From "Ekklesia"[1] to Something Else | BY DAVID E. THOMAS

In 2014, this paper was presented to the Adventist Society of Religious Studies discussion of ecclesiology.

I n this paper, I wish to reflect on the church as organization. In particular, I wish to reflect on how church as organization may, for reasons that will be explained here, experience an unconsidered or non-deliberate change in its own ecclesiology, effectively moving it away from the concept of church-as-a-community-of-believers to something else. For those whose view of church is formed by the scriptural idea of a community of called-out believers, this would be an unhappy eventuality indeed.

I was first alerted to this prospect of an unconsidered ecclesiological change by a comment made by Katie Funk Wiebe in *The Christian Leader*. She wrote, "I sense that we are allowing business terms to creep into our language . . . I am convinced that because language shapes our thinking and actions, we change the nature of the church and its leadership if we substitute business language for 'body' language. An organism quickly becomes an organization if it is thought about that way."[2] This statement struck me with force. Could it really be that a change in language use could result in a change in theological perception; that, because language shapes our thinking and actions, the use of "business language" rather than "body language" could actually result in a shift in ecclesiological self-perception, effectively changing a living organism into a mere organization? This disturbance of thought equilibrium sent me on a search, the reflective results of which I share with you today.

It turns out that the process that opens the prospect of an unconsidered ecclesiological concept change is embedded within the nature of organizational structure itself. One of the best ways to understand this is to look through the eyes of organizational theorists, people "out there" who are fascinated with and study organizations, how they are born, grow, function, and finally die. One of the better-known postulations of organizational theorists is the existence of a prevailing and all but inevitable and inexorable organizational life cycle—called the "Organizational Life Cycle"[3]—which all organizations pass through. Depending on which school of organizational theory you read, this life cycle is said to have four or five stages beginning with a Start-up or Entrepreneurial Stage, moving on through a Growth Stage that is often broken into two sub-stages—Early Growth which is often quite rapid, and Middle Growth where growth slows—followed by a Mature Stage,[4] where growth becomes very slow or stops altogether. The Mature Stage is followed by a Decline Stage which leads to the most critical stage, the Crisis Stage.[5] The Crisis Stage may be followed by either renewal, or demise.

In this life cycle there are two critical elements that play a very big role in determining organizational trajectories. The first and most obvious one is the Crisis Stage, where the way leaders approach and handle crises can lead to either organizational renewal or organizational decline and death. Organizations that have leaders who foresee crises and manage them well may renew themselves, while those that have leaders who do not foresee or handle crises well go much more quickly toward demise.[6]

The second primary factor has to do with what we call infrastructure. Though more hidden than the effects of crisis, the effects of the development and abiding presence of infrastructure as an organization ages, become major factors in determining what the future for an organization will be. We will look at this first.

It is not hard to figure out why and how infrastructure develops. As a movement catches on in the mind of the public, it grows. Early growth is often quite rapid with volunteers and informal conversation being the primary

purveyors of mission.[7] At some point, the movement becomes too large for the early, charismatic leaders to manage by themselves and the need to create some kind of structure becomes obvious and urgent.[8] The path to organization is easy to trace—the prosecution of mission requires vision, which is broken down into strategy, which is reduced to plans that get embedded in policy, which then creates organizational structure and practice. And organizational practice pursued over time creates organizational culture and identity. By this process, organizations stabilize themselves to become predictable and efficient, and they gain the real prospect of projecting themselves from a successful past through a successful present all the way (as long as the future ends up being similar to the past) to a successful future.

In the midst of all the exciting growth that makes the creation of structure necessary, something happens that goes largely unnoticed. Just as surely as the creation of infrastructure brings stability, it also initiates what theorists call "organizational entropy," the technical name for the process that brings on the aging and disordering and subsequent possible death of a movement or organization.[9] Speaking of infrastructure, theorist Jeffrey Saltzman says, "The purpose of these rules is to allow the organization to make decisions using standard operating procedures as a guideline and hence remove from the organization the need to think about the decisions being made."[10] But, "removing the need to think about some decisions (this is what infrastructure does) carries with it an inherent risk, the risk of mediocrity or worse, the risk of extinction."[11] What is being alluded to here is that the early stages of organization are usually very beneficial to mission-producing benefits out of proportion to the resources invested but, in later stages of organization life, infrastructure itself becomes problematic.

Specifically, the establishment of infrastructure has three effects. First, it sets itself up in competition for resources that would otherwise have gone to frontline mission. Secondly, it places employees in among the volunteers, who then tend to dilute their volunteerism because there are now paid people to do the work. And, thirdly, and most importantly to this paper, the appearance and growth of infrastructure produces and makes available managerial or administrative power[12] to those who have charge of the infrastructure. These three things—competition for resources, the appearance of paid personnel, and the rise of managerial/administrative power—become the elements that affect or determine the future of an organization. While the first two items are important and quite interesting, this paper is going to look only at the third one, the rise of administrative power, for it bears most directly on the subject of unconsidered ecclesiological change.

Probably the best way to delve into this is to observe that, in the early stages of an organization, the leaders who originally articulate the vision have no administrative power. They have only the power of persuasion, exhortation, encouragement, prayer, personal appeal, and personal example, all of which depend on the voluntary compliance of adherents to achieve their desired ends. Early leaders have to win the goodwill of the people. They have to bring followers to the point of willing consent. But the appearance of infrastructure brings with it a very different dynamic for it introduces, and very quickly brings to bear, a new kind of power that is of a different sort. Administrative power is very efficient, it is immediately available to leaders and leaders only, and it operates by something other than persuasion. Administrative power does not necessarily have to concern itself with the voluntary nature of the commitments of those who come under its jurisdiction. It has the power of policy and is able to use the prospect of penalty as motivation.[13]

This difference between persuasive power and coercive power is very important to explore. When a charismatic leader encounters a problem, it is time for visitation, persuasion, exhortation, appeal, invitation, prayer, even tears. Early leaders have to rely on this kind of power, even though it is not very efficient and may require time and muddling along to achieve its purposes. Its primary strength is that it elicits the willing compliance of adherents. But the emergence of managerial power makes for a very different scenario. Rather than having to expend time and effort trying to persuade, a manager may go directly to policy by way of which compliance or noncompliance can then be determined. After that, decision making can be rather straightforward, willing compliance considered or not.

The temptation to use administrative power can be considerable because it offers the prospect of very quick resolution, it is "fair" in that it applies "across the board," and it usually requires relatively little deliberation so can be applied quickly which means the "problem" is resolved and the organization can get on to other things. When a reli-

gious organization is careful to limit the use of managerial power to issues of infrastructure, life can be very good. But when it allows for a generous expansion of the use of managerial power to include also matters that pertain to belief and faith and a vision for the future, it likely enters a whole new arena. History shows that the temptation to broaden managerial power expansively is a temptation that is very difficult to resist. In far too many cases, leaders have succumbed quite readily to the temptation to use managerial power to deal with ideological and belief issues. Discrepancies over doctrine, belief, and commitment can be very challenging and messy and prolonged in resolution, so administratively powerful leaders face the great temptation of looking at belief issues as management issues that could be settled not by argumentation, discussion, or persuasion but by appealing to policy, after which compliance and non-compliance can be readily measured. After that, the path to resolution can be very short.

When a religious movement accepts or allows this shift to take place broadly, when it allows for matters of faith and belief to be treated as matters of policy and management, at its heart it transitions away from invitation to coercion, replacing the power of persuasion with that of requirement. Instead of calling for assent, it calls for compliance and in so doing, overlays voluntary commitment, which is the essence of religion, with an involuntary mandate, something that is inimical to faith. Administrative power does not work by persuasion and invitation but by coercion. It does not work on the inside but from the outside. It works by mandate, able to administer a penalty of some kind for non-compliance. It is the power of statecraft and so is inappropriate at the level of belief. While administrative power is important and useful, it should not, indeed cannot, effectively be used to manage religious commitments and ideas. Being elected to a position of power does not make a person right. It only makes them powerful. Efforts to enforce compliance easily lead on to duplicity rather than genuine faith.

Any essentially voluntary organization that makes the shift from invitation to mandate in matters of faith brings about a subtle but substantial change in its own nature. Put in theological terms, it unthinkingly changes its ecclesiology.[14] It moves in an unconsidered way away from the idea of church as a community of believers where coercive power is viewed as inimical to life and so is pushed away from the center, toward a hierarchical concept of church as a sanctified organization where centralized power is seen to be essential. In a community of believers, a "problem" is an occasion for fellowship and exhortation and discussion and invitation, for messy interactions. In an organization, it is time to find a policy by way of which compliance or non-compliance can be measured and action taken. And once that kind of shift takes place in a religious movement, it is not very long before "orthodoxy" and "heresy" get defined and life becomes very difficult for those who dissent. In so many cases, this is the very dynamic that brought death to those who dissented at the hands of those who persuaded themselves that by destroying the dissenters, they were only doing the work of God.

While researching this topic some time ago, I happened upon mention of a fascinating study, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, written by Walter Bauer back in 1934. According to Alistair McGrath, who cites this study, the conclusion Bauer came to is that, at least in the early Christian Church, "basic unity did not seem to be located at the level of doctrines, but at the level of relationship with the same Lord. Christian unity lay in the worship of the same Lord, rather than in the formal statement of doctrine (which is how 'orthodox' tends to be divined)."[15] Bauer goes on to claim that, "a variety of views which were tolerated in the early church gradually began to be regarded with suspicion by the later church. An orthodox consensus began to emerge, in which opinions that had once been tolerated were discarded as inadequate."[16] The operative question immediately becomes one of how this orthodox consensus developed. Bauer's

Administrative power is very efficient, it is immediately available to leaders and leaders only, and it operates by something other than persuasion.

answer is quite striking: that "'orthodoxy' was the result of the growing power of Rome, which increasingly came to impose its own views upon others, using the term 'heresy' to refer to views it rejected."[17] In other words, as the Bishop of Rome's infrastructure-driven power increased, he was able to transition from invitation to mandate. He was able to take more and more initiative to himself and his office and he was able to apply greater and more substantial penalties to those who dissented. This is what brought Bauer to his conclusion, that "the difference between orthodoxy and heresy often seems arbitrary."[18] It appears to be more a derivation of the opinions of those in power than anything else. It is by this process that the Church of Rome grew to such prominence.

Clearly, the rise and role of infrastructure, how it functions and what power it grants to a few, is something that needs very careful thought in believing communities. While necessary, infrastructure in church cannot be left to function like infrastructure in for-profit companies. Is infrastructure using up too many resources? Is it limiting growth by being too fixed? Is it in harmony with an appropriate ecclesiology? Is it giving too much power to too few people? And is the power produced by infrastructure being used for management issues or is it broadly being called upon to also settle matters of belief and commitment? More pertinent to our setting, where is the SDA Church in all of this? How far along in the Organizational Life Cycle are we? And what kind of language are we using to describe ourselves? How is managerial power being used? And how do we perceive organizational structure: as some kind of missional necessity, or as something quasi-sacred in and of itself? All of these things warrant careful thought and reflection. They warrant our best and collective attentions lest we thoughtlessly transition away from being a mission-driven "community of believers" to something else that probably ought not even to be named among the faithful. ■

After twenty-four years in pastoral ministry, **David Thomas** became a member of the Walla Walla University faculty, in 2001.

References

1. The word "ekklesia" is understood here in its common sense of designating those who have been called out of the world by the Gospel to form themselves into communities of believers.

2. Katie Funk Wiebe in "The Christian Leader," *Christianity Today* Vol. 33, No. 17 (Aug. 1989).

3. Organizational Theory is quite well known and understood in the business world but is virtually unknown outside of it. Sadly, knowledge of this theory and how it works and what it postulates, seems to be particularly absent in church organizations.

4. Some features typical of organizations in the Mature Stage are: infrastructure is of enormous size to the point there is "a policy for everything;" there are many employees whose entire focus is on tending infrastructure rather than front-line mission; the treatment of employees is highly standardized with more interest in "fairness" than in "merit;" operations become regulated by policies more than by opportunities; new hires are evaluated more on loyalty than on entrepreneurial spirit; employees gain more control over mission than volunteers; a large proportion of resources are allocated to infrastructure in the place of mission; there comes to be little, if any, new initiative money. Growth slows, then stops. By this time in the life cycle, all the infrastructure will have created such a great amount of inertia, it will be almost impossible for it to change, which sets things up for a likely crisis if change does indeed come to the marketplace.

5. The New York Institute of Technology has an article with a clear and concise history of the developments that brought to life what is today called Organizational Theory, located on the web at http://iris.nyit.edu/~shartman/ mba0120/chapter2.htm. A very interesting and informative article on Organizational Life Cycles by Carter McNamara can be found at http://managementhelp.org/org_thry/org_cycl.htm. In this case, four stages are described. A representative description of a five-stage organizational life cycle that is typical of this arena of thought can be found at http://www.legacee.com/FastGrowth/OrgLifeCycle.html.

6. Points of crisis are significant in the Organizational Life Cycle because, since they threaten organizational well-being or existence, they become the only times when any real prospect of significant change exists. It is simply the case that the larger and more complex its infrastructure, the more fixed to the past an organization will be, particularly if that past is characterized by success. Another way of saying this is that the more complex the infrastructure becomes, and the most success that can be looked back upon, the more difficult it is for an organization to adjust and change. This is because the stabilization brought about by the creation of infrastructure creates organizational inertia. And complex organizations develop so much inertia that has to be overcome if change is to occur, the kind of change necessary to deal with an unanticipated future is simply too great. This has elicited the observation that many

companies fail not because the future was unpredictable but because it was unpalatable. So, crisis is a dangerous opportunity that, if handled well, may lead on to organizational rejuvenation but, if handled poorly, may lead to organizational demise. It is worth noting that in the for-profit world, there are two elements that affect how crisis is dealt with: the existence of shareholders who may take precipitous action if they become unhappy, and the existence of outside predators looking for the chance to take over. Pressure from these two entities makes the prospect of change quite high. By contrast, in church organizations, similar elements are missing. There are no predatory entities looking to take over and, especially in churches with big infrastructures, the members who are the rough equivalent to shareholders are usually so remote from organizational power that they cannot force change. In consequence, change in churches can only be brought about by those who are in leadership positions. The prospect of such people making significant change is very small indeed because organizations tend to promote those who are most loyal to organization, churches easily sanctify their structures if they have been successful, and those in power tend to be the ones who benefit most from the status quo. For these reasons, churches have been known to simply disappear before agreeing to change, Methodism in England being a relatively recent and prime example.

7. We downplay the power of informal communication far too much. It is one of the most effective means of communication available to humans. What we hear informally almost always trumps official word. This is one reason conspiracies and urban legends become so prevalent and powerful and resilient.

8. Those who are acquainted with Adventist history no doubt know of the great struggles the Adventist pioneers went through on this issue. Many strident speeches were made to the effect that any kind of organization would constitute "Babylon." But something as simple as the need to own property legally made resistance futile.

9. Organizational entropy is a very expansive and challenging subject that cannot be covered here. There are many articles to be found discussing it. One place is an article by Jeffrey Saltzman at http://jeffreysaltzman.wordpress.com/2009/11/19/organization-entropy-2/. There is also a very interesting book by Imre Lövey, Manohar S. Nadkarni, and Eszter Erdélyi dealing with organizational entropy titled *How Healthy is your Organization?* (Santa Barbara:Green-

wood Publishing, 1999-2010).

10. http://jeffreysaltzman.wordpress.com/2009/11/19/organization-entropy-2/.

11. Ibid.

12. The terms "managerial power" and "administrative power" are used interchangeably in this paper.

13. Very interestingly, this tension was debated among Seventh-day Adventists in the 1890s with two different ecclesiological models being debated, one wanting to place primary focus in the local church as a community of believers, the other wanting to give priority to the universal nature of the church. Barry D. Oliver, *SDA Organizational Structure: Past, Present and Future* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1989), 136–140, 219–221.

14. Titled "What Really Kills Great Companies: Inertia," management guru Gary Hamel said, "If organized religion has become less relevant, it's not because churches have held fast to their creedal beliefs—it's because they've held fast to their conventional structures, programs, roles and routines. The problem with organized religion isn't religion, but organization. In the first and second centuries, the Christian church was communal, organic and unstructured—a lot like the Web is today. It commanded little power (it couldn't raise an army or depose a monarch), but had enormous influence. (The Christian church grew from a handful of believers in AD 40 to 31 million adherents by AD 350, roughly half the population of the Roman empire) Today many mainline denominations are institutionally powerful, but spiritually moribund—at least in the US." This blog can be found at http://blogs.wsj.com/management/2009/09/29.

15. Alistair McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 113.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

Any essentially voluntary organization that makes the shift from invitation to mandate in matters of faith brings about a subtle but substantial change in its own nature.