Practicing Peace

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"peace be with you" –Jesus-

"Blessed are the peace makers" – Jesus-

The problem of violence

"Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God" -John 16:2-

In the early 2000's, about four years into my ministry as an Anglican Priest, I started to seriously doubt my own leadership capabilities and probably came close to slipping into a clinical depression. I had been working in a series of financially struggling parishes with small congregations. Although I'd been given pretty good training to be a 'minister of word and sacrament', as the Anglican ordination service puts it, I hadn't really been taught what a distinctively 'Christian' way of leading might look like. I think I just auto-piloted to copying (imitating) the way I saw other people exercising formal leadership, both from my previous work in the business community as well as the way I'd seen clergy operating during the years I had been a lay person. I was young and enthusiastic, came up with lots of (I thought) great ideas which I tried to engage other people with - you know the old story about heroically leading from the front. I simply assumed it was the job of the priest to come up with ideas and make them happen – basically to be the one 'in charge'. The latter was supported by terms on the bishop's license like 'rector' (ruler) and 'priest in charge'. My endlessly patient congregations bore with me with humility and encouragement and the parish bills continued to mount and number of people in the congregation remained static. But worse than this, I was working way too many hours, was often tired and grumpy at home, and was basically becoming a rather obnoxious control freak.

When I look back on this experience I can perceive what can only be described as signs of violence – violence to myself but also subtle forms of violence towards others, either in terms of the way I thought about people (internal violence) or tried to control them (external violence). This is particularly ironic because I had always been very interested in Jesus as the *way* of peace, the call to Christians to be peacemakers (ministers of reconciliation), and for the church to be a community of people who imitated Jesus in a non-violent way of living. I'd even preached and taught extensively on this subject.

 I don't think I'm alone in this predicament. In my observation, the use and abuse of power is one of the unspoken-about 'shadow' aspects of church life. By 'shadow' I mean the Jungian sense of that which is invisible/hidden to ourselves. Given that a good deal of my working life is now spent working in non-church contexts, I know that the problem of violence (sometimes physical but largely emotional and spiritual) is endemic to organisational life, not to mention our world more broadly. This is not surprising because the problem of violence lies deep within us and it is this 'bad news' to which the 'good news of Jesus' speaks directly and tangibly.

Practical peacemaking

"be the change you want to see"   -Mahatma Ghandi-

"If we believe, we can be transformed into agents of something beautiful that is trying to be born in our world. We can be caught up in the unfolding, emergent, spiralling process of God giving birth to a beautiful whole, the Kingdom of God"   -Brian McClaren-

As the predicaments of my own parish leadership experiences started to distil for me, our regional bishop was beginning to promote a vision of being church called 'Ministering Communities in Mission'. This is an approach to being church which takes very seriously the baptismal vocation of every member of the congregation and supports a creative team-based approach to parish leadership. This enables local communities to adapt themselves to local conditions with great flexibility in order to put the vision and mission of Jesus first. In a statement that was a real paradigm shifter for me, my Bishop said to me one day, 'the definition of a Christian community is not the capacity to raise $150,000' a year (the approximate budget required to fund a full time priest, rectory and running costs on a worship centre).

I was soon to become Archdeacon for Ministry Development with a specific charter to advance the *Ministering Communities* vision in the Northern region of the Anglican Diocese of Perth. I soon encountered another problem. Although we were recovering a New Testament ecclesiology of what it meant to be a 'ministering community' rather than a 'community gathered around a minister', I was still struggling with what this meant in terms of day to day decision making and how power gets exercised in communities, either violently or non-violently. I discovered (because I am a slow learner) that it's possible for power to be abused in a Ministering Community no less than in a clergy dominated church. So what to do?

There is a well known statement which asserts, 'when the student is ready the teacher will appear'. It was when I was at my lowest, really struggling with the issued described above, and literally on my knees in despair and in prayer that I was referred by my professional supervisor to Brendan McKeague, one of the early adopters in Australia of a process called 'Open Space Technology'. Open Space Technology is both a way in which groups of people can meet together to listen to each other, discern the emerging present, and deal with complex questions (of which, in the church and the world, there are a multitude). But even more importantly, for me, I saw Open Space as a theologically based and embodied way of 'practicing peace'. Rather than just *talking about* practicing peace, it provides a community with an experiential way of actually doing it.

Suffice to say that this was life changing for me, the church and the broader suburb in which we lived and worked. I have now worked with Open Space process for 15 years, in my own ministry contexts, in the facilitation of over 150 formal Open Space meetings in churches, NGO's, government, education and private sectors and in the training of church and community leaders. I thought it was time to write up some reflections on the experience.

As a follower of Jesus, who tries, with various levels of success and failure to 'practice peace' in my own life, I am learning that we need to attend to both *inner work* and *outer work* aspects. I mention each of these, briefly, below.

By **'inner work'** I mean *'head' work* and 'heart' work. The head work is about developing a *theology of peace*. This is fairly new work which has really only taken off in the last 60 years, a prime catalyst for which was the holocaust. Key catalysts were Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer who both resisted Hitler, and who have both profoundly affected later 20th century theology. Barth was concerned at how readily the German Lutheran church fell into lock-step with the imperial war machine and highjack God for nationalistic purposes. 'The Barmen Declaration' was Barth's response to this phenomenon. Barth's theological agenda was to refocus the church's attention on Jesus Christ as the revelation of God. One of the implications is that if, as Archbishop Michael Ramsey put it, 'God is Christlike in whom there is no un-Christlikeness at all', then God is nonviolent, and so must be Christian disciples. More recently, an important emerging influence has been the work of the French Anthropologist Rene Girard and his Christian interpreters such as Gil Bailie, Water Wink, James Alison, Scott Cowdell, and Michael Hardin and S. Mark Heim. The *'heart'* work of the practice of peace refers to developing some reasonable degree of self-awareness of our own personal and collective 'shadow'. Unless we do some regular self-awareness work, then we will inevitably project our violence onto other people in the kinds of invisible (to ourselves) scapegoating manoeuvres that people like Rene Girard have described so well. A good starting point for reflecting on the nature of the 'shadow' is James Hollis's book, "Why Good People Do Bad Things: Understanding Our Darker Selves" (2008).

By '**outer work'** I mean that we need to actually develop some different ways of doing organisational/church life together. This means to embody a 'theology of peace' in practical ways. This is the subject of the rest of this paper. In this essay I endeavour to reflect, theologically and practically, on what could be variously described as 'leadership through emergent self-organisation', 'collaborative leadership', or 'dialogic leadership'. My short summary of what is distinctive about this approach is this:

> *"instead of coming up with good ideas and heroically trying to implement them, we pay attention to what is emerging through conversations(dialogue) and run with that. Instead of trying to control the universe, we seek to discern what is emerging through the self-organising universe and the enable the emergence of new life"*

Or, to use a phrase of Margaret Wheatley's, it means exploring what it means, as a leader, to move 'from hero to host'.

I admit the danger of any dualistic distinctions such as the one I drew in the preceding paragraph. Any of us in the business of trying to make a positive difference in the world fall somewhere on a spectrum between endeavouring to influence others (with our own intentions), and letting go and responding flexibly to the intentions of others. It's usually a matter of degree and my assessment of organisational leadership is that we generally orient more to power and control than to flexibility and openness. Even when we think we're being flexible, if we really analyse our own shadows we might find that we're simply being flexible now in order to win later (the 'art of war').

Thinking through the lens of 'emergence' offers something which transcends such dualisms. Rather than the regular argy-bargy of debate and discussion there's an invitation here to deep dialogue and collective listening – trying to discern something that is greater or deeper than the positions held by any individual or interest group.

The self-organising universe

"As for your future, your task is not to foresee it, but to enable it" -Antoine de Saint-Exupery-

*"Emergence is higher order complexity arising out of chaos where interactions among the diverse entities of a system **disrupt, differentiate** and ultimately **coalesce** into something novel (there is a movement from chaos to higher order novelty)" -Peggy Holman-*

We live in a self-organising universe by which we mean that present complexity has emerged from initial simple conditions without any formal human control system. Harrison Owen, the originator of Open Space Technology, has observed that we've ended up with a pretty extraordinary planet before anyone had their first good idea. Nevertheless human beings, for good and for ill, have emerged as part of this continuing self-organising system. Humans have a distinct positioning within our eco system of not just instinctively responding to life but consciously shaping it – imprinting our wills upon it. Yet despite us thinking we're in control we can readily observe every-day 'miracles' of emergent self- organisation all around us.

Consider for example the extraordinary phenomenon of a city of a million people which everyday self-organises to feed itself. There is no 'Chief Executive Officer (CEO) for Metropolitan Feeding'. No-one developed a master plan. No one person or group is in control. How does it happen? In short, it happens through millions of conversations – simple 'linguistic acts' – declarations, requests, offers and promises all held together and made functional by the glue of stories, relationships and trust. Formal organisations like churches and companies, and informal organisations like cities, are enormous networks of conversation and mutual commitments. All the action seems to be happening in the spaces between us.

Theology and Leadership in an emergent self-organising world

"[Christ] is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word"   -Hebrews 1:4

"in him all things hold together"   -Colossians 1:17)

"what has come into being in him was life"   -John 1:3)

I'm interested in what it means to lead when we apply the lenses of *emergence* and *self-organising systems* in conversation with the lenses of *Christian theology*. Saying that we live in a self-organising universe is, for Christians, entirely consistent with a faith in the sustaining presence of God in creation. This paper is very intentionally directed to anyone who self-identifies as a 'Christian leader' or to anyone else who is interested in hearing an explicitly Christian theological reflection on leadership. I know there are tens of thousands of volumes written on leadership including thousands from a Christian perspective, particularly from an American cultural perspective. I couldn't and wouldn't want to duplicate any of that. My perspective starts out of stories of my own experience of leadership in the context of parish ministry, as a university chaplain in the Anglican Church of Australia and as a self-employed coach and facilitator of Open Space meetings. This is a reflection on how my approach to leadership shifted substantially after being exposed to emergence thinking and, in particular, to processes like *Open Space Technology* and *Dialogue Circles'*. In short, it changed everything. It was like

black and white. It was like a conversion experience. I am a bit like the ex-smoker or the recovering alcoholic who wants to talk about how their life has changed.

An excursus on terminology

In this paper I will be using the terms *Open Space Technology* and *Dialogue Circles* repeatedly. So I need to say something about what these terms mean.

Open Space Technology (OST) is a particular way of bringing groups together to experience *emergence* through *self organisation*. Hence I sometimes use these three terms interchangeably. There's no point in talking theoretically about emergence unless there is some way for groups to experience it in a practical way. Open Space Technology, in short, is a way of meeting which intentionally reflects what is already going on, always and everywhere – that is, 'self-organisation'.

If the reader has never experienced OST, you can get a sense of how it works in practice from the following stories on Youtube, one from a community forum and one from business:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPEIM4on648

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTEO9CQe7Mw

Open Space Technology was devised by Harrison Owen who just happens to be an Episcopal Priest. I have had the pleasure of meeting Harrison Owen a couple of times – in San Francisco in 2008 and in Manilla in 2012, on the latter occasion where a hundred people from 12 Asian countries came together in an Open Space meeting to reflect on "The Future of Learning". Harrison Owen says he didn't 'invent' Open Space – he simply discovered it one day over a couple of martinis at the end of a conference which had been organised along very traditional lines. Harrison Owen tells the story at the following link:

https://www.susancoleman.global/episodes/2017/10/31/harrison-own-opening-space-for-peace-and-high-performance?rq=harrison%20owen

Harrison had noticed that all the really energetic conversations in a conference occurred not in the formally organised sessions but during meals and cups of tea. Anyone who has ever been to a conference can probably relate to this.

Open Space articulates 'four principles and one law' which describe the nature of self-organisation. I will refer to these principles at various points in this paper:

> **The four principles**
>
> Whoever comes are the right people
>
> Whatever happens is the only thing that could have
>
> Whenever it starts is the right time
>
> When it's over it's over

The one law

The Law of Two Feet

There's been surprisingly little written about emergence in the leadership literature coming out of university business schools and even less written about Open Space, despite at least 250,000 Open Space events, over 25 years in over 130 countries. However there are some substantial minds in some substantial institutions of learning giving consideration to emergence, and a huge body of accumulated stories. I have listed some useful resources at the back of this paper and include some anecdotes throughout this paper. I claim that leadership might be more like art than science. Certainly Open Space seems to be art in motion.

A *dialogue circle*, or *talking circle*, is another way for facilitating deep listening for 'emergence'. Rather than people posting conversations and breaking into smaller groups, as is the case in an Open Space meeting, a group of people sit in a circle to explore a particular theme or question. An object, called a 'talking piece' is passed from person to person (or is placed in the middle of the circle for people to pick up). Whoever has the talking piece in his/her hand can speak uninterrupted by others. The talking circle continues for as long as necessary provided the group continues to stick with the agreed principles of listening. If necessary, recesses can be called and follow up meetings scheduled. The process gives rise to a deeper level of listening and dialogue than conventional conversations which operate on 'discussion' or 'debate'.

Anecdote

> *In her book, Doing Democracy in Circles, Jennifer Ball tells a story about how a Dialogue Circle process was set up in a local community to consider a proposal to establish a half way house for sexual offenders returning from prison into community life. It would be hard to imagine a more controversial issue, and a complete 'nightmare' for local and planning authorities. After a series of intense and sometimes emotional meetings the group gradually 'moved' towards supporting the proposal. When the proposal was eventually withdrawn for unrelated reasons, the group 'complained' that the centre was now not going to be built in their suburb.*

> *What might be the impact if Christians, who are charged with the 'ministry of reconciliation' were to be more actively instrumental in the opening of Dialogue Circles in their own churches (since we always start with the 'logs in our own eyes') and then sponsored dialogue circles in communities and organisations? What might be the impact of Christian lay leaders in secular organisations initiating the use of such processes to deepen the quality of dialogue in high stakes commercial decision making?*

Emergence, Open Space and Christian Leadership

"wherever space is opened, peace breaks out"   -Harrison Owen-

"The glory of God always shows itself in an empty space"   -Fr. Timothy Radcliffe-

The way I've approached this paper follows directly from my own experience. It's informed by some of my own frustrations and failed attempts to lead with any degree of effectiveness and realising that 'opening space' and letting go of control led to better results and happier people around me, realising that an approach which mentioned absolutely nothing about Jesus and was in widespread use in

multiple contexts, cultures and faiths was, from a Christian perspective, pure 'gospel' in its shape and that leading in this way felt to me like a daily lived experience of prayer and practical nonviolence.

A question that I'm really interested in is this, 'if churches are a sign and herald of the Kingdom of God, does the way we live together and make decisions together actually mirror a Kingdom of God ethos? How often do our average parish council meetings seem like secular board room discussions and our Synods sometimes reflect the less attractive aspects of federal parliament'?

Christian leadership, whether clergy working in churches, or lay people leading multi-billion dollar organisations must be, in my view, much more than applying a veneer of Christian ethics to what is otherwise a thoroughly secular paradigm, characterised by control, power and coercion (Christians do the latter as well as anyone but in a much 'nicer' way). I regularly come across clergy who are stressed and miserable because they don't have the tools at their disposal to lead in a way which is consistent with their own deepest theological beliefs. Their internal and external worlds have become split. Their inner life is shaped something like the paschal mystery, and expressed in the Eucharist, but the outer structures of parish councils, synods and the daily management of vested interest groups within parishes feels more like a cold war. Internally they feel like St Francis but externally they feel they need to act like a federal politician in question time. I want to suggest that using the lenses of emergence and self organising systems offers a theological and practical form of leadership of a rather revolutionary nature.

The great, and somewhat scary, news for Christian leaders is that we have resources in our theology that can radically change organisations and the world. It turns out that processes like Open Space and Dialogue Circles are living paradigms and parables of the Kingdom (I use the word 'parable' here in a similar sense to which the Taize community in France describes itself as a parable of the Kingdom). These approaches can be *lived* by Christian clergy and Christian lay business leaders. In experiencing what is apparently 'new' we simply re-discover our own tradition in a fresh way. As TS Elliot says in his poem, Little Gidding, "*We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.*"

I structure the remainder of this paper under themes of Christian theology where I perceive naturally occurring and obvious connections with emergence. I explore Harrison Owen's "four principles and one law" of emergent self organisation, in dialogue with the Christ story, as a paradigm for leadership, whether in churches or 'secular' organisations. It is all work in progress. Open Space, is itself, is an unfolding experiment.

Purpose

"The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the Good News"   -Mark 1:15

Groups of people are drawn and held together by a combination of shared story, history and purpose. Sometimes the purpose is clear to everyone and sometimes it's confused. If you don't believe the latter then just wait till you've got a group of people who aren't working well together and ask, 'what's going on here? What are we trying to achieve?' and then wait for the multitude of responses. Sometimes we're all just muddling along until something goes pear shaped and then we discover we're no-where near having a commonly agreed purpose.

Whether or not purpose comes to be shared by others, it generally begins with someone, or a small group, with a passion for something. Somebody cared enough to declare publicly their passion and invite others to join them. Hence all intention begins with a question…'is anyone interested in joining me?' Purpose starts with call.

Abraham is called to a new land; Moses is called out into the desert and calls others to come with him; Jonah is called to Nineveh; Samuel is called by a quiet voice in the night; Jesus is driven an inner call into the desert and then calls others to follow him to Jerusalem.

Someone (I forget who) has said that organisations start as *movements* of the Spirit, become *missions*, and over time tend to morph into *machines* (complete with systems, policies and procedures). At some point the organisation becomes unresponsive to its environment and, combined with a spiritual disconnection to the passion which formed it, the organisation faces a crisis in which it either modifies itself or solidifies into a *monument* (also known as a tombstone).

When faced with a crisis organisations sometimes ramp up the demands on their beleaguered members by yelling louder at them about what they *should* be doing. That doesn't work very well because nobody likes to be 'should-ed' on. Story telling is generally a more effective approach when faced with crisis. We re-ignite people, and help people to focus on what is really important in the midst of chaos, by reconnecting people, in a compelling way and in contemporary language with their founding stories.

Open Space doesn't start with answers, plans or strategies which we try to get other people on board with – it's not a more sophisticated way of 'shoulding' on people. Open Space starts with a story and a question to which we invite others to engage. Then we sit down in a circle and get to work. The kind of questions we ask, therefore, are crucial. Are we just asking questions about our own survival, or are we asking questions inspired by our foundational vision? For Christians it is likely that what we notice in our local contexts, in conversation with the 'big story' of the Kingdom of God, will shape specific questions. In Otto Scharmer's book, '*Leading from the emergent future*', he challenges us to be asking big questions – ones which take us out of self-interest. The 'oikos' (the Greek root word from which we derive both 'household' and 'economy') is not just our own family, business or nation, but the whole planet. So, Scharmer asks how we can move from 'Ego-system to Ecosystem economies'). This is a profoundly big-picture, Kingdom inspired, question. *Economy is a subset of Ecology*, not the other way around.

> *Anecdote*
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> *As a newly ordained priest I spent the first five years of my ministry coming up with good ideas (i.e. 'answers') to all the great things that our little struggling communities could do to revitalise. I had great ideas in worship, in bible studies, prayer groups, ways of connecting to the local community - Idea after idea. The congregations in which I worked were endlessly patient and supportive, more or less, with what I was putting before them. We also had planning sessions in which members of the congregation come up with ideas about how we could be more 'mission shaped'. Nothing much seemed to shift. I started to feel depressed and pretty much a failure in my leadership. My supervisors were encouraging and assured me to press on faithfully.*
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> *Then one day I noticed some patterns starting to occur in my conversations with different people in different settings. In an experience similar to what Carl Jung would call 'synchronicities' people were*

talking about community gardens and wouldn't it be interesting to explore the possibility of a community garden in Lockridge. We could start on the church block and maybe one day even extend across to the piece of disused land which was owned by the Shire.

It would have been so easy for me for this to have simply become just another 'good idea' that I thrust upon my long suffering parishioners. However, by God's grace, I had also been recently exposed to a process called 'Open Space Technology'. Rather than treat a community garden as an 'answer' or a 'plan' or an 'objective' we decided to treat it as a question – to explore the question as a 'possible' movement of the Spirit. We convened an OST meeting and cast the invitation as widely as possible in the broader suburb. In short, people responded. Passion combined with Responsibility.

It's now 14 years since I left that parish. The garden is a thriving part of the Lockridge community. Many people have come on board….the shire, the local schools, residents, refugees, ex-prisoners. Tens of thousands of dollars have been raised by various grants. To me this is an example of emergence. Whatever emergence is, it seems to be characterised by a vibrancy of spirit. Here are some recent photos of the continuing life of the garden:

https://www.facebook.com/pages/Lockridge-Community-Garden/164950934700

Posing questions and opening a space for anyone who wants to show up can be very scary for leaders who want to hang on to control. We never know what is going to happen. Christian leaders, of all people, might be encouraged to take this leap of faith because they know that God's Spirit is already going before us and can be trusted to lead us to life, albeit by sometimes unpredictable paths.

Harrison Owen distils leadership to a few words. Leadership = Passion + Responsibility. Without passion no one is interested. Without responsibility nothing happens.

Recall Jesus' call to his disciples, which I imagine sounded something like, 'Follow me – we're going to Jerusalem and likely get killed – want to come for the adventure?' That's a kind of 'Open Space' invitation. Passion combined with a willingness to accept responsibility for what emerges.

The questions we ask might themselves have been shaped by a careful attention to the leading of the Spirit. Jesus' invitation to others was formed by a solitary prayer journey in the desert. How do we hear the 'compelling questions' of the Spirit in our own day?

Anecdote

When I started working as a Chaplain at the University of Western Australia in 2005 I was personally interested in the phenomenon of a major university, ranked in the top 150 in the world, having such an apparently 'secular' ethos, and despite the words 'Seek Wisdom' appearing on the mast head. My predecessor Chaplain had done some ground work on the possibility of offering an undergraduate unit on Spirituality modelled on a unit offered by David Tacey at La Trobe University. When I started I tried to continue this work with a spectacular lack of success. Then I realised, to my own chagrin, that I had fallen into exactly the same trap as when I started in my former parish – the trap of getting attached to an idea and trying to heroically lead/sell/promote it within a larger system.

I quickly decided to take a more emergent/open space approach. The question I set for myself was, 'who's interested in theology or religious studies in this university?'. I then went out to find those people and try to stay alert to what patterns or synchronicities were emerging in conversations. After a couple of years a clear pattern started to emerge. Joining those people up with each other and reflecting together on what seemed to be emerging resulted in the development of a major new three year

initiative called the "UWA Religion and Globalisation Initiative", which included a substantial relationship with the Tony Blair Faith Foundation. I remember sitting in a meeting one day with Sister Veronica Brady, Emeritus Professor of English at UWA. She had come through, with some battle scars, the secular/religious tensions of UWA's history over the past 50 years. In our meeting she was shaking her head and saying, 'it's almost impossible to believe that this initiative is actually happening'. The most important thing was that no one person made this happen and certainly not me. We simply observed emergence. 'Whenever it starts is the right time'. Now, three years later the initiative is morphing in a new direction and we can say, 'whatever happens is the only thing that could have'.

Jesus always seems to me to be intentional in his purpose and direction (towards Jerusalem) and invitational in inviting others to join or leave him on that journey. i.e. 'do you care to come with me on this journey and to accept responsibility for what emerges?' Jesus is clear that new ways of 'holding' the emergent spirit will be required (new wine will need to be put in new wineskins) and that some familiar (related to the word 'family') things will need to be left behind ('let the dead bury their own dead').

Jesus' call is non-coercive. While Christian Ministers, Pastors and Priests like to think we model our leadership on Jesus as the 'good shepherd of the sheep' we might need to be alert to our own cultural conditioning. Rather than the biblical image of shepherds leading small flocks by name, Australia tends towards industrial scale agriculture with sheep dogs nipping at the heels of vast un-named flocks. In the New Testament the shepherd calls by way of invitation not by a nipping at the tail. If Jesus is our Shepherd then how do we hear his voice – the voice of one calling us to greener pastures, or in eschatological language, towards a 'resurrection future'? I like the observation made by Brendan McKeague, who introduced me to Open Space, which could be paraphrased as 'there's nothing quite as *juicy* as a good question'.

Open Space starts with a question rather than an answer. And yet it's not directionless. For Christians, questions emerge from a vision which is, itself, gifted to us – the emergent/coming Kingdom of God.

Listening

"Speak Lord for your servant is listening"   - 1 Samuel 3:9

"You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times" -Matthew 16:3

"For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself"   -2 Corinthians 5:19

'he who descended is the same one who ascended….so that he might fill all things'   -Ephesians 4:10

Although a church, community group or business has a direction and a vision, what is the process by which we make decisions on a daily basis? Christians generally claim they wish to be obedient to God's calling but to do so we need to be able to *hear/discern* that call.

This is a challenge in our very busy and noisy world where there is so much noise. But maybe it's always been a challenge to hear. Five hundred years ago St Ignatius wrote a series of exercises to help train people to listen and discern the call of God from other competing calls. Ignatius observed that

discerning individual call was not an entirely solitary matter but that we discerned call in the communion of the church. Nevertheless he was really interested in exploring how individual persons heard the guidance of the Spirit.

What about groups? How do large groups of people make collective decisions? Is it possible to listen to the guidance of God communally? In my observations most large groups don't do collective listening very well. More often than not a small group of people take responsibility for doing this, whether it's a parish priest, a parish council, a prophet ('thus says the Lord'), or in organisations a CEO or an executive team. This seems, on the face of it, to be efficient and lets the majority of the group off the hook. It's so much easier for the group to then stand back and criticise if they don't like the direction offered by those 'in charge'.

In churches it's possible to appeal directly to the language and practice of prayer. But what if we're a Christian leader and want to take discernment of the Spirit seriously, not only in our own individual lives but for the organisation? Does God offer guidance to people who don't believe in God or who would consider listening to God in an organisational setting entirely irrelevant or inappropriate? We can just imagine the CEO of any secular organisation calling a communal prayer meeting. Career over. Contemporary missiology says that the 'misseo dei' (God's healing restoring movement in and towards the world) is much larger than the work of the church. If so, who's listening and how do people listen particularly in the great majority of 'secular' organisations? I am increasingly of the view that the misseo dei is discernible in patterns of life-giving emergence.

Peggy Holman describes emergence is this way, *"Emergence is higher order complexity arising out of chaos where interactions among the diverse entities of a system **disrupt, differentiate** and ultimately **coalesce** into something novel (there is a movement from chaos to higher order novelty)" (Engaging Emergence).* Otto Scharmer uses the word, "Presencing" which he describes as "a blended word combining *sensing* (feeling the future possibility) and *presence* (the state of being in the present moment). It means sensing and actualising one's highest future possibility – acting from the presence of what is wanting to emerge)" (Leading from the Emerging Future p.19). To me, as a Christian, the latter sounds a lot like the Kingdom of God and the journey for receiving, or entering this Kingdom, is the paschal mystery.

The experience of a group engaging in deep listening in a dialogue circle in a 'secular' context can be extraordinarily similar to the experience of a group of Quakers sitting in a circle, in silence, waiting on 'God'. Similarly I have heard fellow Christians noting the movements of conversation over two days of Open Space to be an experience, for them, of prayer. Patterns start to emerge out of apparent chaos. Such patterns are often commented upon at the end of Open Space meetings. Small groups, when asked to name themes which they saw emerging during their conversations, often come up with surprisingly convergent results. It turns out that new kinds of order are an emergent property of a self organising system – but always on the 'other side' of disruption and disturbance.

In considering what emerges from Open Space and Dialogue practices Christian communities may be using some particular 'discernment filters'. St. Paul's advice was 'test everything; hold fast to that which is good' (1 Thessalonians 5:21). He also offers useful guidelines for discerning what is 'good' in his writing on the gifts of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). We might be asking whether what is 'emerging' in the group is leading to greater love, forgiveness, communion, reconciliation in the world, for interpersonal relationship and for planetary life as a whole. Very often such 'fruits of the Spirit' emerge

very clearly. As I once heard Harrison Owen say, 'where ever space is opened, peace breaks out' and that has typically been my experience at the end of Open Space events, even those which have contained a great deal of emotional conflict (and always on the proviso that enough time/space has been allowed). This, for me, seems like an example of what has been referred to in theological language as 'common grace'. If it is the case that self-organisation is part of God's creative process, then the corollary is that adopting an Open Space 'way of being', if not actually utilising Open Space Technology process, is more likely to yield life-giving results than if we utilise heroic leader driven processes where we try to stay in control.

This raises both a challenge and a promise. The challenge is the mindset of those who sit in the circle. If persons in the circle are convinced that they alone carry the ultimate truth/answer, then the kind of listening required for an emergent truth, one that is greater than the sum of the parts, is naturally restricted. The promise of a genuine dialogue is that we might find a way of transcending apparently irreconcilable dualisms. We can learn a lot from the contemplative/meditative tradition of Christianity (and other religious) here. It is only when we slow down into much deeper level of quietness can the dualisms of the rational mind be fruitfully transcended. So I think there is some kind of helpful interrelationship between the deep listening of contemplative practice and the deep listening of circle based dialogue.

Bede Griffiths, the Christian teacher of contemplative prayer, draws attention to 'Nicholas of Cusa, an eminent Roman cardinal of the fifteenth century, [who] wrote a splendid book called *The Vision of God* in which he speaks of *'coincidentia oppositorum',* the 'coincidence of opposites'. There is a point where the opposites coincide. Our dualistic mind always sees them as different, but when we get deep enough, we realize that reconciliation is possible. I think that Jesus came to reconcile opposites *(2 Corinthians 5:19)' (The New Creation in Christ.p.61).*

I invite us to consider that processes like Dialogue Circles and Open Space can be ways of listening to the Holy Spirit with very large groups, whether Christian or non-religious (hundreds, or even thousands of people, in a single meeting). Christ the reconciler is always and already present in the circle before we even begin our conversation.

> *Anecdote*
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> *I know of one large organisation with a new CEO whose first task was to lead a major reassessment of the organisation's positioning in the market place combined with an associated organisational restructure. Because the CEO wanted to be far more 'consultative' than senior management had been in the past, he called for expressions of interest for a change 'commission' to help guide and advise on process. This commission, comprised of important and well educated people, then called for written submissions, summarised and integrated the content of those submissions, and issued a discussion paper with preliminary recommendations. Further submissions were invited in response to the discussion paper and a number of 'town hall' style meetings were called so people could make their views known. Once all that work was assembled the commissioned designed an 'implementation strategy' and appointed implementation working groups to take responsibility for smooth implementation.*
>
> *Whilst this process looks logical on the surface and was certainly far more 'consultative' that any previous practice in that particular organisation, the process is 'clunky'. It is relatively ineffective in harnessing the huge potential of dialogue and emergence. Firstly, the process relies to a very large*

extent on people's willingness and capability to put complex abstract thought into written form (which is probably why only a tiny percentage of the organisation actually put in written submissions, whilst a far greater number kept their opinions restricted to elevator, hall way and bar room conversations). Secondly, the process fails to capitalise on the creative possibilities of dialogue (dia-logos - making 'meaning across') through face to face conversation. In dialogue, meaning emerges not out of written 'opinion' and 'counter opinion' but out of the subtle texture of speaking and listening in the present moment. Thirdly, in the 'consultative approach' described above, the convergence of themes happens in the mind of a very small group of people, and sometimes just one person, and therefore places a disproportionate amount of power and control (as well an assumption of competency), in the hands of a few.

Letting go into a life of participation

'I am the Lord's servant, let it be with me according to your will'   -Luke 1:38

'let the same mind be in you as in Christ Jesus who.... emptied himself and took the nature of a servant and humbled himself and became obedient even to death'   -Philippians 2:5ff

'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God'   -Matthew 19:23

'unless a seed falls to the ground and dies it remains but a single seed. But if it dies it bears much fruit' -John 12:24

'as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us"   -John 17:21

'where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?   -Job 38:4

'no sign will be given [to this generation] except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth'   -Matthew 12:39-40

What happens when we open ourselves to listening more to the Spirit, to each other, to our church, organisation or community group by opening a Dialogue Circle or an Open Space meeting? To sponsor such an event, or to be sitting in a circle looking into what can feel like the vast 'emptiness' of the circle, can provoke feelings of curiosity and excitement as well as anxiety and fear. There is no agenda on the wall. We might have a whole day before us and no 'plan' beyond a desire to engage in conversation about the convening theme. And yet what is there, really, to be afraid of? Viewed theologically, the circle only *appears* to be empty. Viewed through the lens of faith, we sit on the edge of a rich field of promise, most particularly if our intention is directed towards the God of life and a life-inspired question. As we look around the circle we may be reminded of the paradox of the Trinity which holds together the paradox of unity and diversity. A unity can be seen in the circle, a convening theme and a shared humanity. The diversity is found in the individuals who gather.

The conversations which follow feel like (and, viewed through time lapse photography, look like) a complex dance, which is reminiscent of the way in which some theologians speak of the inner life of the trinity as a 'perichoresis' (lit: *dancing around*). After an Open Space meeting participants often report having had powerful experiences of reconciliation and hope. Looking at this phenomenon theologically I'm not at all surprised if, indeed, the crucified, risen and ascended Christ is present. The

limiting factor, for life, of course is human frailty and 'sin'. As Harrison Owen points out in 'The Practice of Peace' self-organisation can also deliver 'high performance' outcomes that are incredibly undesirable, such as a small group of committed people flying planes into buildings (or, for that matter the 'shock and awe' of the state-sanctioned bombing of a city). Christ is crucified. Whilst self organisation generally seems to drive towards life (witness evolution), life seems to include chaos and destruction. God's answer to Job's question about unjust suffering is not a particularly revealing one. Christian hope resides in the resurrection and ascension of Christ, a pointer to on-going creation and a fulfilment in which 'every tear will be wiped away'.

 If opening space is an exercise in letting go, the converse is trying to remain in control. For example, consider the traditional 'town hall meeting. I have worked in more than one large organisation where the CEO calls people into 'town-hall' style meetings   several times a year. At these meetings information is given and questions are taken. As an information delivery mechanism such meetings can be useful and taking questions is certainly better than doing nothing. However it's worth noting some other features about these kinds of meetings. In these meetings the CEO remains firmly in control. Firstly, the CEO decides who to invite. Rather than the Open Space principle of 'whoever comes are the right people', it is the CEO who decides who are the 'right people' to ask. Secondly the CEO remains firmly in control of who speaks and for how long. Thirdly, the communications 'traffic' is channelled backwards and forwards through the CEO so he/she keeps control of the process.

Anecdote

Not long after Kevin Rudd was elected as Prime Minister he convened a series of meetings called the 'Australian 2020 summit' (19–20 April 2008) in which people were invited to attend meetings focused on a range of key areas of policy of interest to the government. A steering group of eminent persons was appointed, who then took responsibility for deciding who would be invited and how the sessions would be run. The process of gaining people's inputs was highly structured. I remember watching an interview with a federal parliamentarian being interviewed on television about what could and could not be accomplished through this event. I felt a certain sadness when I heard him say something to the effect of, 'well obviously it isn't going to be possible for everyone who comes to talk about anything they want'. By this politician's own admission, the design of the process placed a constraint on what could emerge.

It is precisely possible, in Open Space, for everyone to talk about whatever they care to talk about, with whoever else is interested in joining them, for as long as they wish. In this way, Open Space process would have been well suited to the generation and 'capturing' of highly creative conversations at such a summit. However, to have achieved this would have required a significant letting go of the need to control process.

In an Open Space meeting, the 'whole system' is typically invited. Anyone who is interested in the topic/theme, from night watchmen to the CEO, can attend. This is an act of courage on the part of the sponsor because the sponsor doesn't really have any idea what will emerge. Spiritually, this is an act of letting go. Psychologically it represents a helpful loosening of control which enables space for unexpected voices to make a contribution. The sponsor (the person who sets the topic and invites people to come) is indicating a willingness to become 'servant' to the group and to the Spirit. This doesn't mean that specific leaders, charged, for example, by their organisations with the power to sign cheques, will relinquish the decision making authority with which they have been charged (which could be an abdication of responsibility), but they agree to genuinely open themselves to the unknown

and to use their decision making power in the service of something or someone greater than themselves – whether we name that 'emergence' or, in the case of the church, the guidance of the Spirit.

This can feel like a kind of dying (to the needs of one's own ego) and yet is full of the possibility of resurrection life. Jesus preached to whoever showed up and thousands did. Some responded and some didn't. Some got heavily involved in the mission and some only a little. Some came with him for a longer journey and some stayed at home. In Jesus' ministry we see a balance of 'purpose' on one hand and a 'letting go' on the other. Intention and surrender is a feature of his life. Jesus engages with the world and then frequently retreats 'to a lonely place to pray' (Luke 5:16). This freedom to speak and listen, engage and then withdraw is also a key feature of every Open Space meeting. The process invites participants to be adults - to engage and withdraw – to use the 'law of two feet' – as they need to. Jesus realises that he can only extend the invitation but that nothing and no one can be coerced. In the language of the Beatitudes, an openness to the emergent kingdom comes from a 'poverty of spirit' (Matthew 5:3) - in other words, an inner emptiness or spaciousness. Such openness is incarnated in Christ (Philippians 2:5-8). The physical spaciousness of Open Space is representative of the inner, psychological/spiritual, spaciousness of the Sponsor. If the Sponsor is full of their own agenda and need to control outcomes then there is little point in opening physical space in the form of an OST meeting. One business leader, Bill O'Brien, who was CEO of a very large American Insurance company articulated well the relationship between inner and outer worlds in the following statement, *"The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervener" (cited by Otto Scharmer).*

All of this could easily sound, to most managers in organisations, highly problematic. How would we ever get business done if we gave people this kind of freedom? How could we admit to our shareholders the promise of uncertainty when everyone is crying out for stability? In considering such issues it's worth remembering that the 'four principles and one law' of self-organisation are not *prescriptions* of the way things should be. They are *descriptions* of the reality of a self-organising world. It is surely true that the 'law of two feet' is operational every day in every organisation in every person. If people are not 'checking in and checking out' with their feet, they are 'checking in and checking out' with their minds. Just observe yourself and others in the next meeting, training course or conference you attend. Look for the glazed expressions, sideways glances, raised eyebrows and subterranean body languages (not to mention the more extreme manifestations of anxiety and depression). To adopt a leadership approach which is cognizant of self-organising principles, means trying to bring out into the light what might otherwise be hidden, or only being expressed in tea room, elevator and bar room conversations.

> *Anecdote*
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> *In August 2012 I heard a news report about an advisory group which had been set up by the Queensland government to review and make recommendations on gun control laws. The core of the news story was that the police were 'furious' that no police were represented on the review body and that any recommendations made by the committee which threatened to water down gun control processes would be fiercely resisted by the police. How often do we hear instances of such 'advisory', 'consultative' or 'expert' panels being set up – and their recommendations then being torn to shreds after the event by everyone who has been excluded and disenfranchised by the process?*

One way which can help avoid these kinds of problems is 'open space' on the issues under consideration. One of the tasks given to advisory groups can be the role of 'conversation sponsor' through which self-organising processes like Open Space and Dialogue circles can enable 'whoever comes' to have their input. This is not just a time intensive way of collecting opinions (which might otherwise be done by the internet or short focus groups) but is a way in which the self-organising process can actually serve dialogue and reconciliation between different points of view. Rather than the 'experts' having to come up with solutions, all by themselves, to complex problems, they become 'discerners of emergence' which flows out of the interaction of diverse players within the Open Space meeting.

The final act of 'letting go' is death or, in Open Space language, 'when it's over it's over'. Communities, churches, groups and companies wind up and new ones are born. The job of leaders is not to protect communities from inevitable death but to support them through it….to become midwives of new life. I recall watching the Abbott of the Benedictine Monastery in New Norcia, Placid Spearritt, being interviewed on the television a couple of years before his death. The interviewer asked him if he was worried that his once vibrant monastery now had only 5 monks. He calmly responded that monasteries came and went through history and if this one were to close then others would be opening elsewhere in the world.

Reconciliation

"Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you"   -Matthew 5:44

"Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen" -1 John 4:20

"All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" -2 Cor 5:18

If there is a one distinctive and challenging core to Jesus' teaching and lived example is it not, 'love people' (which was not a particularly original thought). Rather it is, 'love your enemies'.

To *listen* and to *let go* are deeply intertwined processes. We can't really listen deeply without 'parking' our own agenda for a little while and opening ourselves to the possibility that our own agenda might be shifted through listening to others. We might well try to listen to God in prayer but do we listen to other people in our work places? How do we listen, work with, or love people who we might intensely dislike, for whom we hold little respect, whom we believe may hold malicious intent towards us, whose views we deeply disagree with? (in short – our 'enemies'). It's worth remembering that Jesus links love and God and love of people into a single commandment (Matthew 22:37-40).

It's possible to listen in church to Jesus' command to 'love your enemies and do good to those who hate you', whilst having absolutely no idea how to put this into practice in everyday life – particularly in the cut and thrust of work and business. When Jesus talks about 'loving your enemies' he's certainly not asking us to manufacture warm feelings towards someone we're prefer to avoid. He's talking about actions.

To listen is an act of love for another person. We might imagine the incarnation, for example, as an act of deep listening by God to the world – God putting God's self into the 'shoes of the other'. We listen to other people by trying to understand their point of view (Open Mind) and by empathising with their deeper feelings and underlying concerns (Open Heart). This is not something that comes

easily to most of us and most of us haven't been given practical skills in how to do it. Some recent 'self-help' books on the market are filling this niche very nicely including a book called 'Crucial Conversations', particularly in relation to one to one conversations. But there is not much available to support listening in groups (see reference list at the end for some good examples of what *is* available).

Practices like Open Space and Dialogue circles are very practical approaches by which 'enemies' can come into conversation with each other without the need for participants to have read self-help books, attended expensive training programs, or even have particularly high EQ (Emotional Intelligence). The process itself, when given sufficient time, seems to provide the space in which people can hear each other's stories and come to shared insights.

It seems that it's only after honestly speaking our own 'truth' and 'hearing the truth of the other' that we can be receptive to what is emerging which is beyond, and larger, than both of us (Open Will) (Otto Scharmer). Allowing this kind of listening to occur does presume clear desire, time and space. People must engage voluntarily. Harrison Owen has suggested that if there is still active hostility in a group then that is a sign that more time and space is required to allow stories to be shared. If key people are not showing up to the conversation then we need to think about the attractiveness of the invitation rather than coercing them.

The self-protective instinct of exercising 'power over' others can easily shut down space when we need to be opening it up. Martin Luther King Jr. expressed the relationship between intention and surrender in this way, *"Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anaemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love (cited in Adam Kahane, Power and Love).* Theologian Paul Tillich defines power as the drive towards realising some action in the world, and love as the drive towards uniting the divided/fractured.

Keeping the creative tension between these two poles is the heart of practical peace-making, relationship building and reconciliation

> *Anecdote*
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> *I once facilitated a two day Open Space which opened up the question of how to stop the fracturing of families and the removal of children from their parents during the first two years of life. The meeting was jointly sponsored by three large NGOs which provided care to families and children. About 90 people attended including parents who had experienced removal of their own children into state care, government agencies, NGO service providers and other interested persons. It would be difficult to imagine a more complex and emotionally charged issue. Parents and government agency representatives sat in circles sharing highly personal stories. Much grief was expressed. By the end of the day there were about 30 people left in the closing circle, which I took to be indicative of the emotional toll of some of the conversations (professional counsellors had been on hand during the day to support people one to one if needed). Day 2 opened with 85 people . Conversations continued and action plans were developed. Comments in the closing circle revealed how the process enabled people to engage and withdraw as the needed to ('the law of two feet'), how mutual understandings had been built, and how useful it all was for the development of better policies and practices in government and service providers. Several powerful new initiatives were launched some of which continue several years later.*

Spiritual gifts

"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'. On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensible" - *1 Corinthians 12:21-22*

"John answered, 'Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.' But Jesus said to him, 'Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you.'" -*Luke 9:49-50*

"Blessed are the poor in Spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven" -*Matthew 5:3*

Why is 'letting go' of control so hard, particularly for those of us in positions of formal authority and positional power? As James Hollis points out in his book, 'Why good people do bad things', some of the worst abuses of power abuse come from those who most seek to deny that power is an issue in their lives – the instinct for power can simply get denied and pushed into the unconscious ready to pop out in some ugly way when we least expect it.

For those familiar with the Christian story this is no surprise. Jesus specifically instructs his occasionally power-coveting disciples to not 'Lord it over' others but to become 'slaves of all' (Mark 10:44).

If there is one common 'shadow' aspect of power by 'servant leaders' it is our capacity to unconsciously *screen out* people. Anyone responsible for being on the welcoming team in churches knows the reality of this. We can ask members of the congregation, 'did you see the new person in church today?' and the answer will be 'no' even when the new person had been standing right alongside members of the church. This doesn't mean people are 'bad', just human.

In leadership the screening-out process often shows up in decisions about who to invite, or not invite, to meetings. It also shows up in leaders' failure to open themselves to challenge, questioning and alternative perspective from anyone but those closest to them (and sometimes not even then). For example, why would we invite the cleaners to a meeting on marketing strategy? Even to pose the possibility seems ridiculous. The taken-for-granted assumption is that the person in power knows who can contribute usefully to a meeting and who can't. This is a very dubious assumption with potentially enormous consequence in terms of failure to make use of people's God given talents and abilities.

Peter Rennie from Leadership Australia points out how elevation to senior levels can, unconsciously, deepen and solidify models of 'heroic leadership' particularly amongst males. He says, 'the heroic leader is often driven by unrecognised fears of not being needed or of others being powerful. They seek to accumulate power and disempower others' (Hubris to Humility). Citing work which has been done by Jim Collins, in a book called 'Good to Great', on high performing organisations, Rennie observed that the CEOs of consistently high performing companies 'showed a fierce resolve combined with humility'. Rennie says that companies are a mixture of humility and hubris:

> *'[In hubris cultures] people flatter anyone who might be interesting to them, inflate their own contribution to a successful project, say 'yes' to everyone but break commitments to all but important people and scapegoat others. [in humility cultures] people respect others, own their own part when problems occur, credit other people for their contributions and keep commitments] (from 'Hubris to Humility – stepping stones to greatness, 2003)*

The 'humility culture' behaviours mentioned by Rennie in the aforementioned quote do not come automatically and there are powerful organisational forces supporting hubris, particularly in 'pyramid structures' (the great majority of large organisations in human history). Leaders who wish to combat such tendencies in themselves need to consciously allow themselves to be exposed to the views of their staff and seek ways of making it safe for people to challenge them. To my mind, opening space is a 'practice of humility', particularly if the leader is willing to hear and respond to issues and questions being raised.

St. Paul had something to say about all this in his reflections on the Body of Christ. He talked about equality of 'value' in the Body of Christ whilst recognising differences in gifting. What he didn't talk a lot about was how gifts get discerned. I sat in on part of a training course recently in a large organisation. The second most senior person in the company encouraged the up and coming young leaders to be forthcoming with their 'good ideas'. This is a wonderful invitation whilst also being somewhat naive when it comes to the way power plays out in organisations. To put forward a 'good idea' can have at least two consequences. Firstly it implies that the current ways of doing things are not as good as they could be. Secondly it implies that work might be needed to change the existing system. Either way, vested interests and resistances further up the line (usually one's direct supervisor or their manager) are going to be activated. Such resistance can present a formidable obstacle to an employee pursuing a 'good idea'.

Companies have developed various ways to circumvent such power dynamics including 'suggestion boxes' and reward/incentive schemes for innovation. A more effective way of way of supporting innovation is to develop a culture of Open Space. Open Space process gives a great deal of permission from further up the line for people in relatively powerless positions to walk new ideas into the public domain. This can enable good ideas to be overheard by more senior people, who can then champion and support ideas which might otherwise have been silenced by more localised power centres.

> *Anecdote*
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> *I once saw a lovely example of this at an Open Space in a large independent school, attended by 90 people. Roughly a third of the group were parents, a third staff and a third students. A 12 year old girl walked confidently into the circle to convene a conversation about why this particular single gender school (for over 100 years) should become co-educational. While she didn't prevail in changing school policy, on that occasion, it was a striking example of providing a space for small voices to be heard and respected.*

What really stands out throughout the Gospels is the radical inclusiveness of Jesus. 'The last will be first' and 'prostitutes and tax collectors will enter the kingdom before chief priests and elders' (Matthew 21:43-46). Open Space offers radical inclusiveness ('whoever comes are the right people'). The image that Jesus uses in John's Gospel, '*in my Father's house there are many rooms' (John 14:2)* is almost like looking at the multitudes of parallel break out spaces occurring in an Open Space meeting. In its context the 'house' that Jesus refers to is 'life in God' but we also know that 'eternal life' in John's Gospel is something that happens now rather than a 'pie in the sky when you die'. In Open Space there is room (space) for everyone who accepts an invitation to be there.

Anecdote

Harrison Owen tells the story of a large Open Space meeting conducted with Rockport Shoes in the United States. This Open Space meeting brought the whole company together, including people from production, engineering, sales and marketing into the same space. Picking up the spirit of 'whoever comes are the right people', one of the security guards happened to be passing and settled into a conversation between some of the marketing people about new product lines. The security guard observed how much time guards spend on their feet each year, the huge size of the potential 'market' and their need for better shoes. This catalyst was all that was required for a bunch of new conversations to be immediately convened. Within a day working plans were developed and a few months later a new product was launched which proved extremely profitable for the company.

Under normal business modus operandi, who would have invited a security guard to a marketing meeting? In Open Space, 'whoever comes are the right people'.

Structure follows Spirit

'The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath'   -Mark 2:27

In an emergent systems approach, structures are designed to support spirit, not the other way around. Jesus observed that the most elaborate structures (even something the size of the Jerusalem temple) will eventually be torn down (Mark 13:2) so don't get too attached to them. The first letter of Peter contains a similar idea in referring to the church as being built from 'living stones' rather that bits of rock   -1 Peter 2:5

Management is important in getting things done, produced on time and within budget. However, as mentioned earlier we need to be constantly alert to the tendency by organisations for systems and procedures, which were originally designed to support a movement of the Spirit, to solidify into machines and then monuments.

When this happens it is often only a crisis which will shift things. Machines and monuments don't tend to change their shape very easily. So when a crisis emerges it's worth asking ourselves not, 'how do I fix this', but rather, 'this is interesting – what can we learn from this? What new thing might be emerging here?'

When systems get destabilised we might consider the possibility that instability is something to be welcomed and mined for meaning rather than controlled. Perhaps we need to be very wary of anything called 'change management', as if somehow we are in control of change, or 'conflict management' as if conflict is something threatening which we need to keep on top of. By trying to control emergence, where emergence which might be a self-organising movement of a system to adapt itself to its environment, may well be to hasten the organisation's demise.

Organisations are networks of conversation and inherently self-organising (it happens in hallways, elevators, tea rooms and bar rooms). We can allow self-organisation to occur or hinder it with the illusion of being in control. Margaret Wheatley suggests that the 'simple initial conditions' of a self organising system are identity, relationships and information. Optimising the power of self-organisation involves helping the system (a *network of relationships* and conversations), bound together by a shared *identity/story*, become aware of more of itself (*information*). We do this, in part, by optimising the free flow of information and connectivity. Open Space is a particularly effective way

of enabling extremely fast information sharing and connectivity, as are other networked self-organising systems such as social media.

In this highly interconnected and networked environment, when there is conflict the challenge is not to *manage* it but to *listen* more deeply to what the different players are expressing. Otto Scharmer and William Isaac refer to this process as opening the 'heart', 'mind' and 'will'. Unfortunately, it is very common management practice that when there is a tough problem to engage a narrow range of content experts (sometimes called consultants) and get them to figure it out a solution or recommendation. Such a recommendation typically provides fantastic fodder to be shot down by everyone not involved in the process, as well as many who were. In an emergent approach if there is a tough problem we recast it as an opportunity to imagine the future. We then invite everyone who is interested to engage in conversation (invite passion and responsibility to show up); convene a circle, post conversations; and sit in the ambiguity and confusion until something clearer starts to emerge from the dialogue. We then prototype something, learn quickly, and adapt as we go. Otto Scharmer describes this process beautifully in his book, 'Theory U'.

I propose the following thought for us to mull over, inspired by the quote by *Antoine de Saint-Exupery* at the beginning of this paper, 'The future is not made so much as enabled – it is a delicate balance of intention and surrender'. The future emerges from the intentionality of our mission whilst surrendering to the possibility that even the way we define our mission might be evolving.

> *Anecdote*
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> *As churches grow they often realise that Parish Council meetings can become bogged down as they try to handle too much detail (e.g. the colour to paint the newly renovated bathroom) and thereby becoming inwardly focussed and lose attention on stewarding the overall priorities of the community (i.e. discerning the emerging Kingdom of God). The first instinctive attempt at re-structuring often involves members of the Parish Council taking on 'portfolios' or 'operational committees'. This has the effect of doubling the workload of already stretched people and also keeps the same small group of people firmly in control. To avoid the latter problems, a second iteration is that the Parish Council decides on the 'priorities' for the Parish and then tries to find other lay leaders to head up operational teams (e.g. Mission, Pastoral Care, Education, Finance, Maintenance). This distributes the workload but means that the priorities are still be directed by 'perspiration' (i.e. we 'should/need' to do these things) rather than 'inspiration' (stalking the flow of life/passion/interest/gifts in the community)*
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> *Another approach is to regularly 'Open Space' in which the whole system is invited to exercise leadership (passion + responsibility). Once the emergent leadership is discerned, the group can figure out together what will be the best coordinating structure to support those movements of the Spirit. In this way, 'Structure follows Spirit'. In one parish the coordinating structure which worked best was that leaders of the different areas of ministry 'passion' came together once a month to a 'Ministry Leaders' meeting to pray and share information about what they were working on. That meeting was also attended by two persons from the Parish Council who provided a link to the Parish Council, particularly in relation to broader governance issues which might have emerged (legal, financial, theological). Parish Council became an encourager/permission giver rather than a gate-keeper.*

Leadership

"you know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognise as the rulers lord it over them and their great ones are tyrants over them. But is it not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great

among you must be your servant and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all"
-Mark 10: 42-44

If it's true, as proposed by Harrison Owen, that leadership = passion + responsibility, then it must follow that leadership resides in every person. Whether or not we choose to exercise our responsibility, we are making a difference in the world, for good and for ill. However, the gift of a truly distributed leadership can only be optimised when the organisation reimages and reorganises the distribution and disbursement of power. Open Space is therefore an act of the prophetic imagination as much as a process for meeting. This can feel risky to those wanting to remain firmly in control. Broadening the base of leadership (enabling any individual to 'author' new things) demands greater decision making competency at all levels; requires quick and accurate feedback loops (for fast learning); good shared access to information; and high quality trusting relationships.

The alternative is traditional planning approaches which tend to split passion (thought leadership/direction) from responsibility (putting ideas into operation). People at the top of the pyramid come up with ideas and people further down the line are expected to implement and get along with some structural or systems change that they have had little influence in creating, except perhaps for a cursory opportunity to comment in writing on a plan that they feel pretty powerless to really affect. At best they will go along with it in a spirit of resigned acceptance. At worst there is outright hostility toward the 'idiots' who dreamt up the new plan. Once again, we are back to the system having to self-organise by way of hallway, tea room, and bar room conversations.

In emergent practice, the question is not 'why would we open space', the question is 'why would we *not* open space'? It is always and constantly an invitation.

Getting started with emergent leadership

Here are a few thoughts about getting started with emergent leadership. Within the context of a community rooted in prayer, worship and study of the scriptures (and therefore a formation in the life of Christ).....

(i) Configure meetings (starting with parish council meetings) in circles. Use a 'talking piece' at the very least for an 'opening' and 'closing' circle and on any other occasion when conflict is becoming evident and/or when the meeting needs to slow the pace down and listen to each other more carefully.

(ii) Welcome disturbance, disruption and conflict as an invitation to exploring what newness might be emerging. Conflict means that people care. Provoke disturbance – compassionately!

(iii) Ask positively worded, possibility-oriented, Kingdom inspired questions. Invite anyone who is interested to come – seek out diversity – welcome those with different opinions – welcome all those who we might be tempted to exclude – including 'trouble makers' and 'negative people'....i.e. 'enemies')

(iv) Provide as much information as possible to everyone – transparency, openness and honesty about what's actually going on

(v) Where possible use formal Open Space process to create opportunities for individual expression, connection, and random encounters. If you are personally 'invested' in the question then invite in an external Open Space facilitator. Don't try to control or be in charge.

(vi) Be alert to patterns, clustering, coherence, and the questions these experiences might be inviting us to consider

(vii) Support people with minimum necessary administration/structure/accountability.

(viii) Allow that which is dying to die (Death/Hospicing) – rather than keeping a dying system on life support

(ix) Midwife, support, encourage, resource, prototype emergent new ideas - don't wait for the perfect plan before getting started

(x) 'Don't work harder than you have to; if it aint broke don't fix it; Never think you are in control!' (Harrison Owen)

(xi) Open Space again.....and again.......and again.......keep reiterating

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Useful web sites

www.openspaceworld.org   [first place to go for everything related to OST]

http://peggyholman.com/   [Peggy Holman is a veteran facilitator of OST and has written on Emergence]

Eric E. Vogt, Juanita Brown, and David Isaacs: The Art of Powerful Questions. PDF file at http://academy.extensiondlc.net/file.php/1/resources/RM-ArtOfQuestions.pdf

http://www.artofhosting.org/home/ [Various Dialogic Processes]

www.couragerenewal.org   [the work of Parker J Palmer; Circles of Trust]

http://peerspirit.com/   [Talking Circle resources]

www.preachingpeace.org [Peace Theology resources]

http://kaidegner.com/   [click on 'Workshop (Free Tools)' for the Listening Café process]