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CHAPTER

Schrödinger's Church



Do you believe in a dying Church? Or do you believe in a living, vibrant Church? I caution you to be careful how you answer; everything may depend on it. In most every field of study, the modern conundrum of how one sees the world is a debate that is alive and well.

Humans can look at the same thing and describe its behavior differently. For the scientific community this paradox is highlighted because, at the microscopic level, matter behaves differently from matter at the macroscopic level, or so it seems. What scientists see through a microscope and what they can see with the human eye tells them different things about how the universe works. This is the theory of *superposition*, also called the *observer's paradox*: the observation or measurement itself affects the outcome, and that outcome does not exist unless the measurement is made. This all can really make your brain hurt.

The dispute among scientists about how one sees the world began a long time ago. It began when Isaac Newton and his fellow physicist Christiaan Huygens proposed competing theories of light: light was thought either to consist of waves (Huygens) or of particles (Newton). The debate continued for hundreds of years. Albert Einstein and his

contemporary Erwin Schrödinger argued about it. Schrödinger eventually tweaked Einstein's theory in his own work, moving the discussion forward.

Schrödinger was a physicist who was interested in offering a thought experiment that would illustrate the theory of superposition.¹ He wanted to show that the new quantum view of probabilities was stronger than his predecessor's views of the world as deterministic. He devised what today is a famous illustration of this principle. Schrödinger's theoretical experiment works this way: We place a living cat (forever to be known as Schrödinger's cat) into a steel chamber, along with a device containing a vial of hydrocyanic acid—a radioactive substance. When a single atom of the substance decays during the test period, a relay mechanism will trip a hammer, which will, in turn, break the vial and kill the cat. We know that it will decay; we just don't know when.

What the experiment illustrates is that the observer cannot know whether or not an atom of the substance has decayed yet, and consequently, cannot know whether the vial has been broken, the hydrocyanic acid released, and the cat killed. Since we cannot know, according to quantum law, the cat is considered both dead and alive, in what is called a superposition of states. There are yet to be discovered many probabilities, and we will participate in them, shaping them and forming them. When we break open the box and learn the condition of the cat, the superposition is lost, and the cat becomes one or the other (dead or alive).² The probabilities are shown to be true. This is of course an oversimplification of the experiment, but I believe you understand my point. Please note there was no actual cat, and no cats were harmed in the thought experiment in Schrödinger's brain.

Margaret Wheatley, in her book *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, says it this way: "Reality is co-created by our process of observation," and "we participate in the creation of everything we observe."³ Two realities are always in existence within a thing, and how we observe or what we say about a thing changes the essence of it. How we look at Schrödinger's cat actually shapes its fate, whether it lives or dies. In fact, more than two realities may exist together at the same time. In quantum theory, it is recognized that in any given moment two states exist and that the observer shapes the reality of that which is observed. This is true for art and people. This is true for light. This is true for Schrödinger's cat. And, it is true for the Church. How you see your Church has a direct effect on the Church itself.

The Church that we observe is very much the Church that comes into being. If we observe a Church that is dying, then we will most assuredly add to growing entropy. If we observe a Church that is alive and thriving, then our Church will thrive and be alive. This is not simply a power-of-positive-thinking lesson. Quantum physics teaches us that the observer shapes the reality of that being observed.

In the Church, we call that the power of the Living Word. In the same way that God creates by speaking his Word, we too cocreate (although on a much smaller scale) our Church and the world around us by how we perceive it and the kinds of stories we tell about it. The implication, I think, is that nothing is more threatening to the life and mission of the Church than cynical and negative leadership. The inability to see God's hand at work in the world around us creates an environment where it gets harder and harder to see God. Life in ministry then becomes a downward spiral.

And so how we see and what we say about ourselves and the Church matters greatly. Theologian Paul Zahl once said, "We become as we are regarded."⁴ These quantum thinkers are helpful: reality is cocreated by our process of observation. How we observe the Church will create the Church we observe.

This is, of course, not the first time we have been offered an opportunity to think about this. There is a story in the Bible that goes like this . . . Jesus has been teaching and he is probably tired. So, he decides to get away for a bit. He and his friends—Peter, James, and John—take some time away from the crowds of people and the daily routine of teaching and healing. They go to the top of a mountain to pray. While Jesus is praying and the others are watching, Jesus begins to be changed. His face changes and shines bright. His clothes become dazzling white. "Wow," they think, "this is really awesome." Then two great prophets appear: Moses and Elijah. They are as wild-looking as Jesus—sparkly and white. They are all there and they are talking about everything that is about to happen and how Jerusalem is going to be an important place in the story of Jesus. It is a glorious moment.

Peter says to Jesus, "It is good for us to see this and to be here with you." Then Peter says, "Let us make three dwellings, three booths, three boxes in which we can have you and Moses and Elijah dwell. It will be great because then people can come to the mountain like we did and be here with you." But Jesus doesn't accept their plan. Jesus is clear that their business is to leave the mountaintop and get back to the world, preaching,

teaching, and healing. This is the work of Jesus, and he is clear that this is the work of those who follow him (Luke 9:28–36).

The story is dynamic and about a living mission. It is about being alive and in the world and not crammed into a box. It is a story about abundant life and abundant mission. I believe in a Church that is alive and flourishing in the world, that is ancient and new, multiplying and diverse, creative, and so much more. This book is about the Church that I believe in. It is Schrödinger's Church with all its paradoxes and complexity. It is the Church I observe and believe is possible in a new missionary age, a generous community united in service and mission.

It is our work to make this Church. Certainly God is even now creating this Church, and God's Holy Spirit is moving to bring it to completion. Yet we are the makers. We are the cocreators. What will it look like? How will it exist in the world? What will its mission look like? Who will lead it? How will it be organized? These are important questions to ask if we are the makers, with God, of this endeavor. Regardless of the form that this missionary Church takes, from the outset it is important to remember the words of King Solomon regarding the temple: "The highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" (I Kings 8:27).

It is clear to me that we have a desire to make things and to build things. It is part of who we are. We are going to continue to build machines like we have always done, but we also are going to be invested in building communities and networks. We will forever be about the work of cocreating by taking those things available to us and making something new from them, tinkering with or repurposing parts from already existing things. We are in the end made to make. This reality is now making its presence known throughout the world through the maker movement. This movement has a motto: *If you can't open it, then you don't own it.*

The idea is that if you can't open it and take it apart and use it and reuse it, then you really don't own it. It is somebody else's. Let me give you an example from a company I am closely connected with, Apple. I love Apple products, so that is my disclaimer. If you by chance own any kind of smartphone—but especially the iPhone—you've bought it and you own it, or so you think. But you can't unlock it, and you can't use unapproved things on it. You can only use the things that Apple says you can use. Now some of you are probably more technical than I am and know how to unlock or "jailbreak" your iPhone, but for me—the poor iPhone owner,

who does not know these things—I am fearful that if I unlock my phone, I will void the warranty. My phone's ultimate potential is closed to me. I own it . . . but I don't own it. And there it is. I am a user. This is an amazing thing, given that Apple itself is one of the founding parents of the maker movement in computer technology.

Here's another example. Every year since 2006, a makers' conference called the Maker Faire has been held, and all these creative types come from all over the world, and they gather, and they show off their innovations. There's art and new technology, and everything is open and reusable. A number of years ago, some artists came up with the idea of dropping a Mentos candy into a one-liter bottle of Diet Coke. Those of you who have teenage boys may have seen this already. Or you can go on the Internet and watch it in action. Even better, you can do this in your own backyard. When you drop the Mentos into the bottle, it creates a chemical reaction with the Diet Coke. It explodes, and geysers of Diet Coke shoot out of the top. Some Maker Faire artists were going around and capturing images of explosions as a form of art. Now, you and I can debate whether that is art or not, but that's not the point of this illustration. Here is the rest of the story. Mentos and Coca-Cola did not like this, because their products weren't intended for this; they were invested in a closed use of their products. They apparently intended to sue these artists to keep them from repurposing their product. Evidently, a groundswell of sixth graders all over the country stood up to them and said, "No." As the story goes, they begrudgingly gave in. Today both Mentos and Coca-Cola sponsor these artists at the Maker Faire. What the companies had to come to terms with was that they could not control their products and that they were open to new applications or repurposing.⁵

There is a passage in Mark's Gospel where the disciples get grumpy about people bringing their children to Jesus. In their opinion these children are really messing up the gospel. These children are a problem to the disciples, who obviously are Very Serious Men. "There is no time for this," they thought. They decide that they are going to keep the children from coming to Jesus, because they are interrupting all the other really good work Jesus is doing. So, they say, "Look. We think the little ones should all go away. They can't be here." Scholars have taught us that the first followers of Jesus were called the "Little Ones," which helps us understand the meaning of the text. As we ponder what the disciples are doing, it becomes clear that they are invested in a closed system. They want to control how Jesus is used, how Jesus relates, with whom Jesus spends time,



and who has access to Jesus. Who they think should have access to God is impacted by their desire for control. It is not the first nor the last time in the Scriptures that the disciples will think that they are able to control the good news of salvation and manage Jesus. But Jesus tells them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs” (Matt. 19:14).

Jesus is going around opening up the kingdom to whoever would listen. In fact, that seems to be the purpose of his coming. He has come to glorify God, bring good news, and open up and give access to the reign of God for all people. This must have driven the disciples nuts! Just as they are figuring things out, creating a new power structure, and getting clarity on the best way to market the rock star Jesus . . . he is going around handing out backstage passes to everyone. The reign of God is open to everyone.

The God that we choose to follow is a God who is out and among the people. The God we follow bids us make a Church that is where he is. We are to make a Church that is out and among the people. Like God we are to make room for creativity and innovation. This God cannot be contained. God’s mission cannot be contained. God’s mission has a Church and that Church is not to contain God.

The Church must repurpose; it must remake itself into a new creation so that God may once again be accessed through its ministry. The Church is a handmade vessel of God’s grace. It can no longer choose to be a stumbling block for those who long for a little measure of grace, mercy, and kindness in a world that is often cold and dark. The Church must choose to take a step forward to find this God. Where the Church is in the way, it must change. We must allow people to come forward and find God, whether it is through the church doors or to sit and listen to somebody out in the world.

For many of us, access to God and God’s love is why we are in the Church. We belong because it makes a difference in our lives. It changes who we are. It challenges us to be a better people. Such a God cannot be contained, even in you.

We must become a generation of church-makers who play in the waters of baptism and in the Scriptures and around God’s altar. This is sacred and holy play through which we reenact—inside and outside church buildings, and in our lives—the great story of God’s creation.

We are to be about making the world into a different place. We are to make it different with all the tools at our disposal. Most especially we



are to make it new with God's love, grace, forgiveness, and mercy. We are to share and open up our church and walk out into the sweet-smelling and lush garden of creation. We are to invite, welcome, and connect with others. We are to share the message that God says to all people—"Come unto me all you who travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you." God says to us who are weighed down by the world, "Come unto me. I'll give you rest." Don't keep the little children away. Don't keep away those who have tried to follow Jesus and believe they have failed. Don't keep those who have drifted away from church from God. Give God away. By all means let them all come. And let us go. And let us make the Church together.

Discussion Questions

1. Bishop Doyle says that "nothing is more threatening to the life and mission of the Church than cynical and negative leadership." What specific practices can we undertake in order to become more hopeful and expectant leaders?
2. What aspects of the Church need to be repurposed? What will this "repurposing" require?
3. Do you believe we are born with a maker instinct? What does it mean to say that we are cocreators with God?
4. Think of all the ways in which the Church is already creative and innovative. How might we build on these strengths?
5. Bishop Doyle asserts that "how we observe the Church will create the church we observe." Can you think of a specific example of how this is true?

Spiritual Exercise

Make a list of all the negative words you have heard used to describe the Church. After making the list, prayerfully read Ephesians 1:3–14. Now make a second list with the words this passage uses to describe the Church. Ponder how your experience of ministry and mission might change if you and others at your congregation saw the Church as Ephesians describes it.

Suggested Passage for Lectio Divina: Mark 10:46–52



Suggested Reading

Bob Johansen, *Leaders Make the Future: Ten New Leadership Skills for an Uncertain World*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2012.

Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2006.

