

# From Death Cycle to Life Cycle

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## Escaping Predictable Decline

Despite the overflowing communication resources available to the church in Australia, we have been dying. We are like the drought-hit farmer gazing at a sky heavy with clouds that won't rain. It's all there, but it doesn't make any difference down where the life needs to grow. Within us, the cost is frustration, anguish and anger.

Around so many of our churches there is an awful predictability of their decline. What is worse is their benign acceptance of the fact that it should happen. The following parable and its sequel show us that churches can escape the awful gravitation of the death cycle.

## THE PARABLE OF DAJARRA PARK

Even before that weekend Murray had felt uneasy whenever he thought about the past at Dajarra Park. He had worshipped there all his married life, yet the events of the last forty years gnawed at him deep within. They had gradually built grand Dopes for their church.

He could remember there were only five houses in the street the day he and Joan moved in back in the forties. There was soon a real community spirit among the families who began to worship in the fibro hall the neighbouring parish had built for them. In less than two years the Sunday School was bursting at the seams. The Board of Mission was approached for a loan, and with volunteer labour the new building became a reality in 1952.

Within a few years they had called their own minister to lead the 190 members. All the signs suggested continuing growth. Perhaps the 250 seat church built in 1961 would not be big enough?

The youth group peaked; there were the engagements and marriages. Kids grew up and away, out to the new suburbs, following jobs and educational opportunities. The membership took a slow consistent dive to 115 members by 1970.

Since then it had remained about the same with only minor fluctuations up and down, as a few extra people transferred in or out. They had tried everything to increase numbers, to no avail.

Now after more than twenty years as a leader in this congregation of such fine people, Murray had attended (reluctantly), yet another of many church meetings looking at their future. Some visitors had been invited to help them in this. The description of congregations caught in the death cycle had been too close for comfort. And worse, the speaker had described the next stage, the one he had seen coming, as the people in his street sold up and brought their retirement homes. A shrinking group of retired people worshipping in their church, so much at home, but unable to relate to the new people moving in. Occasionally a younger couple came, but they didn't come back.

What had made it worse for Murray was the realisation that, even as it grew, Dajarra Park had been programming itself for extinction. Their congregation had grown from those who had transferred from other congregations and from the children, mostly from church families, who grew up through the Sunday School. Even most of them were no longer with any church.

It was all so obvious. They had shied away from what the speaker insisted was vital: conversion faith, in which a congregation expects adults to come to faith. He knew the congregation had never seen it as their task to raise the question of faith and expect other adults to believe. There was the unspoken assumption that it was the minister who should reach the adults. The congregation was cut off from the community with no real way of aiding others to come to faith. He had come to accept that his neighbours would remain non-church families.

Now he saw that conversion growth was vital. A congregation needed to expect, plan and prepare for people of all ages to come to faith whether quickly or slowly.

Was there still hope for Dajarra Park to begin a life cycle instead of continuing the death cycle they were in? Murray knew it would be a difficult task. Everyone assumed the habits their congregation had grown up with were right, hallowed by traditions and familiarity.

He saw now how he unconsciously directed all faith sharing efforts towards Sunday School children and teenagers. It enabled him to avoid the most difficult area of his religious experience, sharing with other adults. He had never been brought up to share deep personal matters with others. Wryly he admitted that even Joan and he found it difficult to say what they believed to each other.

Is it any wonder the congregation is caught in the death cycle, he mused, when talking about Jesus Christ is effectively tabooed at work, in recreation, and he thought incredulously, most of the time even while in church. Perhaps we teach children and young people more effectively than we ever know, that religion is kid's stuff and not meant for the adult world.

Murray remembered the closing illustration at the meeting with the visitors, about a minister's wife who had led a group through a workbook which brought home to them the need for change. As they followed the study they prayed, 'Lord, let us see adult conversions.'

She and the whole group were galvanised when, within two weeks, a husband who had nothing to do with the church accepted Christ as Lord, an 'outsider' came in need, joined their congregation and came to faith, and an elder of many years' standing had faith come alive from one line of a Bible reading.

Murray would have been overjoyed with three in a year! The secret he realised is to believe it is God's purpose for people of all ages to come to faith. God didn't care whether it was quick or slow as long as it began. He saw now that he needn't live with the failure to reach out, or with the ache Joan and he knew because two of their children had turned their back on belief.

Rather than live with the past and its blame, Murray was slowly turning toward the hope that new beginnings were possible with this God who could even convert adults, and he laughed as he thought, 'Even me.'

## **CHURCHES IN A DEATH CYCLE**

The story above is unfortunately common, causing too many churches, in too many contexts, in too many denominations to suffer the death cycle. There is an awful predictability about churches.

The driving force of change in their circumstances may have been different, but overall, the church has not been able to respond adequately to them. In the battle with change, the church has too often laid down and died.

There are many reasons why churches have become caught up in a death cycle.

Oftentimes they have become too clergy centred, relying totally on church transfer and births for new members. Sometimes an excessive focus on the traditions received from a previous generation or a

previous popular minister has produced a church subculture quite foreign to the next generation. Such patterns are often augmented by excessive concern with properties and 'keeping things tidy'!

In some cases, the death cycle has been cemented in place-by a complete neglect of the Great Commission. Mission has been reduced to education of children in the principles of the faith at the expense of adult mission or even of adequate-reflection on what adult faith is really about. There has been a loss of nerve for evangelism.

In other cases, what adult mission has existed has largely been mission at a distance—rallies and the like—that have really only been effective with those already involved in a church. At its worst evangelism at a distance has totally neglected the Great Commandment!

Even in the bustling ethnic churches there is the same problem. Their children are growing up bicultural, and the solidly 'old-country' church becomes a foreign land for most of them. They have just as much trouble evangelising their young as the traditional Anglo churches had twenty years ago. Their future is the same—the death cycle.

## **CAN THESE BONES LIVE?**

Ezekiel discovered what God can do (chapt 37). Can these dead bones come to life? Those of us who have attempted to revive dying churches will identify with Ezekiel's doubtful response to that question. Yet God has not abandoned his church. There are some pathways through which leaders can lead their people, if they are willing, into the life cycle.

The stories which follow are the result of conversations with many hundreds of people, attempting to discover the ways in which people grow in Christian life. The usual approach to attempt to grow Christian faith by seminars and preaching alone is far short of the mark. Based on the evidence of how we actually grow, a substantial change in the agenda is needed. Let us return to our parable to uncover the principles of the Life Cycle.

## **THE LIFE CYCLE**

How did Murray get the picture which drew him forwards? What made Murray realise that they were in the death cycle?

## **GETTING THE PICTURE**

It was on a special weekend. A speaker had described the stages of the death cycle, had diagnosed their lack of expectancy of adult conversions, and had told a story that gave them .ill hope. Murray had realised that his love for his church and in| lord would mean changes for 'even me'. It is stage one: 'Getting the Picture.

It may be a special event, special counselling or a special weekend that really opens people up to new listening. A special person can say the very things that finally tears open the sacred veil of familiar routines. Or it may be a personal crisis or interaction with someone quite different . It may be a moving experience or some exceptional failure.

From my experience, this moment of 'getting the picture' can occur in many ways. There are some common threads that emerge, however, from listening to people's experiences of this moment: It is not a focus on the decline and survival of the church that motivates people. That can only frighten them. It is the expectation that their hopes and longings are to be met by moving forward again not by harping back. They look at their community and see that a changed society is ready for changed approaches concerning the same gospel. • It is not just a 'church' issue. To be in mission will affect our faith, mostly by stretching and growing it. Our lack of faith, when it comes into clear view, is cause for repentance and humility, not self-justification. • It is not just an 'issue'. It is people we are talking about. It was the story of the three conversions that let Murray know that mission was all about people like him and his friends and his family. It was not a crusading commitment to go out and challenge society with the pure gospel. It was a love-exercise for real people in real-life situations.

In summary, 'getting the picture' is a process that takes place outside of normal routine. It looks at our place in our community and our place in relationship with Christ, and it hears some stories of hope about people not too much further along the track than we are ourselves. It is not just information, but a motivation to take responsibility for God's mission to our communities and to the networks of our everyday life.

## **MISSION EXPOSURE**

Where do they go from here? Let's continue the story, from the point of view of one of Murray's friends at church.

Murray and a few of us met to talk it over. We watched a video about effective mission in Asia. It was inspiring and informative. Now that we saw our own situation more accurately, we could identify with

those on the video as real people, and not just 'missionaries'. A week later we went in cars and started visiting other churches in other areas and talking with them about how they saw their mission in their context. It was so exciting to hear their victories, so reassuring to hear their mistakes, so solid to hear how God had walked with them every step of the way. 'It has been very difficult at times, but I would not ever want to go back the way we were,' said one elderly lady.

After a bit more reading and praying, two members of our home groups were sent by the church to Malaysia to visit some churches there. There they experienced, like us, Christians in the minority, in a moderately hostile setting, within a multicultural community. With the help of World Mission and .1 missionary organisation they visited a Methodist, Baptist and two Pentecostal churches. What an eye-opener! What an experience! They came back full of everything they had seen and heard. All the missionary stories, all the Bible stories, all their prayers in church for the last forty years actually made more sense now than ever before!

Some others of us, a bit less adventurous (or wealthy!) visited some creative churches in a mixed part of our city. Slowly some connections were being made. The minister restrained us from launching too soon into big long-term commitments. 'It has been good to watch others, but now its time to test ourselves out,' he said.

## **MISSION ADVENTURE**

What comes next? Usually a Mission Adventure.

We started to investigate short-term mission of different kinds. We decided it matters less whether its starting point was social justice, evangelism, welfare or development so much as making sure it did not stop there—that people were committed to the whole gospel. By now our number had grown, due to simple infectious enthusiasm. In another home group two of the young families went to a Scripture Union Family Mission. A few people went together to work as volunteers and to be trained by a Fusion centre. Four of us ventured into a street march about abortion, and were a lot wiser after the event! We then attended the public meeting about local housing issues. I actually surprised myself by having a say.

All of us experienced great joy in seeing God at work; some stress at trying something new; some humility in realising how poor was our prayer life and how easily tired our compassion became. We went back to Scripture to discover new insights into faith, mission and life. It was almost intoxicating sometimes to see so much vibrancy in the Bible for the first time in a long time!

After a while two separate groups went to help in parish weekend missions and saw that their testimonies and their nervous contributions were used by God. They really made a mess of the preaching, but everyone agreed that their hearts gave a clear message anyway. As Murray said, 'It was as though there was just no way we could stop God from doing something there.'

It is two years down the track. A better equipped, more humble, more experienced group of people were now ready to make some long term plans.

## **PARTICIPATORY PLANNING**

It had been difficult to leave some of the church duties to Others for two years. There had been criticism of the minister, snide comments at Parish Council about all these people busy Outside the parish', some desperate pleas for help by overworked saints who were propping up dying ministries. We had to talk it through, renew our vision and stick to the priorities that would bear much fruit for God. No doubt about it, we and they were all starting to grieve. Things were not going to be the way they were. No matter how much we were glad, there was still some room for sadness.

It was really special one weekend to have an Anniversary service that honoured the past and then said goodbye to it. Such a day of thanksgiving! Hard to believe, but out of those stories from the past, a new hope and a new vision spread even further through the congregation. For instance, when dear old Mrs McSavage told about the all age family activities at picnics during the Depression, the young parents were open-mouthed. 'That is what we are talking about,' they said, 'except not through picnics.' Then Mrs McSavage's jaw dropped too. She had never before realised! Some apologies, said all together, brought healing to many relationships.

A working group checked out several planning models and chose the one best suited to our situation. A lot of our best outreach people are not interested in church meetings so we had to make sure they were individually invited and encouraged.

Three principles were our anchors.

1. We knew we had to make specific goals that were achievable. We weren't going to change the world but we were determined to put a dent in it and, come next year, we want to be able to see how we've gone.

2. We knew everyone had to have a place in the plan that emerged. Without exception, they all have a gift of ministry from God. So we asked everyone to contribute and gave them different ways to do so. Only a few were good talkers. Some were only able to say what troubled them. Some (not enough) were creative ideas people. Everyone has a gift. Everyone belongs. So everyone is included in different ways and at different stages.

3. We wanted quality growth as well as quantity growth in our mission. Having seen how God loves to bless people and to save them, we knew that our faithfulness would see results. We had a few healthy arguments about that, and all agreed we weren't just chasing 'popular success', 'bums on seats' as we used to say.

After we had been able to focus on the different groups we felt the most longing to reach out to, we had lots of ideas coming out of our reading and our last twelve months' experience. How glad we were that our minister had not cut the corners, and had worn the unfair criticism, and kept us on the slower track. We knew we were all together talking sense and living out our faith. You could feel the presence of God in our little plans! One of the best ideas (I can hardly believe I am the one saying this—me who used to wear seven hats of responsibility in the church) was to have two months without any committee meetings! One month was to be given to extra prayer and the next month was to be given to extra visitation and hospitality. I am looking forward to that! Imagine a planning exercise which plans to make a space instead of filling it!

For most of our ideas, we could identify some mission agency or another denomination in the area which was open to helping get us established. That is the story so far. Despite all the great statements I have made I must confess I am still a bit afraid. We all are, really. Some are afraid of change, others afraid of failure. I am not sure I will be able to cope with the success, quite frankly! The minister is afraid of how his role will change.

Many of us are just a bit sad to see some of the old tried-and-true ways get changed, so we're going to have another funeral' when the New Year starts; a bit like the Anniversary service. We're not going to start on our plans until then. We're just waiting for God to get through to each of us about our fear and about walking by faith.

Thanks for listening. I have to be off. I've joined the bowling club now. They're great people down there. Old Bert Major said I am the first real Christian he's ever met at the bowling club. That is a start . . . isn't it?

## RACHEL'S STORY

Murray's story illustrates a common pattern in the process of moving from the death cycle to a life cycle. Murray had a long and deep commitment to his church. For many younger adults, their faith in Christ is often despite their churches. That too can generate a death cycle of cynicism. Moving to a life cycle means doing something positive, perhaps with just a few other people.

Yet, in this situation, the same process tends to evolve as the story of Rachel, Murray's daughter, indicates.

Murray's daughter, Rachel, just looked on. Although she was glad that Dad was finding a way forward, she couldn't get as excited as him about 'effective planning' and 'parish mission'. 'What difference is it going to make to the people I know?' she said. She felt that no matter how much the church got involved in the planning and exposure exercise, it would still be years before she would feel comfortable even in her best dreams, to bring some of her friends from work along to church!

She loved the people. She had grown up there and been in youth group there, met her husband there. But for the unchurched she felt it was just a foreign country. Nor did it seem to be about anything that really mattered. The real lifeline for her was her group of friends, whom she had met in that church. Some were still in this church (busy with young families which she and Ken hadn't started yet). Other Christian friends lived here, there and everywhere in the city. They met every week for a Bible study and prayer time which was more than just swapping ideas about Bible passages and more than sentimental attachments to nice ideas from the Scriptures. They really prayed for each other and struggled through life together.

They were a support group, a Bible study group, a prayer group all rolled into one. Sometimes they talked about being a house church but most of them were not prepared for that sort of commitment.

However, Rachel, like her father, was stirred by the conference and started to glimpse some of the ways forward for herself and the group. 'I wonder what we could do about getting the picture?'

She had seen books about Christianity in Australia. They had the overall picture of the social data but the great gap between the church and society was an everyday reality for them—they didn't need to

become acquainted with that. What they needed to rediscover was their identity in Christ. So they began to study it. It proved deeply moving when they discovered from reading more widely that many young people had felt the same about church, about it seeming irrelevant, about themselves being disenfranchised (particularly women). No-one in particular was responsible for it, but an overall ethos or culture had grown up, whose values were perpetuated and not questioned—just because no-one questioned them. Until now. Some pieces were falling heavily into place.

They started visiting one or two other churches, particularly churches where the young generation met. They began to discover all sorts of different things. Some churches were very helpful for their freedom of expression. Some churches had the discipline which young people craved. They attended a seminar on Accountable Discipleship which thrilled them and challenged them.

Over the course of two months their attitude turned around from being very secure in complaining about what was wrong, towards starting to see that lots could be done. They belonged to Jesus and nothing could change the fact that he could use them and wanted to use them.

One or two people continued to be negative every time some new way forward was suggested. In the end the group decided they had to move ahead anyway. It was sad that for no fault of their own their personal identity as Christians had only grown in an atmosphere of negative feeling towards church. They were responsible, however, if they continued to maintain that attitude when new doorways of opportunity were opening up.

The group decided that they would have to get more exposure and experience of life. They visited some different parts of the city. They also saw some ministry to young people involved in drug abuse.

One night, one of the Bible study group who works for an architectural firm was talking about the New Age movement as one of the ways in which people at his work were pursuing a spiritual search. They decided they ought to get better information and they visited some New Age book stores and went to the Body, Mind and Spirit Exhibition and talked with the people there. Then they discussed it together and assessed where there were dangers for Christians, challenges too, but especially opportunities.

During this time their sense of frustration at their inability to communicate the gospel had grown. They had been in many situations in which they recognised the opportunities to share the faith or make a stand on justice but when the opportunity came, all they could think was: 'What shall I say now?' So

they decided to enrol in a Gossiping the Gospel course (a basic personal evangelism course), which they all thought was likely to be a bit ho-hum. But it was not like that at all. It proved to be a source of deep encouragement and enrichment to them; helping them to unlock their own heart-felt words of witness.

In talking things over, just amongst themselves, they became more and more excited, and more and more committed to prayer for their friends and family. They knew then they had to try and do something together. They knew they had to begin 'an adventure' in sharing the faith. So they covenanted together to report to each other once every month in their home group about opportunities they had received for sharing the faith at work, or with family or friends. This would occupy most of the meeting night once a month. They were alert to the need for integrity and justice to pave the way for words to speak. Meanwhile, every week in home group they would pray for three friends each in prayer triplets within the group.

After a few months of establishing that discipline within their group (and of having to re-establish it once or twice when they jointly 'forgot' about it), they found that their openness to the leading of the Spirit was extremely powerful and gave many opportunities for sharing the faith.

The second initiative was to become involved in some form of outreach at some point in the year, as a short term programme. One of the people was very much attracted to street witnessing and therefore joined up with a group from an Anglican church in one of the beach suburbs, spending time on a Sunday afternoon with street theatre and beach witnessing. Another one became an active member of Friends of the Earth. This was their mission adventure.

Two of the families decided to join a Scripture Union Family Mission. A single man and his girlfriend decided together to co-operate with one of the Fusion centres and do some of their training. One other person, who was able to take long holidays, decided to join an Operation Mobilisation or a YWAM tour to other countries for seven weeks, financed by himself and some other supporters.

In a couple of months' time the group had grown with the addition of two others who had become Christians and who found in the group a sort of quaint vitality. They sometimes remarked how strange some ideas seemed to their unchurched ears, always telling themselves they must be the ones at fault. But the group managed to persuade them that the gospel was for them where they were at and they shouldn't regret what God had done with their lives; that they should freely offer their insights because they were good for the whole group.

As they looked, too, they knew the group would have to split in two at some point in the coming six months. One direction for them could be perhaps to do more with family groups, forming a family cluster group. Another possibility was to form a group much more for single younger people. They also thought that every now and then they could meet together for a big family celebration. It wasn't risk free! They could lose everything. They all joined together in planning and they knew that the cosy fellowship that they had was about to end. This was their participatory planning for longer term mission.

Some very different questions arose. 'What happens in our church when our group splits and more people start joining our group?' It was clear that there would be some resentment in the church. Some people did not want noisy babies in the church. Some people thought the young people dressed slovenly and the group knew that anyone who came to their group and tried to come along to their church would be frustrated by the monochrome style of worship.

They didn't want to take over and make it a young persons' church. They did want room for everyone to belong, young and old, very young and very old. They resolved that they should talk to the minister about it, but whatever the minister or the elders say, it need not stop them.

Here end the parables of growth and life. The pain is real and so is the need for proper grieving. Curious conflicts spring up between friends, and also within oneself. But even more surprising is the growth of the people in grace. The life cycle is not always the easiest path, but it is the path to life. And so, the cycle repeats itself. The seed dies unto itself and is born again, becoming a flower declaring God's love, itself sowing new seeds, needing to die to themselves.

## References

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