

Luke 4: 16-21, Acts 5: 27-39

Pymble 6.5.18

Migrating the Church from Institution to Movement

Today I am going to begin with a story from Anthony de Mello, a much-loved Jesuit priest who spent most of his life in India. Perhaps I have read this before, and if so, I don't apologise because I'm sure you will enjoy it again...

Prayer of the Frog, Shipwreck...¹

The third in this series of migrations that Brian McLaren speaks of is to do with the Church itself.

To where does the *Church* need to migrate in order to fulfill its purpose?

And de Mello's story humourously and rather surgically cuts to the heart of the problems with the modern church – too often we forget our reason for existence and become distracted by secondary things; we lose our passion and opt for comfort.

The way McLaren puts it is that the church needs to migrate from being an organized religion with a focus on its institutional forms to being an organizing religion, or a movement of people loyal to Jesus Christ, serving the world. He draws on *social movement theory*,² an arm of the social sciences that seeks to explain why and how social change occurs. And I'm just going to briefly outline the terminology

Social movement theory identifies 3 basis terms: *communities, institutions and movements*.

As individuals we live in **communities** in a certain location or context. In order to enhance our various needs, communities develop **institutions** such as education systems, governments, financial systems, religious denominations and so on. But when these institutions fail us, **movements** rise up to confront and challenge those institutions that they might once again serve their communities.

By their very nature, institutions are concerned with status quo, stability, and if they are open to change,

¹ Prayer of the Frog, Volume 1 Anthony de Mello, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash Anand, India 1989. P. 112

² The Great Spiritual Migration, Brian D McLaren, Hodder. P. 137f

it is carefully planned, evolutionary change.
They often grow large and cumbersome,
can lose touch with grassroots issues
and instead serve their own interests.
I don't think it is overstating it to suggest
that the large banks (to be topical)
are examples of institutions
that have, to some degree at least, lost their customer focus
in the clamber for ever-growing profits.
Like the life-saving stations in the opening story,
institutions can forget their reason for being.

Movements, by contrast, are keen for large changes
and call out institutions for losing their way.
They are characterized by passion, agility
and the loyalty of their followers.
In order to complete the example above
according to the social movement theory,
a movement for change and accountability has risen up
against the banks in order to call them back into line.
Other larger examples of movements include the
US civil rights movement and the women's equality movement
both demanding wide societal change
Movements like these
are perhaps always bubbling away under the surface
but at key moments a number of factors will converge
to make significant change more likely.
Many feel that our present moment is ripe for such change
in the Church and in society.

So let me just be clear on what McLaren is calling for:
the idea is not that the church
turns into a placard-waving revolutionary mob
but that we need a little less institution and a bit more movement
in all aspects of our life.
A little less status quo and a bit more passion for a better world.
A little less focus on structure and regulations
and a bit more sharing of our Good News.
A little less concern for our Brand,
and a little more genuine concern for those on the margins of society.

And I think this movement mentality for the Church is
aimed in two directions.
One, the Christian movement is speaking to the Church institution,
calling it to follow more closely its founder's teaching and action.
We might say it is calling the Church to be more Christian itself.

And two, the Christian movement is speaking to the institutions of our world – the political, economic and social institutions – to say, *We can do better; the system is broken for so many people; we are not leaving the world in a better state for our children; rising inequality is not just; our mad consumerist mindset is unsustainable and our increasing militarization will not lead to a lasting peace.* Full of faith and hope, McLaren sees the Christian Church along with other religions of goodwill, can play a leading part in the healing of our world.

A local example, that I am sure McLaren would support, is the role the Uniting Church has played with Sydney Alliance, the group focused on improvement in our civil society. Community groups, unions and churches have joined together to campaign for specific, well-researched and achievable goals in areas such as better access to housing for low income households, small but meaningful improvements for asylum seekers living in the community and more. In March this year, as a result of the campaign by Sydney Alliance, buried in a huge report, the NSW government reluctantly committed to a 5-10% inclusion of affordable housing in new developments. It wasn't quite what they were after, and there is still much to do, but it was a significant win for Sydney Alliance.

When the Church is operating mostly as an institution, it is focused on its own needs but when it is operating as a movement it is alive to how we can serve others. In this regard the words of Jesus are heard with fresh relevance: *“Those who want to save their life will lose it; but those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”*

So as we bring this series to an end, I hope you might have developed some wanderlust for these migrations in your own life and in the life of our congregation. I hope you might have caught some fresh vision of what Christian faith can be –

- a way of life not just a set of beliefs;
- serving a God of liberation not violent domination,
- supported by church as a movement, loving and serving the world not just an institution concerned with it's own position and power.

I hope these sorts of visions for the Church will be in your minds as together we edge towards making decisions

about our congregation's shape and future.

For while these reflections have been broad and universal in scope, they are enacted by concrete local decisions and actions.

May God grant us a new all-encompassing way of seeing our faith and may God grant us a fresh vision of what Church can be.