

Maturity and New Growth



Each year, our deciduous Maple tree produces fresh green shoots full of potential, alongside a remnant of the beautiful mature leaves from the previous year. The roots, trunk and branches give or carry life to both the old and new leaves. I believe that such growth can illustrate something of life in the Church. For example, what does it look like for us as mature leaves, or as new growth? Is there a place for both—a necessary place? Both are supported by the life of the same tree. Both are Christ-bearers.

The mature leaves of the Maple eventually drop off and feed the tree. Their life is changed, not gone. Meanwhile the new shoots become fresh leaves. How might our lives as members of the body of Christ, the Church, be like branches of such a tree? This image is not a complete analogy of our Christian life, but it can give us one way of looking at the past, present and future of the Church of God.

Let us start by imagining ourselves as a branch displaying some beautiful old leaves. These leaves have gradually developed their colour, just as we have slowly grown in our Christian faith and our love for God and our neighbour.

One important way we grow is through our experiences of helping and being helped. There may have been difficult and painful times in our past, such as when we grieved a deep loss in our life and someone unexpectedly helped us. At other times, when we needed to help another, we usually managed to do it, and were glad that we did.

Surprisingly, we also matured when we had to accept and work through our failures. These may have included when we turned away from a new opportunity, or let down a friend who had asked us for support. To say sorry in such situations can be costly, and may take time as well.

The leaves on the branch reflect these struggles with their varied colours, bits missing and splits here and there causing them to bend in different directions.

All this discussion about leaves may resonate for us with our past lives, but when we look at the branch on the cover of this leaflet, there are new green shoots growing among the mature leaves.

I suggest that whatever age we are, and however experienced in the Christian life, we are expected to continue to grow and mature in our relationship with God. This means we must be open to test and accept or modify new ideas presented to us that can express loving God and neighbour in our contemporary world context.

It is easy to go a certain distance in our lives and then decide we have had enough. We might sit back in a comfortable chair, reflect on the past, and avoid any new, upsetting or demanding thoughts from invading our minds, smugly regarding them as not for us! We tell ourselves we have done our bit and no longer have the energy or desire to be involved in any change. If others want to upgrade our Church services or alter how our Church is organised, that is up to them. We shall respond by just withdrawing from any involvement, and wait for death!

On the other hand, perhaps we will choose to take the time to examine something new that another has suggested. We may discover that it could open for us, even with our limitations, a fresh perspective on caring for others enabling us and others to grow spiritually. By sharing what we have to offer and being prepared to receive from others something a bit different, we can all contribute life to our branches and to the tree or Church of which we are a part.

A branch can also be thought of as our parish or region. The old and fragile leaves are not to be suddenly shaken off and discarded in order to

allow new green shoots to take over and grow. Rather, the old leaves with their larger size, attractive beauty and maturity have an important role to play protecting and guiding the small fresh shoots for a little while longer.

It is easy for the young to become impatient with the old when they seem so slow and closed. They may be tempted to go elsewhere where there is more action and fewer obstacles blocking them from doing what they want to do, or perhaps what God wants them to do. Yet both the mature and young leaves on the branch are vulnerable and need the life they receive from the same roots and trunk of the tree, *and* help from each other.

Eventually, as we know, old leaves do drop off, rot and feed the tree through its roots. In other words, younger members of the Church can be nourished through the memories of loving acts, perseverance, writings and perhaps humour of older or former members. God wants to use both old and new members to assist in the work of the whole Church.

Together, as followers of Christ, Christ-bearers, succeeding and failing but keeping on trying, we can advance the mission of the Church to bring about the reign of God on earth. We shall do this with the help of the Holy Spirit and by expressing our love for God and neighbour, within and outside the Church, in a relevant manner.

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