

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.

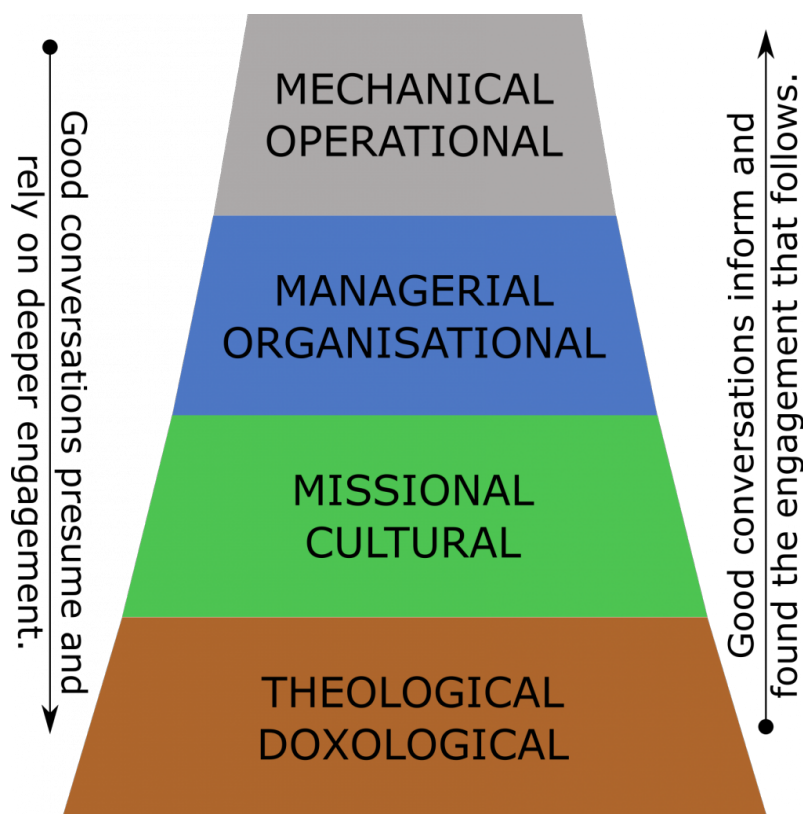
Theology cannot be divorced from doxology. The conversations at this level are also intensely spiritual. I have had delightful conversations with deeply contemplative folk who make use of art, symbolism, metaphor, and even silence. Shared spiritual disciplines are located here. It is at this level that 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:



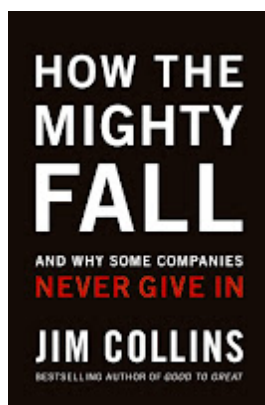
It is a simplification, but it does help as we ponder how we ourselves engage in dialogue about the church.

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: How the Mighty Fall



I sometimes read books that are from a different “field” than my own. This includes books from the world of corporate management and capitalist technique – an area I tend to avoid due to excessive buzzword compliance and a lingering suspicion that the author has perfectly polished teeth and has dictated the book while wearing a Kylie-mic. I forget who or what recommended Jim Collins’ *How the Mighty Fall and why some Companies Never Give In* to me – and why it was recommended. But I read it, and found it informative and useful.

The basic premise that Collins works from is to reverse his normal endeavour of analysing why some companies go from good to great in order to understand why some great companies have somewhat inexplicably crashed and burned. He considers

companies such as Ames, Bank of America, HP, Motorola and compares them with success stories in the same field – e.g. Wal-Mart, Wells Fargo, Texas Instruments. (The complete list is tabulated on Page 141). It's an intriguing analysis as it demonstrates that "normal" causes of failure – passivity, complacency, lack of innovation etc. – were not evident. The stories he shares are often ones of a "spectacular fall despite... revolutionary fervour." (Page 11).

Rather, his analysis identified "five stages of decline" that were more or less evident across the examples of fallen companies. (See chart on Page 20).

1. "Hubris Born of Success"
2. "Undisciplined Pursuit of More"
3. "Denial of Risk and Peril"
4. "Grasping for Salvation"
5. "Capitulation to Irrelevance or Death"

Within each stage he offers examples and some decent considerations of the leadership and management principles that would have helped reverse the death-ward journey. It is here that I found the most relevance. If we are looking at the "mighty fallen" then the institutional church at least fits that bill *prima facie*. The gems of advice are worthwhile. And they are certainly assisting me in how I think about the current review of my Parish.

For instance, the importance of inquisitiveness of a leader that constantly asks "why, why, why?" (Page 39) does much to alleviate the arrogance that characterises the first stage of decline. Collins further unpacks the problem:

"The rhetoric of success ("We're successful because we do these specific things") replaces understanding and insight ("We're successful because we understand why we do these specific things and under what conditions they would no longer work.")." (Page 43)

Similarly, he talks about manage of people and teams. One particular example interacts with the institutional church's tendency to fall back to bureaucracy when things need doing or when things go wrong:

"When bureaucratic rules erode an ethic of freedom and responsibility within a framework of core values and demanding standards, you've become infected with the disease of mediocrity." (Page 56)

In other words, bureaucracy results when you put the wrong people in the wrong place and take away the freedoms of the good people.

In the era of internet preaching personalities, his view of team leadership needs to be strongly heeded by Christian leaders:

"The best leaders we've studied had a peculiar genius for seeing themselves as not all that important, recognizing the need to build an executive team and to craft a culture based on core values that do not depend upon a single heroic leader." (Page 62)

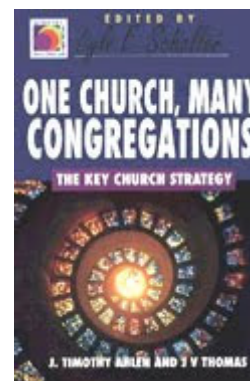
If we can correlate this analysis to the state of the church it's probably appropriate to look towards the later stages of decline. Here there is another piece of advice worth heeding – "Stage 4 begins when an organization reacts to a downturn by lurching for a silver bullet... they go for a quick, big solution or bold stroke to jump-start a recovery, rather than embark on the more pedestrian, arduous process of rebuilding long-term momentum." (Page 89). Church leadership is very rarely about thunderbolts – it is about decent, ongoing shepherding – the teaching of the word, the bringing of it in and out of season and doing the work of an evangelist. It's about getting the basics right and being committed to slogging it out for Jesus.

I think this book applies to the church because in the end it is not so much an analysis of business but a consideration of corporate human psychology intent on avoiding failure and embracing fear. Here is some common sense, some earthly wisdom, and a decent call to both boldness and humility. We can learn from this.



Review: One Church, Many Congregations

One Church, Many Congregations is a fascinating little book. Written from an American Baptist context it explores what the authors call the “Key Church Strategy.” While the book is very closely tied to this strategy and occasionally assumes some familiarity with both the Strategy and its associated material and jargon, it does put forward some sound principles for revitalising church through mission.



The fundamental premise is this – that “the most effective – and often the lowest cost – way to reach new generations... with the gospel of Jesus Christ is through new worshiping communities.” (Page 11). Unashamedly, **“The most effective form of evangelism is church starting.”** (Page 135). Here is a holistic view of evangelism that avoids utilitarian and overly-pragmatic views on the most efficient ways of winning souls. It recognises that not only do people (as in persons) reach people for Jesus but people (as in congregations) are necessary to reach people for Jesus. The idea is this – if you want to grow the church, plant and nurture new

congregations and missions.

While it's never explicitly spelled out (something of a frustration) it appears that the Key Church Strategy revolves around breathing life into old churches through enabling that church to plant other churches or satellite ministries. In their chapter on "Foundations" the authors look towards NT history to pattern a model of evangelism-by-church-planting.

The most useful thing they extract from the biblical pattern is the "Indigenous Principle." Having already illustrated the idea earlier when talking about an outreach to a local apartment community in which "a pastor from the community" is "enlisted and trained" (Page 23) it is explained:

"The indigenous missions principle states that congregations are healthier and more productive, and require little or no outside support, when started and developed in the context of the socioeconomic condition and culture of the people who are to be evangelized or congregationalized." (Page 32)

Here we see the holistic nature of the Strategy: we find mentoring and leadership-development at the heart of mission and evangelism. They include the exhortation to "Teach members of the church planting teams to replace themselves by enlisting residents indigenous to the target community and teaching them to be leaders." (Page 35). Without knowing the strategy, this is the sort of thing that has been happening at Connections and which needs to happen further if we are to build significantly onto some of the inroads we are making, as a community, into different socioeconomic groups.

The insights are not restricted to the churches being planted but fundamentally to the church doing the planting. The authors see the role of the Key church as *sponsorship* or *partnership*:

"...sponsorship is a partnership between the new church the new

church congregation and the established church. Each partner supplies some expertise and resources needed to begin and grow a new church... The goal of sponsorship is for the sponsoring church's presence to decrease as the new congregation grows. The sponsor can call itself successful if it works itself out of a job." (Page 37)

This stuff is dear to my heart and of great relevance to myself as I consider my own ministry of context of the Parish of Burnie where we find ourselves multi-congregational and needing to implement changes in governance and other structures that recognise this sort of partnership and allow a network of partnerships to emerge. The structure they put forward (a "Key Church Council") would not readily apply to my context, but the principles are sound: "A necessary part of any church ministry strategy is the establishment of an organizational structure that will do more than simply meet and make decisions. Good organizational structures facilitate ministry, not merely debate it." (Page 53). That's close to home.

For the potential "Key Church" the idea is that revitalisation comes through embracing a willingness to invest internally by focussing externally. The vision is not a myriad of uncontrollable, resource-draining programs hanging of an old structure – but genuine outreaches that aspire to the "three-selves" of maturity (self-supporting, self-governing, self-extending). Even when there is ongoing connection with the centre (in the so-called "Indigenous Satellite Strategy") and the outreach remains a "permanent part of the sponsoring church" (Page 79), the aspiration is still towards this sort of maturity, and to a mutual understanding that "the resources are in the harvest" (Page 81) and that there is blessing in investing in a number of demographically homogenous units that allows the church network as a whole to be a heterogeneous community (see Page 83).

There are numerous practical suggestions. From a list of “temptations to avoid” when enlisting a core group (Page 114) to guidelines in the appendix that run to detail such as financial arrangements (“tithes and offerings should be pooled and a separate checking account opened in the name of the new congregation.” (Page 132))

Like all ministry-management books it is never a direct match for one’s own context that can be directly copied. But there is decades of experience here in a model of doing church and growing the kingdom that beats close to my own heart and the necessary direction for our own church. I’m glad to have a had a glimpse and pray to know the same wisdom in the here and now. And it is stirred me to not simply be content with ensuring the church machine continues to tick over, but seeing it accelerate.

