

**“The Life-Cycling Church”**  
***Exodus 18.12-27; Mark 3.7-15; Acts 6.1-4***

Preached at Christ United Church of Christ, Bethlehem  
on July 8, 2007 by the Rev. Dr. Toby Holleman  
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Scriptural Examples of Institutional Change

Exodus 18.21f (NRSV)

You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you.

Mark 3.9, 14f (NRSV)

He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him ... And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons.

Acts 6.2b-4 (NRSV)

"It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word."

Sermon

Do you ever think you may be rushing headlong into *obsolescence*? Or that your children or grandchildren think you're *antiquarian* and *outmoded*? Ever get the feeling that your *expiration date* is just about up?

My sons have been convinced for years that I am culturally *out of touch*. One frequently refers to me as "the old man," while the other tries to advise me on what I wear. But none of this intergenerational give-and-take ever bothered me much until a couple of months ago when I was teaching a class on "Jesus and the Gospels" at Lancaster Theological Seminary.

I was waxing eloquent on some fine point of exegetical rumination when I inadvertently slipped into a colloquial speech pattern of yesteryear. To drive home the

point I was trying to make, I uttered a harmless metaphorical phrase that I had heard my elders say countless times when I was a young lad. In the 50s and 60s this idiomatic expression basically meant that one had said everything on a particular topic that one could think of to say. Case was closed. It was time to move on to something else.

But when I uttered this (now unspeakable) phrase that day, I noticed out of the corner of my eye that quite a few of the students started snickering. I thought nothing of it, however, until a couple of days later when I received an email from one of the students. She began by complimenting me on the way the course was going, and then she got down to the real reason for writing to me. She wrote very politely, “Dr. Holleman, I was not sure I understood what you meant when you said *thus-and-such* in our last class. What exactly did you mean by this phrase?”

I didn’t know what to make of her question, so I turned to several on-line and up-to-date dictionaries. Most of them listed as the first definition of the phrase that innocent and rather prosaic meaning I had intended. But the second and more up-to-date definition, to my horror, had something to do with a sexual activity that I *and most of you* would probably be too embarrassed to think about, much less talk about in polite company. I ... was ... mortified.

At that very moment my older son came in to the room and so I asked him, “Blake, last week I said something in class that apparently has more than one meaning. What do you understand *thus-and-such* to mean?”

I almost had to call 9-1-1. Blake began laughing so hard that I thought he would have a heart attack. “Dad, you didn’t say *that*, did you? And in a graduate school class with nearly thirty students? How could you do that? Don’t you know what it means? What got into you?” Every question interspersed with paroxysms of laughter.

In self-defense, I want to report that having shared this story with some of my peers, I’ve learned that I’m not the only antiquated baby boomer who has put his foot in his mouth by saying something formerly clean and innocent that has become—at least for the MTV generation—a downright salacious remark.

### ***Why can’t words just stay the same?***

It was the ancient philosopher Heraclitus, I believe, who once said:

*"No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man."*

Change happens to us all, whether we like it or not. We are born small; we grow tall; we then grow in other directions; we grow old; and we return dust to dust. It’s called **THE CYCLE OF LIFE**. Every plant and every animal—including the human species—is programmed to follow the cycle of life.

But did you know that social, political, economic, professional, educational, and even religious institutions, like the Church, all go through a cycle of life? That’s right; they do. And social scientists are able now to describe what the stages of an institutional cycle of life consist of.

## I

Most organizations have a **CHARISMATIC BEGINNING**. That is to say, they come into existence because of someone who is a remarkable visionary and who also has the extraordinary ability to get other people excited about and committed to that vision. Think of Bill Gates and Microsoft. Or Oprah Winfrey and her multi-billionaire television empire. Or Susan B. Anthony and the women's suffrage movement. Or Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement. Or John Wesley and Methodism. Or Moses and the wandering tribes of Israel. Or Jesus and his Church.

Institutions begin with an exciting vision that captures the imagination of a host of followers who become devoted disciples of the founding visionary. At this stage there are no hard and fast rules for membership, no task force groups or committees, no set rituals, no clearly defined leadership structures, no real tradition to speak of. There is only a compelling vision to do something great in and for the world, and a charismatic leader who inspires his/her followers to fulfill that vision with every ounce of energy in their bodies and souls. Life is challenging, exciting, unpredictable, hard, exhilarating, and risky. This is one life-transforming roller coaster ride you don't want to miss!

## II

But then the charismatic leader dies, or retires, or becomes overwhelmed, or is resurrected to heaven. And so we come to the second stage in the life cycle of an institution: **ORGANIZING ADOLESCENCE**. Everyone has to regroup. No longer is there a single charismatic leader to do it all. If the leader is still around, (s)he divides up responsibilities. If not, his/her followers have to figure it out themselves. And this can get pretty sticky. If the second generation can't reach a consensus on how to continue to live out the charismatic founder's dream, then schism will occur.

That's a big part of the problem today in Iraq. Mohammed lived and died in the seventh century, and then two disciples stepped forward to lay claim to his mantle of leadership—one was son-in-law Ali and the other was a caliph named Abu Bakr. Ali's group became known as the Shias, and Abu Bakr's group became known as the Sunnis. And you know "the rest of the story"!

All three Scripture passages read a few moments ago deal in different ways with this organizing adolescent stage of institutional life. Moses can get the Israelites out of Egypt by dint of his own charismatic charm (and with a little help from God!), but to keep everyone together as they wander through the wilderness he now has to appoint seventy associates to help him out. Jesus' gospel ministry expands so quickly that he begins to disciple twelve followers to help him handle the crush of the crowds who press in on him every day. Several years later, with their founder now resurrected to heaven, these very disciples must themselves make mid-course institutional corrections as they appoint seven deacons to deal with justice issues so that they can continue to focus on preaching the gospel and prayer.

What is not often appreciated by this second stage of the institutional life cycle is that even if the leader is still present, things begin to change. Social life and leadership

structures are routinized; rules spring up about who is in and who is out. The vision changes some, and how it is implemented changes even more. It may take years and even generations for this adolescent phase to work itself out, but eventually the original movement undergoes a profound metamorphosis.

For example, the wilderness wandering, shepherd-oriented, twelve tribes of Israel settle down into farming or city life and get themselves all united around a human king (not what Moses recommended!). The Jesus movement that took the gospel only to the Jews finds in the Gentiles a welcome audience, and within one generation mainstream Judaism is left behind as a new world religion comes into being. Jesus may be the Savior, Lord, founder and unparalleled inspiration for the Church that bears his name, but it is Paul and other “second generation” apostles who gave us the systematized theology, many of the ethical guidelines, and even some of the liturgical practices that we as twenty-first century Christians embrace today.

### III

When all of the major beliefs and administrative systems get worked out, then comes the third institutional life cycle phase: **BUREAUCRATIC MATURITY**. Now the organization is pretty much on cruise control. There’s still some tweaking here and there, some adjustments to minor changes in this and that. But for the most part the social group is in symbiotic harmony with its environment. It continues to grow slowly but steadily because its beliefs, structures and practices are designed to function efficiently and effectively in the cultural environment in which it finds itself.

For the Roman Catholic Church, think “High Middle Ages” and “The Holy Roman Empire”—historic periods when the Church under the authority of the Papacy ruled not only the spiritual but also the political life of Europe. For Protestants, bureaucratic maturity was achieved with the establishment of denominationalism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. While many of the critical Protestant beliefs may have been worked out in the century of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and the Anabaptists, the social and structural organization of Protestant mainline churches didn’t really become set until the rise of corporate capitalism. It is no secret that the bureaucratic structure of most mainstream Protestant bodies is analogous to that of big business. There is a hierarchical leadership structure, with a division of labor according to people’s interests and skills; there are rules and procedures for proper conduct within the organization (e.g., *Robert’s Rules of Order*); there are traditions and rituals designed to preserve the memory of the founders of the institution; and of course, everyone knows what the primary purpose of the institution is.

Tweaking: you might be surprised at how much of what we typically think was handed on by Jesus and Paul actually came into being in the past two or three centuries during the rise of denominationalism—Sunday schools, stewardship committees, *church* weddings, and nearly all of the hymns we typically sing on Sunday morning are just a few examples. And did you know that the Puritans frowned upon the celebration of Christmas?

The bureaucratically mature Protestant mainline church had great appeal and enjoyed great success in American society. Its high point occurred right after the Second World War, when a higher percentage of Americans went to church each Sunday than in any other period in U.S. history. Many of you recall that there were no Sunday morning

distractions in those days—no little league soccer, no interesting TV to watch, no malls in which to stroll. Instead, everyone expected everyone to go to church. Church-going was culturally embedded in our psyches. All you basically had to do was open the front doors, employ a minister who was a decent preacher, and people came in droves. Add to that the fact that families were still pretty large, and that most children hung around rather than moving far away when they became adults, and you can see why churches experienced strong attendance in the middle part of the last century. Many of our nation’s civic leaders were proud members of mainline churches; and on the surface, at least, the values of mainstream America were pretty much identical to the lessons taught in our mainstream churches.

But then something happened. Let’s simply call it the *subversive sixties* and *cynical seventies*. Cultural expectations and values dramatically changed. A deep pessimism in regard to all things institutional began to set in. Social fragmentation became the norm. This has been documented in dozens of civic and social organizations. It was also true for the mainline Church. Volunteerism declined dramatically as mothers went to work and fathers worked more and more overtime. Alternative forms of spirituality evolved. Slowly the bureaucratically mature Church, which had functioned like a “lean, mean religious machine” in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, began to gasp and sputter like an Edsel choking on dirty gasoline. Once great and mighty, the mainline church began a slow descent into missional and organizational mediocrity. And every day it seemed to lose more and more “market share” to the newer, more culturally relevant, and hence more appealing spiritual movements that new “charismatic” leaders were starting. (Do you see why denominations like ours now place so much stock in starting *new* churches?)

#### IV

Since the late sixties the mainline Protestant Church has been standing at the proverbial fork in the road, where the fourth stage of the institutional life cycle begins. Before the Church lie two choices, two ways in which every mainline congregation can go. The first choice is to keep doing the same thing that worked so well just a generation or two ago. But of course that doesn’t work very well anymore, which means that choosing this path will take a congregation down the road to **DECLINE AND DEATH**.

The second choice for every mainline church is to become proactive: to assess what is going on in the culture around us, and to figure out what we need to change in order to become relevant to those who no longer feel we are relevant to them. If we do this, if we take this “road less traveled,” I believe we as local congregations will experience **REBIRTH AND RENEWAL**.

Of course, taking this alternative path means we have to take some of our precious customs, habits, organizational systems, and patterns of thinking about how to incarnate the gospel ... and place them reverently in the church parlor or library where all of the precious artifacts of yesteryear are displayed. And then we need to do what every business and social organization has to do from time to time if it wants to continue to hold market share in an ever-changing economy and society: we must adapt to the changes *out there* by changing *in here* the way we incarnate and present the Good News of Christ to the world.

I don’t mean we must change our core values, such as our fundamental belief in the gospel of God’s love in Jesus Christ, or in Christ’s vision that “they may all be one.” We

must still “love our neighbors as ourselves” and we still need to “seek first the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness.” But the way we live these guiding principles out in our personal daily life, and in local church life, has to change.

I witnessed a mainline congregation taking this road to **rebirth and renewal** a number of years ago when I was a pastor of a UCC church in Dallas, Texas. A neighboring congregation, Grace United Methodist Church, was in the process of undergoing a remarkable change. Grace had once been a church of “the rich and famous.” Many high society and influential types of people were counted as its members, including a former governor of the Lone Star State. But times changed, many members moved out to the suburbs, and by the early 1980s Grace UMC was a shell of its former glory.

Then a new minister was appointed to the church, a young man fresh out of seminary with the “crazy” idea that if a church focused on mission *out there* rather than its health and well-being *in here*, somehow (miraculously?) things would get better. (Didn’t Jesus say that those who try to save their lives will end up losing them, while those who lose their lives for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save them?—Mark 8.35)

So Rev. Bryan, ever the charismatic visionary, challenged his congregation to look outward rather than inward. And as they looked outward they saw dozens and dozens of refugee families moving in from all over the world. That East Dallas neighborhood was fast becoming a small “United Nations” community of Thais, Cambodians, Vietnamese, Ethiopians, Latino/as, and many other third world peoples. And what those people needed more than anything else was what all impoverished refugees need: help in getting jobs, decent clothing, safe places in which to live, help with learning the English language, help with legal matters, good medical care, and a host of other things that most of us take for granted. And so Grace UMC became to reach out and try to address some of those human needs.

And they dreamed big, really big! Realizing that they couldn’t tackle all of the social ills in their burgeoning neighborhood alone, and knowing that there were other “Anglo” churches in the area that were also struggling, Rev. Bryan invited these congregations to join his congregation in reaching out to the refugees. Within a few short years, the East Dallas Cooperative Parish came into being—comprised of twelve or so Methodist, Presbyterian, Disciples of Christ, Baptist, and UCC congregations! Money was sought from area philanthropic organizations, and by the early 1990s the EDCP had a budget of a couple of million dollars!

And some really fantastic ministry took place during that time. Many people were greatly helped. A number of separate ministries took shape, with the participating churches running them by sharing their human and financial resources.

And yes, Grace UMC itself underwent a major renewal. Local people became to come to the church to find out what motivated these people to be so generous. A second (bilingual) pastor was called to serve at Grace. They and the surrounding churches became much healthier—financially, spiritually, membership-wise, etc. In fact, every one of the participating congregations experienced new vitality and growth.

What great thing it is, when a church at the proverbial fork in the institutional road chooses to take the “road less traveled” that leads first to internal change, and then to congregational **rebirth and renewal!**

This is the choice that stands before every church in the Penn Northeast Conference today. I am more convinced of this today than ever before. When I came to PNEC nearly ten years ago, we had 157 congregations. By this Christmas, we will have about 145. I have read widely about the mainline Church in the United States, and I have personal first-hand knowledge of most of our churches. And that's why I believe our churches stand at an ecclesiastical crossroads. We can either stay the same, to decline and die; or we can change, to be reborn and be renewed.

Because you are spiritual people, and because you are smart people—working and praying together, and led by the Spirit of God—I am convinced that you can figure out what types of real-time changes/adaptations you need to undertake in order to be reborn and renewed in the twenty-first century.

As a fellow traveler on this journey of faith, I invite—nay, I *urge* you—to make the right choice in terms of your future life together. As Deuteronomy 30.19 says:

Choose life so that you **and your descendants** may live...

And may God bless you—indeed, may God bless us all—as we choose to live out, in spiritually relevant ways, the transforming presence of Christ in our generation and for all of the generations to come.