

**Closing the Back Door**  
**A paper by Rev. David Lindrooth**  
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Many people are silently slipping out the back door of the General Church today. While you don't see much of it in the resignation reports in 'New Church Life,' they can be more clearly seen in declining worship attendance statistics around the world. Some leave because they are just too busy to make time for attending church with any regularity. There is probably not much we can do about that. Some leave because the idea of attending 'church' seems to go against cultural norms of their peer groups. Again, while we can 'dress up' our offerings, church, at its most basic level, is still church and we really don't have much control over their loss. Some simply disagree with the doctrine. This is okay too, provided that they are responding to an accurate representation of the true doctrine that they disagree with and not to something made up or poorly communicated. But there are also many people leaving church, not because they have 'lost' their faith, or lost interest, or because they feel they found a better church, but because they feel that the dysfunctions in the organized church are detrimental to the health of their faith and the spirituality of their family members.

Unfortunately, these people often have high potential to be tapped as the future 'pillars' of our congregations and could be numbered among those who are most able to help the church thrive. Their loss is disturbing! And yet since this exit is caused by organizational factors that are within our control, the trend can be reversed. We can do this together. The future of the General Church (yes, I mean the man-made organization), depends on our willingness to honestly and humbly address these issues with an openness toward change and being more flexible in our approach in a new century. While change is difficult and tests everyone, I believe that these changes allow our organization to become more focused on the true faith that is advocated in the Heavenly Doctrines and communicate it to those whom the Lord leads our way.

The Word is full of deeply inspiring messages about the uses of evangelization which urgently call us to cooperate with the Lord and establish a love of actively pursuing His New Truth in relationship with others in that sacred community we call the church. Here are a few of these passages:

*"The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest." (Matthew 9: 37,38)*

*"You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lamp-stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:14-16)*

*"I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" (Isaiah 6:8)*

*"And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen." (Matthew 28:18-20)*

*“After this work was finished, the Lord called together the twelve disciples who followed him in the world. The next day he sent all of them out to the entire spiritual world to preach the gospel that the Lord God Jesus Christ reigns and that his kingdom will last for ages of ages, as foretold by Daniel (Daniel 7:13, 14) and by the Book of Revelation (Revelation 11:15); also that "people who come to the wedding feast of the Lamb are blessed" (Revelation 19:9). This occurred on June 19, 1770.” (True Christianity 791)*

*“To minister. That this signifies when engaged in worship and in evangelization, is evident from the signification of "ministering," when said of Aaron, by whom is represented the Lord, as being worship and evangelization. By "worship" is signified everything that is representative of worship from the good of love and the truths of faith; for the worship that is from these is truly worship, whereas worship without these is like a shell without a kernel, and like a body without a soul.” (AC 9925)*

These are just a few passages that underscore the hopeful future of the New Church. They draw our attention on what our purpose is as an organization. I believe that to the degree that we gather and single-mindedly focus our energies on accomplishing this internal mission of evangelization put forth by the Lord Himself, recognizing that we all have challenging difficult circumstances that differ in nature and need, the Lord will continue to build a robust, healthy New Church on earth.

### **Spiritual Factors Causing Decline in Church**

From a certain perspective, decline in attendance and participation in the General Church cannot be very surprising. So much of our culture and methodology of our organization was adopted from surrounding Christian standard procedures - from the very church that the Heavenly Doctrines had already declared as being dead. I very much doubt that it would have been even possible to start our organization without unintentionally integrating the flaws that we all have unwittingly accepted as normative from our once ‘modern’ culture. But that being the case, we have the responsibility to evolve and change our organization to more clearly represent an advancing view of what it means to engage in the New Church actually described in the Word. This is why we have the statement in the Order and Organization of the General Church of the New Jerusalem that: “Because the General Church is a living body developing under the leading of Providence.... nothing in [the Order and Organization] is intended to bind the future” (Order and Organization p.2). I believe this seminal statement built into the fundamental description of what it means to be ‘General Church’ rightly places a responsibility on us to seek to discern the leading of Providence with a view toward change. Unfortunately, it is a well known organizational principle that as bodies age, they become more resistant to change.

It is important to remember that the root forces threatening to kill churches are much bigger than all of us as these forces stream from the hatred held by hoards of evil spirits residing in hell. We read that *“unless we seek help from God Almighty we have no more power of our own against evil and falsity than a fish has against the ocean, or a*

*gnat against a whale, or a piece of dust against a mountain that is falling on it. On our own, the power we have against evil is much smaller than the power a locust has against an elephant or a fly against a camel. Furthermore, our power against evil and falsity is even weaker because we are born into evil. Evil cannot act against itself” (TC 68). These forces are what ultimately cause the disease, decay and death of every church. The teachings are painfully clear:*

*We are taught that two evil lusts which ruin everything in a church: “... Sodom and Egypt. This symbolizes the two hellish loves, namely, a love of ruling springing from a love of self, and a love of holding sway from a conceit in one's own intelligence, loves which are present in the church where there is not one God and where the Lord is not worshiped, and where people do not live in accordance with the Ten Commandments. Sodom symbolizes, in the spiritual sense, a love of ruling springing from a love of self, as we shall presently see; and Egypt symbolizes, in the spiritual sense, a love of holding sway from a conceit in one's own intelligence, as we shall also presently see. So, because these two loves are symbolized, therefore the city is called, spiritually speaking, Sodom and Egypt. A life like that is possible only from Him who is life.... [2] A love of ruling springing from a love of self, and a love of holding sway from a conceit in one's own intelligence, are the principal loves of all the loves in hell, and so are the origin of all the evils and thus of all the falsities in the church. This is something unknown at the present day. The delights of these loves, which surpass the delights of all the heart's pleasures, cause it to be unknown, even though they are, spiritually, Sodom and Egypt” (AR 502).(compare with TCR 619 speaking of spheres that flow from ‘the dragon’ infecting the Christian world)*

*Indulging in these lusts entice churches to gradually turn away from that is truly important in the Lord's eyes. We read that “every church, in process of time, decreases, by receding from the good of love and the truths of faith, until there is nothing of them left; and this takes place by the successive increase of evil and falsity; and when there is no longer any good of love and faith, then there is nothing but evil and falsity; and when this is the case, there is an end of the church. In this end, a person knows no other than that evil is good and falsity truth, for he loves them from the delight he feels in them, and therefore confirms them.” (AR 658)*

*Once a church turns from focusing on the life of charity, it begins to try to prop itself up by promoting some form of faith alone. Of course this is its end as is described here: “Faith without charity is not possible. That faith without charity is not religion. That faith without charity falsifies the Word. That faith without charity wholly blinds any understanding of truth. That the church comes to an end when there is no faith teaching charity. That every church degenerates into Babylon\* and into faith alone.” (LJ Post 270)*

*“The end of the church is when there is no faith because there is no charity” (Last Judgment 33)*

The Heavenly Doctrines note one characteristic of a dead church that seems worth noting because it is not often talked about. It seems that the members make up 'traditions' that have no spiritual value: *"People who probe into spiritual and celestial things by means of reasonings and who thereby produce a form of worship for themselves are said to possess forms of ritual that exist merely as items of knowledge. Because the forms of ritual belonging to such worship originate in reasonings and in factual knowledge they are called fact-constituted forms of ritual, which have nothing spiritual or celestial within them because they originate in self"*(AC 1195).

Perhaps this is a cautionary reminder to those in the New Church to be careful about what practices and traditions we define as being essential to our organization. I believe that many lay people do not respond well to churches that impose practices that are not well substantiated in doctrine.

The book "Last Judgment Posthumous" speaks of two ruling systems of Christianity that have been rejected at the Last Judgment. The one is a system derived from 'faith alone' and is with the Reformed Church; the second is a system developed with the Catholic church placing the Lord's authority in the clergy. We read: *"The Apocalypse treats of the two religious systems in the Christian world, that with the Reformed and that with the Papists, for the whole of Christianity is from these two, since they are the ruling systems. The religious system with the Reformed is a system of faith alone, which has devastated the church; and that with the Papists deals with the Lord's vicarious authority over the church, thus over the souls of men, and also over heaven, that resides with the popes and the primates and subordinate officials of the church. It is these two ruling systems of religion which [have been rejected] by the Last Judgment..."* (LJ Post 183) What would the Church look like if we gradually replaced these systems? Do we yet know what an alternative, more 'new church' system of government really would look like in its place? Do we have a clear idea of what the church and its practices might look like that is more closely aligned with the government of heaven? I can only imagine that to the degree that we allow our systems to grow to more clearly mirror the organization of heaven, that we will offer a fuller, more robust experience to the members of this church that more fully connects them with the Lord.

### **The Establishment of the New Church IS Happening Now but Requires Patience!**

The Heavenly Doctrines state clearly that the New Church is here to stay: *"Daniel prophesied that this church is going to supersede the churches that have existed since the world began, that it is going to last for ages of ages, and that it is going to be the crown of all the churches that have existed until now"* (TCR 788). I see the dual challenge imbedded in this passage that we need to work toward securing the future of the Lord's church (permanence) AND doing so in a way that allows the Lord to make it truly the crown of all the churches (quality). While the General Church (again the human made organization) may or may not succeed in this - working toward both permanence AND quality are the dual challenges that the Lord has tasked us with.

It is helpful to know that we do have time. We read that *"It is of the Lord's Divine providence that **the church be at first among few and that it gradually grow to be among more, because the falsities of the previous church must first be removed.** For truths cannot be accepted before then, inasmuch as truths accepted and implanted*

*before falsities have been removed do not remain, and they are also expelled by followers of the dragon.” (AR 547).*

One natural assumption based on this statement is that we should pay attention to removing the falsities that are tied in with our systems of organizational management within the church. We improve the church by examining our assumptions to see what is false in the light of truth and abandoning those falsities. In so doing, I think it fair to say that we are improving the church’s ability to be effective.

While falsity may be the biggest factor within our control that inhibits the growth of the New Church there are other factors as well. People won't respond unless they are interiorly disposed to seeing the truth. People won't join if they are confirmed in 'faith alone' types of theology. In addition there is the spiritual reason that the church will grow in proportion with the growth of the New Heaven.

*“There are several reasons why this New Church that is called the Holy Jerusalem will first begin with a few, afterwards to be with more, and finally to reach fullness. First, its doctrine, which is the doctrine of love to the Lord and charity towards the neighbor, cannot be acknowledged and thus received except by those who are interiorly affected by truths, and those only can be interiorly affected by truths who have the ability to see them, and those only see truths who have cultivated their intellectual faculty, and have not destroyed it in themselves by the loves of self and of the world. A second reason is that the doctrine of that church cannot be acknowledged and thence received but by those who have not confirmed themselves by doctrine and at the same time by life in faith alone; confirmation by doctrine alone does not prevent reception, but confirmation by life also does prevent, for such do not know what love to the Lord is, nor what charity towards the neighbor is, nor are they willing to know.[3] A third reason is that the New Church on the earth grows according to its increase in the world of spirits, for spirits from that world are with men, and they are from such as while they lived on earth were in the faith of their church, and none of these receive the doctrine but those who have been in the spiritual affection of truth; these only are conjoined to heaven where that doctrine is, and they conjoin heaven to man. The number of these in the spiritual world now increases daily, therefore according to their increase does that church that is called the New Jerusalem increase on earth. These also were the reasons why the Christian Church, after the Lord had left the world, increased so slowly in Europe, and did not attain to its fullness until an age had elapsed” (AE 732).*

Taken together, I see these passages calling for greater flexibility in externals without sacrificing a strong commitment to the internals taught by the Word. This approach preserves what is really at the heart of the General Church while allowing it to serve fully in a broad variety of human states of mind. This flexibility means cultivating a willingness to allow different groups and congregations to experiment with different external forms that might better foster an environment of New Church growth responding to the specific culture and environment of the location, and yet remains clear that the General Church represents a disciplined approach to the Three Fold Word. If the General Church is not going to fade from existence, we need to allow these experiments

to occur and learn from them while continuing to teach and advocate the ideals that are conveyed in the Heavenly Doctrines.

### **Statistics.**

Overall, there are a number of studies that show that the Christian Church in the United States has experienced a gradual decline since before the beginning of the new millennium. One current indicator of this decline is that every year over 4000 churches close their doors and go out of business. This can be compared with the starting up of only 1000 new congregations (a net loss of 3000+) ([churchleadership.org/](http://churchleadership.org/) US census data). Also recent surveys suggest that currently every year about 2.7 million members stop attending church ([churchleadership.org/](http://churchleadership.org/) US census data). While that is a lot of people, the total United States population who regularly attend church has only declined by 4% between the years of 2007 and 2014.

We are told that the fastest growing religious segment of the population in the United States is the people who are unwilling to admit any affiliation with any religious organization (called 'the nones' in the media because when asked what their religious affiliation is, they reply 'none'). This category now represents almost 23% of the population. Also troubling, is the fact that a huge number of people, almost 65% of the population of the United States, say that religion has 'little or no relevance in their lives.

These statistics were measured in the United States, but they certainly reflect a growing trend in all the countries where the General Church operates. That is not so surprising when reflecting on passages in True Christianity, or Apocalypse Revealed, which speak of the decline and downfall of traditional Christianity.

There are more statistics that are worth noticing. While the culture in the United States is becoming less religious, and fewer (particularly Millennials) are attending church, the numbers of people who say they are religious, believe in God and practice their faith remain essentially the same. Of that group (people affiliated with religious organizations), the number of people who say they believe in God remains the same; the percentage of people who pray daily is essentially the same; and the percentage of people who say they regularly attend church remains essentially the same at 62% (down only 1% from 7 years earlier).

### **General Church Worship Attendance/Membership Statistics**

These statistics can provide a backdrop for us to look at the rough attendance figures reported by our congregations to the General Church central office. While the data is still very spotty, the returns from annual report forms submitted to the Secretary of the General Church suggest that worship attendance in our organization has declined in the US by roughly 15% between 2010 and 2017 (measuring 7 congregations that provided complete data sets and had resident pastors). Attendance in General Church congregations outside of North America has also declined in somewhat similar fashion.

To contextualize these numbers, we need to remember that it is important for a church to have some measure of new people replacing the old, if, as an organization, it is going to avoid problems of decline in the future. Since the members of a congregation age every year, the congregation needs to essentially find replacements for existing members who are aging and become too old to support the life of the congregation

through volunteer help, through contributions and other activity. According to some church statisticians (and I am no math whiz), the minimum percentage of new members to prevent decline in a church organization is 5% (called a 'refreshment rate'). In other words, if a congregation has a refreshment rate of about 5% new people joining the congregation per year, the congregation can maintain its current size for many years. Any growth of less than 5% is a trend that if consistent will result in gradual decline in the size and strength of the congregation as the members gradually pass away.

This concept of refreshment rate raises concerns since the General Church membership rolls have grown at a very steady rate of less than 1% per year for many years now. Unfortunately, by applying the 5% principle spoken of above, this trend indicates overall, long term organizational aging and decline unless something changes.

So to summarize, a weakening worship attendance and a very flat membership growth rate are two statistics that currently indicate concern for the long term health of the General Church. Both are indicators of a weakening organization.

### **"The Dones"**

Many of the people who say they are done with the General Church organization still characterize themselves as 'New Church'. Many will still say they are members of the General Church, though they almost never attend. Most won't bother resigning or otherwise making a public statement that they no longer affiliate with the organization. And while they are unconnected, these are people who also exhibit strong characteristics of someone who is generally regarded as a faithful member. They read the Word (both Sacred Scripture and Heavenly Doctrines), they pray, they shun evils as sins and try their best to live a good life. They talk about religion, God and Providence with their family members and friends. They also are active in their communities and in other charitable organizations. If they have wealth, they give generously to non profits outside of the church. To be clear, I am not talking about people who leave because of a job change or other circumstances outside of their control. These are people who intentionally leave for reasons other than religion. In short, if asked, they generally say they left because they came to view the church organization as an impediment or even a threat to their spiritual lives (and sometimes both). In short they say they are 'done' with our current version of organized religion.

I feel I need to take a moment and describe some of the feedback that these people give me about the General Church. This feedback is very difficult to hear and I am very hesitant to communicate it. I ask for your forgiveness in advance because of the difficulty of their message. Some of it may not apply to your situation. Some of it may feel unfair. Whether just or not, I feel it is worth communicating because it characterizes what many voices are currently saying. I recognize that there are many other voices as well, but I think the voices such as the following tend to be written off and unheard.

One woman put it this way: I am tired of forcing my children to go to a service where the minister is speaking over their heads, addressing only the parents. A man in his 50's who grew up in the church spoke of the church calling him and asking him for money, when no-one asks or cares about his thoughts on how to effectively reach young adult children. Another man, in his 60's who also grew up in the church told me that he

has given up on the church because the clergy (in his opinion) doesn't care about the views of lay people and insists on ignoring their wishes and opinions. A senior citizen referred to the clergy as a closed union being only interested in taking care of their own. A couple told me that they were leaving the church because they simply got tired of being harangued about money every Sunday after the sermon by the treasurer. A young woman in her 20's said that the church does not seem interested in dialoging about issues that she faces with her generation. Many women and men of all ages have commented that they struggle with being a part of an organization that treats women as inferior to men.

If the General Church were an automobile, from an organizational perspective, I would say that it is clearly experiencing engine problems. Its engine problems negatively affect its power, making it rattle and give the exhaust a funny smell. In fact the problems have been persistent enough it to cause some to leave in frustration because the ride was not what they were looking for, and they were unable to fix it. It is hard for us to diagnose, as many of us 'inherited the automobile' long after the engine problems developed, making it much more difficult for us to notice that the engine is out of tune, that it can be fixed, or how to do it. But that does not mean we should abandon the vehicle! We just need to get on with the process of proper diagnosis and remedy.

There are cultural forces in play making it easier for people to be upset. Today's generation, for example, is more sensitive, less trusting and more easily disgruntled by organizational flaws than generations before. In addition, there is a history of harsh or abusive treatment that is associated with past pastors or painful memories of practices that are no longer a part of the church today. Hardly surprising, this is a trend that is not unique to the General Church and is mirrored in many Christian denominations all over the world today. The fact that it is a dynamic in other religious organizations makes the General Church even more vulnerable to criticism.

And as other organizations have struggled with the same issues, they have also taken corrective action which can provide us with information that can help. One particularly helpful book addressing the problem with the 'Dones' is titled: "Church Refugees: Sociologists reveal why people are DONE with their church but not their faith" by Josh Packard, PHD and Ashley Hope.

In this book, Packard and Hope categorize the various reasons "the Dones" are currently leaving church into four basic groupings. I find the book helpful because it offers simple characterizations that help explain the upset people have been reporting to me in the General Church for the last ten years. "The Dones" are: 1: people who initially turned to the church looking for **community** and left when instead they experienced others judging them. 2: They are people who wanted to **participate** and make a **difference** in their congregation and instead got tangled and frustrated in bureaucracy. 3: "The Dones" leave when they desire to enter into **conversation** about faith and their desire to interact is met instead with dogmatic explanations 4: "The Dones" are people who wanted to **engage in serving** the greater community and instead experienced the organization's sense of moral superiority.

According to Packard these four issues summarize why many of the brightest and best are choosing to leave active involvement in their faith organizations and

develop other ways of articulating their spiritual life. While the book is looking at some twenty United States denominations, I found it that it also accurately describes why many people are leaving the General Church.

Unfortunately when these people leave, they, almost without exception, never return. And while this is a discouraging thought, there is a lot that can be done, that, without sacrificing doctrine, will not only create an environment where these people can thrive, but that can improve the health of the Church. So while the statistics suggest that we need to carefully look at changing the way we operate as a church, those changes can improve the General Church and actually make it more reflective of the Church the Lord called us to be!

**Problem #1: People wanted community and left after experiencing others judging them and isolating them.**

The passage in Married Love that says “friendship is the face of love” (ML 214) is a key teaching illustrating the most effective way to introduce and engage people in the church. In short, people generally come to church looking for relationship. If we are able to successfully offer a friendship that mirrors the type of love promoted by the teachings of the New Church, then people will likely stay, get involved and become more deeply interested in the doctrine and its life. It is important to note that very few people actually come primarily inspired by a desire to learn doctrine (though it does occasionally happen). Doctrinal interest is secondary and develops in time. Doctrine is certainly important as it is the way forward, but relationship is actually a more accurate goal of the church.

I see this reflected in the teachings about salvation. We are taught that the chief love of the priesthood (and the church) is the salvation of souls (HD 317, AC 10796, D Life 39, Charity 160 et alia). But we might consider what the word ‘salvation’ actually means from a functional perspective. I would say that ‘the state of salvation’ is a state of healthy relationship with the Lord, angels, and other human beings (see TCR 726). The very word Religion seems to suggest the same meaning with its root to ‘re-connect’. Religion is about connecting, or reconnecting with the Lord and the Neighbor. In contrast, while heavenly life is community itself, it seems that the very nature of hell itself is isolation and loneliness derived from the life immersed in the interests of proprium.

It is certainly true what one cannot think of true spiritual community without following the truth and using it to practice repentance and regeneration, but the purpose of truth is to help a person become skilled in relationships. A church, being a place that values truth, should be clear that it values it for the purpose of promoting healthy heavenly relationships.

Simply articulating this helps people understand the value of truth, wisdom and judgment - and helps mitigate fears that the church uses judgment in ways that ostracize and put down others.

It has been said by a variety of religious bloggers that religion is going through a great transition from an organization largely existing for the purpose of priests transferring doctrinal knowledge to lay people - transitioning into an organization that

exists for the purpose of facilitating spiritually healthy relationships and exploring the Word together to better achieve that end. I believe this transition is happening in the General Church as well. And to the degree that it successfully makes that transition it will mitigate loss of membership due to people feeling judged when they come hoping to get involved in relationships.

Certainly the Word warns us against taking this too far with teachings such as Divine Providence #340 warning us of the 'fiery flying serpent' (Isa. 14:29; 30:6) as being the notion of "instantaneous salvation out of mercy apart from means". This 'serpent' which might be the desire to create a community without any regard to founding principles of truth, is destructive of the church. Our theology is foundational, establishing the context that supports community. But community is still the goal.

### **Judgment**

I wonder if something is broken about how priestly judgment is experienced in our church. It is certainly true that many people simply seem poised to negatively react to any whiff of judgment no matter how minor. Perhaps this is partly due to a sense of confusion in our culture, blending what we would value as 'righteous judgment' with external prejudice. Some of it surely is due to a hereditary reluctance to acknowledge external theological truth as having bearing to one's personal life. In any case the sum result has been that our world today has a very low tolerance for poor or reactive judgment, or judgment over seemingly meaningless external details of life.

One obvious way to reduce upset caused by judgment in the church is to cut down on mistakes! Priests who incorrectly judge without fully knowing the conditions or circumstances of a situation damage the credibility of the entire priesthood and the church. Priests who judge overly harshly even in events where the facts are straight also can be embroiled in negative repercussions. In our world today, people don't give a priest the benefit of the doubt if issues where he is exercising judgment are not crystal clear. The days when a priest would be trusted because by right or ordination or position are gone. Priests face an uphill battle of distrust and suspicion because of past abuses associated with the position. This professional trust began to evaporate with the television evangelist scandals of the eighties. The Catholic sexual abuse scandals in the last 20 years also added to a culture of overall suspicion of any one in church holding a position of authority. This naturally creates a very volatile, difficult environment for exercising judgment in the capacity of the priesthood. This does not mean that we are to avoid judgment all together, it just suggests that we need to be exceedingly careful. The Writings clearly teach that human beings are to learn to judge and differentiate between good and evil, helpful and harmful behaviors (AC 2258; SE 4425). But we live in a world where the tolerance of error in a priest's judgment is very small - and those errors have huge negative consequences.

There are people who exemplify good judgment in our church. I think of a lay friend whom I will call 'Bob'. He comes at it from the perspective of a recovering drug addict who realizes that his drug abuse put him very close to death. After years of hard work at recovery, his perspective is that everyone is broken and hurting at some level - like himself. Observing him over the years, I have been repeatedly amazed at his combination of deep caring for others and disarming honesty about life's problems. He

just has a disarming, yet kind way of interacting with people about deep issues in open and honest dialogue. On numerous occasions, I have seen him approach a person saying, "What's up? It looks like you are struggling with something?" Or, "Hey, how's it going? I heard you were having a hard time... Want to talk about it?" Or, "Looks like you need a cup of coffee!" Time and time again the person he is addressing opens right up. I asked him about this and he said that he believes his role in life is to help people when they struggle and to be there for them - he feels he is struggling as well and people need to talk about their struggles in order to heal. I have seen him at the local coffee shop many times supporting people who, for one reason or another, are in crisis. I wonder how many lives he has saved through his simple intervention techniques. While he would deny that he is judging others, I would disagree and say that he is constantly judging, but his judgment is widely recognized as offering help and perspective. Could General Church priests be more widely known for that kind of judgment?

A second matter relating to judgment is to recognize that there is a polarity between the ideals of the church and the broken lives of the members (particularly those new to the church). This polarity calls for gentleness and tolerance while still encouraging New Church ideals - a difficult balance to be sure. The Lord repeatedly urged forgiveness and tolerance (though He clearly also advocated amendment of ways). He said that: "those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." (John 9:12). The statement recognizes that people whom the Lord wishes to draw into the church are broken. People who are new to the New Church commonly bring with them behaviors and beliefs that are not in line with New Church theology. They should be welcomed! They also come with thoughts and opinions that a priest, who has many years of immersion in the Doctrines, might disagree with. How can we as priests better cultivate an environment that welcomes these people and values them as individuals? How do we allow appropriate space for individuals to grow? How do we encourage people new to the Church to investigate their faith, evaluate their own ideas in the light of the Word and dialogue safely with others about their opinions even if they are in conflict with 'doctrinal norms' of the church?

It has been said that the church needs to aspire to be the safest place on earth for a person to ask questions, dialogue and express ideas about how to conduct life. It needs to be a place where people can talk about anything that is on their heart without fear of retribution, a place where they can explore alternative ideas without feeling judged or being shamed on account of their opinions. Is it possible for the General Church to widen its acceptance of variety of dialogue, welcoming broken people to explore faith relating it to modern life in an affirmative manner?

The church could be helped in this effort by turning to the family model as an organizational principle spoken of in the Heavenly Doctrines, principally used in the Ancient and Most Ancient churches. I believe this model is described because family groups are the best construct for groups of people dealing with the challenges that come up as one strives to live a religious life.

Of course pastors are not 'fathers' of the lay members of their congregation (We are specifically told this in the Writings (DP 330)). That said, pastors are still tasked with preaching and speaking the truth as they understand it being advocated in the Word. But people are encouraged to go to the Word themselves to develop their own

understanding of its message in a mutually caring environment, but also an environment where there is lively dialogue about differing opinions. The pastor has a special role to emphasize personal inquiry and encourage dialogue. Like my friend 'Bob' in the above example, the pastor can gently ask questions that help open up honest conversation about truth-based healing and growth. In a family environment, corporate uniformity in understanding the particulars of faith mean less than individual shared wisdom each helps the other in his or her relationship with the Lord through His Word.

**Problem #2: People left the church who looked for conversation about faith but instead were given dogma.**

A key characteristic of the New Church is its encouragement of individual intellectual freedom to search the Word looking for the Lord's guidance for moving through the problems encountered in the daily life of this world. The inscription above the door in the 'Nunc Licet' Temple in True Christianity says: "Now it is permitted to enter with the intellect into the mysteries of faith" (TC 508). Individual human intellectual freedom is an ideal espoused by the New Church and is seen as a key component in a person's enlightenment and wisdom. It is not only one of the most exciting aspects of the church but it is also a spiritual method of cultivating the growth of intelligence in a person. We are taught, for example, that the British are "in a deeper light" because of the freedoms of speech and the press in that country (TC 807). This teaching encourages freedom of discourse about different ideas in the arena of the church because that dialogue helps people become smarter.

In contrast, the book, Doctrine of Faith points out that a faith that is reliant on the authority of others (i.e. the priesthood) is not a genuine faith but is only natural and thereby flawed (Doct. Faith 1; see also AE 232). In fact, we are taught that this "faith is not faith so long as the natural mind only is opened" (AE 790[4]). The passages seem to suggest that the New Church will become more satisfying by placing greater emphasis on supporting individuals developing their own view of faith. In that environment priests certainly could continue to teach and lead by truths they find in the Word and lead by them to the good of life. But they recognize that they need to do so in a way that empowers individuals to think for themselves about how the Word leads toward the specific application in their own unique life. These individual insights can then be shared throughout the church in order to inspire others in similar situations.

The adage, "Give a person a fish and you feed him for the day, teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime" seems to apply here. Such an approach would have to recognize that there is more variety of answers and perhaps rigorous debate than in the past. It seems me that we have struggled with feeling comfortable with a variety of doctrinal opinion and such variety has long been a source of tension and struggle in the General Church. I have heard it said that it is important to maintain a high degree of uniformity between congregations to enable pastors to easily transfer from one congregation to another. I wonder how true this actually is. If one congregation struggles because it is forced to comply with another pastor's views who lives in another geographic culture, that congregation in today's world is going to suffer, making it more difficult for the church to be effective in that situation.

We know from teachings in the Heavenly Doctrines that as long as charity is the goal, variety is a positive value in the New Church (see HH 56 and HD 26 as examples). Unfortunately, today, more people are provoked to leave the church when they perceive its leadership displaying a lack of tolerance of variety of doctrine. Is it possible for pastors to allow for greater variety in dialogue within a congregation while still preaching a unifying message from the doctrines on Sunday? It seems possible that greater variety actually allows for a stronger, healthier individual growth and better personal wisdom than what comes from relying on a single messenger. It is important to note that tolerance is neither agreement nor endorsement - it is simply developing the ability to avoid reacting to varying opinions expressed in the church. A pastor can have clarity about the Heavenly Doctrines, teach his perspective and can still allow for variety of viewpoints to exist among the participants of the church. That tension between viewpoints can be embraced and seen as a positive example of how the church values intellectual freedom among its membership.

Lay-led small groups are one way to cultivate the ability of a church to embrace rich doctrinal exploration and wider dialogue. Small groups that are led by different people greatly increase the opportunities for adding variety of doctrinal expression with participants. Allowing lay people to lead those discussions broadens the emphasis on individuals exploring doctrinal application on their own. It also creates opportunity for a wider variety of people to call the church their spiritual home. A pastor can still provide a strong, positive unifying voice through preaching in worship while offering curriculum and guidance to properly equip the various group leaders. The groups themselves allow for a richness that no one person could possibly foster himself. The outcome allows for much more variety and allows a richer, more varied experience within the context of one congregation than what would otherwise be possible. Again the family model comes to mind where a variety of family type groups thrive in the community as a whole.

**Problem #3: The church has lost people who wanted to contribute to the life of the church and instead got hung up in bureaucracy.**

One could ask what it truly means to be a member of a church. Members are invited to attend church but how much can they influence the direction of the church? To what degree are they able to participate? Are they invited to just participate in programs? Are they able to help build the programs? Do they have a voice in what happens in worship? Are they able to influence a church's doctrinal understanding? How about matters of application of doctrine to life? I think it fairly obvious that there are a lot of different factors influencing how active and involved lay people can be in a congregation. Some of those factors are due to the pastor, others due to committees and individuals who control different aspects of a church.

To me, the church at every level should be seeking ways to broaden members' influence in the life of the church. Robust involvement and participation can be viewed as an essential aspect of faith development in the individual. I think of passages like Arcana Caelestia 1083 which point out the importance of charity as being an underlying part of everything of a church. If that is true, it makes sense that the church organization should, as fully as possible, invite people to participate in and influence the life of charity that exists within the church. One example is inviting participation on the sermon writing team, as used in congregations like Sunrise Chapel or NewChurchLive, where lay

people meet with the pastor every week to dialogue over different aspects of upcoming sermons. It might take form in using lay contributors testimony during sermons, in church publications, or members on strategic planning teams.

**Problem #4: People left who hoped for opportunities for service in the community but instead experienced moral superiority.**

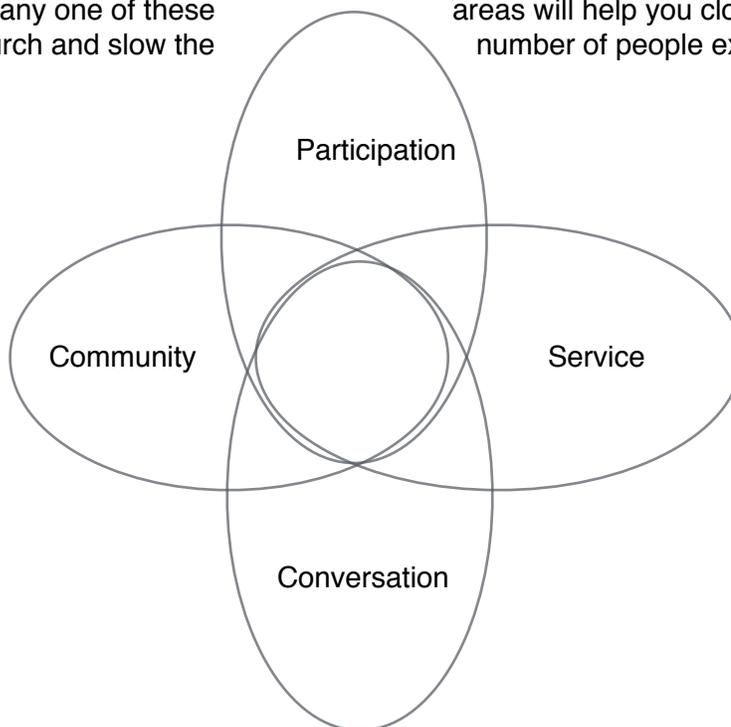
This disappointment has resulted from a weakness that seems built into the General Church from its inception. The church was founded on isolationist principles leading members to avoid mixing with people of other faiths. We see it articulated in the Principles of the Academy (see NCL 1899 p.118f on the principles of the Academy). The document's second principle states that "the old or former Christian Church is consummated and dead, with no hope of a resurrection; except with those who separate themselves from it and come to the LORD in His New Church. The New Church is to be distinct from the Old, in its faith and practice, in its form and organization, in its religious and social life." The twelfth principle states that "the true field of Evangelization is with the children of New Church parents". In addition historically we have spoken of teachings about 'benefactions of charity' as if they were unnecessary in the life of a good New Church person, which is of course untrue. As we know these external acts, while they do not save, lead a person inward introducing them to deeper states of true charity (see TCR 425, 426, 429).

The New Church is an active, life oriented organization. Arcana Caelestia teaches that "all things [in the Word] have reference to life (AC 9383). We are also taught that "all religion is of life, and the life of religion is to do what is good" (Doctrine of Life 1). The Doctrine of Charity teaches "where there is no good of life, religion does not exist" (Charity 212). I wonder if we communicate this as an organization strongly enough. Take for example the 20 websites of General Church congregations that have resident pastors (there are more congregations with resident pastors who do not maintain a web presence and were omitted from this survey). Of these 20 websites only 3 openly offer invitations for people to get involved in service activities that reach out and target the needs of those outside themselves. While most offer volunteer opportunities to serve the congregation by cleaning the church, by performing maintenance, or teaching Sunday school, or serving as an usher or chancel attendant, these activities are directed toward maintaining its own rather than others. Such activities, while useful, are not widely considered as 'service opportunities' in the way our culture defines it. When viewed collectively, seventeen inward focused congregations out of twenty creates a strong impression that the General Church is not overly concerned with serving others outside of itself. We know that in reality there are tremendous examples of individual generosity throughout the General Church, both in terms of individuals who privately help others outside of themselves and collective groups of General Church members who band together for the sake of serving others. But our churches need to become better known in their local communities for their efforts to make a difference. This has been a key component of NewChurchLive from its beginning. Its service opportunities are one reason many people choose to attend the church and get involved. The Bryn Athyn Congregation has a great story in its gradual transition from a large congregation with few opportunities for service outside of its church and school, to a congregation that is becoming well known in the greater community for its caring and service in many

different ways. In the last four years, Bryn Athyn has done this by taking small, steady decisive steps that have gradually re-oriented the community toward service. These congregations and others can serve as models for how to transition into a community that is known for its value of service.

#### **Four Simple Problems Causing People to Leave Through the Back Door**

I have sat with and listened to many people of all ages describe one of the four above issues as reasons they left the General Church in the last ten years. Maybe some of these tensions are not present in your congregation. Maybe your congregation has several, but they are not issues that you feel you can immediately change. That is fine. However, I would suggest that starting to offer leadership to your congregation in any one of these areas will help you close the back door to your church and slow the number of people exiting.



Of course no congregation is going to have perfect interactive dynamics - and yours is no exception. But resolving these issues can have dramatic effects on retaining the members of the congregation. The more your congregation communicates its value of community, of dialogue about faith, of meaningful participation, and of active impactful service in the community, the more your church's back door will close!

## Humility

If I were to take a step back, I would say that each of these issues above is inter-related through the deeper issue of humility. Consider the teaching that “all worship must contain humility, and if separated from it no adoration and so no worship at all is present”(AC 2327 [2]). We know that humility at its most basic level is a willingness to follow the Lord’s leading. As such, humility is a core attribute of any effective efforts we make to be a church. Is the General Church known by others for being humble? Do we do enough as a clergy to promote and model humility as a core value in our church? What would look different if we were better at this?

Consider the teaching in the Heavenly Doctrines saying, *“Piety consists in thinking and speaking piously; in praying assiduously, and in behaving then with humility; in attending churches, and in devoutly listening to the preaching there; in partaking frequently during the year of the Holy Supper; and in observing in like manner the other acts of Divine worship, according to the ordinances of the Church. But the life of charity consists in willing and doing good to the neighbor; and in acting from a principle of what is just and fair, and good and true, in every work and in every office; in a word, the life of charity consists in the practice of uses. Divine worship consists primarily in the life of charity, and secondarily in piety. Wherefore, he who separates the one from the other, that is, he who leads a life of piety, and not at the same time a life of charity, does not worship God. It is true, he thinks of God, yet he does not think from God, but from himself; for he constantly thinks of himself, and not at all of the neighbor; and if he does think of the neighbor, he has no respect for him, unless he is of alike quality. He also thinks of heaven as a reward; and for this reason there is in his mind the idea of merit, and also the love of self, as well as a contempt or disregard for uses, and thus of the neighbor; at the same time also there is present with him a faith in his own guiltlessness. From this it may appear, that a life of piety separated from a life of charity, is not the spiritual life which ought to be in Divine worship. (See Matt. vi. 7, 8.)”* (NJHD 124)

I quote this at length because it seems to suggest that churches are most alive in the place where humility, piety and true charity exist together. It seems something of a ‘sweet-spot’ that seems designed by the Lord. Where these attributes are known to exist together, it creates space for open dialogue, respect for others, opinions and inquiry, desire to have many participating and working together in creating a church, and a desire to selflessly reach out to engage in community.

I am reminded that Jim Collins, the Harvard Business researcher who wrote the book “Good to Great” studied ‘Fortune 500’ companies that transitioned from being good companies to companies that were truly excellent through out-performing their peers by a wide margin. I was interested that he notes that the two key leadership components common with all the CEO’s of these companies that made the transition were humility and diehard commitment to principles. These are not the bombastic leaders we often read about in the media who draw attention to themselves and their own accomplishments. These are people who work hard, who don’t seek recognition, who are convinced that there are lots of others who could probably do their job better than they could, who value advice, look for help, and seek an outside perspective at every

opportunity. (see Harvard Business Review, Best of HBR 2001, "Level 5 Leadership" by Jim Collins).

While these corporate executives clearly are walking in a different world from us, it seems likely their example is good corroborating evidence suggesting the value that humility plays in quality pastoral leadership.

### **The Warning from Mars.**

There is a story in the book, Earths in the Universe, that is so dark it keeps me awake at night. The story, in the form of a memorable relation, refers to states of former inhabitants of Mars. I have to wonder if the point of this story is so difficult for us humans to hear that the Lord chose to soften the blow by directing it toward inhabitants of another planet. And yet, it is difficult to ignore its implications for the New Church on this planet - and specifically us.

Here is the story in its entirety: *"I saw a most beautiful flame of varying color, purple, and also bright red, and the colors with a beautiful ruddy glow from the flame, I also saw a certain hand, to which this flame adhered, at first on the back, afterward in the palm, and thence it played round the hand on all sides. This lasted for some little time. Then the hand with its flaming light was removed to a distance, and where it rested there was a bright light. In that brightness the hand receded, and then the flame was changed into a bird, which at first was of the same colors as the flame, and the colors glittering in like manner; but gradually the colors were changed, and with the colors the vigor of life in the bird. It flew round about and at first around my head, then forward into a certain narrow chamber, which appeared like a shrine; and as it flew farther forward, so its life receded, till at length it became as of stone, at first of a pearl color, afterward dark; but though without life, it was still flying. When the bird was flying around my head and was still in the vigor of life, a spirit was seen rising from below through the region of the loins to the region of the breast, who wished to take the bird away. But because it was so beautiful, the spirits around me prevented him; for their eyes were all fastened on it. The spirit however who rose up from below, endeavored strongly to persuade them that the Lord was with him, and thus that he did this from the Lord. And then, though most of them did not believe this, they no longer prevented him from taking away the bird. But as heaven flowed in at that moment, he could not hold it, and presently let it go free out of his hand. When this was done, the spirits around me who had intently watched the bird and its successive changes, spoke with one another about it, and this for a considerable time. They perceived that such a sight could not but signify something celestial. They knew that the flame signified celestial love and its affections; that the hand to which the flame adhered, signified life and its power; the changes of colors, varieties of life as to wisdom and intelligence; and the bird also the same, but with the difference that the flame signified celestial love and the things of that love, and the bird signified spiritual love and the things of that love (celestial love is love to the Lord, and spiritual love charity toward the neighbor), and that the changes of the colors and at the same time of the life in the bird, until it became as of stone, signified successive changes of spiritual life as to intelligence. They knew also that spirits who ascend from below through the region of the loins to the region of the breast, are in a strong persuasion that*

*they are in the Lord, and hence believe that all things they do, even though evil, they do by the Lord's will. But yet they could not know from this who were meant by this appearance. At length they were instructed from heaven that the inhabitants of Mars were meant, that their celestial love, in which very many still are, was signified by the flame which adhered to the hand, and that the bird in the beginning, when in the beauty of its colors and the vigor of its life, signified their spiritual love; but that the bird's becoming as of stone without life, and at length of a dark color, signified such of the inhabitants as have removed themselves from the good of love and are in evil, and yet still believe that they are in the Lord. The same was signified by the spirit who rose up and wished to take away the bird. (EU 72, AC 7620-7622).*

Clearly this story illustrates the decline of a church caused by clergy, who, while persuaded that they were being led by the Lord, were in reality manipulating their organization in an effort to promote their personal, selfish ends. Sadly, the incredibly beautiful truths that their church had once used in the most loving and tender ways, successively became more lifeless, colorless and stone-like.

What threat to our church organization is captured by this imagery? What does it say about the life of our congregations? How about our efforts to establish the church and to grow? And what are we willing to do differently?

How can our organization grow to function better to allow the innate radiant beauty from truths the Lord has given us through the Word to shine forth as they are wisely applied to life?

And what are you willing to do about it?