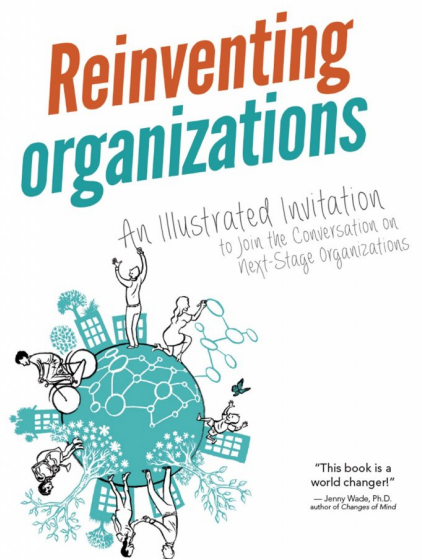# Review: Reinventing Organizations — An Illustrated Invitation to Join the Conversation on Next-Stage Organizations

What a fascinating book. This is about more than management techniques, it's a distinct vision of how people might organise, relate, and flourish.

Reinventing Organizations is doing the popular rounds. I'm going to approach it, learn from it, and critique it from the point of view of church leadership. The author is Frederic Laloux, about whom I know little. It is wonderfully, helpfully (although somewhat, um, caucasianally) illustrated by Etienne Appert. This is not some tome. It's like a printed powerpoint presentation, and reading it feels like attending a seminar.

Laloux' framework builds upon an evolutionary understanding of human organisation. He imagines human society having grown through "sudden leaps" (page 18) from "**red (impulsive)**" communities characterised by gang-like dominance (page 21), through "**amber (conformist)**" army-like shaping of the world (page 22), through "**orange (achievement)**" machine-like

enterprises (page 26), and "**green (pluralistic)**" family-like cultures. He imagines, and this is the book's *raison d'être,* a "**teal (evolutionary)** worldview" (page 38) which is shaped by "individual and collective unfolding… taming the ego… inner rightness as compass… yearning for wholeness" (pages 38-39). This is what he examines, explores, and seeks to apply in the real world.

There's a lot that is good in his vision, and we'll get to that, but there are two fundamental disagreements with which I must clear the air first.

Firstly, I disagree with the worldview in which he explores these worldviews (his meta-worldview?). It is typical human progressivism: We were once ancient and primitive, and we have slowly grown more enlightened over the years, passing through the different colours of the sociological rainbow until we find ourselves at the brink of the next leap forward. This is not peripheral to his outlook; his vision has a religious fervour. His language is almost e*schatological*: "This might sound surprising, but I think there is reason to be deeply hopeful… the pain we feel is the pain of something old that is dying… while something new is waiting to be born"! (pages 16-17).

Such language might be novel in the business world, but it's entirely familiar to the world of faith and spirituality. This world, however, offers the necessary pushback: A linearly progressive story in which we go step by step into either utopia or the apocalypse is rarely a helpful picture. The best eschatology is an insight into the here and now. The different colours and types that Laloux puts forward are useful depictions, but they are less helpful when locked into some sequence of progression. It is more real to think of them as different facets of what human life is like now, and what it has always been. If only he would talk about organisations operating in certain *ways* rather than at certain evolutionary *stages,* his work would be much more accessible.

The fact is, we have always had the **dominant reds**, and the **conformist ambers**, and the **organised oranges**, and the **organic-but-not-quite greens**, and *yes,* the **wholeness-flowing teals**. For sure, they have not always been in balance, but they all have their place, and they all have their ongoing, present value. e.g. red organisations can be *excellent* in a crisis, or where order needs to be brought in the midst of chaos. These worldviews have always been there. To ignore that is to embrace a sort of generational bigotry which refuses to learn from our ancestors who were somehow unable to "hold more complex perspectives" (page 33) than our much more virtuous generation.

Secondly, and relatedly, his teal worldview is nothing new. It might be that it isn't particularly apparent in the contemporary Western world, and so it is a good corrective. But he isn't broaching untapped waters here. At best, he is re-discovering something long forgotten.

Perhaps he can't see it because of a typically prejudicial view of religion that sees the church as being primarily about "rules and traditions" (page 33) and conformity to hierarchy ("oppression" even, page 24). It's clear he simply doesn't get religion, especially of the organised Western sort, which isn't stuck in **amber-conformity** but **orange-machine**! I audibly laughed when he assumed that "priests aren't assigned KPIs, as far as I know" (page 27). He really doesn't know!

It's a shame. This prejudice makes this an awkward book to use in a Christian context. Moreover, it overlooks the deep riches there are in faith traditions, including Christian spirituality, that actually supports his teal worldview.

For instance, the language and concept of *vocation* or *calling* is ever-present in his teal world. Similarly, the sense of belonging and organic flourishing resonates with Biblical imagery of being members of a body, in which we not only *exercise* our gifts, but we *are* a gift of

grace to the larger whole. Organic organisations have been part of missiological thinking for some time now; the lifeshapes framework of a couple of decades ago may not always be practiced as it is preached, but it looks to biology in the heptagon and speaks of "low control, high accountability." Laloux speaks of being a "sensor", the charismatic and contemplative world speaks of discernment and intuitive insight. He speaks of the teal "yearning for wholeness" (page 39) and I reflect on the language of "groaning" for fulfilment in not only Paul (Romans 8), but the laments of the Old Testament. He speaks of the need for "reflective spaces" and I look to the vast wealth of liturgical rhythms and spiritual disciplines. None of these are on his radar, and that's a shame.

So Laloux' wisdom, like most living wisdom, has an unacknowledged companionship and heritage. But in the end that's not necessarily a problem; there's still good here.

There's a refreshing honesty in his analysis. I found his exploration of the interplay between the **green-pluralist** and **orange-machine** to be very applicable to church leadership. These two worldviews are the predominant ones in the West, and they often collide. Many churches, and most church hierarchies, are unashamedly orange, and they should be ever mindful of orange's shadow side (page 29). Many who have fallen out of the religious industry now lean towards green. Here we are "aware of Orange's shadows: the materialistic obsession, the social inequality, the loss of community." Greens "strive to belong, to foster close and harmonious bonds with everyone… they insist that all people are fundamentally of equal worth, that every voice be heard." **Orange**–**green** typifies, sociologically speaking, the **evangelical**–**liberal** divide.

For many, being green seems to be the answer. The reality, however, reflects Laloux' insight into the "contradictions" of **green-pluralist** organisations (page 32). It's certainly

something I've observed:

> *In many smaller organisations, in particular in nonprofits or social ventures [churches?], the emphasis lies with consensus seeking. More often than not it leads to organizational paralysis. To get things moving again, unsavory power games break out in the shadows. (Page 32)*

I've seen such paralysis. I've been knocked about by these shadowy power games. The games are often in the shadows of church dynamics; power is often pursued with a degree of self-delusion that denies that power and ego is present at all. It's a complex dynamic to navigate and Laloux does us all a service by acknowledging it.

There is much that is virtuous about the teal ("evolutionary") worldview. The interplay of teal's central characteristic of "self-management", "wholeness", and "purpose" (page 55) is an exciting and dynamic way of exploring organisations such as churches. It leads to some aspirations: e.g. to embody a culture in which "we are called to discover and journey towards our true self, to unfold our unique potential, to unlock our birthright gifts" (page 38). I only need to look at my teacher, nursing, and clergy friends, and others who have pursued a vocational path, to see such a yearning.

I resonated with his understanding that the "one critical variable" to the success of organic teal systems is "psychological ownership people feel for their organization" (page 140). It applies to the ecclesiastical world. In the end, a church's health does not usually come down to capacity, resources, or opportunity; it comes down to motivation. What do we *care* about? Have we actually *bought into* the love of God and the Great Commission of Jesus? What's the difference between our *espoused* theology, and our actual lived-out beliefs?

I loved his image of the "bowl of spaghetti" (page 139), as a

metaphor for the task of unravelling a complex system with simple, sensorial movements. In the church world we speak of "the long walk of obedience" with steps of both *discernment* and *faith*. It is similar; each step is gentle tug on a strand of spaghetti, to see what is next on the path.

Above all, I was encouraged to find that as questions arose in my mind, they would almost always be answered.

For instance, he speaks of leaderless self-managed teams, with little if any hierarchy. I could admire the picture, but couldn't conceive of it working unless there was firstly a dynamic leader who could create the culture and hold the space in which the organic could emerge. His main example of the nursing company Buurtzorg and its leader, Jos de Blok, reinforced what appeared to be a contradiction. How can self-management rely on a dynamic leader?

Laloux recognises the dilemma, and engages with it. He doesn't eschew the concept of power, as if it doesn't exist — "the goal is not to give everyone the exact same power… it is to make everyone powerful" (page 123). He recognises the necessity of visionary, culture-setting leaders, such as Jos de Blok. Sometimes "a committed and powerful CEO is needed" (page 144) to be a "public face" and a chief sensor (page 148).

It has similarities with the dynamic of being a vicar! In church traditions we speak of the "apostolic" gifting, which is interestingly connected to, and often at odds with, the "episcopal" function; perhaps that is an **orange (episcopal)** — **teal (apostolic)** creative tension! The apostolic *covers*, and articulates the common purpose around which others are organically coalescing. It is a joy when a church operates in this mode, and doesn't need micro-managing; "the organization's purpose provides enough alignment." (page 125). It's why we harp on about purpose, mission, and gospel… or at least we should.

This leadership dynamic is especially applicable within the pioneering and church planting worlds. In some circles we speak of pioneer "dissenting pathfinders" who push on into the unknown with gospel purpose; and we have also learned of the need for an "authority dissenter" who covers them and "holds the space" (crf. page 149) in which they can thrive.

Nevertheless, the self-contradictions of the teal vision cannot be fully resolved. For instance, teal is organic and flourishing with self-management, yet in the pragmatics "control is useful and necessary" (page 145). Laloux is honest about most of these tensions, but doesn't fully resolve them.

I am left, therefore with some unease, and it comes back to the philosophical foundations. Laloux' vision is effectively a progressive utopianism, and that is rarely, if ever, grounded in the real world.

For instance, it is a virtue for **"inner rightness"** to be our compass (Page 39); this is the stuff of vocation! But if Laloux had looked into centuries' worth of engagement on human issues, including the monastic traditions, he would have learned how vocation falls when it becomes self-fulfillment alone. Jesus demonstrates this with his spirit and attitude of *kenosis*, or self-giving/self-emptying (see Philippians 2:1-11). Ironically, without that kenotic aspect, Laloux' "inner rightness" is inherently egocentric, tuned in orbit to an individual reality, and not to a grounded, shared, common sense of what is right and wrong. His epistemology is on show here, and it's basic individualism.

Similarly, consider how **"taming the ego"** is crucial to Laloux' vision. It's an excellent aspiration, to realise "how our ego's fears, ambitions, and desires have been secretly running our lives" (page 38). Again, if he had looked to the richness of how the traditions have dealt with ego over the years, he may not have missed the balancing perspective. They speak of sin, corruption, depravity, and shame, and the need for

communities to both allow for it and protect from it. The teal vision is appealing, but it is only effective, and safe, when there is sinlessness. This is never the case; Laloux' eschatology is overly-realised!

Laloux speaks often of trust. Trust is valuable. Trust is precious. And it is these things because it is *rare* commodity within the tensions of the real world. It is right for trust to be withdrawn, because sin abides. Sometimes, walls of protection are what is needed for life to flourish. A worldview that relies so heavily on trust runs the danger of coercing it, and therefore, of doing injury. I did a straw-poll of some friends about their emotional reaction to the phrase "This is a safe space": the offered responses indicated *elevated* fear and insecurity. The assertion of "safe space" into a *system* coerces trust; "If you don't trust us, you can't belong." I can't shake my sense that the teal vision rests on this subtle manipulation.

This mishandling of the human condition obscures the *danger* in the teal worldview. For sure, I can see teal dynamics bringing life (there is wisdom in this book!) But I can also see teal structures being a place where the bullies can win, the power-games can be played, dissenting voices can be silenced, and the popular majority can rule over the lost and forgotten. Perhaps, at their best, these structures can be "natural hierarchies" (page 77), but nature can be harsh! We can imagine, with Laloux, the joy of people "showing up in loving and caring ways?" (page 93), but what happens when they don't?

Similarly, I get that its a virtue to bring your **"whole self"** to work (page 82), but is it really? My whole self has corruptions as well as goodness. Is that allowed? My whole self has shames and injuries. Should I take those out from "behind my professional mask", or from behind whatever persona might actually make work a safe place for me and others? There is a subtle demand for *exposure* in the teal framework, and this is not entirely healthy.

What I do know, from observation and experience, is that the more you lead with the whole of yourself on display, the more you have to count the cost of the inevitable injuries. Every room has it's shibboleths. Teal isn't a worldview in which masks can be dropped; it's a different mode in which different masks must be learned, enforced by tingsha bells.

Vulnerability is inspiring and powerful (let's hear it for Brene Brown). By definition, however, it is a choice to be self-givingly "unsafe". There is goodness in it; Jesus himself shows that it is a path through pain to life. We may aspire to this form of open resilience in ourselves, hope for it in our leaders, and nurture others towards it as well. But vulnerabilty cannot be demanded without causing injury. We do not cast our pearls before swine; there's a reason we offer our deepest parts to the Lord alone, or in close, intimate relationships.

Teal has it's virtues and I have learned much from this book. But just like all the other colours, I do not think it is entirely safe. "Practices are lifeless without the underlying worldview", Laloux rightly records towards the end (page 131). And here's the crux of it. There is some wisdom in this book. Some good things to ponder, insights that can offer a corrective. But in the end, I cannot base my life, my leadership, my wholeness, my organisation upon his utopianism. As a church, we have our founding worldview, and we begin with Jesus.
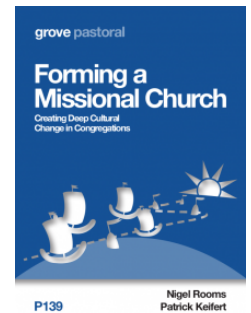
Review: Forming a Missional

# Church — Creating Deep Cultural Change in Congregations

We have noticed a welcome recent trend in thinking about church life. It is a movement away from a fixation on processes and programs, traditions and techniques, mechanistic deliberations about an organisation. It is towards considering the *culture* of the church and understanding it as a social and familial system. It is towards recognising (perish the thought) that God the Holy Spirit *is* actually thoroughly and presently involved; church leadership is more a matter of sharing spiritual discernment than reliance upon managerial expertise.

Two books I have recently read—Patrick Keifert's *We Are Here Now,* and the Grove Booklet *Forming a Missional Church* which Keifert has co-authored with Nigel Rooms—do well to advance this trend and make it accessible to local congregations. The two overlap in content and I will concentrate on the Grove booklet here.

The need for cultural change is often recognised and touted albeit somewhat impotently. Rooms and Keifert seek to actually get to a practical outcome. The groundwork that gets them there takes a number of forms:
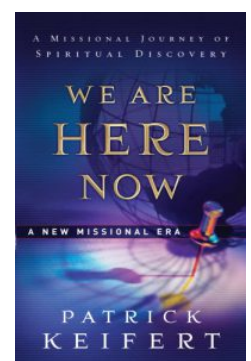
Firstly, they engage with postmodernity. Cultural connection within a postmodern world necessarily requires pushback against such modern influences as individualism, propositionalism, and didacticism. It means advancing modes

and manners of being church that value real and shared experience.

> *The categorization of faith as private is among the reasons why many Christians do not speak and act as if God were living and active in the here and now of our every days lives. (Page 4)*

This basis for their approach is not novel: the juxtaposition of church and the postmodern world has been around for at least two decades. Keifert is right not to be morose about the changing world. Rather than phrases like "post-Christendom" he prefers a "new missional era." This obvious and positive sense only adds to my bemusement that such cultural thinking has been largely left behind in academia by church leaders in the field.

Secondly, they bring insights from systems theory. Keifert and Rooms recognise that churches like all "living, feeling, learning human organizations… are not simply machines to be fixed or problems that respond to **technical** solutions" (page 5, emphasis mine). Our tendency for off-the-shelf solutions makes us ill-prepared for "those challenges or problems or complicated situations for which there is not a ready or known fix." Instead, we must attend to **adaptive** change.

> *Adaptive challenges require change and transformation on the part of those facing them, in contrast to technical problems where there is a known solution and no change is required… (Page 6)*

Indeed, technical "solutions" can be used to insulate ourselves from the costly self-reflection and honesty that is necessary for the mission of the church to be taken seriously.

> *Our task is being born into our world, our culture and context, and **dying to all we do not need** to be God's church*

I have found the language of "adaptive" and "technical" to be reasonably useful as a "way in" for people to begin wrestling with the sorts of issues at stake. It is quite managerial in tone, however, and some might find liturgical or reflective language more helpful. After all, as long as the tendency to apply it only to individuals can be avoided, "adaptive" language speaks to concepts such as "being refined", "amending one's life", and being "*transformed by the renewing of your mind*."

Thirdly, they ground everything on robust missiology. The beginning of this is the now famous adage, which they do well to quote:

It is not the church of God that has a mission in the world but the God of mission who has a church in the world. (Page 10)

Missiology in practice emphasises the centrality of *discernment* in the mode and manner of being church. "We cannot simply bless every good thing" (page 11), they say, clearly understanding the propensity of churches to equate their programmatic busy-ness with effective outreach. Rather, "the main skill individuals and Christian communities require to lift anchor faithfully and sail into the unknown, adaptive, exciting, challenging journey of the *missio Dei* is discernment… asking and finding answers to the question, 'What is God up to?'" (page 11). Such a journey can seem uncertain and therefore unprofessional or irresponsible for some, but from experience we know that it is, in the end, an *exciting* journey that is literally mission-critical:

…rather than doing mission by conducting a programme of mission activities (Alpha courses, holiday clubs for children and young people, invitational events etc), none of which are unhelpful per se, the church becomes so caught up in the missio Dei that its members are naturally 'detectives of divinity.' The church's very being becomes missional so that all it is and does serves the mission of God. (Pages 11-12)

I was astounded, however, by the claim that in 2008-9 "the missiological concept of the *missio Dei* was only just taking hold at the level of theologically trained clergy" in the English context (page 10). It makes me aware of how ahead of the curve things have been in other less-established contexts around the world. But the fact that it is on the agenda is fruit of the *Mission-Shaped Church* report from 2004 (which they mention), and seminal works such as Wright's *The Mission of God* from 2006. It elevates the importance of works such as these and other significant efforts (Forge Network etc.) around the turn of the millennium.

These three forms of engagement coalesce and have their natural conclusions in what it means to live and act as a church community. Clearly it also challenges some of the precious ways we have viewed leadership. The challenge for church leaders can be personal and overwhelming; it's one thing to talk about missiological concepts in theory, or even to bring some sort of analysis to the church as an institution, but adaptive change cannot be led except by example. It means dealing with the "trap" of modernity that makes the "professional" leader "the primary basis of identity for both the community and the leader" while at the same time recognising that there *is* a role for "spiritual discernment, spiritual leadership" (page 13). To avoid this trap the leader must take a "personal spiritual journey, sometimes called a rule of life" (page 14) that faces and avoids "our own desire for control and certainty, especially in choppy waters" (page 15). Personally speaking, I have

known the pain and frustration that comes from falling into this trap, seeking a vain fleeting peace in control and drive and avoidance, when the call is to trust God even as impotence and anxiety loom.

In the end, Room and Keifert present "six missional practices" (page 20). These should not be seen so much as steps in a recipe but practices that found and inform a "diffused innovation." The hope is that through them cultural change might advance throughout the community while naturally responding to strengths and weaknesses and the very real human aspects that will either welcome or resist it.

dwelling in the word — a shared method of Bible that seeks to heed what God is saying in his Word, recognising that the Holy Spirit will speak in Scripture not only *to* individuals but *through* the members of the body, one to another. It sounds simple but, when taken seriously, allows a shared experience of being undone and remade by the Spirit of God through the Word of God.

dwelling in the world — involves the shared journey of listening and hearing what is happening within and around the community. It allows hard things to be heard, and undiscovered ways to be revealed. It anticipates the *activity* of the Holy Spirit in the real world who calls us beyond ourselves.

hospitality — is engagement beyond the community that comes neither from above or below, but both gives and receives, "taking turns hosting and being a guest" (page 22). It recognises that the best place to encounter both world and word is at the point where relationships open up. It turns us towards those "people of peace"—"friendly looking strangers"—that we often ignore, who are right in front of us, who are possibly not what we had expected or hoped, but who are open to heed and be heeded.

corporate spiritual discernment – is placed not at the beginning, but in the middle, as the shared experience of dwelling in word and world begins to develop a sense of "What is God's preferred and promised future for our local Church?" "Who is God calling us to join in accomplishing that preferred future in our community?" (page 22)

announcing the kingdom – recognises that there is a gospel to share, and a Saviour to speak about. It is adaptive, not impositional: Putting words to the recognition of how the Spirit of Christ is already at work, it invites others to join him, and to enter into the kingdom not as some abstraction but in how he is present in the here and now.

focus for missional action – urges a further and clearer pursuit of the journey of discernment:

> *"Every ministry setting has more good things to do and more good things to love than any local church can rightly or well take on. Without the practise of discerning a focus for missional action, the sixth missional practice, the others lead to a kind of disorderly love and dissipation of energy and life into nothingness. **St. Augustine refers to this pattern of behaviour as sin and it is a very common practice in most local churches.**" (Page 23, emphasis mine)*

These six applied practices require further thought on my part to fully understand how they are meant and why they are emphasised over other actions and disciplines. The groundwork on which they are based certainly matches my own experience.   By laying this groundwork Rooms and Keifert have helped answer my own questions of "*What* is going on?" in a mission-adverse church. In the six practices they also attempt to answer the "So what" question: "So what can we do about it?"   Given the veracity of their starting point, they certainly cannot be lightly dismissed. Critical and biblical enquiry would serve to strengthen what should be strengthened, and

correct what might be askance. This is something I hope to attend to at some point.

My main caution (which is not insurmountable) is this: behind these books is an ecclesial **product**. *Partnership for Missional Church (PMC)* is a church consultancy framework through which churches who want to explore these practices can "buy in" facilitation and support over a three-year process. Monetisation like this isn't necessarily bad; it is akin to 3dm (focussing on discipleship and missional communities) or NCD which takes an inventory based approach to balanced growth. But there *is* a little discordance when a framework which resists a culture of faddish quickfixes is promulgated as something that literally needs a ™ symbol. Nevertheless, PMC does better than most to transcend the irony; a non-linear messy frustrating journey of discernment is not the stuff of populism. To the extent that it will play its part in the developing trend—changing culture until mission is a natural rhythm—it will do itself out of a job and, in that possibility, it would rightly be seen as a success.

Four Levels of Church Conversation

There's something to observe when Christians get together and talk about themselves in meetings, in groups, or even over coffee. It's an observation that relates to the question of "what is this meeting for?" and "what are we not talking about?"

Here is how I've come to answer that question: by identifying **four levels of conversation.** It's an oversimplifying

categorisation, for sure, but hopefully a useful way to discern what page a conversation is on.

The **top level** of conversation is *mechanical and operational.* Like coats of paint, it's this *top* layer that is on the surface and is often the easiest level to enter into.

It is at this level that we find ourselves talking about operations: planning services, organising rotas, remarking on how good the flowers look, the size of the congregation, the clarity of the sound, and the feel of the sermon. These are all necessary things to discuss and it's not for no reason that such topics dominate the agenda of many meetings, and make up the bulk of a minister's emails and phone calls. Things need to happen, programs need to run, and coordination and conversation is required to do that.

Conversations at this level, however, *presume and rest upon* an understanding about *how* the church operates. That's the topic of the next level of conversation:

The **second level** of conversation is *managerial and organisational.* At this level, it's not so much about keeping the church operational but *improving* those operations.

These are conversations that deal with priorities, financial allocations and budgets, improving efficiencies, and responding to hiccups and crises. A good engagement at this level keeps things running smoothly. Most complaints and criticism are also at this level because they usually relate to how things could supposedly be done better. Boards and oversight committees often spend time talking at this level.

These sorts of conversations *inform and found* how we talk about the operations of the church (the previous level), and *presumes* the church's mission and purpose:

The **third level** of conversation is *missional and cultural.*

This is where questions of identity, purpose, and values are considered. It's a level of conversation that is both *reflective* and *strategic.*

It is reflective, in that it involves questions about ourselves: *Who are we? Where are we going? What are we for? What's really important? What are we struggling with? What is good about us that needs to be affirmed? What is wrong that needs to be addressed? Where are we clinging to idols that we should put away? What gifts are we ignoring that we should cling to? What is our culture? Where are our blind stops? What makes us tick?*

It is strategic, in that it involves questions about mission and calling: *What is God doing in with and around us? Where is he leading us? What is his heart for the people and place in which we find ourselves? What is the culture in which we find ourselves, and how do we bear witness to the gospel in the midst of it?* It is in this sort of conversation that vision and purpose are tussled through and articulated.

Conversations at this level can be quite rare. Such engagements are usually motivated by passion or crisis, or both! Where the context is marked by stability, or even stagnancy, these topics are rarely broached; the presumed answers suffice for the sake of management and operation. This is understandable; for conversation at this level to happen well, there needs to be a willingness to embrace the *challenge* that these sorts of questions generate, and that often requires facing fears and insecurities and daring to dream and be imaginative.

Conversations at this level *inform and shape* how we talk about the management and organisation of the church (the previous level), and *presumes* a theological and doxological basis:

The **base level** of conversation is ***theological and***

doxological and deals with spiritual foundations.

These conversations can sometimes feel a bit academic or esoteric. This does not necessarily mean that they are not delightful, dynamic, and life-giving. The main contributor to my own theological formation was coffee with fellow students! I have wrestled with fellow colleagues about things like Neo-Calvinism (when it was a new thing) and New Perspectives (which still is). There might be no clear application for such discussions, but they do shape the foundations upon which all other conversations rest. *What do we believe? And why?*

Of course, "theological" doesn't just mean cerebral things. Theology cannot be divorced from doxology. The conversations at this level are also intensely spiritual. I have had delightful conversations with deeply contemplative folk who make use of art, symbolism, metaphor, and even silence. Shared spiritual disciplines are located here. It is at this level that our conversations come close to the heart of worship.

Again, these sorts of conversations can be few and far between, even in a church setting. There is often an intense sense of privacy and vulnerability that prevents the dialogue. We often tend to mitigate this by relegating these sorts of topics to a didactic sermon or by speaking in abstractions so that awkward conclusions can be avoided. Yet this sort of engagement is the stuff of life, it is where we discover a common root for our passions, a base level unity that founds a true and open community, irrespective of disagreements at the other levels.

Diagrammatically, it looks like this:
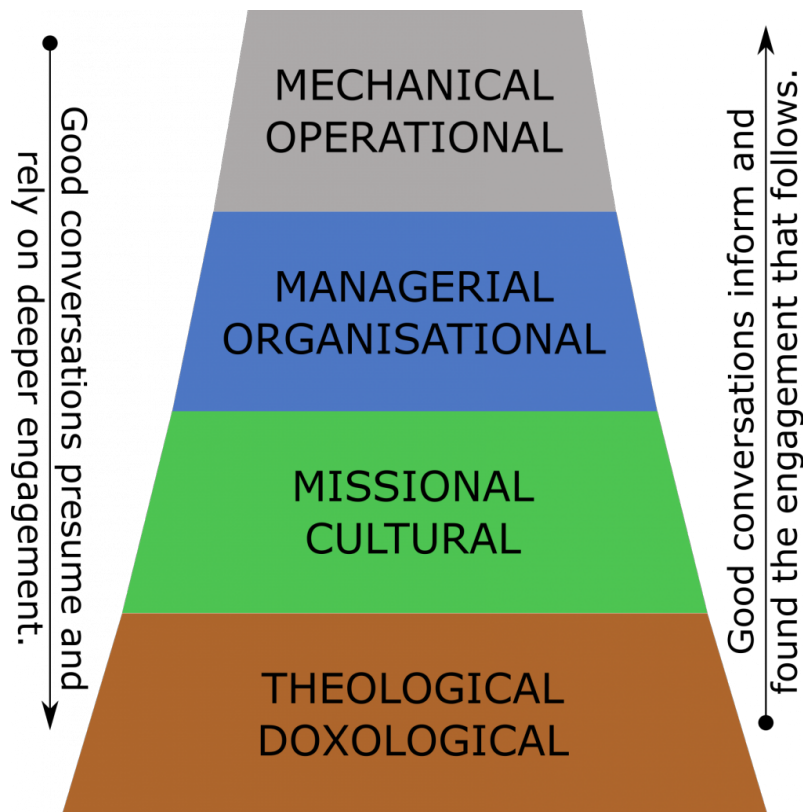
It is a simplification, but it does help as we ponder how we ourselves engage in dialogue about the church.

I suspect that every one of us is more comfortable engaging at one level more than another. And sometimes we try and do things at the wrong place. This is the situation where a conversation about hymn selection is not about the operation of the music ministry, but actually a commentary with regards to priorities, purpose, and base values; the issue is rarely the issue! This can help discern where the conversation needs to go.

But it also reminds us of the conversations that we *need* to have but sometimes never get around to. The management meeting that spends all its time on minutiae and forgets the important things is a well-known experience. The old analogy of the church that forgets that it is a lifeboat station is a failure to have the deeper conversations at the right time and in the right way.

The thoughts, and hopefully the conversations, continue.

Review: 5 Voices — How to Communicate Effectively with Everyone You Lead

Personality type inventories and leadership style analyses are a common tool in leadership and management circles. I'm sure this is the case in the business sector. It is certainly the case when it comes to churches and non-profits, with our high volunteer basis, and our emphasis on vocation and personal engagement.
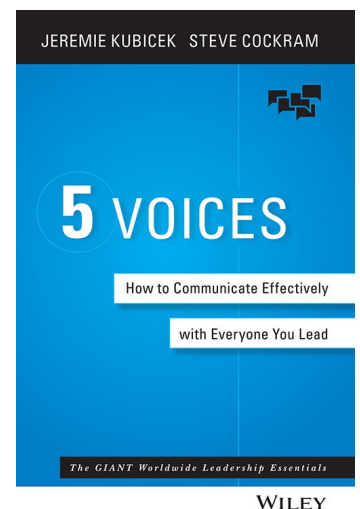
Over the years I have become familiar with Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), DiSC, Personality Plus, and even some of the more esoteric ones such as Enneagram and Motivational Gifts. I have recently come across Colour Energies which appears to be a condensed version of MBTI and is apparently growing in popularity in management circles. Each has a different focus on nature or nurture, or things such as innate personality and context. All have a fundamental grounding in an understanding of the human psyche as individuals and as a team or system. All have something useful to contribute, but some more than others.

And now, on a recommendation, I have picked up a book on the 5 Voices. The focus is a link between personality types with communication in a team dynamic. There's a clear application built into the premise (the subtitle says it all) and this is useful. The authors continually point out the benefit of

their readers knowing "what it is like to be on the other side of them" (p17).

The Five Voices are, in order of "loudness:"

NURTURER – "Nurturers are champions of people and work to take care of everyone around them… They are always concerned about the relational health and harmony of the group… They are completely committed to protecting values and principles… They innately understand how certain actions, behaviours, or initiatives will affect people." (p31)

CREATIVE – "Creatives are champions of innovation and future ideas. They are conceptual architects and are able to see how all the pieces fit together… Creatives are never satisfied with the status quo; they always believe it can be better… They are like an 'early warning radar system' and can see the opportunities and dangers of the future before everyone else." (pp33-34)

GUARDIAN – "Guardians are champions of responsibility and stewardship… They respect and value logic, systems, order, procedure, and process… They have a selfless capacity to deliver the vision once it has been agreed… Guardians guard what is already working." (pp35-36)

CONNECTOR – "Connectors are champions of relationships and strategic partnerships… They rally people around causes and things they believe in… Connectors believe in a world where everyone can play and get excited about future opportunities… and they work to make it happen… They are usually persuasive and inspirational communicators." (p39)

PIONEER – "Pioneers are champions of aligning people with resources to win or achieve the objective… They approach life with an 'Anything is possible!' attitude… Pioneers believe visioning a new future is always the highest priority… Pioneers brings strategic military-like thinking to achieve the agreed objective." (p41)

As a simple personality inventory, this system is **somewhat lacking.** Unlike MBTI and DiSC, for instance, where the categories *derive* from a fundamental framework (the psychology of processing information in MBTI, the interplay of task-or-person focus and empowerment in DiSC) the five voice categories seem a little *arbitrary*.

Author Steve Crockram talks about his desire to "repackage" the 16 MBTI personalities (page x), but this is not that. How do you condensed 16 into 5 in a way that maintains the integrity of its derivation? And besides, that work has been done: there is so much material on, for instance, how NF's interact with ST's. It is telling that in some of their subsequent analysis they feel the need to *split* the Creative voice into Creative-Feeler and Creative-Thinker (p115). Similarly, at other times, they need to *combine* the Nurturer and Guardian voices into a single entity. There isn't a consistent framework, a derivation to look back to in order to justify their conclusions, or reach forward to new ones. The voices are presented as simply "what is", a product to buy into, or otherwise.

The spiritually minded could perhaps attempt a mapping from APEST/Pentagon/Fivefold terminology: Apostle = Pioneer, Prophet = Creative, Evangelist = Connector, Shepherd/Pastor = Nurturer, Teacher = Guardian. But this is tenuous.

I think this is why I found myself pushing back at some of the over-simplifications. For instance, the Nurturer voice could easily be caricatured as maternalistic, always ready with the empathy. But Nurturers (as an expression of their *nurturing*) also know how to exhibit "tough love", avoid mollycoddling, and to break symbiosis or transference. They can be *champions*, not just wetnurses. Similarly Pioneers are caricatured as militaristic generals, ready to roll over the top of other people for the sake of the goal. But Pioneers

(as an expression of their *pioneering*) also know that bringing the people with them is not just part of the goal, but integral to it. Creative voices can be quiet, but not always so!

Nevertheless, the **benefit of the book is significant** and it lies, as mentioned, in the area of communication and team dynamics.

The first benefit is that of self-awareness, not only of yourself, but of others in your team. The descriptions of each voice throughout ask questions such as "What do they bring at their best? What questions are they really asking inside?" and considerations of likely negative impacts. They also encourage you to not only work out your *foundational voice* (and so understand your weaknesses and limitations) but also your *nemesis* voice that you will often fail to hear, and often fail to reach.

They suggest "Rules of Engagement" for staff meetings and the like, because there's "no such thing as accidental synergy" (p128). Having a speaking order of Nurturers, Creatives, Guardians, Connectors, and Pioneers makes internal sense to their system, as well as the assurances and challenges that are put before each voice.

I'm not entirely convinced; for instance, it's not just about ensuring that the louder voices wait their turn, it's also about a dynamic in which the quieter voices are willing to step up, in which case something like Lencioni's Five Dysfunctions of a Team might be a better place to start. Nevertheless, they fully acknowledge that their Rules of Engagement might (initially) feel a little contrived. The unpacking of the sort of "weapon" each voice brings to a dysfunctional table is useful as a description.

All the weapons deployed every day in any environment where human beings interact. Usually, teams simply accept friendly

fire and allow the Nurturers to care fro the wounded without analyzing what's really happening. But where the use of weapons remains unchallenged, teams function at far below their true potential. Where team members understand the impact of their weapons system and become intentional in how they deploy it, team culture and productivity will change immediately for the better. (p108)

Similarly helpful is the role of each voice in vision casting and change management. The gap between Creative/Pioneer and Nurturer/Guardian is stark, and the alignment of each with progressives and conservatives respectively is well-made. The role of the Connector voice in keeping the two ends together is no mere "piggy in the middle" here, but a crucial part of the dynamic.

In a perfect world, Pioneers and Creatives would be out on the front lines, focused on and exploring the future possibilities. Connectors would be trying to message the opportunity, getting everybody on the same page and fully aligned. Nurturers and Guardians are connected and engaged but invariably towards the back because they want to make sure it's safe and that the people, money, and resources are being taken care of. (p169)

All of this can help the reader to analyse their team health, be self-aware of their own voice, and the voice of others, and to avoid being an unnecessary contributor to dysfunction. What it doesn't do is give you a real way forward in how to deal with dysfunction.

This could have been explored. For instance: How do you deal with a disconnect, when all have retreated to their castles? How do you deal with an other-voice leaning team, when you're well outside of your energising 70/30 principle situation in which you are using your natural voice 70% of the time (p155)? How do you go about motivating team health from an

empowered position, a disempowered position, an oversight position, or a "leading-up" position?

To the extent that the 5 voices can provide a common vocabulary, and be a catalyst for personal and interpersonal reflection, it remains a useful resource. Despite its weaknesses, it's a worthy addition to the menagerie of leadership style products. Add it to the mix, and use it when it's useful.

Pioneering Mission and Authoritative Dissent

It's always great to get in conversation with stimulating people who understand the dynamics of mission in the church and all that's in play and at stake when pioneering is needed. One of the things that happens is that words and phrases get used that state a concept or an experience that you've always been aware of but have struggled to describe. With new words comes an opportunity for reflection.

Recently we had cause to reflect on the concept of "dissenter." It's in two parts, **"pathfinding dissenter"** and **"authority dissenter."**

They're not terms we've coined. You'll find reference to it books such as Arbuckle's *Refounding the Church: Dissent for*

Leadership, which I haven't read but plan to. It's in a whole bunch of pioneering ministry material, which you can google for, but which I also haven't read. All that I say below are my thoughts, capturing our experience through in these terms.

The concept of **"pathfinding dissenter"** is readily grasped. Everyone understands that for something new to happen there needs to be a form of leadership that is constructively *discontent* with the status quo and simply refuses to agree that the way things are always done is the best way forward. This form of leadership, when done well, pokes and prods, questioning assumptions and the cultural "givens." The discontent is entered into and wrestled with, preferably in a gathering community of the like-hearted, and a pathway forward is discovered and followed.

To others, it may not look like a path. Indeed, it is sometimes the task of the dissenting explorers to "toss their caps" over an impossibly high wall so they can find their way. But this is why *dissent* is a good word to use. It's a disagreement with the presumed impossible, it blazes a trail, it gets new things done.

Gill and I have had the joy of walking with pathfinding dissenters. For us, the phrase was "damn the torpedoes" and for an all-too-brief season it was the way of new things.

It's the term **"authority dissenter"** that has intrigued me. But, of course, it makes sense also. The authority dissenter is the one who interfaces between the pathfinder and organisational structures. *They have authority, and they recognise, release, cover and connect with the constructive pathfinding dissenters.*

They have institutional authority but a pioneering spirit. They also share the same constructive discontent. They also dissent from the cultural presumptions of the status quo.

They also understand viscerally that new paths ahead need to be found and forged. And they champion and support the pathfinders, without getting in their way. They take their hands off, create the space, and protect where needed.

An ineffective nerdy analogy perhaps: It's the wisdom of Gandalf, and then Aragorn, who allow the ringbearer and his friends to forge their own path, while they get on with the jobs that need doing and the wars that need waging, all the while watching, believing, and drawing away the enemy fire.

Without the authority dissenter, the pathfinders will still go ahead — the pioneering spirit cannot easily be quenched — but they will do so disconnected. Their task will be harder and the pathfinders will struggle. But most importantly, the organisation will also be disconnected, without a way to follow along the new ways forward, and with a diminished sense of "blessing and being blessed in return."

The authority dissenter is a permission giver, but of a particular sort. Many effective leaders will hear proposals and the creative ones will give permission to make it happen. But the authority dissenter doesn't just give permission to what can be known ("Go and do what you have said you will do."), they give permission to the *unknown* ("Go, and may the Lord show you your path.")

Authority dissenters can cover the pathfinders in all manner of ways, from providing resources, to dealing with and removing bureaucratic overheads, to bringing people into community with one another. They are the champions that justify the pioneers to whoever sticks their nose in, so that the pioneers are released from the ever-present weariness of having to justify every step (and mis-step) to eagle-eyed naysayers.

And here is an important dynamic: the authority dissenter does not demand primary loyalty. The relationship with pioneers is

not that of patron-client. It is a parental-release dynamic.

The analogy is this: I expect a certain high degree of loyalty from my children. But as they forge their own path, those loyalties will rightly and appropriately shift, most clearly towards the formation of their own family.

In pioneering it is the same: as pathfinders scale their walls and go through fire together there will be a mutual loyalty which should not be tampered with. As a pioneer leader passes through trials and moves in the charism that necessarily follows, their chief loyalty will be towards those they serve and serve alongside.

At this point, without an authority dissenter, the organisation will try and claim it's prize, or like a clinging mother-in-law, try to put it in its place and demand its dues. But the authority dissenter is there to make more room — the space given to the pioneer at the beginning of the journey is now extended to those who have been found at the end and along the way. Because it is clear: the new thing will expand in God's grace, and the old will either move and embrace it, reject and abandon it, or be cracked and broken by it.

The authority dissenter is there to be the point of embrace, taking upon themselves the points where it rubs and wears, mending the cracks, and helping the blessings flow both ways.

Gill and I have had "authority dissenters," whose authority was episcopal. It was a foundational blessing. In other ways, though, we've had to cover ourselves: arching our backs against church machinery that would squash the fragile new things that were growing. It's wearisome and wrong to run up and down the path, pushing with the pathfinders at one point, pushing back at the machinery at another.

My reflection concludes: The authority dissenter, the cover of the apostolically hearted, is not just important, it is essential. We look for innovative pioneers to push us

outwards. But that's not enough. We must also incorporate
into ourselves, and give authority to, those who can
recognise, release, cover and connect with those who will do
what we need to do next.

Q&A: What is the practical role of recent retired people in the church?

Big Bad Wolf asks: *What is the practical role of recent
retired people in the church? Stacking chairs and serving cups
of tea?*

Hi Wolf,

Is their some personal hurt behind your question? I would
understand if there was because I have come across churches
where the retired/older people are relegated to (what might
sometimes be considered to be) menial or trivial tasks, and
this is hurtful. So there might be a question behind your
question.

But to interact with your question as it stands…

A church, like any organised community, takes a lot of energy
to run. If people are to be blessed, particularly newcomers,
then there is a necessary reliance on people putting their
hand up to serve the community in many various ways. This
includes stacking chairs and serving cups of tea!

So, there is no reason why a recently retired person should be
excluded from acts of service, if they are willing and able.
 I have come across many recently retired people who have

delighted to serve the church in such a way, and have valued the fact that they can carry some of that load while they have the energy and the freedom from caring from children etc. that may not be afforded to others. Let us not denigrate the necessity, importance, and value of those so-called menial tasks of service and those that volunteer for them. As someone who has reached the end of service to be faced with 100 chairs to pack up, having someone say, "Will, I'll do that" is such a relief and a blessing, truly soothing. I value it greatly.

But perhaps your question implies an "only" — is that the "only" role for the recently retired? Absolutely not! Each member of the body is gifted according to the Spirit one to another so as to build the people of God and further the gospel. The task of the church is to encourage everyone, regardless of their age, towards ongoing maturity and the wise application of their gifts and talents.

However, if there is one direction that I would, generally speaking, encourage the "recently retired" to particularly explore, it is the task of mentoring. The age group you refer to have a particular wealth of experience and knowledge to gift the church with. If they can be involved in some way, large or small with the ongoing task of identifying, apprenticing, releasing and commisioning newer leaders they will have blessed God's people and produced much fruit for his glory in that way, and it may be a useful framework for their direct hands-on ministry.

Thanks for the question,

W.