

Reflection on spiritual presence and ecclesial discernment in light of institutional theory
and social media network theory as it applies to Pacific Community Church.

by

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More recently I attended a *WillowCreek Leadership Network* event hosted by the Willow Creek Association in Canada. Bill Hybels was the primary seminar speaker. I continue to respect him highly for his finely tuned capacity as a leader. But as I participated in the day with some fellow staff members I was reflecting how the day of the “grand formulas” is in decline. I came to the conclusion that at many of these “how to be successful events” disillusioned pastors tend to hear only what they want to hear in order to continue to sustain efforts with diminishing returns in the face of a revolutionary change-I think there might be a link to the number of people who attend such conferences and the rate of pastoral disillusionment (hard to mimic superstars). But beyond that critique I am intrigued by the idea that the success of Bill’s church leadership may have been poorly framed perhaps by himself and most often by others. What impresses me each time when I listen to Hybels is that he is often exasperated by pastors who avoid meetings where opposing ideas are provided room for combat and participants are responsible to wrestle toward a shared action. Hybels is thrilled by the energy that results when a community engages in collaborative ways for the sake of the gospel. Perhaps some of the genius of his leadership skill is his embrace of the “participatory golden rule” where “decision makers must be consequence-takers; and vice versa—consequence-takers must be decision makers.”¹ It is this particular idea that I want to highlight and reflect upon.

¹ Gary M.. Simpson, “God in Global Civil Society: Vocational Imagination, Spiritual Presence, and Ecclesial Discernment,” (St. Paul, MN: 2010), 10.

Clay Shirky in his book, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*², argues that we are undergoing a revolution in which social networking technology is enabling and empowering our capacity to participate and influence civil society. He states, “The current change, in one sentence, is this: most of the barriers to group action have collapsed, and without those barriers, we are free to explore new ways of gathering together and getting things done.”³ One of the examples he explores is the profession of journalism. Where once reporting was done by the professional journalist who through the existing technological and institutional means provided news for the masses, the masses via network media become the new journalists. Print media is radically changing. He provides a compelling theory as to why social media is so revolutionary. Let me attempt in my own words. Institutions emerged and developed as a result of a cost and benefit formula (see, I am real simple). Expansive corporate structures were developed to be able to coordinate the activities and efforts of people who had shared goals and aspirations. With the development of the more efficient and reduced “transaction costs” associated with social media tools institutional structures are being undermined if resistant or transformed if open. The coordinating and networking role of the institution is being supplanted by the capacity of individuals who can now self organize.

Shirky’s book provided me a way to rethink the formation of small groups. Small Group ministry is one of the core structural practices of Pacific. It has been one of my tasks from the beginning to promote and build it. In fact, I would claim to be a bit of an

² Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations* (NY: Penguin Press, 2008).

³ Ibid., 22.

expert on small group strategy and small group health. I can spot a wounded group a mile away. I can take ten total strangers throw them into a room with the Spirit and they all come back thinking that “there is no other group in the world like it.” But overtime I became frustrated and unmotivated to help grown up adults mix it up with other people to participate in spiritually transforming encounters with each other and with God. The job was a pain. Though I started the small group effort with a bang, sustained the positive momentum for a few laps, more recently I have tended to sit on the sidelines trying to figure out what all the running was about.

What did Shirky do? Well, he introduced me to the social website, “Meetup.” Meetup is a social network tool that helps people with shared interests to meet face to face unlike facebook where you don’t necessarily ever get to see the face behind those comments. For instance, if you were a guy who liked to knit you could go to Meetup online and do one of three things 1) find a men’s knitting group in your area and join it, 2) indicate that you are looking for a men’s knitting group and so be notified when one occurs near you or 3) start a men’s knitting group at your local Starbucks on Friday nights. It took me all but three minutes to see that this is what I was looking for. Within the hour of being introduced, I signed up and started a Pacific Community Small Group Meetup group. I can arrange meetings in different places. Members can indicate interests and be notified of all meetings. I can upload and provide a collaborative place for leaders to develop the site. Members can collaborate about new small group startups. Instead of maintaining a list of people’s names and numbers we invite them to the meetup group. In terms of economic transaction value the use of this \$250.00/yr site is perhaps the equivalent of a part-time small group coordinator at \$25,000/yr.. But greater yet is the

potential of the many members of the group together shaping what is best. Shirky

comments:

The communications tools broadly adopted in the last decade are the first to fit human social networks well, and because they are easily modifiable, they can be made to fit better over time. Rather than limiting our communications to one-to-one and one-to-many tools, which have always been a bad fit to social life, we now have many-to-many tools that support and accelerate cooperation and action.⁴

My little adoption of Meetup as a way to help people connect face to face for meaningful encounters is but a small example of a revolutionary change. Apart from the fact that I only have one member in my group does not diminish the fact that our society is undergoing a major shift. “When is there a revolution?” asks Shirky, “Revolution doesn't happen when society adopts new technologies--it happens when society adopts new behaviors.”⁵ This tool coincides with a general trend in our church community to engage the whole of the community in matters of deliberation and future planning. This tool, not only reduces a particularly frustrating work expectation, but it compels the community to collaborate together to shape a Christian community.

Robert Bellah's exhortation in his book, *The Good Society*⁶, that we need to “recover the capacity for common discussion and public invention⁷” seems now to be more of a plausible possibility. The governmental and corporate structures which ballooned and overwhelmed a person's sense of ownership and sense of responsibility in the last century are now being challenged by a renewed social capacity where people are

⁴ Ibid., 158.

⁵ Ibid., 159.

⁶ Robert Neelly Bellah, *The Good Society*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf : Distributed by Random House, 1991).

⁷ Ibid., 66.

now capable of sharing, cooperating and participating in collective action. The structured hierarchies which provided an effective (lowest transaction costs) means of communication in a complex social fabric are now being replaced by a model of “small world networks⁸”.

In relation to church structures this shift has significant repercussions not the least of which is the way leadership and power are structured organizationally. Particularly, it seems that front line pastors and denominational bureaucrats will struggle with the “lump of labor” fallacy⁹ and thereby overlook the greater reality that as more people are able to participate in decisions that shape them power is no longer isolated upon one but upon the many. It seems to be a healthy “pentacostolizing” direction or in political terms...democratizing direction.

Bellah’s assessment of America (and in general terms Canada too) suggests the need for our divergent private and our public worlds to interconnect—our best embedded values may be at risk if we don’t. The Church is a significant contributor not only in supporting such a lofty initiative but deeply informing it. The prophetic nature of the church is what Simpson calls a “constituent component” of a “missional church’s vocation as public companion with God in civil society.” In a tumultuous time where corporate and governmental finance systems are careening and social networking is escalating, the Church can provide a “normative insight” that affirms what is good and exposes what is not good.

⁸ Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations*, 217.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 304.

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