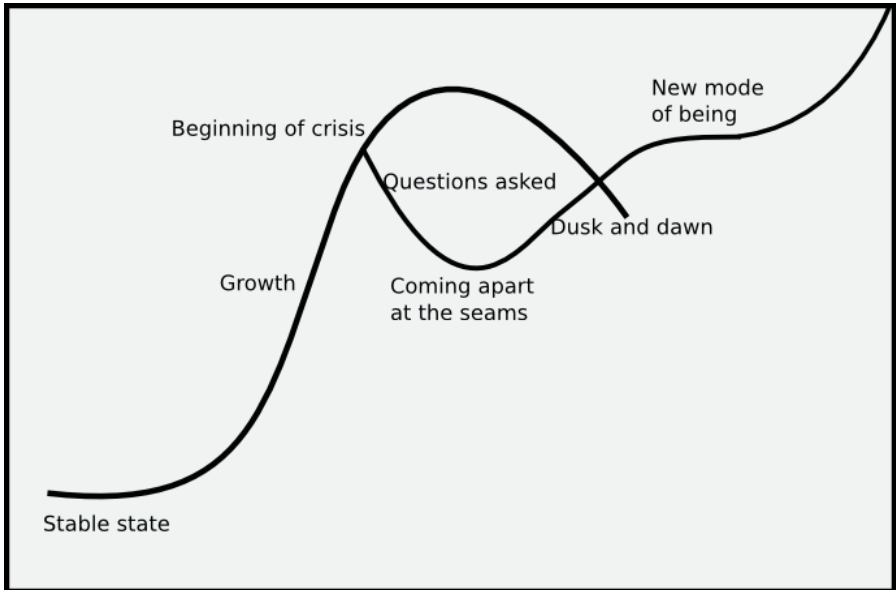
world, and in the Western church.

Change is constant but not always at a constant pace and in the first quarter of this century there will be major changes in the church in the Western world, so I trust that what I outline here will help give some understanding to the common uncomfortable pathway during times of great change. If we can understand how to traverse major change then we will be better equipped to cope with the adjustments that are needed during less traumatic times.

I write with a perspective that not all groups of people are asked to journey in the same way and at the same pace. This does not make one group further on than others, or superior to others. As Jesus said to Peter (John 21) 'what is that to do with you?' We each must make the response we have to make, so I am writing to those who have found themselves being disturbed from top to bottom.

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## A map for change



I have borrowed and adapted a common curve used in explaining growth and development. Here is how I am reading this:

**Stage 1:** a stable state leading to growth or fulfilment of vision. This is when leadership is clear, everyone knows their place and what is expected of them. Can life get any better than this - for we all belong to something of significance?

**Stage 2:** the beginning of crisis. Crisis and yet the curve is destined to go up further - so the question will come from some as it will be

easy to deny that there is a crisis. If there are relational or personal weaknesses the tensions will begin there, hidden at first, only later to become visible. Because the growth can continue it takes faith to see that major change must take place. Insecurities will also surface as any threat of change always threatens the status quo.

At this stage there are two paths open. With two paths open there will always be disagreement and even to some extent division. The path of growth is still visible, indeed it is more visible than the path that will lead to the next curve.

In the space that opens questions will be raised, questions that probably were not present prior. Why these questions arise and for whom they are an issue will have to be explored further.

**Stage 3:** now the world views are pulling people in two different directions. And overall there is a coming apart at the seams - there can be no holding of it together, certainly not within the old framework. Conversations that are courageous will be part of what will have to enter the context.

**Stage 4:** for those who have allowed the questions to continue to disturb them they enter the hardest time yet. I think 'dusk and dawn' is a good description. Is it the disappearance of light or the beginning of a new day? The answer seems to me to be both. If there is a willingness to persist with the journey then there is the possibility of another stage. If there is no willingness then the growth will continue for a season and then there will be a major dropping away.

**Stage 5:** a new mode of being. What does it look like? Well it won't

be 'here' and it will never be 'there' so we have to journey and discover.

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I will now seek to expand on the above journey.

There is a default (and not a bad thing in itself) for organisations to move toward stability. The problem arises when the stability of the organisation causes the organisation itself to become resistant to change. For change to occur stability has to be disturbed if there is to be any real progress.

The famous words of 'we have always done it this way' become the voice that resists the future, or even 'this was not in the original plan'. An inability to understand that the future challenges the present and even requires that the present changes.

'Prophets' are welcome in the organisation when they prophesy its success, but often become marginalised as the growth phase continues, for they become aware that everything is about to be shaken. (Prophets are those who respond to the coming phase(s) and do not bask in the success of a current phase.)

During the time of stability roles are easily understood. Leadership is clear, both in the sense of who the leaders are, and they are also clear in terms of the vision. There is an overall resonance between what is set out as the vision and what is the vision of the body of people. There will always be those who do not fit the organisation

(the mavericks) but generally speaking there will be a good healthy fit for most people. This 'happy' phase releases energy and leads to effectiveness and to growth: real or perceived.

In this phase virtually everyone knows and understands their place and they operate within it successfully, although there are a few who need to be 'put' in their place (and this is not always 'rightly' put in their place; not all mavericks should be tamed). Some find themselves leaving the organisation because they did not fit and were marginalised in a way that they cannot continue. Overall there is a good feel to an organisation in this stable phase and the majority of people experience a sense of fulfilment. However, change is coming and the need for change comes before there is real evidence of any crisis. In the 'map' the 'growth' curve is still on the up: it will take foresight to believe that changes are needed. Foresight if the focus is on what is happening at the centre of the organisation, but if we have sight of what is taking place at the periphery there will be signs that not everything is as harmonious as we might have thought.

On the map as we make our way up the growth curve I have put a marker in: **Beginning of crisis**. As noted above this will not be very evident as the 'growth curve' is still headed in an upward direction. However the destabilising is beginning.

## **Instability: the questions arising**

This process has a reasonably gentle beginning and is not normally recognised in the early stages. It begins when certain events do not fit into the meta-narrative that has held the organisation together.

These aberrations can be ignored as they are not seen to be significant. Those that voice the questions can be ignored as they have, after all, never really fully fitted. For those who are closer to the decision-making centre nothing changes at this stage. Leadership, often has a strong vested interest in the overarching narrative being true and are often too tied to the organisation and its success to notice that there might be a problem. It is this strong alignment that blinds them.

It is rather those on the edge that notice that all is not well, and it is there that the shaking is experienced first. Questions are formulated that challenge the current practices and, of course, the identity of the organisation. If the vested interest at the centre is high the questions will be silenced and those raising the questions marginalised.

However, this phase is what marks the opening of a doorway and the possible beginnings of a journey to a new mode of being. The questions do not disappear but in time become even more acute (and if we were to add God to the mix!!) God will not allow what is being shaken to stabilise again.

Change then is in the air, but it is seldom that the change is going to be led by the current leaders because of their alignment (and also, in some cases, their vested interest). Leaders, for their part, now have to work harder to produce the same level of results and their inner tension increases. As the process slowly gains momentum some leaders experience burnout, a few will even jump ship at this stage, but the majority tighten the shape of the organisation. Crisis is on the way to conflict if there is no change.

If the process is not halted but the tensions are taken seriously as a sign that change is coming there will come pressure on the places where the organisation has been held together. 'Oh, no, quick someone, a needle and thread, that seam is coming apart!' will be non-verbal response.

## **A Coming Apart at the Seams**

The process of questions being asked; a realisation that certain observations call into question the accuracy of the 'success' story of the organisation is where both the crisis and the journey toward a new mode of being begins.

As the process continues there is an increasing manifestation of things coming apart at the seams, at the places where things have been joined together. In this process there rises a greater expression of individuality. This expression will both be bad, in the sense of independence and also good, as fresh creativity of thought comes through. However, whether bad or good, it is necessary.

Typical events that take place are:

- New relationships forming (and old ones weakening or dissolving).
- Some people spin out of the organisation at the same time as others solidify around current leadership.
- Hence, cliques develop and self-preservation by various parties become a major part of what motivates those who align to one clique or another.



And if there is no recognition of the process (and there seldom is ) then leadership becomes even more centrist. Talks of vision, new shapes, we are family / relationally-oriented not organisational become more common.

All these signs mark the beginning of a new beginning, for the process is not going to stop there, but will proceed to further stages. It does though often mark a point of division, for some will want to go on (or not be able to go back) while others will solidify around what has been. This normally means a redefining of the organisation, with it becoming both smaller, but often also with a tighter vision statement to hold it together.

If there is no recognition that an old way of being is over and there has to be change and a process put in place to facilitate change, the natural process of shaking and questioning will continue. Those tensions can become so evident that the organisation cannot hold together and at this stage there are organisations that split right apart.

## **Dusk & Dawn**

Is the light going or is there a new day rising? Sometimes that is hard to tell and in many senses the answer in this transitional sequence is that it is both.

The process we are considering (and it is important to remember that it is not marked by neat crossing over points) continues and there comes a time when the former phase of being is almost gone, but a new mode has not yet emerged. More has gone than has appeared - hence the lack of clear light.

How this phase is navigated is very important.

Temptations arise to find something that works. This can be a solution from within, or the adoption of a model that seems to work elsewhere. To move to a solution too quickly must be resisted. In the chaos of not knowing the way forward the space and environment for creativity appears. The pain and even the confusion are the framework that will become the birth canal for something new.

Premature births, and even still births, can take place, but this phase will teach us to learn to trust and to enjoy being (seeking to resist the temptation of doing). Conversations will become so important in this phase, and the ability to listen to one another will become paramount.

Voices calling for a return to the old ways will continue. And there will be those who push for a re-inventing of what has been.

However, there is no going back. There has been too much movement for there to be a return to the former thing. For those who are courageous and willing to take a risk (or for those who cannot do anything else!) there is another stage to come. It will not, and must not, come quickly for there has to be an effective detoxification from the old ways.

Inevitably there will be a sense of 'two steps forward and one back' and also of 'one step forward and two back'. Overall though there will be movement forward and then clarity will begin to come into aspects of what needs to take place. The clarity will not be over the whole spectrum but into parts of the future. This will not be a time for a new 'vision statement' to be drafted, but a few green shoots will

begin to emerge in a few random places. Take hope from that, but there still needs to be a resistance to making bold statements about what is taking place.

## **A new mode of being**

The chaos, the questions, the pain: worth it all?

This new mode cannot be predetermined, although there are some elements that will manifest. It must be marked by a new level of authentic 'mission' - goals and activity. Yet it has to be beyond activity and press into new ways of being. There will arise new language to articulate the new mode, and any leadership that emerges will be from those who are able to take on responsibilities in the new phase and for the future. Such leaders will not be living from position or appointment, but from their sense of vision and therefore appropriateness for their role. They will also discover others coalescing around them who are ready to pioneer fresh things.

The vision element within such corporations as they come through the transition will be very fresh. The vision will be coherent across the corporation but will not be centred in a neat vision statement (indeed it will not need to be centred in such a statement as the vision will be embodied). The 'statement' of the vision will be more in terms of the demonstration of the vision than a statement, and so the vision(s) can also be quite diversely expressed. Uniformity through outward alignment will prove to be limited as far as effectiveness is concerned, and in any positive transition space for diversity should be greater after the transition.

The good news is that transition can occur. The journey, as always, seems to be down before there is any evidence of rising to a new level. Disturbance and trouble will precede the well-being that can be experienced later. Change is challenging and it is often wise to have objective skilled people involved in helping in the process (just as it is most helpful to have a mid-wife involved in the birth scenario - my great medical knowledge coming forth yet again here!).

In bringing this section to a close here are two aspects to focus on with respect to the cultural change that are required when a transition takes place:

- the focus has to be more on the release of the people than on a structural change, and
- that the external context, the context beyond the corporate body, has to be instrumental in bringing about any 'conversion' (transition).

Finally, two aspects that can be considered during a corporate transitional phase.

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## **Two aspects on the journey**

### **Develop a 'twin track' approach**

There are two opposite ways of approaching change. One way is to

blow up what is here as it is judged to be past its 'sell by date'. Doing this will often prove to be pre-mature and later we discover that we have lost people who have not understood what is taking place; we will have blown up more than we should have. The relationships are important, albeit when we arrive at the other side of the transition those relationships will have changed. The other way is to hold tightly to what we have in the hope that it will move forward. I cannot say I have any optimism for the second approach as it seriously underestimates the power of organisations to pull toward a negative 'steady-state' scenario.

In contrast to the above two approaches I suggest a third way that can be profitably explored. It is that of working along two tracks, provided we act within the boundaries of the following phrase:

Don't abandon what is here but invest into what is rising, into the future.

When we abandon the future but invest into what is here we will be in enormous trouble. The future only belongs to those who prepare for it and invest in it. So what do I mean by twin tracks? There is a track that is already established and many people are on that. It is the tried and tested (albeit very tired) way of doing things. There might be no need to abandon it, but to allow it to continue - in a diminishing way - as seed can be sown there so that people engage with the issues. However, we must not naively think that what has been established will transition in a nice smooth way into the future. It is for this reason that I suggest we begin to invest in a second track.

The second track is not an alternative version of what we have, some trendy up-to-date model. Rather it is more like an alternative landscape alongside the existing one, and on this landscape we begin to encourage new experimental shapes that relate to the opportunities that have to be engaged with **and to the dreams within people**. It is not an alternative organisation, but an alternative setting, a re-positioning for people, a re-deployment of resources, which will include space for experimentation, and as with all experiments not all will be 'successful'.

As an investment is made into those settings, stories need to filter back as to what is taking place. Stories have always been what feed movements and the purpose of the stories is to stir the belief that others too can step out in what is in their hearts.

Will it be successful? There are never rock-solid guarantees but effective leadership will also involve areas where they step back. Over-dependence on any centre will eventually limit growth. Allowing for vacuums to arise where something can either collapse or come to a new level is a brave but necessary step.

We must also make sure we do not hold up new examples as **the** way to do it. We are not looking for a new thing to replace the former way, but of living (and tentative) examples of what can happen when people are empowered to pursue their unique expression and gifting.

## **Allow and encourage conversations**

Conversations take time. They also take place best when we do not have a preconceived idea of what the outcome can be. Hence they

are better earlier in the process rather than later. For them to be profitable they need to be taking place by the time there is the coming apart at the seams stage (and preferably before this).

A possible way for conversation to take place is to set aside time of at least a few hours. To let people know that there will be an open forum looking at the way forward, to which all are welcome. At the appointed time here is a suggested process (adapted and perhaps an inadequate summary from *The Power of Spirit*: by Harrison Owen):

- a chair person simply outlines why the people are together without making any comment about what the outcome should be. We have to trust the process.
- as far as possible it is helpful to have everyone sitting in a circle – no hierarchies and no ‘back rows’.
- people are invited to write down every issue as they see it that should be addressed. Those are placed by each person on a large blank board. This process will probably take about 40 or so minutes.
- once those are placed there the issues need to be grouped together.
- once grouped together there needs to be a recognition of the issues that are particularly ‘hot issues’ and ones that need to be prioritised.
- this all needs to be fed back, and from there times and places set for the discussion of those by action groups. Such groups need to be led by a suitable facilitating person. At a

future stage those groups will report back with their work, from where priorities will be set and action planned.

Another way of facilitating conversation is to set people in small groups on a table and let them discuss, doodle etc. there (World Cafe style, from the book of that title). Then move to a new table and let the richness of conversation develop.

However, for true conversation to take place, regardless of any framework used, time is required, and it is vital that hearing all the voices is encouraged with centralised control being absent.

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Perhaps the two pathways might meet up at a later stage: the pathway where there is the hoped for new mode of being, and the one that had the growth at the beginning of the transition do cross one more time (see the map).

Many groups will find themselves already in the dusk / dawn situation; others will begin to find themselves in a situation where the old way of working is no longer producing the same level of fruit it used to.

Transition... challenging, but in the context of many global collapses it seems that transition will increasingly not be optional, for new modes need to arise!