

# BECOMING AN OPEN SYSTEM CHURCH

*THE CORNERSTONE ISSUE – OCTOBER 2014*

In my sermon, at our Panel Service with the Hon Tim Mander MP, I noted the significant shift in the nature of St Jude's Church, around 2007, when we moved from a closed-system church to an open-system church - an open-system church that is not only reflected in the way we operate but also in the very nature of our new Church building itself. This change came about as a result of a number of factors interacting at that time, which included:

- a revelation of the way in which passivity can so bog an organisation down that it becomes more and more ineffective in its primary purpose – that is, when the going gets tough, instead of the tough getting going, they stop;
- certain contextual actions that Fr Colin and Ps Andrew took at that time that breached the closed-system forces that were attempting to enclose us. In other terms, it breached the “catch-22 situation within which we were caught (*a catch-22 situation is defined as “a dilemma or difficult circumstance from which there is no escape because of mutually conflicting or dependent conditions” or “a situation in which any move that a person can make will lead to trouble”*).<sup>1</sup>
- the purposeful building of trust throughout our Parish during quite trying times;
- the open acceptance and inclusion of all four types of worship congregations that make up our Parish – thus breaching the fear of exclusion that assailed us; and
- the one-step-at-a-time process that eventually saw the building of our new church complex through the miracle-working power of God coming into play at each step we took.

The following article is aimed at helping us understand a little more the dynamics of closed and open systems. For additional information please see the book *The Emerging Paradigm of Diversity* by Ps Andrew Peters.

## THE NATURE OF OPEN AND CLOSED SYSTEMS

Open and closed systems relate primarily to the relational development and interaction within an organisation or church and its relationship with its environment. Internally, it has to do with to how we get on with one another and how we are able to challenge one another in a positive way. Proverbs 27:17 notes:

*As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another (NIV)*

Externally, it has to do with how we engage the world around us without losing our own identity and

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<sup>1</sup> Collins English Dictionary—Complete and Unabridged @HarperCollins Publishers 1991, 1994, 2000, 2003.

**Origin of term** - 1970s: title of a novel by Joseph Heller (1961), in which the main character feigns madness in order to avoid dangerous combat missions, but his desire to avoid them is taken to prove his sanity.

purpose in the process. We need to engage that world and meet the challenges it poses to us, without losing our identity and core meaning as Christians and as a Christian Church.

The proponents of Systems theory call us to see an organisation or church as whole, rather than simply a conglomeration of its parts. We are culturally trained to see things as parts and not as a whole. We are taught to break down problems or processes into smaller parts to make them more manageable. Whilst that method enables a certain degree of productivity, it also results a failure to see the big picture – the whole, within which all the parts fit. The value of systems theory is it enables us not only to see the big picture, but also to understand the way different parts of an organisation or church operate together and affect each other.

Whether an organisation or church is operating as an open or closed system will affect the ability it has to interact with its environment: to be stimulated by the challenges that environment poses, and to respond innovatively and successfully to those challenges. The level of effective interaction that goes on between an organisation and its environment, and within the organisation itself, indicates the level of openness operating within it. The level of openness determines the organisation's ability to sustain high performance, to be effective in fulfilling God's purpose and to bear fruit. It affects the church's ability to:

- make sound decisions;
- be open to options and opportunities as they arise; and
- evaluate reasonable and responsible risks.

A closed system contains within it:

- a fear of reasonable and responsible risk;
- the closing out of options and the failure to respond to opportunities as they arise; and
- a high level of mistrust.

Closed-system organisations become self-defeating because they exclude the type of people, ideas, and methods that the organisation needs to break free of the rut into which it has fallen. A rut that grows deeper as it attempts to maintain and use tried and true processes and activities that has served it well in the past, but no longer serve it effectively in the present.

However, the movement to an open-system is not a matter of adopting every novel scheme or approach the world, or the wider-church itself, is currently serving up. The church needs to move beyond simply the appearance of change, encapsulated in such terms as being relevant, to do the tough-minded work to bring about the type of sustained change that will make it effective in fulfilling God's purpose.<sup>2</sup>

# USING OPEN SYSTEM DYNAMICS

*THE CORNERSTONE ISSUE – NOVEMBER 2014*

In the October issue of *The Cornerstone* we addressed the movement of our church from a closed to an open-system church. The concept of open and closed system churches has its early beginnings with the teaching of the Apostle Paul. He expounds this in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4, where he uses the analogy of a “body” to explain the systemic nature of the church, its people, groups, activities and leadership. He also uses system-thinking to challenge the Galatian church, which had forsaken the Gospel and turned back to the Law. For Paul all members of the Body of Christ are both unique in their gift-mix and indispensable for the effective life of the church, which is the Body of Christ.

In our own time, Systems Theory has deep resonance with Paul’s understanding of the interrelatedness and interdependence of the different members and groups in the church. Systems theory formed one of the key models used by Social Sciences over the last couple of decades and subsequently used to describe organisational dynamics in both business and volunteer-intensive organisations such as the church. Its focus is two-fold: 1/ the internal relatedness or interaction within the various groups or sectors that go to make up an organisation or church; and 2/ the engagement of the organisation or church with its external environment. Internally, relatedness notes the importance of seeing the different sections or subsystems of the church as related rather than unrelated, therefore noting the implications of decisions made in one section of the church, which can have an inordinate effect on other sections of the church. Externally, it notes the importance of the church’s interaction with its environment – its local community, city and nation.

By moving towards an open-system church our own church has positioned itself to engage three processes that help us to be effective in achieving our God-given purpose:

**1/ the first is an awareness of the nature of our external environment (the world around us)** - the failure of the Anglican Decade of Evangelism, at the turning of the second millennium, led us to believe that the world around us was impervious to the Gospel – we were led to believe that the world around us was not interested in the Gospel/Church or just did not want to be bothered. This was the expected conclusion of fifty years of church decline. I want to say categorically that that picture of the world out there is no longer true, if it ever was true. That picture of the world came from a disengagement of the church from its external environment, as it moved to a seclusion of the church within itself. An open-system church will engage that world again and seek to understand its motivations and language and speak into it in terms that it can understand.

**2/ an understanding of the church’s specific mission** – the church has a general mission to preach the Gospel to the whole world. However, each local church has its particular skills and abilities that uniquely equip it to impact various parts of our society and the world at large. This requires our church to reflect upon and think through the unique message we have for

the world we are re-engaging. One aspect of that message for our church is the essence of giving that lies at the heart of God who gave us His Son, and the joyfulness and excitement of giving that unleashes the miracle-working power of God in our midst.

**3/ its development of the core competencies needed to accomplish that mission** – a closed church ignores or deliberately resists the call to learn and grow through learning that is at the heart of equipping its members for their specific mission to the world at large. It means taking the time to meet in study and discussion groups that involve a dialogical interactive learning process. This along with specific skill development enables our members to effectively interact with our external environment – where there are people who want to know the Gospel and what they need to do.<sup>1</sup>

The movement from a closed to an open-system church involves enabling team members to get to know each other better. We do this so that the church can achieve its goals and vision, as well as, enabling individual members to satisfy their need for inclusion, support, power and achievement. When this is done properly it develops a church that works responsively with its leadership to achieve God's purpose for His church. When it flounders or is hijacked by people with their own agendas, it creates a divisive element in the church that pushes people into factions and undermines the leadership of the church. Mink, Mink and Owen note the following points as important for church members to overcome the debilitating effects of a closed-system church to that that exhibits and nurtures openness:

**Developing Trust:** trust develops in groups that reward sharing of ideas, thoughts, opinions, and feelings and that make and keep simple agreements. Such groups are characterized by a climate of cohesion, belonging, and mutual confidence.

**Accepting and Recognizing Individual Differences:** communicates acknowledgement and respect for each person's unique point of view.

**Giving and Receiving Feedback:** to learn, grow and succeed, team members require feedback on how their performance compares with what is expected of them. The availability of feedback enables the individual and the team to stay on target. When the team is closed to constructively analyzing its performance against expectations, the likelihood of failure is increased immeasurably.

**Problem Solving:** problems arise and the successful team learns how to identify them and develop solutions. The alternative to problem finding and solving is binding the group's energy in faultfinding and scapegoating, both of which reduce the team's effectiveness in achieving its goals.

**Letting go of the Past:** effective teams spend time celebrating their accomplishments. This process strengthens the team. It also enables the team to let go of what has been done and to refocus its energy on what is to be accomplished next. When a team experiences a setback or failure, it is important to take time to grieve together. This process frees up energy that would otherwise be tied up in resentments, regrets, and shaken confidence. Although there has been

failure at the task level, the grieving process turns defeat into victory at the level of group maintenance and individual needs.<sup>2</sup>

For a church to move out of closedness to openness it needs to develop a learning framework that enables all its members to understand the culture, ethos and nature of open-system dynamics. This moves the church towards effectiveness in its God-given mission and the individual members to growth in fruitfulness. This framework will enable different members to learn in their own way the things that they need to be vibrant effective Christian men and women.

## AVOIDING CLOSED SYSTEM DYNAMICS

*THE CORNERSTONE ISSUE- DECEMBER 2014*

Over the last two issues of *The Cornerstone* we have reviewed the nature of open-systems dynamics that have enabled our church to move forward to complete our God given mission. Having broken out of the dynamics of a closed-system church we need to be aware of the things that contribute to closed-system dynamics and develop processes in our church's life that enable us to continue to grow as an open-system church. Two specific things occur in an organisation or church that becomes enmeshed in closed-system dynamics: a fear so deep that it begins to paralyse the organisation in its ordinary everyday activities and operation - that is, the work stops. The second is a movement away from the organisation or church's central or core values.

An organisation or church is a *group* within which a number of people join together to *work* toward a common *goal* or *purpose*. That is, an organisation or church forms to engage in a *task* or *work* that enables it to fulfil its goal or purpose.<sup>2</sup> For the church it is its God-given purpose to be a light in the world; proclaim God's Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ to all humanity; and to nurture its members to grow and be righteous men and women of God. When closed-system dynamics grip a church it enters into a *non-work mental state*. This does not mean no work is being done. It means that the *right work* is not being done, because distraction is extremely high in a closed-system church.

A *non-work* or *work avoidance* mental state develops out of a fear of exclusion or separation amongst members of the church. This results in official group meeting decisions being deliberately undermined by members who hold small meetings outside the group (as one member noted - *meetings in the car park*). These small meetings seek to undo what has been agreed to and decided by the group. In the church such groups include Parish Council, MU, Creative Arts and Beacon Counselling Ministry. The issues discussed in the car park are never raised in the appropriate meetings by the people who have those issues. The fear makes them hold back from sharing their true feelings with the group. Instead they collude outside of official group meetings to overthrow or hamper decisions made in group meetings. These counterproductive actions lead to anger, blame

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<sup>2</sup> *Groups at Work* – Mink, Mink & Owen, 17.

and phony conflict within the group and church as a whole.<sup>32</sup> Ironically the very fear of exclusion or separation from the group leads to real separation from the group as well as an enormous waste of the church's resources and its members time. The negative characteristics of this non-work state are:

- Low creativity - members devote creative capacity to self-defeating ends;
- Self-esteem decreases;
- High level of frustration in doing tasks;
- Burnout in highly motivated and committed individuals;
- Predictive capacity decreases—Foresight becomes hindsight;
- Thoroughness and quality decrease;
- The work climate deteriorates;
- Perception narrows;
- High level of disorganization;
- Resistance to learning and change;
- Low or poor rate of task completion;
- High levels of anxiety impeding change;
- Lingering and unresolved discontent;
- Little or no personal development;
- Communication not sensible;
- Inability of people to listen;
- Increased incidence of mental rehearsal prior to speaking;
- Negative feelings prevalent;
- Team controlled by time;
- Ongoing conflicts created by low harmony among roles.<sup>4</sup>

Over the last five years our church has come out of that type of environment and begun to engage open-system dynamics. Although we have moved into more open and inclusive dynamics, the energy needed to build the new church has hampered the ability of our small team of leaders and team members to recover and repair the damage that had been done to our church's life from its experience of closed-system dynamics. One thing we do know is none of us really want go back to the debilitating effect of closed-system dynamics again.

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<sup>3</sup> *Groups at Work* – Mink, Mink & Owen, 19-20.

<sup>4</sup> *Groups at Work* – Mink, Mink & Owen, 20.

One of the responsibilities of the key-leader of a church is to launch a vision that enables the members of the church to know its goal and purpose. In addition to that, the key-leader also needs to identify what that *right work* for the church is and set-up processes and protocols that enable it to do what it needs to do to achieve its God-given purpose.

The second thing that occurs in a closed-system church is a movement away from the church's centred or core values. It is this situation that Paul addresses in his *Letter to the Galatians*. Paul challenges the church at Galatia about the undermining of the church's life because trouble-makers had infiltrated the church and brought a different ethos and philosophy into the church's life. Paul notes the effect of this was a movement away from the original Gospel Paul had proclaimed to them. It was a Gospel received by faith in Jesus Christ and came with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Paul argues that the original Gospel he proclaimed was founded on faith in Jesus Christ to become Christians and an on-going faith in Jesus Christ to live the Christian life.

In its place, suggesting that Paul's Gospel was not complete, the trouble-makers insisted that the new Gentile Christians needed to be circumcised and follow the Jewish food laws, traditions and seasons. They needed to complete the Gospel with adherence to the Jewish Law. Paul vehemently argued that to rely on the Law again was to abandon the true Gospel and to be severed from Christ. Such a movement had led the Galatian Church into the grip of closed-system dynamics. They had left their central or core values. Those centred or core values set the parameter of the church's mission and establish the protocols by which it operates.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to adopting and implementing the protocols and canons of the Anglican Diocese of Brisbane, our parish has also identified a number of centred or core values that enable us to understand the base from which we operate. These are:

- **Intimate Relationship with God:** We believe as a community and as individual believers, we should be growing in a vibrant and intimate relationship with the Father through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and with each other.
- **Worship:** We believe that our vibrant and intimate relationship with God should be expressed in the traditional and contemporary aspects of our worship life as a community.
- **God's Love and Holiness:** We believe that the love and holiness of the risen Lord Jesus Christ should permeate every aspect of our community and personal life.
- **Obedience:** We believe that as a community, and as individual believers, we should be obedient to the will of God in every situation, as reflected in the Scriptures and the leading of the Holy Spirit.
- **Lost People:** We believe that lost people matter to God, and also matter to us as a community and as individual believers.
- **Community Support:** We believe that every member of our faith community needs the

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<sup>5</sup> For further information on Galatians see *Holiness without the Law* by Ps Andrew Peters.

support of our faith community through study groups, prayer, pastoral care and nurture.

- **Changing Hearts:** We believe that success and prosperity in our lives, as a community and as individual believers, comes from a heart's response to the living God. We as a Church are in the business of changing hearts and transform lives.
- **Culturally Relevant:** We believe, that as a community, and as individual believers, the expression of our worship, faith and love should be contemporary and culturally relevant, to impact those on the highways and byways as we invite them in.
- **Gifts and Fruit of the Holy Spirit:** We believe that as a community and as individual believers, we should be using the gifts and expressing the fruit of the Holy Spirit.
- **Mission and Vision:** We believe that as a community and as individual believers, we should be committed to and contribute to the Mission and Vision of our Church, in a spirit of excellence.<sup>6</sup>
- **Leaders:** We believe that we should be growing and developing great leaders through training, prayer, encouragement and accountability.
- **Preaching and Teaching:** We believe that anointed and dynamic preaching and teaching are essential ingredients for the growth and development of our community and its life.
- **Anglican Core Values and Beliefs:** We believe that the retention of our Anglican core values and beliefs are important to our ongoing effectiveness as a Church. Though we may need to change the expression of those values and beliefs we will not let go of them.

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<sup>6</sup> Excellence in all that we do is not the achievement of perfection, but doing the best you possibly can with the resources you have available.