



A reflection on complexity theory and finding a way forward in this most chaotic of times.

By Alan Donaldson

“I don’t know where I’m going and I don’t know where I’ve been.” Six months as interim pastor of a small Baptist church and, to be honest, the most sensible words I can utter are, *“The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men gang aft agley, An’ lea’e us nought but grief an’ pain, For promis’d joy!”*

I just don’t understand! It used to work! Are you the same? We tried so hard! Is this all we are left with? If only the church was more like the virus, growing, multiplying, exploring new variants, adapting to the environment, staying one step ahead! Could it possibly be?

In my search to find a way forward in this most chaotic of times, I have found the concepts within complexity theory’s models of leadership the most helpful. They make no promises, offer no guarantees but they do guide and direct my path in a

way consistent with my Baptist principles and with what I read in the scriptures of a Father who is a vine keeper, a self-emptying Saviour and an enabling Spirit.

I describe the place I am in today as ‘the edge of chaos’; in negative terms, it is a place of frustration, devastation and great loss. However, complexity theory offers an alternative view: a place of healthy agitation, potential innovation, a place of *kenosis* (the ‘self-emptying’ of Jesus’ own will and becoming entirely receptive to God’s divine will) and *anastasis* (rebirth, resurrection).

As I understand things, I can focus on the survival of the congregation or seek, in the chaos, fresh opportunities with the faithful remnant. In making my choice, I am reminded of a conversation with Dr Mike Pears who said, *“survival thinking closes imagination, reduces*

risk taking... it is radically quite contrary to the cross.”

My understanding of complexity theory encourages me to focus on three areas with the church. The words ‘with the church’ may be the most important words in this article. In technical terms, it is referred to as self-organisation. Within our baptistic family it would be the rediscovery of the genius of the priesthood of all believers. It is my conviction that the whole congregation has a part to play in discovering the church of the future. My role as a leader is to facilitate the discernment and gathered wisdom of the whole people of God. If we are to discover new paths out of this valley, then they will be discovered together; we must ask whose voices we are missing, and then be attentive to those voices.

The three areas that I believe will enable us to surf the wave

of chaos together are: attention to our foundational values, practice of central disciplines and engagement with our environment.

Attention to our foundational values

We are Baptist churches and, as such, this is a time to rely on the foundational values that are often taken for granted or even disregarded, such as: being a believer's church; practising believer's baptism as an ordination into mission, ministry and communal discernment; our conviction that each local church is competent to discern how they can best serve the purposes of God and his kingdom in their locality and create wide and varied models of worship and witness. This is a time to trust what is in our roots, and grasp the beauty and freedom contained within our Declaration of Principle.

Practice of central disciplines

In John 15, the call of Christ to his disciples is to 'abide in him'. The practice of abiding should be simple to explain and put into practice. In complexity theory, this concept is referred to as fractals or disciplines. For starlings creating the most beautiful murmurations, patterns in the sky, the fractals are: don't get too close, don't get too far away, and when you see a threat, respond! If we desire to surf the edge of chaos, seeking new paths to emergent beauty, I believe it will be small, repeated

disciplines that are foundational: prayer and worship, engagement with God's word, fellowship and witness. During Lent, our church met for one hour a week on Zoom to discuss Luke and Acts. We each read a chapter or so a day and came prepared to say what we had discovered for the first time, what questions we had and what we had learned. I was astonished at the learning that took place, at the fresh engagement with the person of Jesus and our understanding of how to do church in the future. It drew us closer together and was a place of intergenerational, multi-voiced discipleship.

Environmental engagement

There is no doubt that the environment in which we exist as the living church has changed dramatically. There is now great uncertainty as to what work, leisure, family, wellbeing and priorities will be. The role of governments and local authorities, the needs of our neighbours, the approach to gathering, the expectation of technological solutions, all of these will change. We may not be skilled as futurologists but we do not have to be. From a place of humility and modesty, there lies before us an opportunity to listen and learn. Three members of our local church have been listening to a variety of local stakeholders so that we can hear the challenges they are facing. Before the pandemic, we thought we knew what our community needed and we were hoping to provide it. Today we are listening and hoping to find partners we

can work with, recognising that we too have great needs.

We have been pruned, some of our branches have been cut out and burned. More than ever before, we realise our fragility and have experienced significant decline. However, we also recognise the hope of resurrection to a new life, rooted in our DNA, developed through abiding in Christ and contextually expressed in relation to the new environment in which we find ourselves. By faith we embrace the chaos of this time, and seek out new life as a community in Christ.



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