Building a Relational Culture

Finding Fellowship in the Church of England

Relational Church UK

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Over the past two years, what started as an exploratory conversation between three clergy from different dioceses about what is the dynamic of a healthy church, has evolved into a passionate belief that intentional "fellowship" or *koinonia* is vital if churches are to fulfil their calling to be the body of Christ in a broken and desperate world.

> **Relational Churc**h understands that there is a serious health imbalance in our church life today, between Worship, Mission and Fellowship. We have a terrifying relationship deficit, which is injuring us, the church, and is one cause of the decline of influence of the church in the UK.
>
> **Relational Church** Is the journey to deepen our relationship with each other as the Communion of the body of Christ so that the world can flourish.
>
> **Relational Church** understands Fellowship to mean a deep intentional relationship, based on loving, with the love of Jesus.

Churches need to model loving and life affirming relationships. Since those first tentative discussions, around thirty theologians and church leaders have participated in online small group relational conversations. Momentum has been building up that it is time for a renewed and intentional focus on building a relational church.

The project is concerned primarily with "fellowship". This is a crucial area of Christian life, which is often neglected in practice. We find it all too easy to focus on worship as an activity, or on mission as a series of initiatives, while we neglect the relationships that hold us together as a worshipping and missional community.

The aim of this book is to refocus our attention as Anglicans on the importance of fellowship as a foundational principle which underpins our shared mission and corporate worship. We hope to be a catalyst for more conversations and to learn from each other…

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Introduction

The Church in the UK faces numerous challenges. These challenges are already urgent but will become even more significant in the years to come. The next few decades will bring us face to face with the consequences of climate change, rising inequality and a global refugee crisis. There will be further demographic shifts, technological innovations, ongoing culture change, and the risk of another pandemic. It is impossible for us to stay the same or act as if everything is fine - while the world is transformed around us. The Christian community will need to adapt to a changing context, while reaching out in love to those who are ignored while others prosper.

The Church of England has begun to explore a vision for the 2020s. This vision aims for a church which will be simpler, humbler and bolder. There is a desire to become a church that is younger and more diverse; a church where mixed ecology is the norm; a church of missionary disciples.

These are worthy aims, but they will not be achieved by starting a few projects or initiatives. Achieving these aims will require a shift in the way that the church operates, from the organisational culture of dioceses to the day-to-day life of parish churches. Achieving these aims will require a new focus and commitment from the entire institution.

When athletes train to break records or win competitions, they have to bring their entire life into the spotlight. They need to think about what they eat, when they rest, and how they spend their time. They need to train their mind as well as their body, so that their whole being is fit and healthy, and ready for the challenges ahead.

Christian discipleship requires a similar discipline - as the

apostle Paul reminds us in his letter to the Corinthians: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? "Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last for ever" (1 Cor 9:24-25).

The challenges of the twenty-first century will require churches that are healthy and fit-for-purpose - churches that are ready to serve Christ in a changing world. Like the athletes who inspired St Paul, we will need to be healthy and focused, rather than complacent, apathetic or resigned to our fate.

Athletes work hard on their health and overall performance, not for the sake of personal fitness, but with a purpose - which is to win the race! Every athlete has a vision in their mind of what winning the race will feel like, and what winning the race will lead to. They are focused on the prize.

The church needs to be healthy in order to fulfill a purpose - in response to the love of God, the preaching of Jesus and the work of the Spirit. The Church cannot fulfill its purpose unless it is healthy.

As human beings, we need a healthy and balanced diet, which enables us to become fit and well. Churches also require a balance of life-giving activities which enable each of us to grow as disciples.

As the editors of this book, we believe that churches need a balanced diet of:

- **Worship** - loving relationship with God
- **Fellowship** – loving relationships which shape our common life in the Body of Christ
- **Mission** - loving relationship with the earth and all its people

Worship happens as we praise God and live lives of prayer.

This can sometimes appear to be an individual act, but we always worship as part of a wider community - the Body of Christ which exists across time and space. We never really worship God alone.

Fellowship is the intentional process of building deep mutually supportive relationships. It is experienced as we build relationships of trust, commitment and mutual support. Fellowship happens as we minister to Christ in and through each other. In the New Testament the word *koinonia* is often translated in this way.

Mission means to share the love of God with others, so that strangers become friends of Jesus who find salvation both in this life and the next. Mission happens as we love the world in the service of the kingdom - bringing life and healing to our local communities and the wider world. Mission is about friendship, healing and justice for all. Our mission is to make the Earth more like heaven as we live out Our Lord's prayer: "Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in Heaven"

We believe that churches will develop in a healthy way if they are active in each of these three areas. Christian Disciples will grow and flourish if they are engaged in worship, fellowship and mission - and will suffer if they are missing out in any one of them.

In this book, we are concerned primarily with "fellowship." This is a crucial area of Christian life, which is often neglected in practice. We find it all too easy to focus on worship as an activity, or on mission as a series of projects, while we neglect the relationships that hold us together as a worshiping and missional community.

And yet, fellowship (*koinonia)* is a crucial theological concept which has a central place in Christian thought. The main focus of the *miseo dei* is to restore the broken relationships between God and creation. Christ prays that the disciples should be one

- so that the World will know the love of God. The community of faith is the training ground within which disciples are nurtured, equipped and sent forth. We therefore neglect the practice of fellowship at our own peril.

Fellowship can be a problematic word. For some people it implies little more than social activities, light refreshments or some form of club. In this conversation, we are talking about something much deeper - linked to community, connection and belonging. It is usually used to translate the greek word *koinonia* in the New Testament which has implications of common identity or participation. In this project, we have found it helpful to talk about "relationality" - the manifold ways in which we are connected. Whether we talk about fellowship, koinonia, community or relationality, the key issue is the same. We live in a world of broken relationships but are called to unity in Christ.

One of the biggest problems for our society is the rise of individualism, which can be linked to loneliness, consumerism, inequality and abuse. The church exists as a sign that community is an essential aspect of God.

Jim Wallis says that:

> …the greatest need of our time is not simply kerygma, the preaching of the gospel, nor for diakonia, service on behalf of justice, nor for charisma, the experience of the Spirit's gifts, nor even for propheteia, the challenging of the king. The greatest need of our time is for koinonia, the call to simply be the church – to love one another, to offer our life for the sake of the world. The creation of living, breathing, loving communities of faith at the local church level is the foundation of all the other answers… It is the ongoing life of a community of faith that issues a basic challenge to the world as it is and offers a visible and concrete alternative. (*Sojourners* 9:1, January 1980. p. 11. Quoted by Kenneth Leech, *The Social God*. 1981, p. 4)

Jesus does not pray that his disciples may be one because this would be helpful for the work of the Church. He makes it clear that unity is both a means and a goal - and this must inform our way of working. When worship or mission are reduced to activities, projects or initiatives which are disconnected from fellowship, there is a tendency to see people as a problem to be dealt with, rather than the focus of God's love.

The Church exists in relation to the Kingdom. It is the community of people who are following Jesus and seeking the Kingdom. Paul's image of the body is really important. We are the body of Christ, not merely a human institution. As a church we are called to seek this new reality both within our own community and through our engagement with the world. Church as *koinonia* is both a sign of the Kingdom and an agent of change.

We should therefore resist the temptation to see the Church as a loose collection of individuals but as a single body constantly working to heal division, listen deeply and act lovingly. We recognise that this is not always the way we are, but this is the divine vision towards which we are heading.

If the churches of the UK are to address the challenges of the twenty-first century, we will need change in the way that we think and live. We will need to change our cultural assumptions.

Yes, we will need to become more missional, and yes, we will need to focus more attention on God, but this will require us to develop a more relational culture, because this is the secret ingredient which will transform us into communities of faith - in which disciples are welcomed, formed, trained, and supported.

The writers of this book are keen to encourage the Church to practice "fellowship" - but this does not mean coffee after services, or networks of people who think the same thing - it means the radical practice of loving each other as Christ loves us - respecting difference and committing to the wellbeing of others.

Scott Peck in his *The Different Drum - Community-making and peace* refers to the Holy Thursday or Maundy Thursday Revolution (Simon and Schuster, 1990). The washing of the disciples' feet symbolically overturned the existing social order and gave us a new way of relating through the Last Supper. Through Jesus, the early Christians discovered the secret of community.

Have we lost the secret? Keith Millar in his book *The Scent of Love* (Waco, Texas, 1983) suggests that the success and appeal of the early Christians was not their charisms nor their doctrine, rather it was because they had discovered the secret of community. There was something about the way they spoke with each other, looked at each other, cried and laughed together that was strangely appealing. They gave off the scent of love, the fragrance of God – even a small hint was not just attractive but transformative. This is what fellowship is about – loving one another in such a way as to attract others to want to experience for themselves the secret of community.

We will need to reform and renew what it means to love another as Christ loves us. We will need to reform and renew what it means to be a community of disciples. Bonhoeffer clearly saw this future when he said "Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. Whether it is a brief single encounter or a daily fellowship of years, Christian community is only this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ" (*Life Together, the classic exploration of Christian Community*, Harper, 1954).

Fellowship means deeper listening, courageous disagreement, and a commitment to the common good. It is not an easy path, but it has the potential to transform our worshiping communities into schools of discipleship, which will prepare us for the further challenges ahead.

As it says in the Book of Hebrews:

> "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another . . ." (Hebrews 10:24-25).

The aim of this project is to refocus our attention as Anglicans on the importance of fellowship as a foundational principle which underpins our shared mission and corporate worship.

The writers who have contributed to this book come from a range of backgrounds and theological perspectives. We do not agree with each other on every issue, but we are united by a desire to encourage greater relational thinking in the Church of England. We see diversity as a strength not a weakness. We seek to be better disciples of Christ as we follow God together.

This book is intended as a discussion starter, not a discussion ender. This is a journey, not a conclusion. We merely hope to encourage further conversation and engagement with these issues, as we seek to become a simpler, humbler, and bolder Church.

The Steering Group:

- Tim Norwood
- Paul Davies
- David McCoulough
- Anne Richards
- Malcolm Grundy

Advent Sunday 2022

Contributors

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John Cole retired in 2008 after five years as National Adviser (Unity-in-Mission) for General Synod's Council for Christian Unity. Ordained in 1968 as Curate at Leeds Parish Church, he quickly became involved in the ecumenical team producing religious programmes on the pioneering BBC local radio station, Radio Leeds. He was Blackburn's first Diocesan Communications Officer. By the mid-1980s he had moved to be a mission adviser in Lincoln Diocese. His workbook for local church groups, "How to be a Local Church" (1992), invited clergy and lay people to rethink their vocations at the beginning of a 'Decade of Evangelism'. In 1997 he became Development Officer for Mission and Unity on behalf of the six main denominations across Lincolnshire. After retirement, he contributed as a member of the editorial team of 'Parish and People' exploring missionary vocation available in the resources section of the website of the National Deaneries Network (www.nationaldeaneries.net).

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of Cyprus and the Gulf where he initiated a deeper sense of fellowship and connection amongst the diverse congregations. He also took a lead in supporting migrant workers and campaigning for structural changes to labour conditions in Qatar. He has served in parishes in the Dioceses of London, Lichfield and Southwark always paying attention to good worship, committed relationships and creative links with the wider community. He has a strong commitment to the Anglican Communion shaped by his experiences of Anglican churches throughout the world, he is committed to a vision of the church in the future, which is vibrant, radical in being deeply relational.

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Making Relational Church Possible

Simon Barrow

"What on earth does 'relational church' mean? What other kind could there possibly be?" Jane looked frankly puzzled. Then she paused and thought for a few moments, sifting mentally through her various experiences over the years. "Come to think of it, I think I can see what you might be driving at. Most of the churches I've been to have either felt pretty anonymous, rather cliquey, or cloyingly over-friendly in a superficial way… I guess that's at least part of the reason why I rarely go any more. It too often feels either a bit remote or rather artificial. Full of people who are hiding away or trying a bit too hard. There's rarely the opportunity to get to know others, to explore, to question, or to relate to people in a bit more of an honest way. There often feels to be no real sense of connection to each other and to God."

Disconnected Church

What is church for, and what difference does it make in our lives? An increasing number of people have been answering that question with their feet in recent years, and not in a positive way. When I was young, we used to 'go to' church, which was basically provided for us by the clergy and a select few lay people. That was a way of being church developed within a culture which was predominantly hospitable towards a relatively domesticated form of the Christian message, and where – despite the political, social, cultural (and, yes, religious) turmoil of the 1960s and early '70s – the Church of England seemed to stretch across the land and form part of its

bedrock. The dominant ethos was that of what sociologists Grace Davie, Linda Woodhead, Nancy Ammerman and others have called 'vicarious religion'. That is, the notion of religion performed by an active minority on behalf of a much larger number, some of whom 'go to church' and many of whom do not, but all of whom feel it is (or should be) there when they need it – for rites of passage, aesthetic beauty, pastoral support and social comfort, for instance. In Jane's language, it seems "a bit remote", though (as I will explain later) that does not always need to be a bad thing.

Some twenty years later, as a paid member of the then Lay Training Team in Southwark Diocese, I became part of a network of people who worked on the basis that church was, and should be, something we consciously 'do' rather than passively 'go to'. The understanding and language we inhabited was about 'being the church in the world'. For us the Christian gospel was a disturbing and transformational force oriented towards 'a new heaven and a new earth', rather than the social and cultural binding agent within society that the 'vicarious' model presupposed. This was an essentially activist credo, stressing discipleship (the personal and corporate following of Jesus) in a very particular set of ways. Much good came out of such an approach, I would argue, but it probably did not touch the reality of life in most parishes. Jane would perhaps feel that it was in danger of being "cliquey". It was something developed by and for an "in group" that too frequently failed to recognise its "in-ness" as part of the reason it struggled.

The fate of the 'go to' notion of church has been gradual (in some cases, dramatic) decline. In many places people simply do not 'go to church'. The habit has worn off and the religious assumptions that sustained it have not been transmitted. 'Do' churches, predominantly of a more conservative and overtly evangelistic type, have done proportionately better, but still occupy something of a ghetto within the wider culture. They may well put off as many as they attract, if not more. They also

want to maintain tight boundaries for belonging, in order exclude those who don't conform to their definitions, despite rhetoric about 'outreach'. Meanwhile, engagement in spiritually resourced social activism (focusing on justice, peace, community action, and the environment) has grown, but has also led some people to drift away from church rather than to stay (or to concentrate on para-church or civic networks), often out of frustration at the reluctance of the majority to follow suit.

Reconnecting humanly for the common good

What Jane describes in her experience is something of the fragmentation of much modern church life, pressurised as it is by consumer culture on the one hand (the temptation to become a marketable 'product' for particular groups of people to 'buy') and deep theological divisions (on the very nature of faith, and on who is 'in' or 'out' of favour with God) on the other. In thinking about 'relational church' we are looking towards practices of belonging, believing and behaving which can resist the former and reframe the latter, I would suggest. This is because the Christian gospel is all about the processes by which we are reconciled with one another and with God, called into a body of shared joys and sorrows in the company of Christ, and enabled to develop the kind of habits and relationships which make this hope tangible and shareable.

At Pentecost there was a deep sense of unity among a diverse group of people who all came to understand what it meant to be caught up in the transformational life of the Spirit through their own specific languages and cultures. This is unity-in-diversity. What it requires is not uniformity, but the ability to translate for and with one another, to build bridges rather than walls, and to *connect*. It is not about forcing everyone into the same mould. People are different, their life experience and needs are different, and at any one time they are at various stages in life. At a particular moment (and this can and will change), some need space and a 'vicarious' community that

provides a supportive but more distant sociality for what they struggle to do, feel or believe; others need to be active, recognised and engaged; and some need to probe, question or reach out to others.

Meanwhile, all of us need to deepen our understanding of the possibilities that exist in nurturing one another in the hope that lies at the heart of the gospel (in and for the world), and to be touched by this in prayer and worship. We may not always recognise this, of course. Awakening that recognition in each other is another part of what is meant by cultivating relational church. Particular church communities will also be better adapted than others to some of those 'roles'. That ought not to matter. Different aptitudes and dispositions can be actively accommodated within the larger body that is also 'church'. The key thing is that, starting at the local level, we nurture human relationships of sufficient honesty, durability and sympathy that we can recognise those differences, and help the different parts of the body work for the good of the whole.

This is surely what 'relational church' is all about. Reconnecting humanly for the common good, and for the needs and growth of each person. Pooling our lives together (spiritually, socially and economically), in the transforming presence of God, is at the heart of what is meant by *koinonia* in the New Testament. It is the foundation of the Christian life, and an essential part of what the church is for. But, as this book suggests, it is too often neglected.

A key element of rebuilding relationships and making healthy connections obviously lies in developing good habits (regular patterns of positive behaviour), and learning to root out characteristic vices (behaviour which fragments and harms us) in the life of any church community. Valuing and caring for one another in this way is essential to discerning how to be, and to let be, together, in the grace of God. Some of the habits to be embraced and the vices to be avoided are well described elsewhere in this collection. What I want to do here is to touch on three specific, collective challenges which need to be faced

in helping to create the conditions for a 'relational church' to come into being. These challenges are about our credibility as church communities in a world which is (often rightly) sceptical about who we are, what we do, and whether what we believe and manifest is truly liberating. These can be expressed positively, as three commitments. They are about striving to ensure that:

- Our practices embody our goals
- Our speech cultivates truthfulness and openness, *and*
- Our faith acts justly and walks humbly

This is not about some fantasy, ideal-type community, we should note. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his extraordinary little book, *Life Together* (Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1939; SCM Press 1954), warns us that impossible ideals can be the enemy of a community which, in Christ, knows itself to be broken and in continual need of healing and repair. Rather, it is about attending to household tasks together, and sustaining an effective livable space in which, as Jane expressed it at the beginning, there can be a "real sense of connection to each other and to God" – in a way that addresses different needs and gifts, while advancing the good of the whole.

Our practices need to embody our goals

When Jane was describing her experience of church in the quotations from a conversation recounted at the beginning of this chapter, she was speaking, naturally enough, about her *feelings*. That is quite appropriate. Feelings are an important part of what makes us human, and it is no part of the Christian message to deny them. Much damage can flow from that but, on the other hand, "I'll do it if I feel like it" can be a real blockage in our day-to-day lives and in our sense of responsibility for ourselves and towards one another. So too with the formation and reformation of church life. If the gospel

of God's reconciling and transforming love made tangible in Christ is the foundation and goal of the community that shares his life, then then these goals will need to shape our practices, choices and relationships. Otherwise 'voluntarism' descends into a basic neglect about *whose* we are, as well as who we are. (I should add, of course, that I fall as short as any in this regard, I know. That is also why forgiveness and reparation need to be essential parts of the common practice of any Christian community.)

The aftermath of the tragic shooting that took place at the West Nickel Mines Schoolhouse in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, provides what for many of us may seem a dramatic example of this (and of what 'relational church' may demand of us). Deeply disturbed gunman Charles Carl Roberts IV shot ten young Amish girls aged 6–13 years there in October 2006, killing five, before committing suicide himself. The response of the Amish community then caused widespread comment across the USA and beyond. Community members visited and comforted Roberts' widow, parents and family. They offered material support to her and attended the killer's funeral. Marie Roberts later wrote an open letter to her Amish neighbours on behalf of the family, thanking them for their forgiveness and mercy. She wrote: "Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. Gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you."

The reaction to this in the broader culture, and in other church communities, was mixed. Many were bemused at these seemingly extraordinary feats of forgiveness, and some felt they were preemptory or inappropriate in responding to such a heinous crime. The Amish and their kindred were asked how they could not feel anger and bitterness at the senseless slaughter of their children. Their response was to explain that their actions were not rooted in their feelings in the first

instance (which were battered and tormented), but in the long-cultivated actions that flowed from how the community understood itself and the Christian message as one of peacemaking and reconciliation. In one interview, a respondent explained: "We did this because this is who we are and what we are called to be. It wasn't a question of whether we felt like it or not. Forgiveness is what Christ asks of us, and in a case like this we hope that in fulfilling the vocation of our community, hard though it is, God will mercifully align our feelings to these actions and bring healing to us as well as our neighbours."

The point here is not to idealise a particular way of life (Amish communities have also been criticised as being authoritarian, patriarchal and even abusive), but to consider a specific standout example of what it might mean for our practices to be shaped by the goals of the gospel, which we would hope would be at the heart of our church life. In that light, perhaps those 'values' and 'mission' statements we are apt to produce, and which can sometimes feel rather abstract or tokenistic, could be reshaped into statements of intent about how far we are prepared to go in seeking to evidence the gospel in what William Blake called "the minute particulars" of life. For those "who would do good to another must do it in Minute Particulars. General Good is the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite, and flatterer." There is a very strong challenge towards what we *really* mean by 'relational church', and how it will be received and understood by those around us.

Our speech needs to cultivate truthfulness and openness

Laziness of speech and pious cliché ('the language of Zion') bedevils too much 'church language', and can fog or betray honesty and genuineness in relationships. I hope I am not being unkind in saying this. Those outside the ecclesiastical walls often notice it all to easily, as I have myself in my own periods

away from church life – because, for some of us, there still need to be "spaces in our togetherness" (Kahlil Gibran). This is why, incidentally, the church sometimes feeling "a bit remote" need not always be a bad thing!

There are no fixed rules here, and tastes and cultural practices vary. But if we are going to build relationship and connectivity within the church (and beyond it), it is worth developing an awareness of our habits of language, asking whether we really know what we are saying, and attending to the extent to which the way we talk might sometimes be about veiling truthfulness and obstructing openness, rather than the opposite. Just as the historic peace churches try to remind us that learning not to kill is hard work, so Bonhoeffer suggested in his posthumously published *Ethics* (SCM Press, 1955) that we need to *learn* to speak the truth. That means paying careful attention to the grain of our language. Is it accessible to all, or does it empower a certain in-group? Does it reveal a mystery, or mask the commonplace in obfuscation?

For instance, what do we actually mean when we use a word like 'fellowship', which has little common currency in the world around us? When I was a teenager, it meant weak lemonade and a sermonic lecture after a games session at the local church youth group. For that jaundiced reason it is a word I am not particularly keen on, and try to avoid. There is, of course, a place for language that binds particular groups together. 'Relational church' is a term that is being employed to focus a certain set of considerations and questions within the life of the Christian community here, for example. But wherever we can use language that connects beyond as well as within our walls, we should, I suggest. In an age and culture where fewer and fewer people are familiar with biblical language, we must also find ways of speaking and acting which express what it has to say in fresh ways, as Bonhoeffer also recommended.

The challenge of both truthfulness and honesty came together for me in a vivid recollection from a packed church

conference about homelessness in the 1990s. The room was full of genuine concerns and worthy intent. But at the end of the meeting a gaunt, nervous man got up and finally managed to speak after some time waving his arm and not being noticed. "I'm grateful for much that has been said at this event," he declared. "But I have a question. Almost everyone from the church who has said something this evening has talked about 'inclusion' and 'being inclusive'. As far as I can tell, none of you are homeless – but I am. So, what do you mean by 'inclusiveness'? Are you going to include people like me, who are actually homeless, in your plans and ideas for us? Are you interested in knowing what we think and what we want? Or are you going to go on ignoring us, while talking about how 'inclusive' you are to make yourselves feel like you are doing good to people like me?"

This was a very sharp jolt indeed. It called into question just how open and truthful the language of "inclusivity" was in this context, or whether it was the right word at all. Perhaps what was needed was a different way of handling homelessness that made the people being talked about subjects and actors, rather than "the done to"? Again, the test of our relationships is the truth they can bear and the extent to which they are open to repair and a new future.

Faith needs to act justly and walk humbly

Few if any reading this will be unfamiliar with the invitation in Micah 6.8 to "act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." In some variants, mercy is rendered "faithfulness". Right now, the Church of England (which I now view from across the border in Scotland, though it was part of my life for many years) is facing an existential crisis of reputation and trust on several fronts. One of these is its historic and present treatment of those who have faced abuse at the hands of clergy and others. Young people also look at the church from the

outside and are puzzled or angered at the treatment of women and LGBTIQA+ people within its ranks. They see the church not as a sanctuary, or a as a repository of wisdom, guidance, compassion and ethical strength, but as a confused, compromised and damaging organisation. If we are to make relationship central to the life of the church, alongside worship and service, as we surely should, these issues of justice-love, of safeguarding and of reparation for wrong cannot be ignored or sidestepped, painful though they are. An abusive church cannot be properly relational, let alone healing. This requires humility before God, before each other, and before our neighbours.

Similarly, while at the Eucharist we proclaim that, "We are one body, because we all share in one bread." However, the actual reality is that there are vast economic inequalities, huge gulfs in access to the very substance of life, within our congregations and denominations, and across the world. In early church communities described in the New Testament and beyond, *koinonia* (which we often translate as 'fellowship', and which embraces notions of community, communion, joint participation, sharing and intimacy) is deeply linked to the sharing of gifts and of common life and goods. The Iona Community is among those Christian communities who try to practice an 'economic discipline' of accounting for the use of resources and sharing them as part of its regular commitment to the integration of work and worship. This may be a separate issue to 'relational church' in certain respects, but any attempt to build relationships which tries to ignore or avoid they ways in which we are divided from each other, or in which justice and mercy are not the fruits of faith and love, will struggle to make progress. Going deeper spiritually will expose some raw nerves, as well as enriching and enlivening us.

What other kind of church could there possibly be?

To conclude, and to return to where we began, it is perhaps worth reconsidering Jane's initial question in response to the matter of 'relational church', looking at how it could (with the agreement of her and those like her, hopefully) be directed in a fruitful way. "What on earth does 'relational church' mean? What other kind could there possibly be?" she asks. How pertinent is that second question, if by church we mean a community of people truly called together by the earthly Jesus and the risen Christ – who is one in the divine feast we are invited to foretaste and participate in, even as we share his sufferings in the world. *Koinonia*, in other words, is not another task of the church, in addition to worship of God and service to the world. It is the identity of the church, if it is true to its calling.

In his marvellous little book *BeLonging: Challenge to a Tribal Church* (SPCK, 1991), Peter Selby links the notion of 'belonging' in the Christian community to the longing for God, for love, for peace, for justice on the earth. To 'be longing', he suggests, is to long for a church that embodies the gospel in recognising that we 'belong' not because of some merit, status or characteristic that marks us out as better or different to others. We belong, rather, simply because we are adopted by God's grace (often in spite of ourselves), and the journey of faith is all about what that means for our lives, personally and collectively. It is relationships forged in that recognition and hope that surely lie at the heart of what we mean when we talk about 'relational church' – "as if there could be any other kind". This means the church refusing the idea of being yet another tribe based on ethnicity, class, race, nationality, gender, sexuality, or any other identity marker which the world uses to categorise or divide us, including 'religion'. The challenge of this may seem immense, but the gracious gospel invitation is always there,

and the habits, dispositions and commitments required to respond faithfully and hopefully are not beyond our grasp. At the end of the day, they are not about technique, however. They are about helping each other to glimpse a vision and return to basics.

A Rebuilt Relational Culture

Malcolm Grundy

Relationships are not always good between Christian disciples. Among the most authentic of the New Testament accounts are those when the followers of Jesus disagreed. They argued about who was the greatest, and who would sit on his right or left hand in Glory. They denied they knew him at the time of his trial, and they disputed the authenticity of who first had seen the risen Christ. St Paul had to spend a great deal of his time and devote much space in his letters to new local communities in dispute. It seems to be a part of human nature to define ourselves by difference as well as by association. Through the centuries, whether by reform or by renewal, whether by schism or separation, emerging and established churches have found living alongside one-another a test of faith. So why now is anything different and why do we need to spend time and energy building a relational culture?

Both the Old and the New Testaments contain many examples of relational best practice between colleagues and across groups. Our Lord's mentoring of his disciples will remain the foundational example. For this joint piece of work a key text has been chosen. It is both a reaction to past divisions and an encouragement towards what might be possible.

> "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another . . ." (Hebrews 10:24-25).

A problem unmasked

How we order our church is a relational issue. Locally, it is about the nature of relationships between clergy and their congregations. Writ large, it is also about a cultural change within a denomination and between denominations. Theologically, a repeated challenge, from the earliest days to the present, has been the question of what our common life (*koinonia*) could and should look like

The starting point for this examination is a much more limited one, even though broad and challenging in its seriousness. It is about the common life within our own Church of England. Churches frequently, and with biblical and theological justification refer to themselves as parts of the Body of Christ. It is one of St Paul's greatest examples – but it can be distorted and experienced as hierarchical and controlling. His emphasis is not on the qualities of the parts but on how they relate to one-another – and to the person of Jesus Christ as the head (I Corinthians 12.27). It is their relatedness which makes them part of one body. In an interesting development provoked by the enforced as well as voluntary use of digital technology during the COVID pandemic, Heidi A Campbell in *Ecclesiology for a Digital Church* (2022) suggests that, with ease of accessibility to worship and spiritual resources from around the world, the People of God relational concept might be more appropriate than the restricted and constrained metaphor of constituent parts of one body. How would that fit our understanding of Anglican ecclesiology?

Theological backgrounds to relational thinking

Relational theologies are relatively new but are being explored in some depth. Anna Case-Winters, in a new plea for the reinstatement of incarnational theology asks, 'Just what does it mean when we claim that God is with us?' Her answer is the rediscovery of a God modeled in the mutual relationality of the

Trinity and 'in dynamic relationality with the world' *(God will be all in all,* 2021, p.30). Ten years before, Lisa Isherwood and Elaine Bellchambers with colleagues have looked at feminist theologies and set out how their contribution could influence ecclesiology in Through us, with us, in us. They say, 'Relational theologies have many starting points, but they appear to turn traditional Christian theologies on their head, asserting, as they do, that it is between us and through our experiences that we intuit the God we profess to believe in who is within and among us' (Isherwood and Bellchambers 2010, p. 2). In their *Relational Christianity: a remarkable vision of God* (2022) Wesley M Pinkham and Jeremiah Gruenberg argue that we need a balanced understanding of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit which they define as 'interpersonal oneness'. They make the strong point that a theologically imbalanced leader will foster an imbalanced and ultimately a dysfunctional congregation or church.

In an early attempt to explore a rebalancing of relationship in ministry the Edward King Institute for Ministry Development held a series of consultations prior to the ordination of women to the priesthood of the Church of England. Hopes were expressed there that the church would become more collaborative, more relational, and less hierarchical (Grundy 2018 & 2019). There is now a need for research to determine if there has been any internal cultural change since the vote in 1994.

Relational oversight and the local church

One of the most important characteristics of local parish ministry, served in a variety of ways by stipendiary clergy and their staff colleagues is that pastoral care can be offered in an incarnational way with increased resources for those who have their 'feet on the ground.' Bishop Michael Marshall, in his recent biography of Edward King gives great emphasis to the nature of priestly formation which King thought fundamental.

The local parish priest, he says, to be well equipped needs to be a person of prayer, well read in theology, knowledgeable about liturgy and experienced in pastoral practice. This concept of Anglican priesthood, King and his successors as theologians and spiritual guides, understood such formation to be the essential requirement for accompanying enquirers into a deeper faith and a life of service (Marshall, 2021).

Not new in the rural church but an increasing trend in urban and suburban churches is the joining of parishes and congregations where one stipendiary minister has local oversight. Few if any clergy would offer themselves for ordination with this as their primary calling. Appropriate selection is a national issue across the denominations. It is often the large single minister congregations which produce ordinands. Many of these will have little experience of multi-congregation situations although given some exposure in their pre and post ordination training. Many will serve a curacy in a large church but will never work in one again. Whether and if most are trained, equipped, and supported for quite different local situations is one of the pressing reasons for this study. To build a relational culture in a relationally oriented church is one of the ministerial challenges of our time. There are many examples of good practice in local groupings of churches and congregations. The exchange of these, together with deanery and diocesan illustrations would begin to turn our prevailing culture around.

Some local examples

On the back page of the service booklet for our team ministry commissioning service I printed 'Bear ye one-another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ' (Galatians 6:2). Our Bishop of Ely, the scholarly and saintly Peter Walker opened his sermon by asking what other characteristic could there be for effective pastoral work? In that newly created four parish team ministry we worked at relationships with one-another

and between parishes, with a Team Council for oversight and policy. We began pilgrimages which were coach outings organised by congregation members. We developed joint worship on the four occasions in the year when there was a fifth Sunday in the month with collections going to projects in the children's ward of our local hospital. Soon we also had a Team Newspaper and a logo designed after a local competition. We were careful not to take away anything which was of value to each constituent congregation.

The local impact of a relational ministry across several parishes, with congregations, schools and denominational mission partners can be significant. It requires new skills. Collaborative or collegial relationships must be worked at. Local rivalries and competitive, divisive histories are hard to leave in appropriate memory banks. When a renewed relational ministry of local oversight is established, mutual benefit can be experienced. Joint engagement in mission has become of increasing importance as a decline in numbers and local impact have become apparent. Shared resources to enable pastoral care and social engagement seen as service to the community can earn respect and followers. An understanding of local and regional issues enables church leaders to be the voice of others and to use their public platform to enable or affirm change.

Inhibiting factors

One non-relational observation which I make from personal experience is that regular face-to-face meetings have been in decline – and not because of COVID. Long before this pandemic struck, I have observed in my consultancy work and in my current membership of a group of parishes, that staff meetings have almost ceased to occur. Throughout my working life the Monday morning staff meeting was the foundation of the working week. Local demands may require a different pattern. The Eucharist, a shared breakfast or meal, bible study

and business discussion were fundamental constituent elements. There were regular occasions where NSM's, MSE's and retired clergy were included. This is not a hint towards clerical domination. Such fundamental meetings serve to help understand one-another better, to explore theological resources and to share pastoral concerns. As ministry teams become much more diverse, constant interaction is essential.

At deanery and diocesan level, there is an even greater challenge, and much work to be done to re-establish a relational culture within English Anglicanism where secure and trusting relationships can become the norm. To only see the Bishop, Archdeacon, or Rural or Area Dean at a Synod or when there is a crisis does not build a relational church. Study, pastoral care, and an appropriate amount of socialising are essential ingredients. In my time as an archdeacon, I requested parish magazines be sent to me. If there was a local celebration, a concert or some significant community event mentioned, I made a point of trying to be there. It is all too easy for the diary of a bishop and an archdeacon to be filled with necessary business. It should be just as easy to free church leaders for increased local presence and engagement.

Oversight, personality, and power

It is right to ground any analysis of this plea for a renewed relational church by exploring both its ecclesiology, and its theology. Governance of episcopal churches is built on an original concept of oversight. Early Christian communities coming together to share their faith, their experience and for mutual support adopted a concept borrowed from Greek and Roman Provincial culture. They did not want a distant hierarchical system of leadership. They wanted a collaborative relational one and chose the concept of 'seeing-over' one-another (epi-skope) through the appointment of senior and acceptable members of their communities. Origins of the method of appointment are disputed but do not change the

original intention. We are familiar with how this local and relational method of oversight which became governance was adapted, developed, and hijacked from the time of Constantine through medieval court hierarchies, royal patronage, and class systems to the present day.

What has gone wrong in recent adaptations and reforms to challenge our foundational principle of relational oversight? There is a strong sense in our emerging English Anglican culture that recent initiatives by church leaders are undermining rather that reinforcing the effectiveness of the parochial system. Extra-parochial initiatives have been resourced in order to reach individuals and groups in English society it was felt could not be touched by traditional ministries. This may or may not be a valid approach. Research evidence suggests that they are only effective when linked to social action on the ground. There is a concern about the theology underpinning or informing evangelism only initiatives, not that they are unworthy in themselves, but that they can be seen as separatist or sectarian in nature. This is a concern as it contrasts with a fundamental characteristic of inherited Anglicanism. From Richard Hooker to Martyn Percy, we have emphases that it is inclusive, tolerant, and comprehensive in its essence.

A colleague, commenting on an earlier draft of this chapter noted, 'I would start to look at the mood of anxiety which has become heightened during the past decade, over numbers, finance, and reputation. It seems to me to have been harnessed by the leadership. The rhetoric then is about growth: the underlying message is threat, existential anxiety, and urgency. The vision is about transformation, which has an attractive ring to it, but is played out in several ways which accentuate discontent, uncertainty, and magical thinking. It is certainly a long way from St Paul and Philippians from glory to glory. In a similar vein, Angela Tilby, writing in the Church Times on March 4th, 2022, about the General Synod's vote to enhance the place of dioceses and the power of bishops commented: The

Bishops, in other words, were lined up almost unanimously in favour of this radical review of governance which would greatly enhance their position in the nation's life while cutting the dioceses. And this in a system that, in spite of resembling Parliament, has neither Whips nor an Opposition. The shameful unanimity of the bishops in boosting their own status reveals a growing division between them and the rest of the Church. It is a part of wider changes in ecclesiology: the elevation of the diocese over the parish, the loss of local connection, the attempts to turn bishops into enforcers of top-down polity, and the subsequent current moves to coerce parishes into diocesan schemes that will rid them of their agency and reduce the clergy to puppets'.

Why a new relational breakdown?

There have been some external constraints put on the pastoral oversight role of church leaders. These have affected our internal workings, how we understand and experience a relational church, in negative and divisive ways. The implementation of safeguarding procedures has meant that an atmosphere of accusation, suspicion and mistrust has come to dominate. Some of the constraints are deserved as history now reveals a lack of integrity in dealing with alleged breaches in professional clerical conduct. Negotiations about pastoral reorganisation have also alienated parishioners and some local clergy. A telling observation is becoming commonplace, inside and outside parish life. It is that central and diocesan resources are being targeted on non-parochial appointments and this has led to a sense of alienation from a bishop and diocese rather than an affirmation of a shared sense of pastoral responsibility.

Personality, power, and a relational church

Paul Tillich in the second volume of his Systematic Theology (1964) called hubris 'the greatest sin – wanting to be like God'.

It is the enemy of teamwork and relationship building. Dr David Owen in his *The Hubris Syndrome* (2007) says this is not an illness but a consequence of long and often isolated responsibility. What has undermined the possibility of developing a relational church is the inability of those making appointments to know the difference between hubris and narcissism. In a review of '*Sex, Power, Control: Responding to Abuse in the Institutional Church* (2021), Linda Woodhead, now a Professor at King's College, London, has written:

> Narcissism being understood in clinical terms rather than simply as vanity. The narcissist buries shameful things that he or she cannot bear to face. Some of these may derive from childhood, some from later episodes and actions. In order to defend against horrible feelings, a false self is constructed. The more grandiose the self, the more it needs to be continually re-inflated. One way of doing so is by joining an institution that confers dignity. Dressing up, being given a title, and being treated as more 'reverend' than others, does the job very well. So – to take a further step – does controlling, demeaning, and even abusing other people. The smaller you make them, the bigger you feel. . . In sociological terms, abuse both exploits existing social inequalities and reinforces them.

One of the unfortunate features of the relational crisis in our church is that people are locked in roles, either by those around them or because of their own internal narcissistic understanding of the responsibilities they have been given. Secular models do not always ring true and only a few are relational. What Peter Senge in his book *The Fifth Discipline* (1999) calls 'mental models' is important. He says that it is the relational ones which we need to reconstruct, 'The discipline of team learning starts with "dialogue", the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into genuine thinking together' (p.10). Such thinking has always been the

essence of the Church of England and is a unifying concept in what we still call the Anglican Communion. Today, episcopal churches through the understanding and practice of their leadership, need to discover or rediscover this unifying relational idea which will be stronger than the energy which is currently being diverted into their divisions.

One way in which we can be helped to fill this theological and ecclesiological vacuum by rediscovering a foundational ecumenical document. Often called the 'Lima Agreement', *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (*1980) has the most concise and relevant analysis of the relational functions of oversight. It is helpful, even fundamental, because it helps us to move away both from collaborative and hierarchical concepts of leadership. It says that relational oversight is expressed **personally**, **collegially**, and **communally**.

I have found these three concepts helpful in the consultancy work I undertake. The first relational role of a leader is about how they understand themselves personally in the setting and responsibilities to which they have been called. Martyn Percy, in his *The Humble Church* (2020) has reminded us that humility is almost an expected approach to any calling and particularly to an ordained role in any denomination. Personal standards, spirituality and integrity are on public display. They should not be observed in the breach but in the life of a public person in role trying to understand themselves. Collegial working is of the essence of responsible leadership. Bishops need to work out, however inflated their egos, how to work together, and in a collegial relationship with other diocesan staff. It is a particular privilege of Anglican church leaders, but no longer exclusively so, that their office gives them a privileged place and a voice on the communal stage, often informed locally, and expressed regionally or nationally. This integrated relational understanding is all about intentional and negotiated pastoral relationships which when exercised with informed theological understanding can build a renewed church.

Can a relational church be rebuilt?

My answer is an emphatic YES! I say this because our Anglican Settlement, the birthplace of what became the Church of England was born on tolerance and on differing groups agreeing to be able to work together. Richard Hooker was able to produce his masterpiece of reflective relational theology to give credibility and legitimacy to such a way of working. Perhaps because of our adversarial or single-issue interest membership the General Synod, from its inception in 1970 has brought division rather than relational debate to the surface. There is no doubt that the lack of 'balance' in senior appointments and within senior staff teams has increased divisiveness and reduced the possibility of collegial decision making. If these issues, can be remedied, not with any further reorganisation, or with the creation of further specialised and often extra-parochial teams, but with a rediscovery of our basic Anglican ethos and spirituality much can be achieved. It can be achieved through our prayerfulness, our meeting together for the eucharist around the Lord's Table and our deliberate resolve to develop non-hierarchical and informal ways in which we can follow the commendation in our key chosen text from the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews to – 'not give up meeting together'. I am a passionate believer that we must address a pressing current need and draw from our cultural heritage so that together we can develop a more relational culture – a community of communities. My hope is that this joint piece of work will model our intention and help to transform our Church of England. It has the potential to become, perhaps for the first time, a relational community of faith in which new members are welcomed, its ministers affirmed, and where we all feel re-formed, renewed, and revitalised.

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Agenda for a Relational People of God

Peter Price

> *'When others look at us in a friendly way, we feel alive and vital. When others recognise us just the way we are, we feel fulfilled. And when we feel accepted and affirmed, we are happy, for we human beings need acceptance just as the birds need air and the fish water. Acceptance is the atmosphere of humanity. Where acceptance is lacking, the air becomes thin, our breathing falters, and we languish.'*

These words from Jürgen Moltmann[1] define to some extent what 'Relational Church' is about. I read and quoted these words at the beginning of a series of conferences that ran over some three years in the 1980's. Our Area Bishop wanted to encourage churches to take a look at their lives as churches and ask, '*What does it mean to live together as the people of God?*' As the representatives of parishes came together in groups one thing became abundantly clear as people shared their stories and their lives: living together as the people of God doesn't work for people who need to build a system.

In its endeavour to be relevant and speak to our times the temptation for the church is to systematise, formulate and structure. Too easily this leads to dogma, discrimination and division. At the core of all the *razz ma jazz*, competitiveness and

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1 Jürgen Moltmann The Open Church Invitation to a messianic lifestyle SCM Press. 1978 p.27.

confusion we call the church, there lies a simple relational truth enunciated by Jesus: '*I shall no longer call you servants because the servant does not know what the master is doing. I call you friends because I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me. I chose you.*'[2] It is because of we are 'friends of God' and of one another and we have been 'chosen' by Jesus Christ that we exist as 'church' at all.

Key then to 'relational church' is the acceptance of one another. '*Accept one another, then, as Christ accepted you, for the glory of God.*[3] When we experience friendship, acceptance of ourselves 'just the way we are 'and being known and affirmed, '*we are happy.*' Such acceptance provides the basis for living together, sharing our lives with one another and preparing ourselves to be those for whom the only value of their lives is '*for others*'[4].

Through the years I have un-apologetically leaned on Moltmann's reflection on '*Community with Others*' - particularly when he offers guidance on just how we move in church life to being a community of acceptance he says: '*Congregation is a new kind of living together as human beings that affirms:*

- that no one is alone with his or her problems.
- that no one has to conceal his or her disabilities,
- that there are not some who have the say and others who have nothing to say.
- that neither the old nor the little ones are isolated,
- that bears the other even when it is unpleasant and there is no agreement, and

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[2] John 15.15-16 Revised New Jerusalem Bible

[3] Romans 15.7. RNJB

[4] Dag Hammarskjöld *'The only value of a life is its content - for others.'*

- that, finally the one can also at times leave the other in peace when the other needs it.[5]

'Mission Audits' rarely, if ever, began with the '*Who are we?' 'Where have we come from?' 'How shall we live if this is who we say* we are' kind of questions. Yet Moltmann's invitation to 'relational church' calls for precisely such reflection. We can only live our lives '*for others'* when we have discerned how to live holistically *with* others.

A great challenge facing contemporary Christianity in the West lies in the paradigm shift required to move from the individual to the communal. Individualism puts *me* first. The communal asks '*what is the value of my life, if not for others*?' Individualism is not the same as 'personal.' A personal faith emerges from the sense of being chosen. But that 'chosen-ness' is in order that we, like Jesus, should live our lives 'for *others.*' Living in such a way calls for 'relationship', listening to a God who bids, '*Look for me where I am.'*

In my lifetime there has been a marked shift in emphasis in Christian thinking. This has been summed up most succinctly by Sam Wells, Vicar of St. Martin in the Fields: *'It's About Abundant Life, Not Hell Avoidance.'* Such a statement is neat maybe too neat. 'Abundant life' in much Western Christianity includes not only having the cake but the right to the icing and cherry on the top: the right to possess homes, possessions, lifestyle and Jesus as we like him on the top.

Abundant life that neglects Jesus's concern for human suffering and the ease with which discrimination, violence and cruelty manifest themselves in the human condition is naïve. It fails to address how these conditions are daily realities for much of the world. Constructing a doctrine of salvation around sin tends to neglect Jesus's *praxis* of seeking the wellbeing (*salus)* of human beings and communities. Jesus envisioned

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[5] *op cit* p.33

human liberation (abundant living) as '*anchored in the experience of the divine as a compassionate God in solidarity with suffering humanity.*'[6] Only when our vision of 'relational church' embraces and pursues 'abundant life' for all humanity will hell be avoided. For far too many of God's children it is our 'abundant life' that is making their lives hell.

Christian spirituality has at its heart is the prayer which begins, *Our Father in heaven, may your Name be hallowed, may your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.* Familiarity of religious language whilst not necessarily breeding contempt nevertheless passes over us without much understanding.

Jesus spoke much less about sin than he did about '*the kingdom (or reign) of God.* Many attempts have been made to interpret precisely what Jesus meant. Here are some examples: St. Cyprian (d. 258 A.D) spoke of it as '*a natural model of equality*.' This has echoes of the Magnificat - *the mighty being brought down from their seat and the humble and poor lifted up'.* Martin Luther King spoke of *kin-dom* - all humanity belonging to single kin. The Mennonites talk of *beloved community*. Pope Paul VI who carried through the recommendations of Vatican 2 described the kingdom as *absolute good.* Contemporary theologians variously interpretated it: Howard Snyder - *Counter System:* Walter Wink as *Domination free order.* John D. Caputo as '*a poem to what the world would look like if God ruled and not the principalities and powers.'*

These insights help our understanding of Jesus's focus the *kingdom of God.* It was for its establishment '*on earth as in heaven;* that Jesus encouraged his followers to pray and work. Most people associate Jesus with 'church' and exclusively Christianity. This has led to much misunderstanding of both the inclusivity and the universality of Jesus's vocation; *that all*

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6 Felix Wilfred *Concilium SCM Press* 2016/1 Journeys of Liberation: Joys and Hopes for the Future pp.13-23

(who embrace the kingdom) may be one.[7]

In Aramaic the word Jesus used for kingdom was *malkuta.* It symbolises a wisdom that nurtures courage to act against the odds, one that heals, empowers, and regenerates. All his actions: prayer in the open air, plucking corn, feeding the hungry, filling fishing boats with fish, ending discrimination, healing the sick. In each and all of these actions lie hidden questions: '*What did you see? What did you hear? How will you respond?*' Jesus described those who grasped this as having *eyes to see, ears to hear*.' Those who did not, or refused so to do, he described as being *deaf and blind* to the truth of God's *saving justice.* When Jesus spoke plainly and prescriptively it was almost always to the religious and political elite. These were those who awarded themselves status and pious separation from the rest of humanity. As in every age there are warnings here against systematisation and advocacy for 'relationship.'

Aramaic was the language of an agrarian, nomadic people. Those who developed the language knew a closeness to creation, the dark silence of nights brightened with celestial lights and governed by the patterns of seasons. Such folk intuited a God given-ness and presence within the cosmos bringing wisdom that empowered people. It is a wisdom that recognises in creation a resistance towards all that threatens '*abundant life.*'

Today we might look at the aftermath of the Chernobyl Nuclear disaster which appeared to wipe out all living things, yet today the trees are growing, animal life is returning. This is the in-built spirit of renewal and creativity which Jesus calls *the kingdom of God.*

'To seek the kingdom of God and God's saving justice I believe can be translated as: 'to strive against the odds for the wellbeing of the Earth doing what is right, what is just and best for all its peoples.' At a personal and communal level few could

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[7] John 17.21. Amplified text mine.

have put the challenge better than the monk Thomas Merton: the kingdom comes when 'God begins to live in me not only as my creator, but as my other and true self.' Only as we seek a new way of relationally living together accepting one another as we are, acknowledging that our lives only have value if their content is for others can we respond to the God who invites us to 'Look for me where I am.'

'Relational church' is about taking what is and submitting it to the spirit of God's transforming grace. It is about creating the *Acceptance (that) is the atmosphere of humanity.* Recently I found some helpful tools [8] for encouraging relationship building. Used in conjunction with reflection on Moltmann's *Congregation is a new kind of living together* manifesto, what follows might encourage and liberate such in the local church.

The four tools are *Resilience, Relinquishment, Restoration* and *Reconciliation.* As we work towards *what has not yet been revealed* about ourselves, our relationships, our *new kind of living together* here are some questions for reflection, discussion and action.

Resilience: How do we keep what we really want to keep; what do we most value? What works well and is worth continuing?

Relinquishment: What do we need to let go of so as not to make matters worse? What is unhelpful or destructive? What do we want to stop?

Restoration: What could we bring back to help us with the coming difficulties and tragedies? What would we like to see more of? What skills or knowledge are we missing?

Reconciliation: With what and with whom shall we make peace as we face our common mortality?

As with all restorative work we need to take time. This agenda

[8] 4R Deep Adaptation, *The Anglican Peacemaker May 2022*

is not like that of a PCC It is there to question, explore and consider the implications. A guide to whether it is an agenda that liberates or threatens to bind lies in St. Paul's words in Galatians 5:1 *For freedom Christ has set us free. Do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.*

Collectives are our Future

Alison Webster

I often lead workshops on themes of practical theology, mission and social justice. As part of these workshops, on several occasions over the last few months, I have shared with people the following quote from a pastoral theologian and therapist, wondering whether it finds resonances with participants:

> 'The average individual I encounter in the clinical situation today is not the same as the person who sat with me 30 years ago. Sometimes the changes are subtle. Often, they are obvious. But they are pervasive and apparently widespread. There has been a marked increase in self-blame among those seeking my care, as well as an amorphous but potent dread that they are somehow teetering on the edge of a precipice. This is confounded by the appearance of a few individuals who seem far more self-assured and confident, even entitled, or defiant, than I have previously witnessed. Somewhat mysteriously, these highly self-reliant souls seem more superficial and one-dimensional than their depressive or anxious cohorts. Meanwhile, addictive behaviors have become more prevalent and have quickly expanded into areas of life not usually associated with compulsivity. Relationships, even familial or romantic ones, seem to be becoming more ephemeral and contrived, almost businesslike. The people I now see tend to manifest a far more diffuse or fragmented sense of self, are frequently more overwhelmed, experience powerful forms of anxiety and depression too vague to be named, display less self-awareness, have often loosened or dropped affiliations

> with conventional human collectives, and are increasingly haunted by shame rooted in a nebulous sense of personal failure. I find myself more disquieted and even confused than I used to be while sitting with people, even less "myself." What has happened?'

Without exception, people recognise this picture as reflective of their reality. They talk of the prevalence of loneliness and isolation within their communities; of polarisation in society, fed by social media; of low self-esteem and poor mental health, including amongst young people. Above all – and especially after Covid and in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis, they recognise the threat of grinding poverty, and the ever-present stark reality of huge inequality in every village, town and city in our country.

The quote itself comes from a brilliant book by Bruce Rogers Vaughn, 'Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age: New Approaches to Religion and Power' (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, Kindle p.11). The book explores the impact of global capitalism through the eyes of a practical and pastoral theologian and psychotherapist. It tackles the whole spectrum from individual pain and suffering through to the biggest systemic material injustices that face us all today, and their ideological roots. It is deeply sobering; complexly nuanced, but curiously hopeful in that it gives us, as faith communities and congregations, *urgent things to do.*

In this chapter I will pick out some highlights of what he identifies has gone wrong in our world; explore briefly his analysis of what we need to build now and apply this to our task of rethinking the mission of our national church around the focal task of building relationship.

Identifying the Problem

Rogers-Vaughn explores in depth the growth of neo-liberal

global capitalism from the Raegan/Thatcher era to the present day, and its historical roots before that. Many of his observations will be familiar to us.

First, individuals have become commodities in a market of labour and consumption. We are reduced to 'human resources' in an exchange market. That market is founded upon a free-market ideology based on individual liberty and limited government. Human freedom becomes the freedom to consume, as rational, self-interested actors in the competitive marketplace. Freedom has therefore been redefined on the market's terms, and society has been replaced by isolated and competitive individuals. Moreover, the actions of these individuals are based on self-interest rather than the common good. As global capitalism has taken hold, so there has been a rapid increase in economic inequality and class-based segregation and a remarkable decline in the quality of social relations.

In cultural terms, the organisation of human society based on individualism and competition '…subtly but steadily influences our attitudes and feelings toward ourselves, including our understanding of what it means to be a "self," as well as our dispositions and feelings toward others. Combined with the erosion of belief in the common good, this leaves us with a society in which each person increasingly looks after their own interests, and leaves others to look after theirs.' (Kindle p.29)

Rogers-Vaughn comments that, 'Prior to neoliberalism, domination was exercised by means of the disciplinary powers of institutions. Today domination occurs through the suppression of these institutions. Prior to neoliberalism, domination required replacing a particular type of subject with a new form of subject. Today it occurs through the fragmentation and dispersal of the subject altogether.' (Kindle p.156)

And as our sense of ourselves as subjects is undermined, we begin to 'lose our voice' – we struggle to make meaning from

our experience. He suggests that 'although everyone in neoliberalized societies may suffer a reduction of voice, this will be exacerbated by the extreme material inequality in these societies. Moreover, loss of voice will be unequally distributed, with those with fewer material resources being the more severely affected. The inability to narrate one's life, then, participates in the oppressions occurring at the intersections between class, race, gender, sexuality, and other loci of social injustice.' (Kindle p.160)

Stated theologically, he says, these conditions are weakening the human soul. He defines 'soul', crucially, as the connective tissue linking us together as a human community, as well as to creation and the Eternal. It is therefore a material, embodied and collective concept. It is not akin to the individual 'spirit' as conceived of by capitalist-inspired individualist spiritualities. The soul that Rogers-Vaughn suggests we need to 'increase', in his words, inhabits a collective home. Indeed, he argues that individuality, because it is dependent upon soul, arises only in a communal context. You cannot be an individual without first being part of community. Soul, he says, is the quite substantial fabric that weaves us all together and with all that is. We are all entangled. 'Soul inhabits a collective body, a body that exhales hope. This hope, once exhaled, expands to enfold our precious, entangled world, only to take it back in again. It has economic and political aspirations and inspirations. Just because it is expansive, however, does not make it abstract. It exists in material form, the form of love and justice' (Kindle p.291)

In a particularly poignant and urgent passage he concludes, 'It is no coincidence that crises such as climate change and the rapid depletion of natural resources are occurring in combination with other symptoms of social breakdown: rising mental disorders, mindless consumerism, materialistic conformism, status competition, civic disengagement, startling economic inequalities, global financial instability and widespread political inertia. While these crises are usually studied in isolation, they are all interconnected.' (Kindle p.38)

He cites the work of the late Rosemary Radford Ruether as chief amongst the pioneering theologians who have for many years articulated a holistic critical analysis of the interconnected forces of oppression at work in our world.

It is worth asking ourselves, from the perspective of churches, the question that Rogers-Vaughn asks of the psychotherapeutic community: how have we colluded with normative neoliberal value systems? In what ways have we 'instilled adaptation to society - rather than resistance; functioning in accord with the values of production and consumption - rather than communion and wholeness in relation to others and the earth, on symptom relief - rather than meaning-making, and accepting personal responsibility - rather than interdependent reliance within the web of human relationships' (kindle p.16). These are key questions and represent deep challenges to our operant theologies of mission. Given the magnitude of the interconnected challenges to humanity that we have explored so far, the extent to which our mission theologies subvert neoliberal narratives should be a key criterion for judging their appropriateness for our age.

Building sustainable community

You will by now see why I described Rogers-Vaughn's book as sobering reading. Now we need to move on to explore why it may also provide us with the hope of a programme for change.

According to him, responding to the sufferings of our age will involve three things:

- The strengthening of human collectives
- The nurturing and increase of soul
- The amplification of hope

In so far as we could see these as three threads in a strategy for renewal, I want to explore them in the context of a model for social change and transformation that I find particularly

powerful, and apposite for the needs of our times. That model is Community Organising (CO), as embraced in the UK by Citizens UK.

For those unfamiliar with CO, I refer you to the very comprehensive website of Citizens UK (**www.citizensuk.org**), and in particular the rapidly developing churches' community of practice which enables theological reflection on Community Organising and resources those who are involved in broad-based alliances as part of their churches. (**https://bit.ly/3dsRqsW**), Also important is the work of theologian Angus Ritchie, and the Centre for Theology and Community in East London (**www.theology-centre.org**). His introductory pamphlet can be found on the CTC website, entitled, 'People of Power: How Community Organising recalls the church to the vision of the gospels.'

Ritchie describes CO as a structured process which brings together grassroots institutions like churches, mosques and schools in a particular town or city to work, to act on issues of common concern. It originated in the USA in the 1930s and has been growing in the UK since the 1990s.

As an example of strategic church involvement with which I am most familiar is that of the Diocese of Oxford, which has a strategic partnership with Citizens UK and is currently building broad-based alliances of institutions in Oxford and Reading, to work with the pre-existing Citizens Milton Keynes. Together they are Thames Valley Citizens. There are now nineteen Citizens Chapters across England and Wales, many of which have participation by Anglican and Roman Catholic Dioceses and Methodist Districts, and all of which have local Christian congregational involvement from a wide variety of denominations. CO activity represents a context for discipleship development, vocational exploration, lay leadership and empowerment, congregational renewal, missional activity, and ecumenical/interfaith engagement.

In short, CO starts from an awareness that whilst the market and the state are 'organised' – the so-called third sector of civic

society is less so. As already explained, collectives of all kinds have waned in importance under neoliberalism, and this has weakened participatory democracy, and undermined ways of building 'people power'.

CO aims to address issues of social injustice through a distinct methodology and discipline that is, above all, relational. It begins with listening to people – their passions and their concerns – through systematic listening campaigns built on 1-2-1 conversations. The 1-2-1 is a basic building block of organising – it is an intentional conversation where the agenda is the other person, being attentive to the building of common 'self interest'; a power analysis is conducted in order to take effective action on particular injustices; there is a constant focus on developing leaders who can testify to their experience and give voice (leaders are defined as those closest to the injustice, who are often those otherwise marginalised and oppressed by systems of power); change is won in a way that empowers leaders and builds agency (ensuring that campaigns are winnable and incremental); all meetings and actions are evaluated by a method akin to the 'pastoral cycle'; broad-based alliances of diverse institutions are evolved that are constantly listening to those in their communities through 1-2-1s such that their institutions are strengthened, and they become part of a long-term 'collective of collectives'. Its power comes through the number and diversity of people that an alliance represents. This broad-based alliance works to an annual cycle of action for change – calling powerholders to account, but can also respond quickly to crises and challenges (eg influxes of refugees; pandemic response; major disasters or crimes in local communities). Member organisations pay dues, which ensures that the alliance is independent of any body from whom it may wish to win changes.

Building Collectives, Soul and Hope

Angus Ritchie explains why Community Organising focuses on

collective endeavours – on strengthening institutions, 'Institutions attract a lot of suspicion, some of it justified. But an institution is just the set of structured relationships which emerge when human beings agree to be faithful to one another across time. That is what a Scout group, trade union, marriage and mosque have in common. It is one of the characteristic myths of our culture that such commitments restrict our freedom. In fact, our institutions are vital to our freedom. They enable us to build relationships of solidarity and trust across boundaries of age, race and religion. Without them, we are isolated individuals, and our lives and communities are dominated even more by the power of the market and the state.'

And Rogers-Vaughn says, 'It is my judgment that the primary challenge for pastoral care, psychotherapy, social activism, and other approaches to caring for souls today is not the effort to fix discrete personal problems or even to redress specific injustices. It is, rather, to aid people, individually and collectively, in finding their footing - to articulate the deep meanings that ground their lives and to strengthen healthy collectives and social movements that hold some residue of transcendental values. These constitute the fundamental resources for addressing whatever ongoing crises people may be enduring under the new chronic.' (Kindle p.163)

This points our congregations both towards strengthening our relationality within, and also to reach out to build relationships with other collectives that we can work with to resist oppressive hierarchies. The particular challenge of our time is to rekindle the concept of 'solidarity'. We need to press through our differences in search of common interests and the common good – all the time resisting 'divide and rule' by those in power and fragmentation amongst an 'us' that must be forever porous. Rogers-Vaughn says, 'If the problems of class exploitation, sexism, and racism arise together, then they must be addressed together. This is a peculiar sort of solidarity, a common life rooted not in sameness, but on a deep respect, obligation to, and thus love for, the infinite and unique value of

every individual. This is the solidarity that sustains soul. Theologians Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan (2012) refer to this as "deep solidarity." They assert: "Solidarity in this context is not the support of people who are exactly like oneself but rather what we are calling deep solidarity. Solidarity is the support of others who are different yet experience similar predicaments"' (Kindle p. 267).

In a broad-based Community Organising alliance, building across different religions and beliefs is crucial. Nobody is asked to 'leave their beliefs at the door', or to abandon the distinctiveness of their convictions. Action is taken only on issues that everyone can agree on, and what is surprising is just how much diverse groups can agree on – and, as Angus Ritche explains, also how different groups can learn from one another without diluting their own core beliefs. For example, the seriousness with which Muslims take Qu'ranic teachings on usury has inspired Christians to engage at a greater depth with Biblical teaching on these issues – and so churches and mosques have been at the heart of a successful community organising campaign for a legal cap on the interest rates of pay day loans.

How is hope amplified by this re-emphasis on collectives and the embracing of soul as the fabric that weaves us together in those collectives? I think in two ways at least. Firstly, and perhaps paradoxically, in the articulation of pain and suffering, and secondly in the discovery that change is possible, and we are not powerless. Like physical pain, psychological, relational, and spiritual suffering has a function – it calls us to take action to address a threat or a problem. As Rogers-Vaughn says, 'Sufferings insist on finding a voice… I (and we) have learned that, when unheeded, pain produces and structures alienation, injustice, ignorance, division, and isolation into our individual and collective lives. I (we) have also learned that, when articulated and heard, pain may yield and structure connection, continuity, integrity, justice, and direction into our individual and collective lives.' (Kindle p.15)

In making relationality central to social change and justice-

making, Community Organising enables the articulation of pain: through 1-2-1 listening, through small group conversations, and through leaders 'giving testimony' and bearing witness, sometimes to audiences of hundreds and thousands. This is not 'telling one's story' for media-defined purposes – which can often further traumatise a person, but it is telling one's story on one's own terms, in order to create change. It can therefore be both therapeutic and political. It is, in itself, resistance.

And, as Angus Ritchie points out '…the questions at the heart of a one-to-one…are questions Christians ought to be comfortable asking. Organising around citizens' "self-interest" does not involve organising around their selfishness. Rather, it honours their actual values and concerns – focusing on the realities of their lives and commitments, rather than talking in the language of vague and abstract ideas. And in the process of building relationships with our neighbours and taking action with them for the good of our families and communities, we discover our hearts are expanded, and our "self-interest" becomes less and less self- absorbed. In losing our lives, we find them.'

A weakness deep at the heart of our Christian congregational life is often a failure deeply to know one another; to pay attention to consistent and persistent community building. No wonder we find it so hard to build community with others beyond our congregational boundaries. The structure of the 1-2-1 conversation alone can be transformative of congregations. But as soon as we get to know one another – our hopes and fears, our passions and commitments, the way we spend our time and our money – our outlook will begin to expand. We become the wider community of those that our immediate community encompasses. I care that your brother is struggling with his mental health and cannot access services; I care that your mother has dementia and is in a care home that is under-staffed. I care about those things because I know you. I care about those things because I care about you. Once we begin to

learn more about one another, we begin to see patterns of common experience. Then we can reach out to others in our community with similar experiences. Relationality drives our outreach.

There is so much about our current context that is desperate. I need not list those things. We need hope. And hope comes from not feeling alone. A relational church engaged in Community Organising, part of a web of diverse institutions winning change, begins to address what the poet Adrienne Rich encapsulates in her poem 'Natural Resources' in 'A Dream of a Common Language (Norton, 1978)

"My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world."

To what are we called, and how shall we respond?

Building a relational culture through Jesus' School of Discipleship Learning

Leslie J. Francis

Introduction

This brief paper emerged from a series of virtual discussions on the theme of 'building a relational culture' within the Church of England. The argument is advanced in three steps. The first step 'rooted in the gospel narrative' raises the primary question 'to what are we called, and how shall we respond?' An analysis of the first part of Mark's Gospel, taking us to the transfiguration, proposes that we are called into Jesus' School of Discipleship Learning in order to become transformed by our growing awareness of God's activity in God's world. This transformation, however, is not for our benefit as disciples, but for equipping us to share in God's mission for God's world. The five thousand, like sheep without a shepherd, deserve food for their bodies and food for their souls. The second step 'rooted in the Anglican tradition', assesses the distinctive continuity between this Marcan vision and an Anglican polity that envisages a Christian presence in every community, a commitment both to discipleship learning and to public service, a collaborative relational presence focused on the bishop,

shared with priests and deacons, expressed through a lectionary-driven eucharistic community in which the whole People of God (lay and ordained) share in the Messianic banquet, and where Catholic and Reformed perspectives offer mutual enrichment. The third step 'rooted in facilitated learning' explores the distinctive contribution of an innovative programme of facilitated discipleship learning (that affords degree-level university accreditation), rooted both in the Marcan vision and in the Anglican tradition. Piloted first in Wales, this programme currently flourishes in the Anglican Church in Newfoundland and in the Anglican Church in Cyprus and the Gulf.

Rooted in the Gospel narrative

Mark's Gospel has a surprising structure, a structure that both Matthew and Luke clearly failed to grasp as they set out to improve Marks' narrative and to reshape it according to their own agenda. In doing so, they obscured the centrality of Mark's clear Gospel message. The prologue to Mark's Gospel, (1: 1-14) formulates with clarity Mark's theological agenda:

> *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ,*
> *the Son of God.*

It is no accident that Mark's opening word picks up the opening of Genesis, and proclaims a new beginning. The good news that Mark proclaims is focused on Jesus, and Jesus' theological significance is captured by the two designations as Christ and as Son of God.

In this prologue the designation as Christ is validated by the activity of John. John comes clothed as Elijah, the king-maker. John comes empowered to anoint Jesus as Messiah, and the anointing that John effects is validated by the voice from heaven proclaiming the royal Psalm of anointing: 'Thou art my beloved Son, in thee I am well pleased.'

In this prologue the designation as Son of God is validated by the encounter with Satan. Just as the first Adam stood there among the wild beasts and confronted the tempter, so now does Adam's successor on the edge the new beginning. This time, however, Satan does not get the upper hand. Instead, angels are at hand to support the Son of God inaugurate the new People of God.

Immediately following the prologue, Mark brings Jesus onto the stage proclaiming (speaking out, effecting) the good news of God's new beginning. The Reign of God is about to be experienced and recognised. In Mark's account the opening evidence that the Reign of God has arrived was seen when four fishermen were called away from their nets, Andrew and Simon from casting their nets and James and John from mending their nets. It is clear from what these four fishermen were called away. But to what were they called?

Mark seems to suggest that these four fishermen were called into close personal relationships with Jesus, into what I choose to style Jesus' School of Discipleship Learning. In the Marcan narrative, Jesus seems to have been very intentional about the way in which these four (and the other nine) were nurtured into reading the world differently and, eventually, into recognising Jesus for who (according to the prologue) he really is. Jesus' intentional strategy is shaped by building a relational culture. Within this relational culture Jesus' School of Discipleship Learning facilitates their re-interpretation of the inherited tradition and facilitates their reading of what they observe of God's activity in the world around them.

In the Marcan narrative, Jesus' School of Discipleship Learning begins precisely as Jesus intends to continue with his relational culture of facilitated learning. The very first activity in which Jesus engages with his first four followers occurs on the Sabbath in Capernaum. The Reign of God is unveiled in front of the four followers in the place where the scriptures are held and where the scriptures are interpreted. It is in the synagogue that Jesus taught. Unlike Luke, Mark makes no

attempt to capture the content of Jesus' teaching. For Mark the point is not in the content but in the weight. They were astonished at Jesus' teaching because he spoke with authority.

Within that synagogue, alongside the interpretation of the scriptures, these four fishermen were confronted with new experience. There they confronted the encounter between Jesus and a man with an unclean spirit. That experience raised a formative question in their minds:

What is this? A new teaching – with authority!
He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him?

Facilitated relational learning, begins not with the proclamation of answers, but with the identification of the right questions, rooted in personal and in collective experience.

Immediately after leaving the synagogue, Mark moves the narrative from sacred space to domestic space. Together Jesus and the four transfer their relational location to Simon's house. Just as all was not well within the sacred space, all was not well within the domestic space. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever. There in the relational domestic space Jesus took Simon's mother-in-law by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her and she began to serve them. Clearly the emerging Reign of God is not restricted to sacred space.

As Jesus' School of Discipleship Learning took root, a fifth member was added to the relational community in the form of Levi (2: 13-17). Later a further eight members were named (3: 13-19) among the appointed twelve. Intriguingly, in line with the ambiguous status of the Levites in various enumerations of the twelve tribes of Israel in the Old Testament, the recently enlisted Levi falls below the radar.

As the Marcan narrative progresses, this diverse group of twelve or thirteen individuals called into Jesus' School of Discipleship Learning witness a great deal; they see a lot and hear a lot as their eyes are opened, and as their curiosity is stimulated. Of significant importance is the way in which they

are schooled to keep a keen eye on the world around them, looking for clues regarding the way in which God's world works. They are being inducted into the approach of empirical theology when Jesus invites them to observe the sower. By observation they recognise and note the four different styles of soil and the different patterns of growth associated with different styles of soil. By calculation they recognise the different growth within the good soil, distinguishing thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and a hundredfold.

Jesus' School of Discipleship Learning reaches its goal at Caesarea Philippi (8: 27-30) when Jesus first asks the global question, 'Who do people say that I am?' and then follows up with the personal question, 'Who do you say that I am?' It seems that by this stage sufficient dialogue had taken place in Simon Peter's mind, engaging personal experience with re-interpretation of the scriptures, for the penny to have dropped and for disclosure to have taken root. 'You are the Messiah' he said (just as set out in the Marcan prologue). The confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi was followed six days later by ascent of the high mountain where Jesus was transformed in the presence of Moses and Elijah (the Law and the Prophets) and where the voice from heaven (that had proclaimed the royal Psalm of anointing directly to Jesus in the second person singular) now proclaims the same Psalm in the third person singular for all to hear.

Jesus' School of Discipleship learning that had focused so much attention on the nurture and formation of the twelve or thirteen who had responded to his call had not invested in these individuals solely for their personal gratification and development. Alongside the involvement in building a relational culture among the few, there remained throughout the Marcan narrative a strong emphasis on the needs of the many. This emphasis is voiced most clearly during the aftermath of the missionary journey (6: 30-44).

The apostles returned weary after their ambivalent experience both of rejection and of acceptance, and in light of

the news of the execution of John the Baptist, foreshadowing the fate of their own leader and teacher. They returned wearied by much coming and going and by having no leisure even to eat. Jesus invited them to set sail for a deserted place. It was in that hypothesised deserted place that they encounter a crowd of five thousand. It was there that Jesus' heart went out to the crowd because they were like sheep without a shepherd. It was there that the hunger of the crowd overshadowed the hunger of the twelve or thirteen who were pressed into service to effect the Reign of God among the many as well as among the few.

For Mark, the feeding of the five thousand was such an important part of the experience of those shaped within Jesus' School of Discipleship Learning that, not only was the narrative reinformed by the parallel feeding of the four thousand (8: 1-10), but both narratives were drawn together and summarised (8: 14-21). Indeed, the summary was reinforced by the rhetorical question, 'Do you not yet understand?'

To understand the Marcan imperative issued by the emerging Reign of God is to accept the call from the old way of life, to embrace the call for engagement with the relational culture of the facilitated school of discipleship, and to engage with God's mission for God's world.

Rooted in the Anglican tradition

Different expressions of Church, different ecclesiologies have expressed the balance between formation of disciples and service for the world in different ways. The architecture defining this balance is complex but remains rooted in clear patterns that underpin diversity (and fragmentation) within the Christian tradition. At heart the difference is concerned with world-affirming and world-denying interpretations of the tradition. The tendency for the sectarian approach (world denying) is to focus attention on shaping disciples in order to rescue them from the world. The danger is that the call to feed the five thousand may be overlooked or undervalued, and that

the twelve may become increasing isolated from the world. The tendency for the church approach (world affirming) is to focus attention on serving the world. The danger is that the call to nurture the twelve may be overlooked or undervalued, and that the twelve may become increasingly ill equipped to carry through their mission of service.

Within this over-simplified demarcation between the sectarian approach and the church approach are two key and highly visible factors. The first factor is rooted in doctrinal priorities. The Christian narrative has been shaped by the dialogue among the three doctrines of creation, fall, and redemption. The world-affirming approach tends to prioritise the doctrine of creation, while the world-denying approach tends to prioritise the doctrine of fall and the Christocentric approach to redemption. The second factor is rooted in theological and liturgical approaches. Christian theological and liturgical practice has been shaped by the dialogue between cognitive and affective priorities. The world-affirming approach tends to prioritise the affective components of liturgy and personal engagement, while the world-denying approach tends to prioritise the cognitive approach and personal belief. The two approaches are distinguished by distinctive attitudes toward scripture and toward the authority of scripture.

Within this kaleidoscope of Christian traditions, the Anglican tradition in general, and the Church of England in particular, occupies a unique position. Emerging from the Reformation with a twin commitment to roots in the Catholic tradition and to roots in the Reformed tradition, the Church of England has remained open to a range of influences that has enabled it to hold in tension world-embracing and world-denying perspectives. With the rise of the Tractarian Movement and the Evangelical Movement during the early nineteenth century the Church of England re-connected in engaging ways with the rich diversity resourced by these twin roots in the Catholic and Reformed traditions.

The current challenge faced by the Church of England

concerns how it can remain faithful to its distinctive heritage in a rapidly changing sociological context. Society has changed and this change is best reflected both in growing secularisation and in the increasingly visible presence of religious diversity. These pressures tend either to encourage the Christian presence to retreat into a sectarian position, raising the threshold between disciples and society, or to attempt to maintain the veneer of a Christian presence that is inadequately resourced and under-developed. Neither option affords longer-term sustainability.

Against this background, I propose to argue for a distinctive continuity between the Marcan vision of the call into the relational culture of Jesus' School of Discipleship Learning and an Anglican polity that envisages a Christian presence in every community. The key to this argument is that a Christian presence in every community, within the present sociological context of secularisation and religious diversity, requires an appropriately balanced commitment both to discipleship learning and to public service. Only the former can now resource and release the potential for the latter. The mandate for such a vision is purely Marcan in its origin.

Such a commitment both to discipleship learning and to public service is consistent with the essence of Anglican identity as reflected in a collaborative relational presence focused on the bishop, shared with priests and deacons, and expressed through a lectionary-driven eucharistic community in which the whole People of God (lay and ordained) share in the Messianic banquet, and where Catholic and Reformed perspectives offer mutual enrichment.

Rooted in facilitated learning

In the late 1990s, a group of Anglican theologians working within the University of Wales began to envisage what the Marcan School of Discipleship Learning would look like transplanted into an Anglican presence within the context of

today's secular and religiously diverse society. We imagined that for such a programme to carry weight it would need to be validated to degree level (BA in Theology for Discipleship) and accredited by Churches as a viable platform for education and formation for authorised lay and ordained ministries (creating a seamless progression for those who experienced a call to ministry, following their response to a call to discipleship learning). The BA in Theology for Discipleship incorporated distinctive pedagogical principles, distinctive mode of delivery, distinctive curriculum, distinctive emphasis on formation, and distinctive pattern for assessment.

In terms of distinctive pedagogical principles, the programme was rooted in the unique experience of the individual participants and in their intended discipleship trajectory. The programme required candidates to be commended and supported by their local church and for this local church to be engaged with their developing expression of discipleship. The pedagogy expected candidates to take seriously their ordinary theology (in the sense proposed by Jeff Astley, 2002, 2003), to connect theological learning and personal formation, and to engage with research-based reflective practice.

In terms of distinctive delivery, the programme was delivered at a distance within the relational culture of Local Education Groups involving between six and ten participants who met weekly for two or three hours for a nine-week term. Participants were asked to prepare for each meeting of the Local Education Group by studying set material and by preparing responses to set exercises. Local Education Groups were convened by a Facilitator. The role of the Facilitator was not to serve as teacher for the Local Education Group, but to facilitate conversation and debate about the areas that had been considered in preparation for the meeting. Facilitation is a skilled task. Comparability between groups was maintained by regular meetings for Facilitators.

The distinctive curriculum was designed to support

theological learning coupled with personal, spiritual, and professional formation, engaging conversation between (on the one hand) the experiences and ordinary theology of the participants, and (on the other hand) the Christian tradition as valued and discussed by the Church and by the academy. The curriculum took seriously the debates of contemporary theological scholarship alongside the concerns and experiences of ordinary Christian disciples engaged with the opportunities and challenges of being actively involved with life in the secular world and in the local congregation. The programme was supported by two key series of books: the Exploring Faith series published by Darton, Longman and Todd (see for example, Astley, 2000, 2004; Francis, 2005; Redfern, 2000), and the Learning Church series published by SCM Press (see Astley, 2014, 2016; Holdsworth, 2014, 2016; Jones, 2014; Village 2016). These two key series were designed to give priority to the experiences and theological quest of the participants, encouraging their experience and quest to engage with the tradition. These two key series do not begin with the tradition. To provide a balanced basis for theological engagement, the programme organised three streams of modules, with one module for each stream present during each of the six years taken by the programme. One stream concerned the Church's engagement with scripture, a second stream concerned the church looking toward domestic matters (say vocation or worship) and a third stream concerned the church looking toward engagement with the wider world (say Christian ethics, or mission and service).

The distinctive emphasis on formation was designed to support an accompanied journey for disciples (as much as for ministry candidates). This accompanied journey is grounded in the Marcan image of Jesus accompanying his chosen twelve or thirteen on a facilitated journey, during which two key discoveries gradually take place. Drawing on their personal and collective experience, and dialoguing their experience with the theological tradition, their eyes are opened to see who it

really is whom they have begun to follow. Then recognising Jesus for who he really is, their task is to grasp what they themselves have been called to become. Discipleship learning is as much concerned with personal, spiritual, and professional formation as with academic outcomes.

The distinctive pattern of assessment reflects the distinctive motivation of the participants. Each module is assessed by a portfolio of three equally weighted components. The first component is held in common with any other recognised academic award in theology. Participants are required to submit an essay that assesses the academic learning outcomes of the module. The second component reflects the pedagogical method of the programme. Each week participants are required to offer a short response to the learning task reflecting the week's course material. At the end of the module participants are required to revisit two of these learning tasks and to develop a fuller essay on them. The third component reflects the overall aim of the programme that encourages dialogue between the academic learning outcomes and the personal, spiritual, and professional formation of the participants. Participants are invited to reflect on the connection between the module and their personal Christian pilgrimage.

Reflections on the way in which the BA in Theology for Discipleship operated within Wales were published in a special issue of Rural Theology (volume 13, number 1, 2015) edited by Jeff Astley. In this collection of essays, Jeff Astley (2015) discusses the notion of 'discipleship learning' and focuses educational and biblical reflections on 'forming disciples'. Leslie Francis (2015) discusses setting priorities for the rural church that involve taking discipleship learning seriously and details the BA in Theology for Discipleship offered by Glyndŵr University in association with the St Mary's and St Giles' Centre. Randolph Ellis (2015) discusses practising Christian formation within a group under the title, 'Moving from idle talk to transformative conversation'. The current Vice Chancellor of Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln, Peter Neil (2015)

undertakes an evaluation of the impact of the programme on participants under the title, 'Exploring a formal model of discipleship in higher education in care studies'.

After the Church in Wales decided to close the programme at Glyndŵr University, the programme was re-established at Queens College, Newfoundland where the programme has taken root and from where it currently flourishes in the Anglican Church in Cyprus and the Gulf. There is experience here in diverse and challenging cultures (the deeply rural Newfoundland and the religiously diverse Gulf) of building an effective School of Discipleship Learning, grounded in a relational culture, and committed to engagement with God's world. Perhaps there is something here worth trying in England?

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Effective Signs of Grace?

John Cole

What if we could see ourselves as 'sacramental' people?
What might this say about how we engage in God's mission?
And what can we learn about how we may nourish one another?
Three key virtues in a relational Church:
unity, reconciliation, and covenant love.

1. Sacramental people

In the middle of the twentieth century, in the decade or so before Rock and Roll and the Beatles transformed pop culture, a revolution took place widely in parish churches across the Church of England. The traditional Sunday morning service of Mattins and Sermon was replaced by a sung version of Holy Communion, which was mysteriously called *'Sung Eucharist'*. Only those who are now nearing four score years will remember the mixture of unease and excitement that greeted the change. We were invited to discover that we were *'the Lord's people round the Lord's table on the Lord's Day'*.

There can be little doubt that the new Sunday morning service arrangements contributed a new vitality to many local congregations. Week by week, vast numbers of worshippers across the country were regularly being given a wafer and a sip of wine. Previously most would have only experienced this - in line with the requirement in the Book of Common Prayer - *"three times a year of which Easter shall be one"*.

As we received this *'sacrament'* (like *'eucharist'* this was a term that we did not fully understand) we were told that this wafer and wine were "the Body and the Blood of Christ". Some of us also heard terms such as "the Real Presence". We caught

a sense that something special was going on, something that might bring us closer to God. I'm sure many of us felt this deep inside, but did we really grasp its significance? What does it mean to speak about 'sacraments? And how might this help us to see ourselves called to be 'sacramental' people?

* * *

The heading of this chapter, *'Effective signs of grace'* is how the great theologian of the Catholic tradition, St Thomas Aquinas, summed up his understanding of 'sacrament' in the 13th century. For me it opens up a whole new way of understanding about ourselves and the mysterious universe within which we are such a tiny part, and with that a glimpse of God's self-presentation in every moment and every interaction that we have with other things and other people day by day. Could it be that every event, every action, every encounter that we experience in daily life - and not just the pleasant ones - all have the potential to be recognised as more or less 'effective signs of the grace of God'? To turn this around, does this mean that we as Christ's disciples - or even as human beings "made in the image of God" - are already living and engaging with others as more or less 'effective signs of grace' today? And if we are less than 'effective', what is the problem?

* * *

A sign is only effective when someone recognises it as a sign and responds to its message or meaning. Different signs demand different responses. The Highway Code divides signs between compulsory and advisory and uses a variety of different shapes and colours to distinguish what kind of message each sign offers. Other signs generate more emotional responses - especially perhaps when some action is not intended as a sign but we find ourselves noticing it as 'significant'.

'Grace' is another word that we use in the context of our Christian faith without thinking much about its meaning. We only recognise 'grace' when it triggers a response of *gratitude* within us. Grace and gratitude are two perspectives on the same relationship, flip sides of the same coin.

This helps to explain how, in the context of worship, a wafer and a sip of wine can also be 'body and blood of Christ'. They are indeed 'effective signs of grace' because they trigger in the hearts of worshippers that deep sense of gratitude. "Feed on him in your hearts by faith *with thanksgiving*," says the person administering the bread and wine, according to the traditional wording in the Book of Common Prayer. The consecration of the bread and wine is not some magical act performed by the celebrant; it is a reality that is recognised by the whole congregation - a 'Real Presence'. It is recognised through not just the shorter consecration prayer provided in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, but through the integrated *'Great Thanksgiving'* - from the "Holy, holy, holy" through to the "by whom, and with whom, and in whom …" of most modern liturgies. And, of course, as we have now learned, 'thanksgiving' is precisely the meaning of the word 'eucharist'.

* * *

Grace and gratitude are indeed two perspectives on the same relationship, flip sides of the same coin. This is the healthy relationship in which we as humans are called to be in relation to God and to God's created order. In this relationship we can be co-creators with God. Without it we will only be destructive, exploiting our planetary home and those around us out of self-interest, behaving as if we were God. Of course, we are imperfect, often self-preoccupied, and liable to inflict damage on others and on our environment - sometimes deliberately, but more often without realising it. Perhaps that's why discovering in us a deep-seated gratitude for God's grace is so important. Only as we know that we are still being healed, can we offer

healing to others.

2. Unselfconscious evangelisers

All this colours the way in which Christ's disciples are called to relate to those who are still at other stages on their spiritual journey - in other words, how we are to be engaged in God's mission. We start by recognising that our own spiritual journey has not reached a final conclusion. Any "blessed assurance" that we may feel is itself only an 'effective sign of grace' - a sign, not a complete package that we can 'possess'. At the beginning of my eightieth year and still in reasonable health, I am increasingly aware how much I still need the grace of God now and in the years ahead. Life's bittersweet experiences will always challenge any feeling that somehow, we 'have arrived'. William Cowper's poem, *"O for a closer walk with God…"* sets the tone for me, offering a glimpse of the source of grace. The poem offers this perhaps especially for those who have suffered bereavement during this pandemic. The key verse for this is often omitted in hymnbooks, so it is worth reading the poem in full online.

It is humbly reassuring, therefore, to discover that, if we are to be sacramental people, effective signs of God's grace, our continuing imperfection - our brokenness - is inevitable and is not incompatible with integrity or credibility. We can still learn what it takes to be *trustworthy*. The 'body of Christ' that we receive at Holy Communion is a body 'broken for us'. We do not have to be perfect in order to communicate Gospel. If fact, if we give the impression of being self righteous - 'holier than thou' - we are being completely ineffective as a sign, which only works if it is pointing beyond itself.

It is almost a generation since the Decade of Evangelism in the 1990s. After four massively expensive national evangelistic campaigns around the middle of the decade, a review conducted by the Evangelical Alliance concluded that all this effort achieved little more than some closer co-operation

between different Christian traditions. There was little sign that it increased the number of churchgoers - and even the closer co-operation between Churches seems to have been lost as denominations become increasingly concerned for their own survival.

It has been said that Gospel communication is about 'out-reach', not 'in-grab'. However, even self-conscious 'outreach' is always likely to be manipulative - a 'performance' rather than the sharing of a journey. We will be engaged as effective signs of God's grace when we are 'tuned in' with others in an unselfconscious empathy. We cannot claim to be immune from the stress and anxiety that so many are feeling as the pain and fear associated with the pandemic morphs into a cost-of-living crisis.

So instead of planning how we can sell the Christian Gospel to the community, how we can 'evangelise' others, perhaps we should check the New Testament. St Paul is clear that his 'telling of good news' is nothing he can boast about. In his second letter to the Corinthian Christians he describes how his own 'thorn in the flesh' was given to him, he says, as a constant reminder that *God's grace is sufficient for him.* Only once in the New Testament (in Revelation 10.7) is 'evangelise' used as an active verb with people as its object - and the one doing the evangelising is God. Elsewhere, especially in St Paul's letters, the term is expressed in a distinctively Greek form, the so-called 'Middle Voice'. In this form, it conveys the notion that 'gospelling the gospel' is something St Paul cannot help doing. Those who hear him must decide for themselves whether his message is good news for them. Is this what made him such an 'effective sign of grace'?

It is worth noting more generally that whether any message is 'news' is only decided by those who hear it. It might just be 'information'. Their emotional reaction will show whether for them that news is good or bad. The emotions can range from anger or fear or sadness to sheer joy. We can experience different news items as everything from gut-wrenching to

heart-warming. And we usually do not need to think before these reactions overtake us. This is why all of us are at risk of being taken in by misinformation, destructive and manipulative attempts to mislead us with 'fake news'. Recipients of news face the difficult but necessary task of deciding which news sources are *trustworthy*. Trustworthiness seems to be key to achieving healthy relationships in all aspects of life in our broken world.

Even the language we use, whether written or spoken, is in fact only 'sign language' - pointing more or less reliably to a reality beyond itself. One of the great theologians of the twentieth century, Karl Rahner, insisted that the Word of God received through the scriptures is delivered sacramentally. The truth of the Bible belongs to God; it cannot reside in the words themselves.

Back in the late 1980s the members of a Diocesan Board of Mission met to make plans for the Decade of Evangelism. In a diocese very largely consisting of small village parishes, we were wondering what our priorities should be. Rather than toss around a range of conflicting opinions, we agreed that we would stay silent for twenty minutes and then go round the room to hear what scriptural references came to mind - hoping that they might be sacramental of God's Word. The outcome was unexpected but compelling: the message that stood out from the rest, repeated by several of those present, was "Feed my sheep" from the final chapter of St John's Gospel. For us the Decade became a call to enable each other - as well as others in the communities we served - to deepen our spirituality. This was what would perhaps enable us to be more effective signs of grace.

So why do churches spend so much time and effort on 'mission' and evangelistic campaigns - as though they feel they have to do God a favour? Might they be better deepening their experience of God's grace in their own lives, becoming sacramental people, through whom others may see something that draws them closer to God? Thankfully many church

people do have that effect on others as they get on with their daily lives. These people would also be the most surprised if they ever discovered that this was the case - as they would also be the most likely to admit to their continuing need for God's healing love. This constant ongoing awareness of God's grace - so that our whole character is shaped by an overwhelming sense of gratitude, overwhelming because such grace is so energising yet so undeserved - is what allows us to be sacramental people, modest but surprisingly effective witnesses to the healing and life-giving presence of God.

3. Curators of spiritual wells

How then can Christ's disciples be nourished so that they live their lives as 'unselfconscious evangelisers', 'sacramental people'? I have asked this question of a great many faithful church people over the years - Christians of many traditions - although I have usually expressed it more succinctly as "Where do you find your spiritual wells?" Their answer, almost universally, was "not in Sunday worship". Instead, they pointed to a whole variety of opportunities to meet in small groups, usually with Christians of other traditions, and not normally under the direction of an individual leader. They mentioned Cursillo, Julian groups, and Maranatha as well as more informal groups; they talked of being part of the Northumbrian Community, of going on retreats in places such as Lindisfarne or visits to Iona. Those who went as young people on visits to the religious community at Taizé in France continued to speak of it as transformative. Their relationships in these groups were at a deep level, and their eyes shone as they talked about them.

Was there a problem with their Sunday worship? I think not. I have come to believe that their meeting to make eucharist - usually in a larger group - was their opportunity to share with others their gratitude for God's grace that they had already experienced, and to receive in the sacramental bread and wine

affirmation of the continuing gift of grace and God's presence in their lives.

The idea that all churchgoers would be enriched if they also had the chance to experience and explore their discipleship within smaller groups is not new. It gained renewed attention around the time of the Decade of Evangelism but seems to have been overlooked more recently. 'Base ecclesial communities' were first labelled as such amongst Roman Catholics in South America. A similar notion was given expression within the Cell Church movement amongst Evangelical Anglicans. A small group, involving among others Peter Price (later Bishop of Bath and Wells) and Jeanne Hinton from the Post Green Community, promoted "A New Way of Being Church". Peter Price's book "Seeds of the Word" (DLT 1996) provides a glimpse of how groups operating without a designated leader might open up this "New Way". All three initiatives seem to have faded away. The limitation of Cell Church was perhaps that it was overly structured - organised, when it seems that cells can only thrive, grow, and maybe multiply, if they emerge and develop organically. For 'New Way' the problem would appear to have been that this new life existed 'below the radar' of the institutional Churches and, if it was noticed, it was discouraged or even disowned.

In principle, however, it seems clear that 'base ecclesial communities' are a vital part of what makes up the Body of Christ, and I am sure that many similar small groups continue to exist 'below the radar'. The Holy Spirit can and does work within such small groups of Christ's disciples to transform them, and the essential ingredient to allow this transformation to happen appears to be when there is mutual cherishing and trustworthiness between all participants.

The cornerstone of these and all healthy relationships is when each participant is committed to being trustworthy. Sadly, we live in a society that discourages trust; and indeed, a naive trust merely shows us to be gullible. However, the more we organise our lives on the basis of distrust, the more we are

treating untrustworthiness as normal.

A group may also be more open to the Holy Spirit's transformation when it is deeply embedded in its local community, striving to meet its needs. The base ecclesial communities in South America developed as effective signs of God's grace as they embedded themselves in the favelas, among the residents of their city's slums.

4. Still 'combatting enthusiasm'?

Almost the only place where such Spirit-filled relationships may still be expressed as part of the parochial structure of the Church of England is in remote villages that still retain a strong sense of community. An example might be a hamlet I once visited deep in the Lincolnshire fens, far off the tourist trail, where life would be very difficult if residents did not support one another in a host of ways day by day. Tiny congregations in these communities need only to be reassured that they are not fifth rate congregations but first-rate cells, bonded because they are the village community.

Time was when the majority of Church of England parishes could be assumed to be integrated communities, inherently diverse but mutually committed, albeit usually with a clear social hierarchy. Churchgoers were then inseparably part of that community, and representative of that community. In each parish their Vicar then slotted into the social hierarchy somewhere near the top. The Vicar was their 'parson', and in the 19th century as village populations grew, and as Methodism was also spreading widely - not least because of the vitality of their small 'class meetings' in people's homes - diocesan bishops encouraged those with enough private means to build their own vicarages to take up freehold incumbencies. The reason given by one bishop for creating these new benefices was that it might "combat enthusiasm" - in other words limit the growth of Methodism! Today these vicarages are among the most expensive private houses in the villages,

and clergy are few and far between. Yet nineteenth century expectations of parish clergy still linger, especially in smaller towns and rural areas. What began as deference to the parson has morphed into concern - and even complaints - that the Vicar can no longer fulfil their expectations.

Alongside this, as towns and cities expanded, eventually draining the population away from the more rural villages and turning others into commuter suburbs, so the concept of the 'parish' with a parson in charge, however desirable, became increasingly divorced from reality. In larger towns and cities residents are hard put to know which is 'their' parish church. Churches of different denominations can be found on High Streets and on street corners, like chains of shops, and the minister is perceived as akin to a shop manager purveying a rather ill-defined 'product' for "those that like that sort of thing". Those who do "like that sort of thing" then feel free to opt for the version of the product (or of the sales technique) that they like best.

The result of this consumerism is congregations of the like-minded. Cosy relationships are, of course, possible in these congregations. New faces arriving at the church door may well be welcomed as 'customers', but they can also go unnoticed for weeks. In these echo chambers, the scope for spiritual growth is limited as is the depth of their empathy with the diverse communities amongst whom they live.

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If a Spirit-filled relational culture is to be developed, parish clergy would nowadays appear to be caught in a double bind, trying to meet conflicting demands and expectations. Even though the number of baptisms, weddings and funerals has been declining, there will always be more demand for individual pastoral care than a clergy-person has time for. Yet at the same time the same clergy are facing demands, often from the diocese, to develop a new mission-oriented church

life. The question is then whether the mission is identified with God or with the Church.

Either way clergy are under pressure, and this may explain why many clergy feel they must act to keep things 'manageable'. Over the years I have met too many parish clergy, conscientious and faithful, who were stressed and frustrated by the conflicting demands of the job. Too often their reaction was become autocratic, to 'take back control' - still feeling the need in effect to 'combat enthusiasm'. Nothing could happen unless they had initiated it and supervised it. Sometimes this reflected a lust for power, but more often it was just a way of coping with complexity. These pressures may well explain why so many parish clergy appear reluctant to take ecumenism seriously - and are so often defensive with each other at Deanery Chapter meetings.

The tragedy is when the Vicar's need to maintain control has the effect of stifling the growth of relationships in smaller and less contrived groups. Subconsciously such groups are perceived as a threat. If they really came alive, they might become an alternative power base, threatening the Vicar's power and authority. Here are two cautionary tales:

> Some years ago, I encountered a group of eight lay people from different traditions who had first come together for an ecumenical Lent course. Years later they were still meeting every two weeks for prayer, discussion and to discover what they could do next as to develop hope within their local community. Here was a Spirit filled relational culture; but with anxious faces they warned me not to reveal that I knew what they were doing. Their heartfelt plea was "Please don't tell the Vicar!"
>
> On another occasion, the local Reader opened her house for a bread and cheese lunch during Lent. After Easter those who came agreed to continue to meet. Over time relationships within the group deepened to a point where they were ready to share their feelings about meaning in

life - and at that point, when someone spoke about their visit to Iona, the experience morphed and, for one person, it proved to be a gateway into an overwhelming sense of God's presence in her life. Sadly however, the incoming Vicar apparently felt threatened by the group. Was it too powerful, too much out of his control? Equally sadly, both the Reader and the group eventually broke their links with the parish. Was the Reader also too committed to staying in control?

So how can the Spirit-filled relationships that people experience when they find their spiritual wells be 'cultivated'? Perhaps 'building a relational culture' is not something that a church institution can achieve. The more urgent task may be to avoid behaviour in our church institutions that inhibits the growth that the Spirit is wanting us to enjoy.

In fairness these pictures date back twenty or more years. Perhaps times have changed.

5. The blessings of powerlessness

Better ways may perhaps be found when the entire Church, bishops, priests, deacons, administrators, lay people, discover the blessings of powerlessness.

Clergy, by virtue of their ordination, are not 'leaders' in any sense recognised by the secular world. They may be called out as 'first among equals' by reason of their individual gifts; but any status is not theirs by right. However, in a local church community what clergy contribute will always be pivotal. Essentially, they are there as intermediaries, connection-makers, 'bridge-builders' (c.f. the term 'pontifex' traditionally applied to bishops). As such they will be working to help Christ's people to live creatively with diversity, rather than enforcing conformity; they will be making 'organic' connections rather than oiling a machine. Above all they will recognise that they are there to enable Christ's disciples to draw

closer to God through Christ, and that nothing they do must get in the way of that.

All this means that ordained leadership in Christ's Church is only true to its calling when it accepts that it is powerless. This is a particular problem for the Church of England, which appears to expect more from its clergy than almost any other Christian tradition. Excessively high or misplaced expectations of clergy will always be matched by inappropriately low expectations of laity – aggravated by the Church of England's historic culture of deference. If clergy try to meet these expectations, the unfortunate result is that they take all power and responsibility into their own hands. Responsible lay people are disabled and forced back into juvenility or adolescence. Or else they leave. Congregations that collude with this will never grow up.

Even local ministry schemes can reinforce this misappropriation of power. Many of the day-to-day tasks that parish clergy see as part of their ministry could be and should be properly seen as the shared responsibility of the whole local Church community, lay and ordained. Local ministers are not volunteers, deputising for the clergyperson.

There is an inevitable human tendency for individuals to accumulate power when others let them take over responsibilities that should be accepted by the community as a whole. It is very obvious in government, even when lip-service is paid to the democratic 'will of the people'. The same tendency is equally observable in the Church. But there is an important difference: In Christ's Church we are called to surrender the power associated with leadership in favour not of the will of the people but of the leading of the Holy Spirit. The whole idea of having Synods was to enable the whole people of God, lay and ordained, to discern together the leading of the Holy Spirit. The current heavily politicised synodical process in the Church of England seems a long way from fulfilling this.

Whoever is given specific responsibilities towards building

purposeful community must constantly reassess the extent to which he or she is accumulating power – and then do whatever is necessary to give it back to God.

6. Reshaping a communion of communities

Within our parish system, can we find ways to identify and cherish the small groups that may from time-to-time morph into places where the Holy Spirit is discovered and God's presence is felt?

It is clearly difficult and possibly counter-productive to try to create such groups. Apart from anything else, it conflicts with the natural instinct of local church leaders to want to create a harmonious whole within the congregation - perhaps even a 'conformist' whole, everyone 'singing from the same hymn-sheet'. Yet the Gospel message of "See how their Christians love one another" only gets its energy when the love is seen in the context of diversity.

Fortunately, even the most monocultural of our eclectic congregations will contain hidden diversity. Individuals and groups will already be associating with small groups of colleagues and friends or engaged in projects alongside other people from a variety of backgrounds. Rather than trying to keep people's discipleship entirely 'in house', might it be better to be cherishing members of the congregation in terms of their involvement in life outside the church? This might mean encouraging church people to get involved in existing charitable initiatives to meet needs in their local communities, rather than consuming all their energy in parallel initiatives sponsored in the name of the Church. Christ's disciples are called to be 'effective signs of God's grace' in terms of all their relationships, expressing their trustworthiness not just within the congregation. It is the same Holy Spirit bringing healing, hope and meaning in people's lives, whether or not people give credit for it to their local church.

At an even more basic level, maybe we are simply being

called to be good neighbours. It is doubtful if even the tiniest of parishes should be regarded as single integrated communities. A researcher looking at the social structure of a Lincolnshire village with a population of c1000 was amused when she identified a 'pecking order' among the social groups and organisations that abounded in the village. In this case the group that had priority when booking dates in the village calendar was the cricket club!

The challenge may be to find ways to bring the good news of God's grace in people's daily lives, as individuals and their various social groups, back into the meetings of the congregation and retelling it there, thus creating a positive feedback loop between worship and daily living. This is important because these experiences are what will give substance to our thanksgiving in 'eucharistic' worship. Sharing these experiences will earth our worship in the reality of daily life.

So much of the Holy Spirit's work evidently takes place 'below the radar' of the institutional Churches. It is overlooked and undervalued seemingly because those responsible for the institution's 'survival' feel the need to take credit for the good deeds, rather than thank God who is the source of all grace. To paraphrase the thoughts of John V Taylor in "The Go-between God", our task is "to find out what God is doing, and join in". This is the evidence of God's grace to which we are called to be effective signs, and for which we can feel genuinely thankful. Sunday worship will then be something we will be eager to engage in, and not just because we "like that sort of thing".

7. "Become what you are" and a perspective from the search for Christian unity

To sum up: Living within the koinonia of the Holy Spirit, living as sacramental people, is an ongoing process - a 'becoming' as much as a 'being'. "Become what you are" is a recurring theme

in St Paul's letters: We are to become "through Christ" what we are "in Christ".

My experience as a mission development adviser in the service of all Lincolnshire's mainstream Churches ensures that I cannot think only of the Church of England. I could have wished that this current initiative to "Build a Relational Church" might have taken more account of the wisdom of the Holy Spirit as received within other Christian traditions. Perhaps this is for another stage as this initiative develops.

However, a 'relational Church' will never be complete if we only seek to build it within the Church of England. Some paragraphs from an article I wrote in 2005 on ecumenism in the local church are perhaps worth reproducing here. They describe three key virtues as we seek to 'become what we are' - a relational Church - discerned from the perspective of the so-called 'inter-Church process'. They are **unity in diversity**, **reconciliation**, and **covenant love**.

The following article was written at the invitation of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. CTBI was re-organised shortly afterwards and the book that would have included it was never published. The text has been slightly adapted for use in this new context:

The experience of local churches through a period of rapid social change and the emergence of 'fresh expressions of church life' has in recent years taken mission theology into new territory. In exploring the new jungle some earlier insights, especially from ecclesiology, have perhaps been lost, or at least 'put in the pending tray'. Both the mission theologians and the ecclesiologists perhaps now need to listen more carefully to each other.

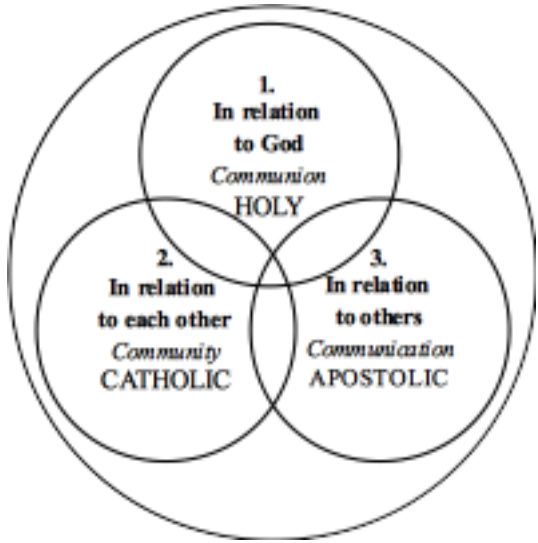
A vital part of what the Holy Spirit gave at Pentecost was effective communication: "Everyone heard the disciples

speaking in their own language." In this 'reversal of the Tower of Babel,' it is what people hear that counts more than what people say. Careful attention to the dynamics of human communication makes it clear that the search for the unity of Christ's Church is more than just a cerebral exercise.

The discovery of 'communication' as an essential ingredient within the 'koinonia of the Holy Spirit' seems to come as a surprise to some ecumenists. Certainly, a great deal of the use of the term koinonia in theological thinking within the World Council of Churches (and in many of the formal conversations between the Churches) has focused on the two strands of 'communion' and 'community'. The Common Statement of the Anglican-Methodist Covenant speaks of "the vital organic life of the Church as a body infused by the power of the Holy Spirit, that is to say … koinonia."(Paragraph 183)

The Common Statement had already very forcefully pointed up the two strands in the relationship in paragraph 83 "Thus the koinonia that we experience in the Christian community is not only a fellowship one with another, but also a relationship of communion with God that is both personal and communal. Koinonia stands for a full communion with God (2 Corinthians 13:13-14), a sharing in the very life of God (1 John 1:3), a partaking of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). This means that the Church should never be defined merely in terms of its activities as an institution, but always in terms of the character and purpose that it receives from God through grace."

It is almost as if the ecumenical movement has been so taken up with these two relationships (with God and with each other) that it has underplayed or undervalued the third - the 'missionary' relationship with others. Yet Jerome's translation of *koinonia* in most of the Pauline passages in the Vulgate Bible is not communio but communicatio. It's a fine distinction which deserves further attention.



The very simple Venn diagram, seen here, shows how these three relationships match up to the three aspects of the koinonia of the Holy Spirit (the three English cognates of the Latin communicatio), and to the three key characteristics of the One Church identified in the Nicene Creed.

A map of this sort may be helpful because it points to the link between the concept of the Holy Spirit's 'communication' and a key word where over recent decades missioners and ecumenists have gone in different directions. That word is ‘apostolic'.

Ecumenists have tended to use the word 'apostolic' retrospectively to emphasise loyalty to a tradition dating back to the Apostles. Missioners have tended to link it to the idea of the Church's 'apostolate' - and give it a here and now and future orientation as the Church seeks faithfully to live out the mission for which it has been sent. In fact, both interpretations need to be re-integrated. The apostolic tradition needs to be experienced as a living continuum within which there is an outward and forward diversifying, to communicate within context, and an inward and backward unifying, as part of what is needed to remain centred in God's truth revealed in Jesus

Christ.

What emerges through the complexity and uncertainty of local church life - and from a three-fold understanding of our Spirit-enabled relationships - is a three-dimensional ecumenism, not just vertically and horizontally (as it has traditionally been pictured) but lived through time both historically, now and into the future. This third strand may then require us to speak of 'process ecumenism' - not just steps and stages towards a fixed goal, but a lived experience.

The ecumenical enterprise is just part of the journey of the whole Body of Christ lived through relationships energised by the Holy Spirit. The language of the koinonia of the Holy Spirit (communion, community and communication) tells us what energises our relationships as disciples of Jesus Christ. The language of communio tells us how these relationships are configured. We see the brokenness of our communion in time and space - and we see the perfection of communion in the very being of God in Trinity. And maybe the languages of covenant and of reconciliation - not yet fully

explored - are then available to enable us to articulate the style and substance of these relationships. Good places to start might be The Covenanted Self by Walter Brueggemann, and a remarkable workbook for local congregations in Northern Ireland, Communities of Reconciliation, by Johnston McMaster and Cathy Higgins.

The Biblical language of covenant speaks of gracious giving and grateful receiving, of constant love for the other, and of a purpose beyond the covenant partners. The work of reconciliation also takes seriously the otherness of the other yet strives towards a depth of community and relationship through which the many know themselves to be one.

On the basis of the Greek words used in the New Testament, McMaster and Higgins offer this definition: “Reconciliation is about taking initiatives and actions that make enemies into friends through give and take and by building new and different forms of community. This kind of reconciliation is

about transforming relationships and structures through lengthy processes requiring courage, risk and commitment." It is a reconciling task which goes way beyond the diversity of the Christian Churches.

In the local scene and in fresh expressions of church life we are witnessing a living and ongoing interaction between the whole and the part, the universal and the particular, between inherited wisdom and the Holy Spirit's leading, between a centred unity and a missionary diversity. Our ecumenical vocation, our call to be becoming one, is an ongoing experience. The whole of it is the work of the Holy Spirit engendering both diversity and unity, the koinonia life-force, the breath, - the breathing of which is the evidence that the Body of Christ is alive. We are not more alive whether we are breathing in or out.

At a time when fresh expressions of church life challenge our conventional behaviour within our congregations, maybe we should remind ourselves that we are 'pilgrim people' - not knowing where we are going. It is enough that we do know that there is the One who is leading us on the journey, whom we will come to know "even as we are known".

Perhaps we should even see ourselves as 'Exodus people' - with all the overtones of a promised land, but with (on the way) miracles, manna and forty years in the wilderness. How tempting it is, in these circumstances, to rest comfortably in our existing congregations, despite their sometimes-unrewarded hard labour, and carry on "making bricks without straw"!

The goal of the ecumenical quest, the outcome for which Christ prayed in John 17, is "that the world might believe." In Ephesians 1, God's hidden purpose is "that the whole universe, in heaven and on earth, should be brought into a unity in Christ." From this perspective, as when we probe the biblical meaning of reconciliation, it is far too small a thing that we should set our sights only on the full visible unity of Christ's Church.

These lessons learned through the frustrations felt within the inter-Church process, amid the pressures on Church institutions in a changing society, surely apply equally to all communities of Christ's disciples. They represent three of the key virtues in a relational Church. We are invited:

- to discover and cherish the joys of unity in diversity
- to commit to being communities of reconciliation within our fellowships and in a broken world
- above all to learn to live within the grace of God's covenant love.

In this way we may become what we are in Christ: his sacramental people, infused by the Holy Spirit's koinonia, and thus increasingly to become "effective signs of God's grace".

Relationality in the Parish: The Need for Roots

Alison Millbank

In 1943 Charles de Gaulle, then leading the Free French in London, gave the philosopher Simone Weil the task of reimagining the renewal of Europe after the cessation of hostilities. Weil would die that same year, partly as an effect of seeking through solidarity to exist on the same meagre diet as her compatriots, but she left an astonishing book, *The Need for Roots*, which both forensically identifies the malaise of materialism in western society and sets out a radical spiritual vision for the future.

In the first part of her study, she identifies what she calls 'the needs of the soul', which are often paradoxical in that they include order and liberty, private and collective property, equality and hierarchy. Her vision for building a new world is similarly paradoxical in that it emphasizes the need for rootedness in the past in working for what is to come:

> It would be useless to turn one's back on the past in order simply to concentrate on the future. It is a dangerous illusion to believe that such a thing is even possible. The future brings us nothing, gives us nothing; it is we who in order to build it have to give it everything, our very life. But to be able to give, one has to possess; and we possess no other life, no other living sap, than the treasures stored up from the past and digested, assimilated and created

> afresh by us. Of all the human soul's needs, none is more vital than this one of the past.[9]

We see this importance of the past in the way that armies seek to destroy a people's 'living sap' by attacking the cultural lodestones or ancient holy sites of the places they invade, such as the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan or the Mariupol Theatre in Ukraine. To destroy a people's past is to dispossess them completely and wipe their history and identity from the face of the earth. In this quotation, Weil is thinking of the industrial classes in particular, and the suffering caused by the uprooting of unemployment, which drives people to leave their homes and all that they possess as social capital. For as David Goodhart has pointed out, the poor are primarily 'somewheres', who rely on neighbourliness, solidarity and reciprocity, and on the physical institutions of the locality, much more than the mobile 'anywheres'.[10] It will be interesting to see how the energy crisis and crises in the cost of living happening as I write, how the class of 'somewheres' will necessarily increase dramatically, as more people struggle to afford petrol to run cars or travel on foreign holidays.

The Anglican parish embodies the positive value of being 'somewhere' and is a place of rootedness in the past, where it is digested and created afresh. Its church building can attract fierce loyalty even when it is a relatively recent construction, as recently in St Barnabas Southampton where people in an area of social housing fought desperately to stop their church from closure. In many places the church will be surrounded by graves of past parishioners, and it witnesses to the creativity

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9 Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind*, trans. Arthur Willis, intro. T. S. Eliot (London: Routledge, 2002 [1949]), p. 51.

10 David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (London: Hurst, 2017).

and devotion of local people in its monuments, kneelers, glass and the worn stone of its steps. These material traces are not just valuable in themselves but as the embodiment of the past they represent an important aspect of what it means to be a parochial community. As Christians, we are part of the Church, which does not just mean the visible Church of our brother and sister believers across the world, but the invisible Church. Our prayers join those offered in that same place five hundred years in the past but also five hundred years in the future. Our worship is taken to the heavenly altar where Christ brings the world to the Father in the Spirit and unites prayer from all times and places. So relationality in the parish is never just spatial but temporal and eternal, as it opens to the divine and to the whole body of Christ, living, departed and to come.

We are witnessing the trauma of uprootedness across Europe in 2022, which only brings home to us the suffering of so many other waves of refugees and migrants in recent years from Syria, Afghanistan and Africa. This rootedness of the parish offers an attractive resort for the migrant. There is a need for much more research into the phenomenon of Iranian Shi'ite conversions to Anglicanism, but it seems undeniable that parish life enables both the expression of Iranian identity, now given liturgical expression with the provision of eucharistic resources in Farsi, and engenders a sense of belonging. For rootedness does not depend necessarily on having an ancestral tie to a place: in Anglican ecclesiology you belong just by being an inhabitant and this fact is picked up quickly by the migrant so agonisingly uprooted from their home. Such a belief that all have a claim on their local church is at the heart of the Anglican idea of establishment, which achieved its most extreme expression in William Temple's legendary dictum that the

church exists for the benefit of those outside it.[11]

One of the unexpected fruits of the Save the Parish campaign has been the way that the church as an historical presence has also engendered love and loyalty from the unchurched, and even become a source of renewal, to the extent of people joining their local Parochial Church Council in order to resist its closure by the diocese and then becoming part of its ongoing life. In a different, more positive way, this tie to the past drew new people into the worshipping community of some parishes in Derbyshire during lockdown. The vicar broadcast his Sunday service in turn from his various churches and in each case offered a tour of its architectural features and an account of its history. People are hungry for history and for reconnection with their past. When we constantly oppose buildings and their worshippers in statements emphasizing that the Church is not stones but people, we ignore the close relation between them. I know people who find a relationship with God through the stones of Southwell Minster, where I minister, and the building even prompts conversions. Stones still cry out.

Relationality in the parish ecclesial community thus has a rather different character from joining a society for the like-minded. It opens out onto the past and includes all who went before in its charity. The parish operates what G. K. Chesterton calls 'the democracy of the dead'[12] and its present members are consciously rooted in a tradition of practice. As Alasdair Macintyre puts it, 'the possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide.' [13] His immensely influential study, *After Virtue,* has drawn attention to the

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[11] See Alan Guiana, 'Letter from the West Indies' *Theology* 59, no. 432 (July 1956): 24-43.

[12] G. K. Chesterton, 'The Ethics of Elfland,' in *Orthodoxy* (London [1908]), p. 53.

[13] Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue*, p. 205.

importance of tradition in grounding ethical action and agency. Before we can act, we need to know of what stories we are a part, which provide a shape in which to understand and direct our part in these narratives. In parish life 'we enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making'.[14] We are enstoried in various ways as individuals but the parochial setting enables the integration of these narratives, which are taken up in their specificity into the Christian story, just as the Son's incarnation in a particular person and place is the opening to universal salvation.

If the first aspect of parish relationality is its diachronic character, the second, which is closely related to this embeddedness in time, is our rootedness in liturgy. We are the body of Christ in that place, made one through our common participation in the eucharist: indeed, without the assent of the people of God, there is no eucharist. Good relationships in the parish church arise out of a community which meets, confesses, reconciles, intercedes and exchanges the peace before breaking bread together. Insofar as a church is healthy, it will be when those liturgical actions permeate common life and when the events of the community – its joys and sorrows – are fully represented in worship and beyond. For a liturgical community is not just one where people worship but where the worship opens out to embrace others in its concern. The Bishop of Chichester is engendering this liturgical relationality through a covenant made with church schools in his diocese. Each child must learn the Lord's prayer, know some Bible stories and five hymns and also be able to respond to the bidding 'the Lord be with you' with 'and also with you'. That simple call and response creates our ecclesial relations and means a child will always be at home in the local church as a liturgical participant. Many clergy spend a good deal of time in their church schools

[14] Macintyre, *After Virtue*, p. 199.

and build excellent relationships with staff and children. They may even bring classes into church for a service but unless there is some attempt at liturgical inculturation, the rootedness will be missing.

The mode of life I have been describing is the result of a thousand years of development but it is endangered in a society whose model of what it is to be human is ever more atomised and individualised. Even modes of commonality in the secular realm tend to be equally atomised so that political parties and unions struggle for members while single issue identity politics unites people along much narrower lines, with clearly defined limits and opponents. The anthropology of the parish is quite different and inherently social. As Marc Barnes describes it such a society 'is the inescapable, communal mode of being in and through which one receives existence, consciousness, intellect, language and indeed the very self'.[15] In our ecclesial society 'one's identity is recognised precisely to the degree that it is always already embedded in the polity for the sake of the whole'.[16] Identity is therefore wholly relational in its essence, constituted through the call and response of baptism, sealed by confirmation and developed through eucharistic participation. We exist through and for the whole body. We need to remember that the language of the body of Christ is not metaphorical but a mystical reality.

Traditional Anglican worship which so defines the rural parish almost universally is highly participatory in this call and response mode, much more so than the free church or evangelical style, which so often has the worship group doing much of the music, a long sermon, and free intercessory prayer

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15 Marc Barnes, 'The Therapeutic Effect of Identity Politics,' *New Polity* (Fall, 2021): 53-57 (p. 56).

16 Barnes, 'Therapeutic Effect', p. 57.

by the worship leader without a response.[17] Relationality works differently in such settings, often through membership of house-groups. The liturgical parish is more holistic in that its liturgy engenders its relations: form and content coincide and are so understood by parishioners who can become quite upset if some element of participation in the service is removed. At the heart then of relationality in the parish is the liturgy, which creates the community around it. As Henri de Lubac expressed it: 'the eucharist makes the Church'.[18] It is the sacrament of unity and the bond of love.

The DNA of parish life is outward facing, a rootedness in whatever is going on locally in their town, village or part of the city. A report commissioned by the Church of England on social action noted this involvement and questioned too easy a decision that the parish is in decline:

> The Church's reach extends well beyond itself by several orders of magnitude with those it directly helps, those it works with and those it simply lets use its buildings. Many in the Church will be surprised by the range of things that the Church itself does, even more outside the Church will be a little astonished at its reach, range and depth.[19]

This community involvement and web of relations is typical of 90% of parishes, with 79% involved in some formal mode of

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17 See Constance Cherry, 'From Passive to Participatory Worship,' Calvin Symposium on Worship 2006 at **https://www.wnccumc.org/resourcedetail/9296176** accessed 12 April, 2022.

18 Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages* (London: SCM, 2006), pp. 75-100.

19 James Noyes and Phillip Blond, *Holistic Mission* (London: Respublica, 2013), p. 6

social service.[20] This is not just useful service but part of the complex web of relations that constitutes a parish. It would be a salutary exercise for a church to make a visual representation or photo-montage of the relations they have communally and individually because I am sure they would be astonished by its depth and richness. The pandemic has been a financial challenge for local churches but also an opportunity for service and for imagining liturgical community outside the building. In a *Spectator* article, Luke Coppen describes how the Polish Catholic Church, weakened in recent years by abuse allegations and falling numbers, has been revived by the enormous energy its members have put into the care of refugees from Ukraine. He suggests a parallel with the Church of England. 'Both are guardians of national identity with unrivalled parish networks. If the refugee crisis has helped Polish Catholics recover their sense of purpose, couldn't a similar challenge do the same for Anglicans?'[21] For if we do not have the scale of migrants that Poland welcomes, '1.3 million Britons will be pushed into absolute poverty by the cost of living crisis. Could the C of E lead an effort to help them?'[22] While those who already know the challenges to church-based food banks may sigh at this, there is no doubt that meeting the needs of others makes for stronger bonds between people and a renewed sense of purpose. Non-evangelical Anglicans are sometimes considered not to take discipleship seriously enough, but they are working with a different model and one which sees helping others at its core, and who can deny that this is biblical, the heart of Jesus's teaching in the parable of the sheep and the goats?

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20 Respublica, *Holistic Mission*, p. 13.

21 Luke Coppen, 'Risen Again: The War has helped to resurrect Poland's Catholic Church,' *Spectator* 16 April, 2022, p.23.

22 Coppen, 'Risen Again,' p. 23.

After historical, liturgical and service relations come those with the natural world. The secular world responds often more positively to the idea of the parish than contemporary Anglicans. For 'parish' has become a central concept in the revival of nature writing, from Richard Mabey onwards, and it reaches back to the parson naturalists of our past.[23] Its value is as much urban as rural, as is witnessed by the powerful writing of Bob Gilbert, *Ghost Trees: Nature and People in a London Parish* (2018), who studies the creatures and plants of the arboreally named London area, 'Poplar' in the parish where his wife ministers in East London. Relationality thought of in parochial terms extends beyond the human to encompass all that makes up our common home and it is often a way in which the parish worshipping community can reach out beyond itself to make common cause with local environmental groups. Indeed, although our problems are universal, local action can be one of the most effective ways forward. For we often respond more positively in initiatives to save the world from destruction by established relationships, by our love of local plants and birds than by imposed targets, which like the law in Romans create guilt and freeze us in impotence at the size of the task. There is a grace in beauty in the very otherness of the natural world, which in its giftedness is like theological grace, pouring from a generous God and calling us to receive and give generously ourselves. A parochial ecology is derived ultimately from the liturgical action of call and response, of liturgy as an offering of the world to God for its transformation and reception as pure gift.

The role of the parson, the parish priest, is central to this *habitus*. Rural parishes have been in multi-church benefices for some years now, but they still depend upon a strong connection

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[23] See the discussion in Andrew Rumsey, *Parish: An Anglican Theology of Place* (London: SCM, 2017), pp. 164-66.

with their parish priest, who holds the cure of their souls. Proposed centralization of parishes will be highly damaging in many ways but especially in the role of the priest in relation to the community and its life. She or he is first, the community's pastor and presider, very much one of themselves, who validates their worth as a community, drawing them together. For the people worshipping at their local church will be diverse, and not necessarily share a great deal. This is not an elective community. Indeed, despite appearances, most people do not travel miles for a particular style of Anglicanism. *Holistic Mission* using the Church's own data, found that 64% of worshippers travelled less than one mile to church and 24% between one and two miles.[24] Part of the glory of the parochial model is the diversity of age, class and culture that can be brought together but the parson and the liturgy together hold and sustain this.

Secondly, the priest is set apart in his or her ministry by the Church and thus roots the community in the diocese and the Church universal, sharing the bishop's pastoral and oversight ministry. Often a parish, used to frequent interregnums and sharing a priest with other churches will be highly independent, working as a lay team and offering mutual care, Yet these parishioners need the parson to open their relations to the deanery and diocese, and indeed, to the secular world beyond their locality. For the parish is a key example of a mediating institution between the individual and wider society. Respublica's *Holistic Mission* report saw this intermediate role as highly important because 'trapped between individualism and collectivism we Britons have since the Second World War gradually eroded and ultimately eliminated most of our mediating and immediate

[24] Noyes and Blond, *Holistic Mission*, p. 13.

institutions'.[25] The parish is one of the most enduring of these, till now still functioning in the ex-mining towns and villages of Nottinghamshire, even after the pub and the working men's club have long gone.

Yet forces such as central church policy and direction of resources as well as financial crisis in some dioceses are beginning to make such communities impossible and destroy their lives. Ever mounting bureaucratic tasks for churchwardens and a fear of unsustainable ever larger 'hub' groupings put the commitment of lay people under great pressure. Our leaders may assure us time and again of the centrality of the parish, but financial decisions to pour resources into a single resource church – one in my diocese has six curates – while letting the parishes around it struggle with few clergy do not make parishes feel valued and they can become defensive. The language of 'mixed ecology' has been substituted for the economic idea of a mixed economy to describe the relations between the parochial system and new ecclesial communities, but there is little sign of the mutuality and reciprocity that such language promises. It is a marvel that so much generosity of spirit, hospitality and even hope still exists in our local churches, especially in the country, where forty per cent of Anglican worshippers live, and which is suffering the greatest centralising reorganization.

Can the parochial interconnectedness I have described survive the uprooting that these multiple parish benefices will involve? Can we find a way to a future? I think the title of this volume gives us a clue as to where to begin, even in a time of scarcity. It is to value the people we have and to deepen and intensify our common life. Where there are ten elderly people in church on Sunday, let us lavish love, care and attention on each other. Older people have had lives, have brought up

[25] Noyes and Blond, *Holistic Mission*, p. 3.

families and often done astonishing things. They have lived through wars, poverty, divorce, unemployment and have stories to tell. When do we ever listen? We are the gospel that we preach and we should know our Christian witnesses to that gospel. One way to begin might be to invite local school-children to record memories of the town in the past, using the congregation to start off and the children's own grandparents to continue, to build an integrated picture. What has sustained these people during their long lives and how has the parish community supported them? One of the most moving aspects of studying the parish reorganization in the Transforming Wigan was reading all the evidence by those protesting against the loss of their parish. Some of these submissions were from people unaccustomed to computers and were hand-written, and there was something so moving in the sincerity and desolation of their feelings. The church had shaped their whole lives and it was as if their being was being erased by these amalgamations.

A number of the respondents pointed out that the hierarchy claimed to want lay leadership but had actually removed it by centralising administration in the hands of one PCC for a number of churches and taking organisation of funerals etc away from parishes, replacing their valuable work with a paid official. Parishioners, by contrast, saw their role in organising funerals, weddings and baptisms as pastoral and missional and it was being removed from them. Already in the Church in Wales, we are hearing of situations where, due to centralized 'mission areas' faithful and involved parishioners are having their funeral taken by a stranger. One cleric found himself banned even from swapping with another to ensure a former parishioner was buried by him, due to the inflexibility of the taxi-rank system now imposed. Other elements of this centralization that impact on relationality are the fact that these are eucharistic communities, for whom access to weekly Holy Communion can become very difficult, without transport or a

local service.[26] No wonder clergy too are leaving, as testified at Wigan, unable to exercise their cure of souls properly in such hub structures.

So the future of the parish church is bleak and I have little confidence that removing clergy from local parishes will make for a relational church. Whole swathes of the country will lack effective pastoral care or liturgical provision and the moves to church closures will necessarily follow. Thousands of ordinary Anglicans will enter a state that Simone Weil describes in another essay as 'affliction'. 'It may happen at any moment that what I am might be abolished', she writes in her essay, 'Human Personality'.[27] It is the opposite of relationality: an opening abyss of distance and lament which Weil locates in Christ's cry of dereliction on the cross.

Rather than cloaking such financially-driven moves in the language of mission, it would be more honest to admit the defeat here. In many places where parish ministry is done well and with energy it is successful and congregations are growing but elsewhere the same energy and devotion do not. It would be humbler not to blame the parish system for failing to reverse secularism but to admit that we are entering dark times and to hope for better days. Churches have been empty and even ruinous before and been rebuilt. True relationality in the parish will involve speaking in hope and yet at the same time acknowledging the crisis. It would also involve speaking to the loss and sense of betrayal, the feeling of being unloved and unvalued which many ordinary Anglicans feel when they are

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[26]For the many protests, see responses to Transforming Wigan at **https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-08/Wigan%20-%20Representations%20-%20pages%20R81-R121__0.pdf** and **https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/parish-reorganisation-and-closed-church-buildings/consultation-parish-reorganisation-85** accessed 12 April, 2022.

[27] *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Sîan Miles (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 90.

described, for example, as a 'rump of believers' (words used recently by a bishop whom I shall not name). Christ's gospel cannot fail but we are allowing the form of life that is the Anglican parish to fail, believing that we can march to the future without roots, refusing to unite our new ecclesial units to the stem, abandoning the perennials if you like for the annual in our rush to church planting. We are not training new clergy and especially those in pioneer ministry in our liturgical traditions and many lack the formation of the daily office. They are unlikely to be praying daily with the clergy in their local parish. Resource churches are rarely resourcing those that surround them. The relational is just not in our missional organising and the parish is so often bypassed or ignored. It was ironic that the one area in which Church House recently reduced its staff was in life events ministry, which is at the heart of parochial outreach, indeed, moving staff to the new ecclesial unit end of things.

And yet the rootedness that the parish represents is needed as never before, as it speaks directly to the sicknesses of soul of our new century: the atomization, virtualization, deracination, commodification of our lives. Incarnation centred Christianity offers a new way of being as God's forgiven and liberated people, centred on the eucharist, learning to be God's gift to the world. If we could only trust in that core mission of loving our neighbour, in Greek, 'the one who is near',[28] forging social bonds in our locality we might find ourselves building that new future with a renewed parochialism.

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[28] David Bagnall, 'A New Parochialism', *Theology In Isolation* 9, SCM at **https://scmpress.hymnsam.co.uk/blog/theologyinisolation-9-a-new-parochialism** , accessed 13 April 2022.

A Healthy Church is a Flourishing Church

Paul Davies

Our dreams and visions for the renewal of parish life and our longing to join in with God's mission in the world as signs of the kingdom of God are influenced and largely determined by the health of our church communities.

As we seek through prayer, reflection and action to live the life of Jesus as communities of his disciples we continue to affirm or discover new ways of engaging with and being a part of God's mission in our local society and in the world, particularly in terms of the pursuit of justice and salvation for the world in Christ. In our times, as in previous generations, we face the challenge of global injustice and poverty and yet in this generation we face the possible collapse of the earth's ecosystem and the devastation of our life and planet through climate change.

Church health is of the essence if we are to have the energy and the will to have any chance of overcoming these destructive forces and make the Kingdom of Heaven a reality in our time and that of our children. Our endeavours, through the grace of God, are to create flourishing churches so as to fulfil God's purpose for the Church and the people of the world, for the soil, water and air that we inhabit as God's creatures.

For our church community to flourish as part of these endeavours we need to affirm the importance of church health as communities of faith. Church health as it is understood today is spoken of as the "fundamental principle," or the DNA of church life.

A healthy church creates a flourishing church.
a church cannot flourish and grow
in influential action where its health is at a low ebb.

We live in a world of constant change and sometimes we can feel that everything has changed, particularly in the face of difficulties and things we don't understand. The whole history of the Church from the time of Jesus has always been about change and yet the importance of what contributes to church health has stayed the same throughout, which explains why church health is spoken of as the DNA of the church, or the fundamental principle from which everything else springs forth for good and for ill in the life of the Church and its influence in the world.

One of the simplest ways to begin to talk about church health is to make a reference to human health. In the same way as our bodies need to have a balanced and a healthy diet so as to flourish, so it is with the church.

Church health has three fundamental elements just as in the same way a balanced food diet has three fundamental elements. These are Worship (protein), Fellowship (fats), Mission (carbohydrates).

Worship in church health is defined as the experience of personal and corporate acts of worship and prayer.

Mission is the twofold sharing of the Good News of the Life of Christ and of the Kingdom of Heaven and the bringing of that Life into the world through the pursuit of service, wellbeing and justice in the world as the body of Christ on earth.

Fellowship is the social and personal flourishing of church life and the coming together as disciples to share the things of God which is what Jesus meant when he said, "Love one another as I have loved you," and when he said, "Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them".

Each of these three elements are a requisite and necessary for a healthy church.

For a church diet to be healthy it is not enough to simply have the three elements present. The three elements need also to be in a right balance with each other so as to be healthy. For the human body this means there will be more proteins than fats in a healthy and balanced diet. To take the analogy one step further it would be to say that for church life to be healthy and then to flourish the balance between Worship, Fellowship, and Mission will often need to be positionally realigned so as to be able to meet the challenges and opportunities of the moment.

The symbiotic dynamic of the three ingredients for a healthy church can be spoken of as Worship being the Receiving from God and each other. Fellowship as the Sharing with God and with each other and Mission as the Giving to God and to the world.

The essential dynamic and natural movement is from Receiving to Sharing, from Sharing to Giving, from Giving to Receiving.

In the same way as the hand of the clock moves clockwise and not anticlockwise. This is not to deny a possible movement in the opposite direction.

Examples of church health in Scripture

In Acts 2 the disciples, "Give to anyone who had need," (mission). They "Broke bread in their homes," (fellowship), "Praising God," (worship) "And enjoying the favour of all the people".

In John 15 there is the abiding in the vine (worship), there are the many branches (fellowship) and the bearing of fruit (mission).

The fundamental principle of a healthy church can also be seen when Jesus reminds us, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

To love God is to worship, (to Receive), to love our

neighbour is mission, (to Give) to love ourselves is in fact to love each other (to Share) as the body of Christ.

Perhaps the hardest thing in our time may be not loving God (Worship) or the world (Mission), rather it might be taking the time and energy to love ourselves - each other (Fellowship). Despite the fact Jesus says to us,

"A new command I give you: Love one another as I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." John 13:34-35

Jim Wallis writes in his book, The Call to Conversion, "Our communion with God and with one another is so small that we just do not have the strength or the resources to live the way Jesus taught." page 24.

He also writes, "The greatest need of our time is for koinonia, the call simply to be the church, **to love one another, and to offer our lives for the sake of the world.** The creation of living breathing, loving communities of faith (Fellowship) at the local church level is the foundation of all the other answers." (Page 112.)

Energy and church health

Can these dry bones live? The prophet asked.

Church (A) experiences energy and hope while church (B) experiences the same church life as something that is dispiriting and lacking enthusiasm, at a deep level there is spiritual tiredness, even anxiety. Clearly church (A) will be able to work towards making its God given vision a reality more joyfully than church B. Both these different experiences of church life are determined by the awareness and the attention that is given to the importance of church health in terms of Worship, Fellowship, Mission and their symbiotic and relational nature. What needs to be avoided is for Worship, Fellowship, Mission to be in competition with each other. When this happens energy is lost, it's like driving a car with the hand brake on. When there

is competition the church diet becomes unhealthy. Unless they are brought back into a symbiotic balance it will lead to a deep sickness, and a lack of influences of the loving Kingdom of God in praxis.

Working with church health imbalance

In church life any one of the three elements of a church diet can become out of balance with the other two and will need to be attended to so as to enable the church to continue to be healthy and to flourish. For example, a church can recognise that while there is a lot of worship and mission taking place there is only very limited fellowship being experienced in church life at this time. What is more, while people are being attracted to the church community because of its worship and missional activities people do not stay and become a part of the community because of the lack of their experience of fellowship.

A healthy church creates a flourishing church, and
A church cannot flourish when it's not healthy.

Answers to church health imbalance

A second imbalance can be experienced when a church can desire in its vision and action to reach out to the wider community through offering relevant Fellowship and then feels frustrated at the lack of of response in the local society. It's as though everything has been tried with little outcome.

One answer to this experience in the understanding of church health would be to review, revaluate and renew the initiatives or create new ones.

Then if there is still a spirit of being stuck and lacking good outcomes then the natural and creative thing to do would be to work out how the church community's experience of Worship and Mission can be strengthened with more positive energy

which will then organically strengthen the influence of Fellowship indirectly.

Breathing well with a strong Heart

A helpful metaphor for understanding church health is to look at the relationship between the lungs and the heart in a body. To have good health a church needs to have two strong lungs, one is worship, and the other is mission, so as to breathe in the breath of God the Spirit (Receive) and to have the energy to breathe out (Give) through the whole body in thought and action.The church body also needs a strong heart to pump the blood round the body and to enable the lungs to inhale through the lung of Worship and exhale through the lung of Mission.

The heart being Fellowship without which the lungs cannot function. In our western culture, because of the value that is placed on individualism and personal freedom and privatisation of the home, it is perhaps the heart that needs the greatest attention in terms of strengthening through the creation of nutrients to feed the mission tree in the context of parish life so as to be fruitful.

The healthy tortoise

When considering church health for renewal of parish life there is a lot we can learn from tortoises. For a tortoise to be healthy so as to live and move it needs to have grown a healthy shell. A healthy shell can only be created through calcium and the metabolization through Vitamin A and D3. Each of the three elements need to be in balance and in the right proportion to each other for the shell to grow and be healthy. The same is true for church health in terms of Worship, Fellowship and Mission.

Are we a good gardener and farmer?

It is life giving and energising for each church member to pay

attention to the health of the church as does a gardener or farmer in the growing season. Attention is essential if the symbiotic nature of Worship, Mission and particularly Fellowship are to do their job in stimulating the energy and life sap that is needed so as to create a flourishing church life. In one of Jesus' parables a man wants to cut down his fig tree because of the lack of fruit. The gardener says to the owner of the fig tree, "Leave it alone, sir, just one more year; I will dig around it and put in some fertilizer." (Luke13)

The fertilizer is the nutrients, the three elements of church health.

Final thought

Much of what has been said about church health may be seen to be obvious and implicit in all the activities of local parish life. In response it can however be said that when something is not seen to be demonstrated explicitly in thought, word and action then it cannot be considered a priority. For parish life to flourish church health needs to be a priority and needs to be expressed explicitly and not assumed to be implicit.

Church health provides the fundamental nutrients to feed
our vision, hope, dreams.
Without due attention to our health, we are a danger
to ourselves and to our world.
A healthy church creates a flourishing church.
The church like our planet cannot flourish
when it is not healthy.

One local example
'Time 4 You' - a Wellbeing Café
Clapham Parish Church, Bedford

Six years ago, at the start of Advent, a couple of people in a village church felt led to open the door and be more available for people. They put the kettle on, took mugs of hot chocolate into the carpark where parents had just dropped off their children for school and invited them into the warmth of the church. Over time relationships began to grow and a few became a dozen or so. Grandparents helped with the little ones, joys & sorrows were shared and underpinned with prayer. During lockdown the WhatsApp group started by one of the parents came into its own, with a recipe and prayer/thought/picture every Tuesday and occasional al-fresco gatherings in the summer on socially distanced picnic rugs. A readiness to listen to and engage with people was foundational and as relationships grew so did the support and prayer for one another in the group.

Coming out of lockdown and with PCC approval and help from others in the church, T4Y became an intentional Wellbeing Café which now meets every Tuesday in school term times from 8am to 12.30pm in a large prefab building used as a church hall which offers a more flexible space. As well as giving parents and others an opportunity to relax together in a welcoming and supportive environment, there is now a more deliberate focus on mental and spiritual wellbeing - it is becoming a form of 'Relational Church'.

On my visit to the Café known as T4Y, I found 15 women, mostly young mums with babies, sitting talking to each other round a long table. The table has grown in time as more people have come to sit together and it's where the craft activities usually take place. There are toys on the floor and toddlers freely move around the space. There are some grandparents and helpers who play with the young children. There are

church members who are part of the team who sit and chat with everyone. The place feels full and is a happy place, a place of community, with good coffee and tasty homemade cakes - what a joy.

There is no real advertisement of T4Y in the community as it speaks for itself. It is a place where people want to gather, a place where neighbours and friends are glad to be invited and are glad to stay and often return and become part of the café community. At some point during the morning, those who would like to, are invited to move to a quiet space in a nearby room for a time of reflection and prayer. At present the Lectio 365 App is used as a basis for the prayers, being easily accessible to everyone. People take the opportunity to relate the Bible reflection and the prayers to the struggles, joys and sorrows in their lives and there is opportunity to share concerns and prayers for others or themselves. After the prayers some stay and continue to talk together in this quiet space, sometimes deeply. When I asked Rev'd Christine what makes T4Y work and be so attractive to people in this large urban village, the reply was "first and foremost relationships, and then prayer, and then helpers".

This Wellbeing Café is an example of what could become a sustainable and healthy church of tomorrow as it includes the three elements of a healthy church.

Most importantly, for Relational Church, the fellowship of the community experience round the common table has a Eucharistic feel about it. As well as the many one to one relational conversations taking place, there is a deeply felt fellowship of mutuality and trust. Worship, the second element of a healthy church, is experienced through the intentional inclusion of the time of prayer.

Mission, the third element of a healthy church, happens naturally through the creation of a suitable environment in which community building, personal support and development is enabled, particularly with those who are struggling with the demands of life. The quality of the mission

and worship of T4Y is clearly determined by the quality and emphasis on building a strong relational culture underpinned by prayer.

Most of the people who come have had very little to do with the Church and Christianity and would not see themselves as traditional Sunday church goers. One of the more recent developments is that some of the T4Y regulars wanted to meet together at another time to talk through their questions about God. Under the leadership of Rev'd Christine, they are reading through Luke's Gospel bit by bit and relating this to their own life experiences. This is surely an outworking of the mission of the church, which has arisen from the Café community which is deeply rooted in the values of relational church in practice and where the fragrance of love is experienced in people's lives.

Some people would want to call this a Fresh Expression, an example of "mixed ecology" or simply Church, the life of Christ lived out relationally. In the "dynamic theory" of Relational Church the positive energy is generated through the fellowship, which creates and reinforces the mission and worship of the Café community. T4Y is a good example of the understanding and living out of Relational Church, growing in depth and in numbers, an example of people building the new church of tomorrow, right now.

An Essay on Church Growth

Robert Van de Weyer

Introduction

Attendance at CofE services has been declining since around 1960. Liturgical reform, modern Bible translation, messy church, Alpha courses, and umpteen schemes for lay ministry, have failed to stop the decline – which in fact has accelerated. Many churches are no longer spiritually or financially viable; so, bankruptcy beckons. Partial exceptions are some Evangelical churches, although reliable figures for this don't exist.

This brief essay points to a way of reversing the decline and letting churches flourish.

Give people what they want

The church grows when it associates the Gospel with meeting some big and urgent need. So, in medieval times the church nursed the sick and dying. In many places in Africa and Asia in missionary times it provided medicines that worked. In industrial Britain it provided a context for safe and respectable socializing – as opposed to the pub and music hall. Through many centuries the church was the main fount of education. And in student cities and campuses today evangelical churches provide warm fellowship for youngsters far from home.

The trouble is that, apart from student fellowship, these various needs and wants are now met by the state, the electronic media, or the market mechanism. So are there other needs, largely unmet, that the church could met? I can think of

two.

The identity crisis

Human beings have a natural desire for identity, often expressed in symbols and rituals, as well as words. Allegiance to a football team is a conspicuous example, as, of course, is patriotism. Religions have always been the most powerful sources of identity.

For at least four centuries the CofE met this need admirably, at both the local and national level. Incidentally, the Anglican 'brand' remains very potent in sub-Saharan Africa. Unfortunately, in recent decades many clergy, who tend to be quite left-wing, have grown suspicious of Anglicanism as a form of identity, perhaps fearful of the church becoming a vehicle for nationalism. So, except at royal occasions, the CofE has become careless of its traditions.

I believe a move towards the revival of CofE traditions in worship could prove hugely attractive, if enacted with conviction and flair. By way of anecdotal evidence, I been approached by several Evangelical ordinands from Ridley Hall, to guide them in High Church worship – they sense this could be a powerful tool of evangelism.

The mental health crisis

There seems to be a long-term mental health crisis: depression and anxiety, and eating and sleeping disorders, are becoming – so it seems – alarmingly widespread. Doctors and professional counsellors provide some help. But many people continue to feel isolated and bereft. And they need the very thing that Christians are especially well-equipped to provide love – warm, unconditional, self-giving, wise, gentle love.

To meet this need we do not need people with lengthy training, and we certainly don't require yet another class of

licensed minister. Instead, we need a simple and practical theology of healing, based on how Jesus healed – and Christians willing and able to enact that theology. Such Christians will find it's the most satisfy ministry they are ever likely to have.

We have some clue about one context in which such mental healing can occur: the Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, which in turn are based on Methodist class meetings. And it's worth noting that AA has a very robust theology. But there are other contexts also – in which friendly chats over cups of tea rank high.

Money

The ever-rising parish share is the most powerful anti-growth tool yet invented. In effect it greatly increases the cost of churchgoing; and it turns churches into fund-raising agencies, whose members spend much of their leisure time squeezing money out of each other – time that could be far better spent healing and improving worship.

An effective church growth strategy must involve a drastic reduction in the parish share; and this means a drastic reduction in the number of paid clergy, and an even more drastic reduction in bureaucrats. Fortunately, responding with love to mental problems is best done by ordinary Christians, not by people wearing dog-collars. And traditional High Church services do not need to be sacramental.

The true age of lay ministry must begin.

Community Organising and Ministerial Training

Andrew Griffiths

Community organising teaches us to see development as a process – one that may not yield the quick results of some other approaches, but one which gradually builds to a point where all God's people have a seat at the tables of power and the Table of God. This is typically expressed in five stages, which can be called Organising, Listening, Planning, Action and Negotiating, with at each stage a rhythm of Research-Action-Evaluation. What we are calling 'the Process of Community Organising' is sometimes referred to as 'the theory of change', because the claim being made is that:

- the best way to change the world is to get people a seat at the tables of power and the Table of God
- the best way to get people a seat at the table is through action by public storytelling
- action through public story-telling needs to be planned, with careful attention to issues of power
- planning should follow careful and curious listening,
- and listening can only work where a relational culture has been built.

So, it really matters that things are done in this order. Try to plan before you form a relational culture, and you'll achieve nothing but resentment. (As community organisers often put it, you get everyone on the bus and then work out where the bus is going, rather than setting the destination and then recruiting

people to get on board). Try to take action for the community before you've listened to the community, and you'll find yourself in power over rather than power with.

Stage in the Process	Internal Categories for Christian Leaders	External Categories for Christian Leaders
Gathering through liturgy and relationships (Organising)	121s Liturgy Fun	121s Building alliances for the common good
Listening	Consultation House meetings Contemplation Theological Reflection	Consultation House meetings
Planning	Power analysis Vision setting Strategy	Power analysis Vision setting Strategy
Action through Public Storytelling	Testimony Preaching Pastoral Care Character Formation	Testimony Evangelism-as-story-telling Campaigning Social Action
Enabling Everyone to have a Seat at the Table	Inclusion Eucharist Flat teams Distributed Authority	Evangelism-as-invitation Negotiation

The first step: Gathering through Liturgy and Relationships (or: organising)

The state has a bureaucratic culture. It can't help it; it's just the way it is. And it exercises power-over you. (If you doubt the reality of the state's power-over you, try resisting it, and you will find the police involved first and then, if you find a way to refuse to back down when the police move in, the army).

Business has a market-oriented culture. Again, it can't help it. It has power-over its employees (and if the employees do not comply, it will find a way to fire them).

But alongside the state and business, there is another culture, which we call 'civil society'. Residents' associations, mosques, student unions, charities and churches are part of civil society, and, at least in theory, these institutions do not have power-over but power-with. The first stage in Christian community organising is making sure that churches are indeed operating this way. It's not that churches are not teams and need to become them; churches are already teams by virtue of being made up from the faithful baptized, but they need to live in accord with that reality.

Internally, this entails lots of '121s' (conversations in which each party both listens well and discloses well), but also team building (For five practical steps towards building a Church of Teams see Griffiths, Refusing to be Indispensable, p13) and liturgy. Liturgy, because community formation is more difficult if you don't have a liturgy that members can grasp and rely on; when the rest of the world changes they can count on the liturgy not because the words will be unchanged but because the ordo, the shape of the liturgy will still be there (Gordon Lathrop, Holy Things (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1998)). *Externally*, yes, lots of 121s, but also ceasing to think that our prayers will be answered by God making England Christian again (whatever that means) and instead committing

ourselves to be a creative minority and be really good at forming alliances and partnerships for justice and the common good with the other creative minorities that make up civil society. And liturgy is as necessary externally in these alliances as it is internally in churches; there is a way, an ordo, of holding core group meetings and civic assemblies and Citizens chapters, and we need to become proficient at living in tune with these liturgies.

If you want biblical examples of God as an organizer, you will find them in Genesis 12, where God starts again with a creative, blessed and blessing minority after the great disorganizing work he did at Babel; in Jeremiah 29, a call to exiles to organize for the common good after the great disorganizing of the exile; and in Luke 1:39-45 where, after disorganising the lives of Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, God engineers the mother of all 121s as the first step to a new community.

The second step: listening

Our culture encourages us to listen to our hearts, listen to our guts, listen to our inner voices, but rarely do we listen carefully and with intent to other people. Online and in person, we're defining ourselves and shaping the narrative and staying on message, while checking FaceBook during Zoom meetings and drafting responses to the latest government announcement as the podium is being set up outside 10 Downing Street. Some Christian leaders are an exception, in that they are adept at therapeutic listening – listening to those who are bereaved or unwell or in trauma. But even those leaders seldom take time, outside this special case, to listen; and especially not to listen curiously.

So, learning community organising means learning to listen. Alinsky encouraged 'double listening' - listening to our institution (in this case our congregation) and listening to the

community[29]. Organizers listen to their community – not by conducting surveys but by having 121 after 121 after 121, and house meetings, and conversations of various kinds. They do it to listen to stories, and the feelings behind stories, and the gifts that people bring to the table, and hopes and dreams. They don't assume, with glass-half-empty pessimism, that they will find nothing but trouble and lack; they assume, with a theology that believes in abundance and the goodness of creation, that they will find gifts and assets and leaders. 'Organizers enter a community not to catalogue a litany of the community's deficits, but to see gifts and identify and train leaders. A fundamental assumption of organizing is that every community has within it leaders capable of acting on their own behalf in relationship with others. A goal of organizing is to find and cultivate these leaders.[30]'

For Christians, of course, along with this double listening is a third: listening to God. The term 'triple listening' was coined by John Stott. So listening needs to include an aspect of contemplation and of bible-open theological reflection, the primary ways in which we 'listen to God' today. The truth is that these three kinds of listening are intimately connected. Christians have an advantage as community-listeners, if they have learned contemplative prayer – me being me in the presence of God being God. Contemplative prayer isn't easy; our attention frequently wanders, and we have to draw it back (gently, as if we were training a kitten) to our breathing and the reality of the presence of God. In fact, contemplation is important for two reasons – first because listening to God is a good in itself, and fundamental to our calling as Christians, and second because the process of learning to listen to others is

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[29] Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp99-102

[30] Jeffrey K Krehbiel, *Reflecting with Scripture on Community Organizing* (Chicago: ACTA, 2017), p16

honed by learning to listen to God. Remember, God is a listener too (think of Hagar in Genesis 16 and 21[31]).

Jesus refuses even the most obvious assumptions in order to create real communication: we co-speak with God the words of our salvation.

To the blind man, "What do you want me to do for you?"
To the woman in the crowd, "Who touched me?"
To the paralysed man by the pool, "Do you want to get well?"
The Syro-Phoenician woman wins her miracle
by wrestling, much as Jacob does.
Each is called to an articulation of faith and hope.

At the beginning of John's Gospel, the reader is very aware of the parallel with Genesis – 'In the beginning was the Word' echoes 'In the beginning, God.' So we're asking the question – what is Jesus going to say? After all, he is God walking the earth – God's first recorded words were 'let there be light', what will Jesus say? And Jesus' first words in John are: 'what are you looking for?' At one level, of course, a polite question – 'can I help you?' But so much more than that, Jesus genuinely wants them to articulate their deepest longings[32]. We must do no less.

The third step: planning

Ernesto Cortes Jr points to a paradox – how is that community

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[31] Four sessions based on this story, including video material from Vanessa Herrick and Andy Griffiths, can be found by searching for 'Hope in the Wilderness' at www.chelmsford.anglican.org

[32] We are grateful to Charlie Tatham for this insight

organising is negative about Planning, yet includes planning in its five steps?[33] The answer, for Cortes, is to distinguish Planning (with a capital P – the kind of Planning that community organising doesn't like, which is done from above, championed by one single leader and 'comprehensive') from planning (the kind of planning that community organising does like). planning is simply the middle stage between listening to the community and action. Stories are turned into bite-sized, 'winnable' issues ('problems lead to conferences, issues lead to action'[34]); when the gifts local people bring, and a power analysis (see below) are brought to bear, a plan for action comes together. Cortes uses the Greek word metis to mean 'local knowledge … gained through incremental learning and constant feedback and evaluation,' and claims that it is metis that makes the difference between Plans and plans. Bretherton uses the adjectives 'prudential' and 'non-ideological.'[35] To which we want to add 'local' or even 'parochial'.

For the Christian, the temptation to be the heroic, central, top-of-the-triangle or top-of-the-tower-of Babel leader is a familiar one. It is the original temptation of Genesis 3, the heart of the temptations in the wilderness of Jesus. But we are following Jesus, and that means we are not heroes but servants, not Planners but planners. 'The Saviour rules, he gives life and breath, he heals us, he keeps us, he conquers sin & carries out decrees -yes, he does all this - but my sisters and brothers, he does all this after the pattern of the cross, and we must never present him as a despot with a way of power, but as a Lamb: patient, lamblike, gentle if things do not go his way'[36].

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33 Ernesto Cortes Jr, *Rebuilding our Institutions*, (Chicago: ACTA, 2010), pp14-19

34 Matthew Bolton, *How to Resist* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p68

35 Bretherton, Christianity and Contemporary Politics, p74

36 Nicolaus von Zinzendorf; see www.zinzendorf.webs.com

So, in community organising, planning is simply the thing that happens after listening and before action. It includes articulating a vision and strategy. You will do it carefully, aware of the pitfalls of power-over rather than power-with; but you will not fall for the opposite trap of rejecting power altogether. As Christians, we can give power a bad press. We focus on God bringing down the mighty from their seat and forget its counterpoint: lifting up the lowly. Where to? To a place of power, perhaps even the seat that has just been vacated! In one of Paul's few references to the Kingdom of God, he tells us that 'it is a matter not of talk but of power[37]'; and when community organising aims for power it is always power-with, not power-over. Power itself is neutral.[38] If we don't look to hold power, others will not hesitate to take it.

Unsettled leaders know power is not bad. An approach to training that is shaped by community organising will move power from the category of 'temptation' to the category of 'gift of God' and, when we see that, we can dismantle something else poisonous. Power is not a zero-sum game. There is not a limited amount of it, like a possession or resource, so that in order for me to have more of it, you must have less. Like all the gifts of God, such as peace, love and justice, power builds when it is shared.

The fourth step: action through public storytelling

So, the next thing that needs to happen, after planning, is action. However, we aren't just saying 'go and do something'. **The action a Community-Organising-influenced training scheme**

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[37] 1 Corinthians 4:20

[38] Alexander Hamilton (yes, that one) defined power as 'the ability or faculty of doing a thing' – Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, p52

envisages, has a very particular texture and character.

1. Because we believe that Christian leadership should keep the diaconal/external roughly in balance with the presbyteral/internal, the location of the action is important. Christian leaders need to be spending about half their energy internally in hybrid church, and about half externally.
2. Because we are following the five phases of community organising, the process of the action is important. Building community, listening and planning come before action. Get them in the wrong order and you risk unintended and destructive consequences.
3. Because we believe in 'action through public story-telling', the definition of action is distinctive. Community organisers believe storytelling and testimony are the keys to enabling pastoral care, preaching, social action and holding business and the State to account, and Christian leaders who see their role as analogous to community organisers will be spending a lot of their time telling stories, hearing stories and helping others tell their stories.
4. And finally, because we live by the Iron Rule, our action has a particular restraint. We don't act for people; we act with them. Just as the God who can do anything with nothing chooses not to act towards us without us, we do not act on behalf of our communities without them.

   But also, we're saying 'go and do something'. Do it gladly. Do it boldly.

One of the ways Christian leaders can see their roles is as public storytellers and leaders who see their role as community organising will find stories everywhere, because people are everywhere, and, to quote Barack Obama, 'Whatever else people are, people are stories'. We can't push this too far –

people are not only stories - but Obama had a point. All the skills of interpretation we learn in order to look at books, and especially the Bible, we can deploy to look at people, the living human documents, because they are just as endlessly fascinating.

Many of the things we do collectively in church life are storytelling. Our liturgy tells a story; preaching is storytelling – or it should be - and I don't just mean we should tell stories in sermons. I mean that a sermon is a way of showing that God's story and our stories meet or can meet. God's big story is about creation and Israel and Jesus's life death and resurrection and the mission of the church and the way God's going to put the world right. Our stories are about pain and sadness and joy and climate change and COVID-19 and a need to be loved and a search for meaning and justice. Put the two of them together and preaching catches light.

So Christian leaders who see their job as community organising will preach better, because they'll have listened to the stories of their congregations and their communities and will be able to make those connections better with the story of God. They'll also be putting lots of energy into helping other people tell their stories. Church services are likely to feature people's stories almost every week – whether of how they came to faith, or of how their faith is making a difference in their working lives, or of the struggles they face. Community organising has borrowed the term 'testimony' to speak of public storytelling and has helped churches rediscover a part of their heritage – among eighteenth century Moravians, for example, every member was assisted to create a long, medium and short version of their life story (they called it a Lebenslauf). It wouldn't hurt if our church members started seeing testimony as a normal part of church life. This won't happen automatically; it will take sensitivity and training. But it really is possible. Community organising gives us a chance to reclaim that word, testimony – Brueggemann speaks of the whole Bible as testimony. If you think about it, most of the things we believe

we believe on the basis of testimony – of a witness we trust telling us their experience. And before you know it church members who've learned to tell their stories inside the gathered church, online or onsite, will have a newfound confidence in telling their stories and God's outside the gathered community. This is one half of the task of evangelism. No argument can change a person's mind, but the right story can change their whole being.

It's not just preaching and evangelism. Pastoral care is largely a question of stories, too – hearing stories, holding stories, giving people space to make sense of and tell their own stories, helping people align their story with God's story. Maya Angelou said, 'there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story within you.' Barack Obama would say that the key decision in all our lives is whether we interpret our own stories with a hermeneutic of fear or a hermeneutic of hope. But we can't make that decision without someone to be there as we're doing it, and it takes years and years, and that to a large degree is what we call pastoral care.

We are not saying pastoral care helps people retell their stories with happy endings. In community organising, the listening component comes before the storytelling and stories are allowed to breathe and to be, in the voices of those to whom they belong, rather than being forced into some predetermined pattern with all the authenticity rubbed away. There are testimonies of conversion and testimonies of faith, but there are also testimonies of injustice and testimonies of lament, and it's important they are expressed and heard without people tidying them up. The glorious thing about the Bible stories, especially the Gospels, is the mix of dark and light, shining example and terrible warning, voice of praise and harrowing cry, and how faithfully those followers of Jesus allowed their mistakes and bumblings to be recorded for all time. Our holiest books are stitched together with human frailty and divine mercy.

The heart of community organising action is not meeting

needs through service projects[39], not 'protest' as such[40], but public storytelling, with a view to helping people get a place at the table. Externally, community organising ensures that decision-makers hear the stories of the people effected by their policies – accompanied by a large number of people having 'turned out' as evidence of the power of the alliance – at formal assemblies, or tea-parties, or rallies, or carol concerts, or flash-mobs, or Zoom, or wherever people gather for public story-telling.

The fifth step: ensuring everyone has a seat at the table

For me this fifth step is all about spotting triangles all over the place and trying to turn them into tables. I can't see a triangle without wanting to destroy it. Don't ever invite me to an orchestral concert. I can't see a triangle without thinking of the tower of Babel and wanting to turn it into a table.

I'll explain. When I look at the church, and look at society, I see people having power over others. Sometimes the majority have power over the minority. And sometimes it's more like a pyramid, with one person or an elite having power over everyone else. You even find this in Zoom meetings, where one person is using their position or their charisma or the force of their personality, or even a mute button, to hold other people down. You sometimes find it in churches, where the idea is that the person at the top or at the centre is the Vicar, and everyone

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[39] We are not against service projects, but we are aware of the potential for service projects to be ways for churches to take 'power-over' the poor. The work of mercy is likely to be necessary in the short-term, but in the long-term it needs to be accompanied by the whole process of community organising if it is to result in justice.

[40] 'Protest sounds like you're reacting to someone else's agenda, action means the people have a plan. They are initiating the change and someone else is going to have to react.' Bolton, *How to Resist*, p77.

else is just their helpers. And then you find the pyramids replicated so that the children's worker is at the top in children's work, and everyone else in that ministry is just their helper, and the music director is at the top of the music pyramid and all the other musicians or choir members, or band members just have to help the music director achieve their vision.

Community organising is not about creating a new community-organising triangle where the community organiser can be at the top and the centre. It's all about enabling other people to shine. It's about power-with, not power-over. And it's about tables not triangles. Here's some poetic writing from Paul Bayes, the Bishop of Liverpool.

> *The table is simple, but it's well-made*
> *because the man who made it was a carpenter.*
> *It has many uses.*
> *A table for meeting, talking around, thumping,*
> *signing treaties, debating, arguing, voting.*
> *But mostly a table for eating.*
> *You can't sit alone at this table,*
> *you can't buy a meal here, or a ticket here,*
> *everything is freely given.*
> *You can sit here with people you don't know*
> *and be bound together.*
> *A poor man feeds you in a way that means*
> *you never go hungry again.*[41]

Which brings us back to the fifth stage of community organising. We call this 'ensuring everyone gets a place at the table'. It's about the poor getting a place at the negotiating table with the State or Big Business. God wants to throw down the mighty from their thrones and lift up the humble and meek, and if God does that, we'll all end up on a level, eye to eye, face to face, Zoom to Zoom. It's also about building flat teams in our

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[41] Paul Bayes, *The Table* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2019), p2. Punctuation mine.

institutions – breaking down the hierarchies and finding new ways to work that are more fully about power-with instead of power-over.

Because we're Christians, we can't hear the word "table" without also thinking about the Table of God, the Holy Table or Altar or whatever you want to call it. It's part of the task of Christian leadership to extend an invitation to the Banquet of God which is prefigured in the Eucharist. So evangelism is absolutely a part of community organising, but so also is an approach to inclusion that makes sure we don't put obstacles in people's way.

It might sound like the three things in this final stage – negotiating, flat teams and inviting people to Jesus and the Eucharist – are just three random things that are only connected by the use of the metaphor "table". But while the metaphor does happen to be convenient, there is more to the connection than tables. The point is – the final stage of community organising is not about gaining anything for the organiser, it's not about power-over. Community organisers try to get other people to the places they need to be. That might mean getting them into the room where it happens when decisions are made, or getting them appropriate power-with within their institutions, or getting them into the best place they possibly can be, which we believe is adoption as children of a loving God through Jesus. It isn't standing above and handing down power like a favour but raising people up to where they were always meant to be. So, instead of calling the fifth stage 'ensuring everyone gets a place at the table', we could have called it 'ensuring everyone is in the best possible position in relation to the State, business, the Church and God, without the Christian leader exercising power over anyone' - but that's just not catchy.

We can't emphasise enough, though, that not liking triangles – hierarchies that exercise power-over, if you like – and liking flat or democratic or participative structures is in the essence of community organising. It stops it being just a set of tools to do

expected or needed things more effectively and enables it to breathe as a set of tools to do different things differently.

The work of community organizing is continuous: not a project to be completed but a relationship to be lived, grown and shared. Externally, the local alliance translates problems into issues, tells stories publicly and develops enough power-with to mean that the negotiations are ongoing, on an increasing number of issues. We become a society with the poor in the centre. Internally, more and more people are included at the heart of the church and find their place at the tables of church decision-making, and the Table of God.

A Relational Church and Social Action Partnerships

David McCoulough

As we partially emerge from the two years Covid 19 pandemic many churches are reassessing how they are, what their purpose is, and what are they called to be. For a number of years, the church in England has faced declining levels of church attendance and a sense of belonging to the church. Paradoxically alongside this challenge church engagement in social action seems to be growing in volume and scope.

The recent Church in Action report, produced by Church Urban Fund (CUF), found that 65% of church leaders now agree that 'tackling poverty is a fundamental part of the mission for our church', up from 54% in 2017 and 44% in 2011. It also stated that in spite of many challenges, 37% of church leaders said despite pandemic restrictions that their parish was doing more in response to rising need, including the provision of practical, emotional, financial, and digital support.

As churches increasingly attempt to respond to the needs and challenges of poverty, isolation and marginalisation in our society, it is an important part of our Christian witness that the church works **relationally**, **responsibly**, **respectfully** and **relevantly**, not only with those whose lives we pray will be transformed, but also with partners and others of goodwill who are active around us and with us.

Good relationships need to be at the heart of church responses to local needs. A theology of abundance rather than one of scarcity transforms the missional mindset. Being with people and communities as opposed to doing something for them changes the relationships and the power dynamics. A

sense that there are abundant gifts, experiences and possibilities in all places turns upside down traditional attitudes and relationships. An Asset Based Community Development perspective can help churches review and reset partnerships at a local level.

When a local church engages in social action there are generally speaking two routes to discerning activity. Firstly, a vision/mission need and opportunity that emerges from within the church community's experience. This may be because refugees/asylum seekers are turning up at church on a Sunday, or a number of people in the congregation suffer from mental health challenges. The church leadership/congregation experience directly and seek to respond in some way.

Secondly, an external charity / para-church organisation / other fellowship / local people approach the local church with ideas / resources / templates for action. This might be a local foodbank needing new premises or volunteers, a GP surgery highlighting the amount of lonely or isolated people turning up regularly and asking if the local church can help in some way, or it might be the Local Authority desperately in need of Foster Carers.

What is key to helping a relational culture shape the church's response?

There can be a tendency for churches/Christian groups to work in isolation. Sometimes a church leader has a strong sense of calling to respond to a need or issue and sets off with energy and enthusiasm to set up a project. However, this can so easily lead at best to overlap with existing work and at worst to frustration, anger and mistrust from others at the way Christians ignore or compete with good work already happening in the locality.

It is important for local church leaders to recognise that many non-Christian voluntary bodies are already doing God's work, that they are part of the misseo dei, God doing his mission in the world, with which we are invited to join in.

We witness by the way we relate/consult/work with others. This is not an optional extra but should be central to mission at parish, deanery and diocesan levels.

So how does the local church encourage a relational approach to partnership working?

If the church is looking to start something new or is re-launching an existing project or piece of work, it needs to **pray**, **look** and **listen**.

1. **Prayer** is at the heart of discerning God's will for a parish's mission priorities. Praying together as a worshipping community should also be an expression of fellowship, of an intentionally relational church culture. "Love one another, as I have loved you" needs to be lived out in the church community to enable community engagement with real impact.

2. **Look around your community.** What do you see? Which areas, neighbourhoods do you not know. Use existing resources to help you to see (don't rely on or be motivated by one case or anecdote) – CUF research, Spotlight, local authority information e.g. on child poverty, employment, housing need stats.

   There are useful tools that can help such as Birmingham Diocese's *Know your church, Know your neighbourhood* resource, Transforming Notts Together's *Getting Started in your community* workshop or CUF's *Growing Good* course can all help churches to discern what are the needs and issues that God is calling them to respond to and more importantly the people to be with and whose voices need to be heard.

3. **Listen to others.** In terms of taking a relational approach to partnerships and social action this is crucial and

requires a commitment to forming and developing key relationships.

Listen to the local community, not just the congregation. A fascinating way of doing this is modelled by Pastor Michael Mather in USA.*

Listen to other churches / faith groups. What are they already doing in your area?

Listen to the wider voluntary sector – CVS, CAB, local charities, Refugee/Housing Need group.

Listen to local councillors / the police / school leaders – what do they say, what do they see as major challenges and opportunities in the area?

Take advantage of existing resources and methodology to enable deep listening, such as those developed by broad-based social organising partnerships such as Citizens UK.

Having prayed, looked, and listened, what next?

1. Do ask diocesan staff / ecumenical partners to meet with church leaders / PCC to get another perspective / share good practice from elsewhere in the diocese / wider church.

2. Do encourage church members to volunteer/join in with existing work whether run by other churches or secular bodies – don't underestimate the impact this can have in building good and impactful relationships

3. Do discern where there are gaps in provision and seek to fill them, in consultation with other local partners

4. Do ensure people with lived experience have a voice and help shape projects and action

5. Do Not set up in competition with existing provision/project e.g. Foodbank around the corner already exists

6. Do Not give the impression that nothing else is happening when it is (even if and especially if a non-Christian led project)

7. Do Not seek publicity which undermines and demeans or ignores partners

8. Do Not seek a quick and easy fix especially if an external offer brings resources, volunteers and a ready-made plan

Joining together in the transforming mission of God is about outcomes which sees lives, communities, and the world changed for the better. There are different ways the church can engage in social action. This might mean running a project, hosting a project in your building, partnering a project elsewhere, supporting a project with volunteers, donations.

Whatever we do has to be sustainable, otherwise we will be seen as yet another 'organisation' who pulls out, leaving those on the margins feeling more stigmatised & even more excluded.

'Faithful capital'/trust can take a long time to build up but not long to pull down.

Healthy relationships within the church and beyond its walls/members can lead to healthy partnerships, which can be part of transformational change. At the heart of this is listening to others, hearing others and especially the voices that are so often unheard.

“Having Nothing, Possessing Everything”

How do you learn to see abundance where others see only poverty? In this book, the Rev. Michael Mather writes about how his congregation shifted its focus from paying people’s bills to cultivating their talents and gifts.

Episcopally Led?

Tim Norwood

Episcopally Led and Synodically Governed

Churches throughout the Anglican Communion describe themselves as "Episcopally Led and Synodically Governed". This phrase is an attempt to acknowledge the special authority of Bishops while embracing a more democratic understanding of Church life.

In many ways, the "Episcopally Led and Synodically Governed" formula is a triumph of Anglican compromise. It was used most effectively by Bishop Michael Turnbull and his working group in 'Working as One Body' published by the Church of England in 1995. It allows us to reap the benefits that can be found in both powerful individual leaders and rich democratic processes - but it also creates a potentially serious conflict given the fuzziness of the word "leadership" and the inevitable conflict this creates.

In recent years there has been a move to adopt more professional models of leadership and management in the Church of England. Those in favour of this move see it as a way of equipping and releasing gifted leaders to do the work of God. Opponents accuse the hierarchy of ever-increasing managerialism.

I believe that the solution to this conflict can be found in our Anglican ecclesiology and a more pneumatological approach to leadership.

But first I want to look again at what we mean by "leadership" and how that leadership is exercised. We need to clarify what we mean when we use this word before we can

think more clearly about how it is exercised.

Defining Leadership

In popular imagination "leaders" are quasi-heroic figures with unique characteristics and a destiny to fulfill. We tell stories of leaders like Churchill, Hitler, Roosevelt, Thatcher, Mandela, Ghandi or Putin. Famous leaders like these generate powerful mythologies which mold our thinking. We associate "leadership" with ideas of struggle, power, persistence, or success against overwhelming odds. Few of us could achieve the impact of these heroes and villains, but they provide unconscious models which shape our own behavior and expectations.

It is also common to think that "leadership" only exists in relation to organisational roles. In other words, "leaders" are people in positions of seniority - head teachers, CEOs, presidents, prime ministers or bishops. Some people do have "positional authority" which gives them a right to exercise particular powers or make certain decisions - but this should not be confused with leadership as a general concept. There is a genuine relationship between leadership and organisational position, but it is not straightforward.

Those who study leadership generally define it in terms of influence and relationships. For example, Chemers (1997. An integrative theory of leadership. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.) describes leadership as "a process of social influence in which a person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common and ethical task". The task of leadership is to encourage or persuade others to think, behave or act differently. As the Community Organisers of Citizens UK like to remind us, "leaders have followers".

People with status or position do have access to "levers of power" which enable them to exercise their leadership in a more effective way. Bishops, for example, have the power to chair and convene meetings, make appointments, or issue

licenses. They can pick up the phone - and expect a reasonable number of people to answer.

There are, however, limitations on the control that positional leaders are able to exercise. These limitations can be personal, moral, legal, systemic or practical - but they do exist. Positional leadership does not give people god-like power - whatever some may think.

It should be noted that many leaders do not have positional authority at all. They lead through force of personality, articulate communication or simple popularity. Many conflicts have begun when a positional leader overestimated their own power and underestimated the things that relational leaders or "little people" can achieve by working together.

Leadership is a complex issue, but we are going to use the following definition for this discussion:

Leadership is influence exercised through social relationships, with the aim of achieving action or change.

The Kingdom, the Spirit and the Mind of Christ

As a Church, we need to have a concept of leadership which coheres with our theology. We are disciples of Christ, and our ultimate aim is life with Jesus in the emergent Kingdom of Heaven. Our leadership must have the Kingdom as its ultimate goal, and we must exercise it in a way that honours Christ.

In the New Testament, leadership is a gift of the Holy Spirit, given for the building up of the Church. It requires humility, moral integrity, self-sacrifice, and a commitment to the good of others. The purpose of leadership is to nurture disciples, ensure good order, and seek the well-being of God's people.

The Holy Spirit has a central role in leadership because the Spirit works through God's people, revealing the Word of God. The Holy Spirit blows where it wills, so it is important to listen

for what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

It is crucial to note that there are people in formal positions of authority within the New Testament community, but the Holy Spirit is not limited to people with identified roles. God speaks through the Apostles but also through deacons, women, slaves, and gentiles. When the Church gathers, it is possible to have words of prophecy or the interpretation of tongues. These are spoken by multiple speakers, while others discern what God may be saying.

Throughout history, God has chosen to work through unexpected people. The gift of leadership is given to the Church through the work of the Holy Spirit - and the Spirit is not limited to those in high office.

This raises a serious challenge for the Church, but it is a familiar one, and it has been faced throughout Christian history. The Rule of St Benedict, for example, challenges us to see Christ in all people - even those we find difficult. Their voice may bring the Word of God that we most need to hear. As Anglicans, our concept of being "synodically governed" is a nod in the same direction.

If leadership is influence, then it is the influence of Christ through the Holy Spirit that we most need in the Church. If the Spirit is active in every believer, then each and every believer is a person through whom the Spirit could exert influence. There is no theological justification for limiting our concept of leadership to those in hierarchical positions. Leadership is given *through everyone for everyone*.

The Levers of Power

Leaders achieve influence through three main activities which we could describe as "levers of power":

1. **Control:** It is easy to confuse leadership with control - particularly when it comes to positional leadership - but control is merely a tool that leaders can use. All people have some measure of control, even if it is only over their own actions, thoughts or words. Positional leaders may have more resources that they can control, or more people that they can command - but their control has limited impact if there is no trust, or the people do not believe in their project.

2. **Relationship:** The impact of leadership is vastly increased if it is backed up by trust, understanding or personal commitment. Followers appreciate leaders who they can relate to on a personal level. Leaders therefore need to invest time in the people that they want to lead. This often means listening to the real concerns of other people and looking for ways to address them. *Good leaders are good with people.*

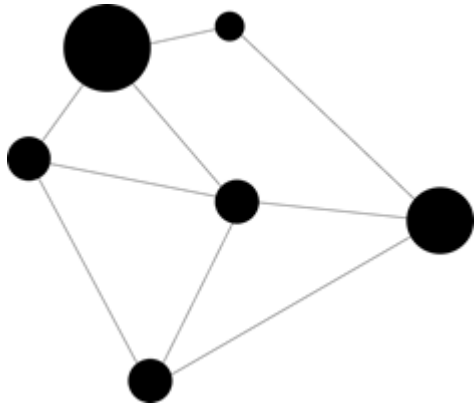
3. **Information:** Knowledge is power, so those who control the flow of information have a built-in advantage when it comes to leadership. They can influence others by the way they communicate, and by what they choose to share - or not to pass on. We should not underestimate the power of gatekeepers when it comes to information. *Knowledge is not neutral; it is always curated.*

In every organisation or community there are disparities between people with greater or lesser access to these three levers of power. It is worth noting, however, that we all have some level of control. We all have relationships with others. We all communicate information in some way. We are all leaders - whether we are aware of it or not.

Measuring Leadership

A few years ago, I carried out a small research project which aimed to look at collaborative leadership in Christian communities. When I started the project, I wondered whether churches could be compared to computers with mechanisms for input, output, memory and processing power. I soon realised that a better analogy was a network - with each node exercising a level of leadership in relation to all of the others.

A church is a community of people linked together by a web of relationships. It's possible to illustrate this using a network diagram which describes the way individuals are held together. Here is a simple example:

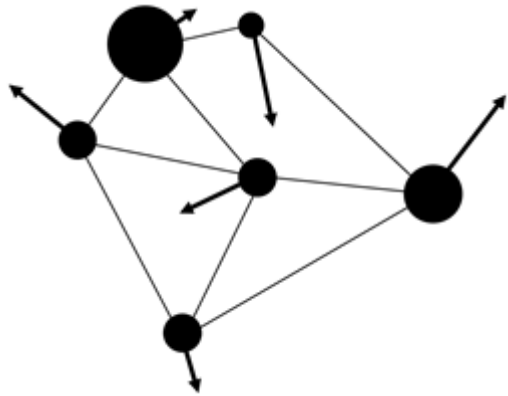


In this example, the dots represent people, and the lines represent the relationship between them. The dots vary in size according to the relative influence or power that different people have. The lines indicate relationships which could be measured in terms of time spent together or the frequency of contact.

It's immediately apparent that each person is different in terms of relative power or the number of connections that they have. This has an impact on their ability to lead.

Leadership is often defined in terms of influence. It's the ability to influence the thoughts and behaviour of other people.

In this simple community, each person could be thought of as a leader. They can all influence the people around them. I like to demonstrate this by drawing arrows, to indicate the relative influence that each person has:



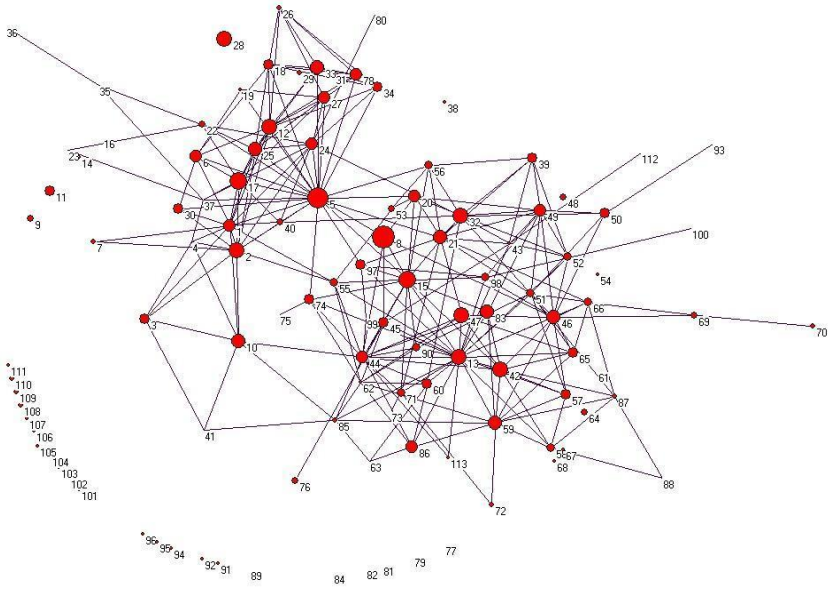
The arrows are pointing in different directions, to indicate that each person is pulling in the direction that they believe the group should go. Some arrows are longer than others, because people put varying amounts of energy into leadership. Some people are very determined, while others are a bit uncertain. Everyone is part of the community however, so everyone has some form of influence on those around them.

The danger is that people are pulling in so many different directions that the group doesn't go anywhere fast. In fact, the different forces can easily cancel each other out so the community doesn't go anywhere at all!

There is a wonderful phrase in the Book of Proverbs and it often gets quoted when people talk about leadership: "Where there is no vision the people perish" (Proverbs 29.18). The implication is that a community needs a strong sense of direction or purpose if it is to flourish or even survive. Without a vision the people might perish, but with too many visions they are completely lost!

With this theoretical model in mind, my next step was to

map leadership within real-world congregations. I used simple questionnaires that enabled me to measure the perceived influence of individuals within the network - asking people to name the six people they spend the most time with, and the six people they get most information from. Using the mathematical tools of Social Network Analysis, I was able to gain real insights into the way these congregations worked. Here is an interesting example:

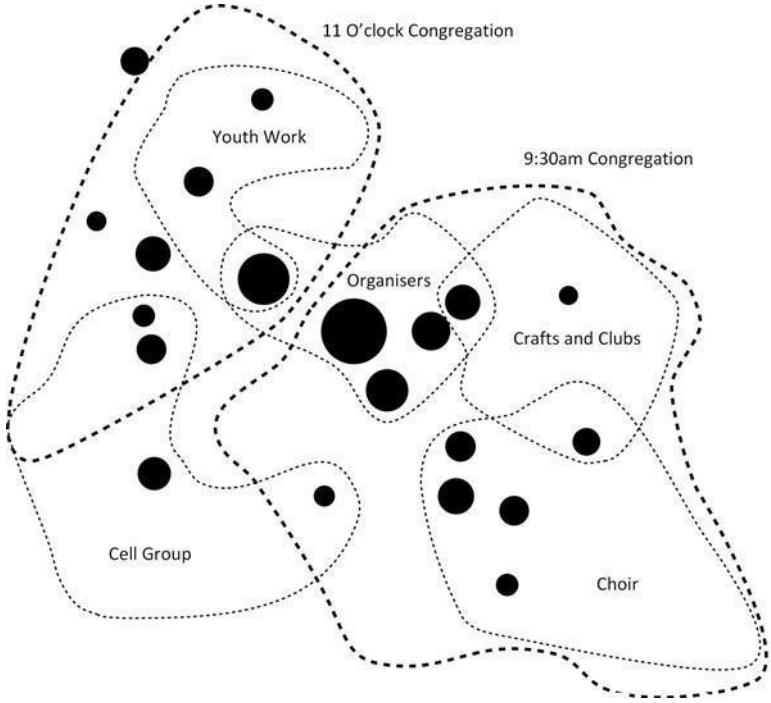


Without knowing the name, denomination or location of this church, there is a lot that this "map" reveals. We can see at least two subsets of people… There are also a number of more connected people…. Some dots are larger than others, indicating a greater level of power… There are a few branches or bridges…. What is going on here?

I interviewed members of this church and was able to make more detailed observations. Participant number 5 was a churchwarden who acted as the main bridge between two

Sunday morning congregations. Number 15 was the other churchwarden but she was more embedded in one specific congregation. Number 8 was an ex-minister who was still in the area. There were also a number of small groups including a choir, a youth group, a cell group and a craft group. All of these elements can be seen in the "map".

The following diagram illustrates the subsets in the church, revealing the connections between groups and individuals:

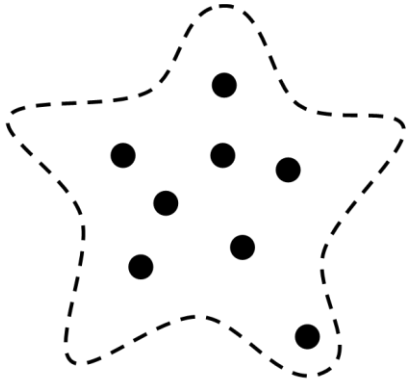


This exercise provided a fascinating window into the patterns of leadership and relative power in a fairly normal Christian community. It shows that leadership can be dispersed throughout congregations with a number of key leaders acting as influential hubs or links.

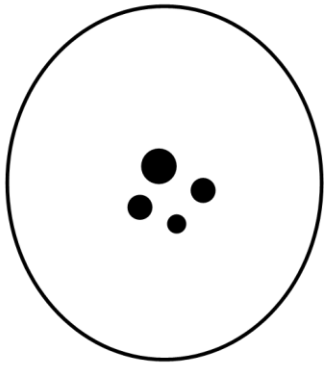
Furthermore, my research hints at the fractal nature of leadership within networks. In other words, similar patterns are observed at every level in the community, from the local

church choir, to the congregation, and (by implication) to parishes, deaneries, dioceses, provinces and beyond.

I found two main patterns in my research. I tend to describe them as "eggs" or "starfish".



Starfish



Egg

"Eggs" have a strong core and an impermeable boundary. This pattern tends to emerge when one person (sometimes with a close-knit team) becomes the central focus of leadership. Everyone belongs because they are in relationship with the leader. This is a strongly pastoral model with many attractions. It provides coherence, consistency, and clarity in terms of roles, vision and belonging. Unfortunately, the relational capacity of the leader and the core team limit "eggs". There is a limit to the number of people that the main leader can hold in relationship. It can also be difficult to break into the community, since the members tend to be inwardly focussed and prevent the leader from making new connections.

"Starfish" are more complex. Leadership is more dispersed, and each limb has its own "brain". The different arms of the body vary in size and can provide opportunities for new members to be integrated and find a home. This pattern has strengths in terms of flexibility, openness and diversity, but it requires a willingness to work in partnership with others. Moreover, the positional leaders must have skills in

collaboration and team work or the whole community will pull itself apart. The potential for growth is very real - if only people can work together!

Reimagining Anglican Ecclesiology

The Church of England is an episcopalian body. Our ecclesiology is often visualised in hierarchical terms with bishops at the top and the laity at the bottom. Leadership comes from those at the top, and others are expected to follow…

Putting aside for a moment the things Jesus said about the first coming last and the last coming first, this picture doesn't reflect what we know about leadership in a Christian community. If leadership comes from the Holy Spirit through everyone to everyone; if everyone is a leader and everyone is a follower, this rigid hierarchy is a poor reflection of who we really are.

I would like to suggest that episcopalianism is better understood as a network rather than a hierarchy. Bishops are utterly crucial to who we are because they are the relational nodes that hold us together - rather than the managers who tell us what to do.

Their authority comes from the depth and diversity of their relationships, not a questionable sense of being "better" than others in the Church family.

A new bishop said to a friend of mine that he felt like an imposter and wasn't ready for the role. My friend said, "that's because you *aren't* ready and you *are* an imposter - but that will change."

When the church sets someone aside as a bishop, we also put them in a position where they can build the relationships which will enable them to serve in this key role - holding the church together and ensuring that the Good News entrusted to the Christian Community is shared and proclaimed.

The same is true of all of us who serve as link people in the

Body of Christ: archbishops connect bishops and dioceses, archdeacons connect archdeaconries, area/rural deans connect deaneries, rectors and vicars connect the people in parishes with the wider church. We belong because we are in relationship with others.

This may sound like an esoteric argument, but it's crucial to the way we understood the "episcopally led" formula. Leadership is not a *right* that comes through status, but a *consequence* of the entire network. It is an *emergent* phenomenon. It is not something that is conferred on a small number of individuals, but the sum total of the Spirit at work amongst all God's people.

I want to reaffirm the phrase "episcopally led and synodically governed" because it speaks to me of the church that we are called to be. True episcopal leadership is leader-rich, dynamic and open. It is fundamentally relational.

Remember the observation that starfish have potential to grow while eggs are stuck within their shells. Centralised leadership often causes us to turn inwards, but God wants us to spread out into the wider world, bringing healing, transformation and hope. Perhaps it's time for us to break out of our shells?

A Church Community of Disciples Learning to Love

Reflections on the work of John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth, Donald Winnicott

Paul Davies

John Bowlby (1907-1990), in his work and writings, speaks of three principal ways of attachment which describe the relationship of a care giver with a child. He then goes on to suggest that these early relationships influence the nature and characterization of adult relationships, which he calls the internal working models. Bowlby's work has led to a rationale for facing difficulties over the nature of relationships between friends and lifelong partners. In the development of Bowlby's thinking there are three essential relationships of attachment. Attachment can be described as long term emotional and external contact with another person. Its features were later defined by his colleague Mary Ainsworth (1913- 1999) as being:

1. **Secure Attachments**, which at their best can be described as a way of having healthy relationships of trust, and often of intimacy. In secure attachments there is a good level of self-esteem, self-confidence and self-disclosure, whereby a person feels comfortable sharing their feelings and thoughts and seeks out and affirms social and meaningful relationships. Here there is a good level of social skills and a grounded ability to connect with people and ideas through a positive world view.

2. **Ambivalent Attachments** are relationships in which there is reluctance, and a struggle to be close to others. This ambivalent view of self and of others leads people to demand of themselves and others a relationship of depth at one moment, then in the next moment to move away from intimacy, creating relational distance and social indifference. There is constant inner anxiety about the dynamic of relationships which often leaves a person feeling unsafe and insecure, lacking the self-confidence to form substantial relationships. This often expresses itself in anger and criticism of others. It reveals itself, under stress, in the need to be noticed and to have constant emotional attention. It is sustained by 'clinginess', fearing that s/he might be let down and even abandoned. A person with an ambivalent attachment is constantly looking for proof of affection, and often no amount of reassurance is good enough for them to feel secure. With this kind of attachment comes a negative self-image: one in which a person sees him or herself as to blame, or as just not being good enough.

3. **Avoidant Attachments** are those characterized by anxiety and difficulties in forming and maintaining intimate relationships in terms of life partners and social friendships. Such a form of attachment is again experienced as being unhealthy and insecure. There is often very little desire to invest in social relationships, along with an unwillingness to share thoughts and feelings with others. Hence the person involved has few close relationships.

   People with avoidant attachment will often come across as superficial and socially distant, self-reliant, independent, even dismissive of the need of relationships with others. They will avoid sharing deep feelings and thoughts and they will avoid vulnerability through deflection, for

example, through humor or criticism of others.

There is often a fear of being overwhelmed by their own feelings and the feelings of others, which might result in a sense of being lost and abandoned. Hence there is an unhealthy mistrust in themselves and in others. In a self-preservation mode of avoidance of deep feelings of vulnerability, a person will focus on (and even be lost in) business and occupation and will develop a projected thick skin of protection. It is as though the heart and the head are disconnected. And yet the paradox underlining all this is the need for relationships of depth and interdependence rather than the independence of isolation.

Bowlby understood that adults' and children's self-confidence, and their attachments to others, could be influenced for the good through enhanced understanding of the self and of others. He believed that through encouragement and renewed focus of intention, people's secure attachments could be deepened towards an ever-greater sense of self-confidence and human flourishing. In the context of the two insecure types of attachment, Bowlby believed they could be moved therapeutically towards an experience of secure relationships. What I would suggest here is that Bowlby's theory of attachment in terms of characterization can be applied to relationships of family and community – and also to a large organization, particularly to those who are seeking to maintain a relational culture for the sake of personal and communal health as well as profit.

Applying the theory to church health (that is, for the life and mission of the Church in its pursuit of the kingdom of God) it is necessary for the Church at every level to build and sustain "secure relationships of attachment". A local church's interpersonal and community relations can often be described through Bowlby's theory as relationships that are characterized by avoidance and ambivalence. Avoidance attachment is often

reflected in the lack of social interaction and in the resistance to most group experiences, for instance, fellowship meetings. It will also be reflected in the way in which a local church struggles with the concept of corporate responsibility and accountability, particularly in the context of personal and communal repentance. There will often be anxiety in maintaining any relationships that go beyond superficiality and function. In some churches which are characterized by avoidance in their relationships, people will find commitment, self-sacrifice and intimacy difficult. Such a church might not even see the desire and necessity for the church to be engaged with the local community and to evangelize. Its attitude might be one that 'people know where we are, so they can come if they want to'.

A church whose relationships are characterized by ambivalent attachments will often be inward looking and will feel uncertainty and hesitancy about inviting others, and the wider world, into its community. This is because it will be perceived as a threat to relationships that are already well established and have created the norms making up the status quo in community life. The energy that is required to maintain relationship will make it difficult to find the will and capacity to make new relationships of depth and inclusivity. In other words, people will say they want their community to change and grow, yet through their behaviour rooted in their ambivalent anxiety, they will see others as being outsiders because of their thinking and lifestyle.

The anxiety about maintaining some kind of community life will sometimes lead to anger and unreasonable expectations and demands, both among themselves and in the perceptions of others in the wider community. This is often the case where the local church is characterized by ambivalent and avoidant attachments. Its corporate worship, particularly where it is formalized, is able to accommodate and hide ambivalent and avoidant behaviour.

In the context of a local church, what is needed is a new

language and communal relationships characterized by accountability, trust, open vulnerability, deep care and concern, inner confidence in words and deeds towards others, and depth in the cultivation of discipleship. A community of secure relationships will have the energy and will to be outward-facing, and to seek to refresh and renew the local society in which it is placed. For each local community of disciples today there needs to be a focus on the development of interpersonal and communal relationships based on deep, secure attachments. Healthy church relationships need to be relationships rooted in secure attachments characterized by deep friendships reflective of faith, hope and love… "and the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor 13:13).

> *Jesus said, "I no longer call you a servant, because a servant does not know what his master is doing. Instead, I call you friends." (John 15:15)*
>
> *Jesus said, you have love for one another then everyone will know that you are my disciples." (John 13:35).*

Donald Winnicott (1913-1999) suggests that in a secure relationship between child and parent, the parent simply needs to be "good enough". Winnicott argues that a "good enough" parent is better for a child's development than a perfect parent. A perfect parent, in the eyes of Winnicott, would be one who gives a child everything he or she needs, and results in the child becoming totally dependent on the parent for their wellbeing. In turn, the perfect parent would discourage the child (for the best of motives) in struggling with the difficulties of life and with inner frustrations, seeking instead to provide for the child's every need and want. Winnicott suggests that, in the long term, adult relationships like this will reduce a person's resilience and capacity to work creatively with the challenges of life and the difficulties in human relationships. For Winnicott, what is required is therefore a good enough parent

and not a perfect parent. A good enough parent would supply all the security needed in attachment, but at the same time allow and encourage a child's self-development in terms of discovery, resilience and self-confidence. A child would know they are loved and would feel genuinely secure, rather than smothered and disempowered by the love of those who misguidedly seek to be "the perfect parent".

Regarding church leadership, a leadership which is concerned for the wellbeing and growth in healthy relationships of the local church community simply needs to be good enough, not perfect. In Winnicott's understanding it can be argued that a priest who seeks to be perfect in serving the faith community and wider society will in fact do a disservice to the local church and its mission. This disservice lies in creating and sustaining an unintentional dependence culture based on institutionalism and clericalism; and what John Tiller calls "cultic religion', which in turn diminishes people's personal and communal self-confidence and autonomy.

In the context of what has been said about the importance of secure attachment, it also needs to be said that secure attachment in relationships needs only to be good enough, and not perfect; perfection does not need to be sought or achieved.

Bowlby, Ainsworth and Winnicott affirm in different ways that, for children to be able to love, they need to have the experience of being loved so as to learn how to love others and themselves. Where this does not happen, forming adult relationships of depth can be problematic, in ways that have been described above.

In the context of the local church, it is Christian love (or even simply Christian kindness) that needs to be experienced and learnt communally and interpersonally. This does not just happen, and neither does the experience of family love and friendship outside church life provide, in itself, the necessary experience of – and learning about – Christian communal love and kindness. Jesus did not simply say, "love one another". Jesus said, "love one another as I have loved you". We are to

love each other not with our own love, but with the love of Jesus; something which we learn from him (John 15:12).

Hence one of the greatest challenges for the local church today is the question as how it can encourage movement towards relationships which are secure. That is, relationships which are not characterized by avoidance and ambivalence. It is my belief that such development and growth need to be learned and taught experientially. It cannot simply be assumed to exist with any depth already. The very fact that, for centuries, there have been religious communities is surely evidence for this truth. Simply put, the Rule of St Benedict, adopted by the Benedictine order, is an illustration of the way in which people in community need to learn and experience how to love, and how to and share that love with others, so as to be able to love the world by offering compassionate service and hospitality, hence exposing the heart of God to the world and to bring down the walls of injustice.

Without doubt, the age in which we are living is one in which we need once more to unearth, like a hidden well in the desert, this truth, so that the Church can once again be healthy and flourish. For the Church to be healthy we must find and rediscover ways to learn kindness once more, and to love together for the sake of the Church's life and mission. This fundamental Christian truth can also be expressed in terms of the urgent need for the Church to build and renew a relational culture of deep fellowship (koinonia) in communion with God and with each other through community. The purpose of this is to be the Church, the Body of Christ, and so to be a sacrificial offering of a healing communion for reconciliation in, and friendship towards, the world.

This journey of recovery in Christian kindness, and in love through fellowship and communion in a renewed relational culture, will be a difficult one for most of us to travel on in the local church. It will require time, energy and sacrifice. Most of all it will require God's good grace in abundance and in receiving the breath of the Holy Spirit. It will require both

humility and boldness. The journey of recovering Christian kindness and friendship can be the driving force for a new Reformation or Revival within the Church of England; one which has not been seen for generations. This journey of unearthing, rediscovery (in fact discovery), is inevitably the beginning of a new paradigm shift for the Church of our time, the likes of which we can only begin to imagine and dream.

In the early 20th Century, the Church had already embraced a paradigm shift in the renewal of worship in its life, and then another shift in terms of local and global mission. The Church now needs to embrace this new paradigm shift of Fellowship, building a strong relational culture as a family of friends called to be the body of Christ in loving kindness and in the community of discipleship.

In the time we are living in there is also an urgency about healing our home, God's earth. Unless we embrace this imperative for a renewed relational culture of discipleship, significantly reducing the Church's relational deficit through the hands and heart of Christ on earth, we will not have the energy or health to be an instrument of grace for the healing and renewing of the earth and its people: the earth that God has entrusted to us from the very beginning in the hands of Eve and Adam.

The healthy and life-giving future of the Anglican Church in this country will be largely determined by how far the Church, particularly the local parish church, is willing to be a community which is intentionally learning how to love as the one great priority of our time. To become a learning community, a family of friends learning to love, in other words.

William Temple would ask of each of us today,

"Will you stay as you are, to flick it out,
a lamp that gives no light,
and mourn and unnoticed"?

Truth is Relational:
An Exploration into the Roots of Relationality

Callan Slipper

Pilate asked, 'What is truth?' (Jn 18:38)
Jesus said, 'I am the way and
the truth and the life.' (Jn 14:6)

It is not uncommon for unity and truth to conflict. Either we stick to our beliefs and break relations with those who think differently, or we compromise to maintain harmony. This has been one motor for Christian division and the breakup of Christ's Church. It is a challenge frequently faced by the Anglican Communion and within the Church of England. The pattern of thought behind the danger of division, in whatever context it occurs, is to seek truth through a debate that strives to persuade our opponents that our thinking is sounder than theirs. Various ploys are used: appeal to authority, demonstrating our logical coherence and reasonableness, pointing out the flaws in the opponent's argument, displaying the attractiveness of our views and the good that comes from them or even (less often in church contexts fortunately) trying to discredit our opponent so that the veracity of their position is put in doubt. It is a mini war, however amicably it can, sometimes, be conducted. Nonetheless, this kind of debate contains much that is good: it harnesses disagreement, holding out the hope of finding, in the winning argument, a perception of truth.

But it is a highly risky procedure, and a knockdown

conclusion hardly ever happens. For it is rare that anyone changes their mind; indeed, to do so may seem like betrayal and smack of moral deficiency. Or, as is more often the case, the contest ceases to be about seeking truth but simply a matter of striving for victory. The conflict of truth and unity, in the white-hot heat of discussion, easily drives people apart and, as relationships come to be destroyed, separation deepens and what is at issue changes. Not only does the ongoing lack of agreement mean that truth has not emerged but, still more, in the ensuing battle it is increasingly less likely to. This confusion shows that the truism is true: truth is the first casualty of war.

I want to suggest that there is another way of finding truth, one that can encompass debate but that goes far beyond it. It comes to effect in human relationality, but it is rooted in a deeper, prior relationality at the heart of reality itself. Hence, while this other way demands enhancing how we relate to one another, so dispensing with the martial connotations of adversarial debate, it cannot be reduced to that. This other way is not merely a matter of disagreeing more efficiently, good as that may be in itself, but enters a new dimension where there is a better relationship with truth.

Truth is a person

To see how we can find truth in a better way, we have first to ask what is the truth we seek? In the first instance, we are seeking to discover 'that which is the case'. The better way of seeking this, I hope to show, is present in what we do when seeking for truth in a deeper sense. For beyond truth defined as 'that which is the case', there is the truth about how things are, about their nature, which includes their purpose and meaning and, with these (if they have them), there is an ethical claim. It is this truth that can provide a better way also of finding out 'what is the case' in other contexts.

It is, of course, entirely possible to claim that the truth about how things are is that they are present to our consciousness and

have no further meaning or intrinsic purpose. This denial is a more complex statement than it may seem. It is an interpretation filtering the view of things through a lens that assumes there is no meaning or purpose, which is an ideological stance as much as any view that posits these things. Cross-culturally, indeed, the intuition has generally been that there is a truth about things to be discovered, even though this same pattern of thought takes on a wide variety of forms – from the mythologies of many cultures to notions such as the Tao in China, ṛta in India, logos in various currents of Greek thought. Christianity too has its version of this intuition, rooted in the historical encounter with a person, Jesus, which gave a particular slant to the use of the term logos within Christian circles. It is this Jesus, central to the claims of the gospel, who Christianity asserts to be the truth of things and who offers a better way of seeing, also in other contexts, the reality of how things are.

From the perspective of the gospel, Jesus, as the *logos* made flesh in the particularity of history, defines the nature of things and their purpose, giving them meaning. In him we understand the ethical claim made on each one of us. The curious thing about the Christian assertion, however, is that it does not say only that Jesus embodies universal truth and that the story of his life, and especially his death and resurrection, displays this truth lived out by a particular human being – already a remarkable claim. But it says that this Jesus can still be met here and now. The truth is a person, and we can meet him and, since he is the truth of things, we all do in fact relate to him – after all, he is 'the light of all people' (Jn 1:4) and the true light 'which enlightens everyone' (Jn 1:9). In this personal interaction, this relationship, we encounter the revelation of the nature, purpose, meaning, and consequent ethical claim of the cosmos.

We need now to unpack this 'nature, purpose, meaning, and ethical claim'. It is rooted in the understanding of who Jesus is. Put at its bluntest: Jesus is God and God present in history. That is to say, with Colossians, that he is 'the image of the invisible

God' (Col. 1:15), which means that he makes visible the invisible divinity, and so gives us access to understanding who God is. Several things flow from this. Since God is the source of all things, it follows that the true understanding of them lies in God, that is, in how God made them: their 'nature, purpose, meaning, and ethical claim' rest in God. If Jesus renders that true understanding visible, then in his very being he renders visible not only the nature of the creator of all but also the nature of what is created. The outflowing of love seen in his life, the readiness to die for the other, all the virtues displayed in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are, in a deep way, the nature of all things. All things are made to be love; and this is not just how they are but how, insofar as they have a choice (as with human creatures), they are called to love. Even where love breaks down, and non-loving emerges, that too has somehow to be encompassed by this nature of things as seen in Jesus; and it is. It is encompassed by love in his dereliction on the cross. Here unlove is transformed into love, the defeat of love into its triumph in salvation; the suffering has the purpose, the meaning, of love and, since this death leads to new life in the resurrection, suffering gives way to joy.

For this reason, Jesus is the 'firstborn of all creation' (Col. 1:15), since he is the principle that gives rise to everything. Indeed, he is both the ontological foundation of all things, since they 'have been created through him', as well as their meaning and purpose, since they have also been created 'for him' (Col. 1:16). This can be summarized by concluding, as Colossians does, that 'He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together' (Col. 1:17). In other words, he is the truth.

The prologue of the Fourth Gospel offers a very similar picture. Here the *logos* is the expression of God, the Word that existed before being spoken 'in the beginning' in the act of creation. It is distinct from God and yet still God. Through this *logos* all things were made; he, who as the Word is full of the divine meaning, is the source of all creation, the one who gives it life and guidance: 'All things came into being through him,

and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people' (Jn 1:3-4). It is this logos who became flesh in Jesus. Jesus is thus the expression of God, containing in himself the nature, purpose, meaning, and ethical imperative of all things.

The dimensions of truth

The truth of the uncreated and of the created which Jesus is, has several dimensions that have practical implications for us human beings in our struggle to live our lives as best we can. We see this by taking a look at the great Johannine declaration, in response to Philip: 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (Jn 14:6). It is one of the boldest *'ego 'eime'* statements of the gospel, with resonance with all of them. Like the others it recalls God's name as the great 'I am' revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14. Saying 'I am' Jesus affirms, as he puts it also in the Fourth Gospel, 'I and the Father are one' (Jn 10:30). The context, however, defines truth as not just something to be understood but as something to be done. The statement comes in reply to a question about the way of going to the Father, and Jesus identifies himself as the way, indeed, he radicalizes the idea of 'way' both by identifying himself as the way and by asserting that he is the only way of coming to the Father. He is the truth about how to find God.[42] The practical import of this is profound. We can only walk this way by, as it were, being Jesus. That is, we have

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[42] It is possible to read this as presenting an exclusivist Christ. Nonetheless, the sense in the Prologue of John of the *logos* reaching everyone and the unconditional love propelling Jesus to give his life for the redemption of all ('And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself' Jn 12:32) would rather indicate an inclusivist interpretation. All in the Old Testament who relate to God and all those outside the Chosen People who come to God are doing so through Christ, whether or not they have an explicit knowledge of him.

to be 'Christified', participate in Jesus' own being. Living Jesus' word, living the sacramental life, especially the great dominical sacraments of baptism and the eucharist which incorporate us into Christ, we have ways by which we can embark upon the way to God. Above all we have to be effectively incorporated into the identity of Jesus who, since he is God, is love. Without love any effort to live the word or sacramental communion is simply a waste of time. This already begins to hint at further depths we shall see in the relational nature of truth.

The realization that truth is not just what you understand but is grounded in relationships is emphasized by the next part of the affirmation: 'I am … the truth'. As David Ford points out:

> In the Septuagint and the New Testament the Greek work alētheia ("truth") not only means what corresponds to fact but also the content of the Hebrew 'emet. This has a broader sense of what, and especially who, is reliable and to be trusted. It is as much about what is done as what is known or believed – belief, cognition, and behaviour are interwoven, as in the truth of a promise.[43]

Throughout the Fourth Gospel, as through the synoptics and the rest of the New Testament, Jesus is depicted as the demonstration of God's faithfulness, which is to say he demonstrates God's truth in action as he works for the saving of Israel and, breaking down all barriers, of all the nations. In his person the perceptual and noetic dimensions of truth coincide with its practical and regulatory dimensions.

Jesus is thus the true one who reliably conveys knowledge of what is true. He is the framework and the measure for all other truth. There is no truth beyond him; he is the highest order category to which all other truths must be related 'whether

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[43] David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 275-76

factual or fictional; conceptual or narrative; quantitative or qualitative; scientific, moral or artistic; intellectual, emotional, or practical'.[44] These other truths are not deprived of their significance or of their necessary autonomy; on the contrary, Jesus' truth as faithfulness to himself (as God cannot deny himself[45]) means he demands that all other things be faithful to themselves. But his truth also indicates that the meaning of things is love, as he is love. All things exist, therefore, to serve and to be served, each thing an end in itself and a servant of all. Truth, seen in Jesus, defines the reality of the entire cosmos and, at the very same time, enjoins a moral imperative, that of love.

For this reason, he is also life for any who share in him, which is to say, who walk on the way that he is or dwell in the truth that he is. To be love, participating in him, is to have the abundant life, the eternal life, the life from heaven, the very life of God that Jesus is. While the point of access is through belief, that access is made effective in sharing in Jesus: 'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day, for my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink' (Jn 6:54-55). We attain true life by our nourishment on the truth, feeding upon Jesus himself and, in particular, by doing so sacramentally in the eucharist. This same life-giving nourishment is also conveyed by the words Jesus speaks (so that we can live them), for 'It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life' (Jn 6:63).

Behind all these dimensions of truth as the person, Jesus, there is another. It indicates that the nature of truth itself is relational. Jesus is who he is because he is the full, total expression of God, that is, as Jesus puts is shortly after the *'ego 'eime'* statement we have been considering: 'Whoever has seen

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[44] The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary, 277.

[45] 'If we are faithless, he remains faithful—he cannot deny himself' (2 Tim 2:13).

me has seen the Father' (Jn 14:9). Who Jesus is depends upon his relationship with the Father. Jesus is the self-expression of God in history. We, if we participate in Jesus, are caught up into that selfsame relationship. Hence we may encounter the truth in the person of Jesus, and so in our relationship with him, but for this truth to be active in our lives, for us really to know the truth therefore, we have in union with Jesus to be in relationship with the source of all truth (being, beauty, goodness, life, joy…). Truth is relational not just in our relating to Jesus, but because ontologically, before the existence of all worlds, it is already relational. That is the nature of the Godhead and, indeed, of all that the Godhead has created.

Accessing the truth

The key question then is how do we access the truth? Believing in Jesus, having a relationship with him, participating in his sacraments, living his words (which are the culmination of all the Scriptures and so imply the acceptance of all the Scriptures) are answers that flow readily from what has been said till now. But more needs to be said. It is all too easy for us to have a superficial understanding of our relationship with Jesus and to reduce our sacramental life and our living according to the Scriptures to formal compliance. As we explore further, we shall see how the recognition of Jesus as truth works out in practice.

We need first of all to take seriously what is meant by our dwelling in the relationship between Jesus and the Father. This is something that for Jesus is clearly extremely important, for 'no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Mt 11:27). Its crucial importance is indicated in the climactic moment of the Fourth Gospel in John 17. Jesus declares that sharing in this relationship defines his mission on earth since he says that while he was still in the world, he protected his followers in the Father's name (Jn 17:12), asking that, as he leaves the world, the Father should

now protect them 'in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one' (Jn 17:11). It is this same sharing in the primordial unity of God with Godself that Jesus prays for those followers who come after, asking that they too 'may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us' (Jn 17:21) and, in a powerful form of Hebrew parallelism, Jesus goes on to specify that he has given his divine glory to them 'so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one' (Jn 17:22b-23a). Living in unity is thus sharing together in the life of God. It is God present and active in the here and now. This is dwelling in the Truth. No wonder that the result is a powerful witness to the reality of God and leads other people not only to believe but to know by experience (see Jn 17:23)[46] that Jesus has been sent by God. Witness is given to the Truth because the Truth has become a living experience.

Far from competing with truth, when unity is of this quality, a mutual dwelling in God, it is the display of truth. Living in unity gives us the opportunity, should we ever dare to take it, of discovering truth. How sad that so often people, even Christ's followers, destroy relationships with the aim of preserving truth!

Of course, the whole thing depends on what kind of relationships we are speaking about. It is the quality of our relationships that allows them to be (or forbids them from being) a sharing in God. It is not enough to have good intentions, to mean well and even to hope sincerely for the good of the other. The quality of love has to be the quality of love in God, a welcoming into ourselves of the manifestation of God's

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[46] The word used for knowledge in John 17:23 ('that they may become completely one, so that the world may *know* that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me'), *ginōskōsō*, does not only mean head knowledge but knowledge gained by experience, the effort to learn, and the ability to recognize something for what it is.

own being (that is, his glory). Perhaps the most important gloss to give to this unity is Jesus' own New Commandment: Love one another as I have loved you (see Jn 13:34 & 15:12). This is how he defines love: as patterned on his death on the cross. Love has never been defined like this before: cruciform. Love lived in God is born in death.

When there is this love we dwell in God together and have his light. We are in God and God is among us. In Matthew 18:20 Jesus announces the same principle using slightly different terminology. Here, in reference to the almighty prayer of those in agreement (that is, in unity), he says, 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'. In his name means in his identity, that identity which is displayed in its fullness on the cross. The result of our living in his identity is dwelling in God; in other words, through being united with Jesus, we dwell with God, because the God-who-is-human is among those gathered in this way. Speaking in these terms Matthew's Gospel gives emphasis to another dimension of the unity spoken of in John 17: it brings us into the presence of the living Christ – that Christ who dwelt in Palestine two thousand years ago and now is risen and dwelling in glory. It is he who enlightens our minds and warms our hearts, as he did with the disciples on the Emmaus Road (see Lk 14:32). Our unity, therefore, gives us access to truth because through our dwelling together in the truth, in the person of Jesus, he gives light to our minds.

Returning to a Johannine framework, we can see the trinitarian dynamic present in this experience of access to truth. Jesus makes a pledge for the future that we will be guided 'into all the truth' (Jn 16:13) by the Spirit for he will not speak on his own but 'will take what is mine [that is, of Jesus] and declare it to you' (Jn 16:14). Then, in a trinitarian flourish, he points to the source of truth in God, saying, 'All that the Father has is mine' (Jn 16:15). It is the Spirit at work in the enlightening of our minds, so as we dwell through our unity in the relationship between the Father and the Son, it is he who gives us access to

the truth, to a deeper knowledge of Jesus. Which should come as no surprise, given that the Spirit is the relationship, the mutual love, uniting the Father and the Son. Growth in relationship means growth in our access to truth. Human relationality when lived in God grants access to that which is the case about the nature, purpose, meaning, and ethical claim of all things.

Beyond dialogue

But we need to be able to live properly in the cruciform love that allows us to enter into the cognitive aspect of human relationality. This alone keeps us in God and frees our minds to receive God's light. Among the many principles that could be adduced, I would suggest three as key so that our thinking together may be the practice of thinking as love.

Relational. In the first instance we need to grasp that while truth in itself is absolute, because God is truth, truth as we perceive it is partial because we grasp only some of it in our relationship with God. What we perceive will be true, but it will also always be partial given our creatureliness. We are finite and can only perceive so much. Therefore, we need constantly to learn and to learn from others. Even Jesus, as a thinking human being, had to learn. We too need to learn from others, a statement that may seem obvious but is not if we consider its radical implications. For if the other person too has a partial, but real, grasp of the truth we need to listen to it fully, even if it appears to contradict what we hold dear. Likewise, when we offer our understanding to the other it can never be the imposition of our point of view because the lack of respect implied by imposition not only destroys love, but it does not allow that the other may have a valid perception which our imposition would crush. Of course, the other may be mistaken, as we may be, but that can only be discovered as we discern the truth together.

Detached. To achieve this, we need to be able to dispossess

ourselves of our partial truth, which does not mean thinking either that it is wrong or that we have to abandon it. We have to be able to set our understanding aside sufficiently to be able to see things as the other person sees them. We do not cling on to our perception as if it were the only truth, allowing ourselves to be challenged by the possibility of a new or unthought-of perception and, at the same time, allowing the other person the freedom to discern the truth at their own pace and in their own way. Growth in this way of receiving and offering perceptions requires a deepening psychological and spiritual maturity, but the flourishing of love that it occasions means that our thinking can really be practised as a participation in God because it has the nature of love.

Open to Surprise. If we have thought together in love, there comes a moment when the Spirit opens our minds to a new perception of truth. It will necessarily share in the limitedness of all our perceptions, but it will carry conviction. It will be a surprise, most often something new that was not present, at least in this way, in the minds of those who are seeking the truth together. It may even be similar to the original thought of one of the conversation partners, but it will also be seen afresh, in a new light. No party will feel vanquished because the surprise of the new thought is owned by all. Hence, within the all-important realm of the interpretation of Scripture by Christians this way of thinking provides a further hermeneutic possibility. By letting ourselves be converted by Christ so that we think in him, with him, we let our meeting with him in our living unity guide our minds. Christ himself, Truth himself it may be better to say, shows us his own meaning in the written word: the Word interpreting the word. For us the task remains to have the courage to remain united, in a cruciform love, through all the moments of darkness, uncertainty, and challenge, until finally we all perceive together, in a divine surprise, the truth we now share.

These three characteristics guarantee that the shared process of thought is undertaken in love. The process is clearly a

dialogue, and it is structured to seeing 'that which is the case'. Yet its demanding ascesis takes us beyond dialogue, and the discovery as it were of facticity, to the dimension of truth in the deepest sense discovered together. This is not a negotiation leading merely to compromise; however much compromise may be useful in some circumstances, but a dwelling with each other in God in unity that allows God to reveal a new understanding. Above all, demanding as it may be, it is possible to be put into practice. The opposite of a mini war, such thinking as love does not share in the defects of debate as conflict, even though it may use the dialectical process of debate. Consequently, this relational process will always benefit from employing logical clarity, or the use of imaginative reasoning, or appeals to due authority, or the expertise of the participants, or any other method of sharpening the mental functions and cognitive capabilities of those who engage in it. But it needs one thing in particular, especially when the process deals with a tough topic: the increase of cruciform love.

Conclusion

Thus it becomes clear that truth is relational in several senses. It is relational because the way to achieve it is via human relationships lived in God. But it is relational because whatever is understood is always a perception in relation to God, the only absolute. And it is relational because the nature of God, the nature of the absolute, is relational. We can only begin to imagine the impact that a practice of truth-seeking based on this relationality would have. Within the various churches, it would provide a way of meeting Christ and of finding his truth that enlightens the meaning of the Scriptures with the potential of taking us beyond the often harmful debates that are, in effect, constantly with us as history progresses and new questions arise. Among the churches it would give the possibility of genuine reconciliation and the shared discovery of Christ's truth in all the various ways, the multiform richness, in which

it can be perceived. Indeed, it should be said that seeking truth in unity gives new dignity to Christian ecumenism. For Anglicans, and in particular for members of the Church of England rent by so many disputes, the way of unity could prove an unexpected opportunity not so much for simply staying together but, more to the point, for solving the very issues that drive so many apart. The possibilities for dialogue with those of other faiths and with those of no specific religious affiliation are exciting should we be able to embark upon a similar journey of discovery together. And what is more, all the disciplines of science and the arts enquiring by their own methods into reality could, with the light of Christ shed through the relationship among people who love, be enhanced and assisted in finding the particular kinds of truth that each has the task of seeking. And, who knows, perhaps these disciplines too will shine that same light back with new intensity upon our understanding of Christ, upon our grasp of the beauty of God?

Organised Church:

How Community Organising leads to Growing Disciples

Keith Hebden

Primarily this is the story of a frustrated parish priest learning the hard way how to organise with his congregation and make it possible for them to act on him as well as the other way around. A year after my second curacy I attended Citizens UK 6 Day training and came away angry that no one had ever introduced me to these simple tools for change before and suggested I apply them to being a vicar. Below is a rough sketch of the initial results of this experience.

As a curate – apprentice Church leader – I hated doing home visits. This was not because I did not like the people; they were lovely. I just did not know what to do with a home visit and was not happy with the 'tea, cake and pastoral ear' model that I lazily thought was what everyone else was doing. Because I disliked home visits, I would put them off. Eventually I would steel myself to an afternoon of visiting: I would take a list of our members, pick someone at random and go and knock on their door. When I finally found someone in, the parishioner, slightly surprised, would invite me in, maybe fetch the China cups and we'd spend around an hour and a half making small talk. I would leave feeling deflated and useless, they would wave me off probably slightly baffled. We had built a relationship based on an odd sort of power-difference. I listened, they spoke, neither of us were challenged or changed.

Home visits became increasingly infrequent. I retreated to

my computer, devising events or services for people to attend. Of course, few people came to these events, despite posters, notices in the pew sheet and announcements from the front of church. I was designing things for imaginary people since I did not know the real ones very well at all. When it came to congregational development I felt like a complete fake, we were a parish with plenty of baptisms, weddings, and funerals some schools and nursing homes so I could content myself with being the paid professional, doing ministry on behalf of a congregation who I could never quite persuade to join in. You may have met church leaders like me before!

What changed my approach was Community Organising – I was interested in campaigning for justice and would much rather do that work than my pastoral work. But the Community Organisers, the staff at Citizens UK, challenged me to think about leadership differently and to see how Community Organising could also be Congregational Organising. Below is my account of what was for me an incredible journey of discovery.

What is Community Organising?

The tradition of Community Organising can be traced back to Joseph Meegan and Saul Alinsky's work in Chicago in the 1930s although it built on precedent methods. In Britain there are many organisations using Community Organising tools but two that emphasis doing so through civic institutions: 'Together Creating Communities' (TCC) on the North Wales Coast and 'Citizens UK' which has chapters across England and Wales and has been organizing local institutions for around 25 years. Understanding what organising is depends on who you ask but here's a couple of helpful definitions:

> Organizing, at its core, is about raising expectations: about what people should expect from their jobs; the quality of life they should aspire to; how they ought to be treated

> when they are old; and what they should be able to offer their children… Expectations about what they themselves are capable of, about the power they could exercise if they worked together, and what they might use that collective power to accomplish.

The starting point is: if you want change, you need power. You build up power through relationships with other people around common interests.

Citizens UK brings together faith, unions, education, community institutions in a formal alliance with a commitment to one another that is demonstrated by paying dues, listening to each other's concerns and acting together on shared interests. In coming together, they are trained in how to organize their people and money within their institution and across their alliance in order to build greater relational power; power being simply 'the ability to act'. The fundamental principle then is that as we build deeper, thicker public relationships then we can be more effective instead of just busier. It's a principle that applies across the alliance but, as I was to discover, it also applies instead the institution.

Maun Valley Citizens: Founding a new Chapter of Citizens UK

In September 2013 a group of 100 civic leaders met together to explore the possibility of forming a local chapter of Citizens UK – Maun Valley Citizens. Because of some significant funding from the Anglican diocese, we already had access to a part-time organiser. As an Anglican priest myself, but with a half time role across the whole town I was able to start having conversations with civic leaders – leaders of institutions – a year earlier and so we already had the beginnings of a leadership group.

Over the following two years we had some good wins on

housing, pay, jobs, and road safety. We were able to act together in dramatic and imaginative ways and built good public relationships with local politicians, the mayor, and the press. By the summer of 2016 we had enough paid-up members to employ a part-time Community Organiser.

Organising in the Church

In my role as Co-Chair of Maun Valley Citizens from 2012 to 2016 I visited church leaders of various denominations. But a particular conversation with one parish priest challenged and changed my approach and led to the experiments described below and to nearly a decade of working with Church leaders on building relational leadership in churches. Revd Phil was, and still is, a gracious pastor and leader in the church. And as we sat in his front room, he named the elephant in so many vicarage conversations. He said, "Keith I love the idea of what you're doing but if my church joins Maun Valley Citizens then you'll want members of the congregation to get involved. And I can't afford that – the few people who do nearly everything – and the ones who will say 'Yes' are already stretched too thin." As I thought about his honest and vulnerable concern, I realized that it wasn't that different in my own congregation, and it was about time I followed Phil's lead and got honest about it too. But equally, I wanted to know if relationship building might be the key to the problem, rather than yet another thing 'to do'.

Since learning how to organize, this had not been my experience. As an Associate priest at St Mark's Mansfield, I observe to important things about how the church related to community organizing: first, people have time for the things that matter to them; second, an organised church develops leadership and adds strategic capacity in the church.

Organised Visiting

As a church leader, when visiting your congregation at home the first decision is about who to visit and why. Is this a pastoral visit or a relationship visit, or what I called 'mutual discipleship'? I developed better methods and principles for home visiting. I drew a distinction between pastoral visits and organizing visits. Although this distinction was inevitably a fuzzy one it was still important. I made a commitment to myself, as a half-time parish priest, to make at least four home visits each week. I would book ahead and tell them why I was visiting and ask to see them for about half an hour. I would always leave within 40 minutes. When I arrived, I would start with us working out what we both wanted from meeting which could be as simple as "I just wanted to get to know you and share some stories together." I would begin the sharing. Most of what I'd been taught about being a good listener went out of the window. I told them a story to illicit one back on the same theme and of a similar degree of vulnerability. I also did it because expecting someone to tell you about their life without being willing to first offer some of your own seems unfair. Finally, telling a story first makes the other person feel safer: you have set some parameters for them so that their talking doesn't feel like such a risk. Often, we would pray. After the visit I would make notes in a prayer diary, so I could remember to pray for their aspirations, activities, souls, and relationships more pertinently. This would also help me learn what mattered to them; this is powerful knowledge since people will act if the action meets their self-interest.

Through my own visiting I learned who was willing to go on two-day organiser training, for various reasons. I learned about the strength of people's networks and activities outside of church. I learned about people's struggles with care for relatives or their own physical and mental struggles. I also learned how they saw themselves and one another and began to see what their common vision for the church was.

Transforming Bible Study through Organising

At St Mark's we had a group of people who formed a team to look at both the pastoral care of members and our shared identity as a member of 'Inclusive Church'. Inclusive Churches seek to "not discriminate, on any level, on grounds of economic power, gender, mental health, physical ability, race or sexuality." This issue went to the heart of faith for some in the Church, was peripheral to others and a source of discomfort for a few. For those for whom it mattered most, getting the values of inclusion more deeply embedded in the congregation was in their self-interest. We also had people who worshipped with us on Sunday but felt otherwise isolated from the congregation and longed for some sort of home-based element to Church. Meanwhile Oliver, one of the most hardworking and committed leaders in the church, invited me to the Church Bible study. Too my shame I had not yet been – but neither had most people! A small group had been running a monthly bible study for four years with attendance never high and dropping to around four people. Oliver wanted to see more members take Bible Study seriously and he wanted young people taken more seriously in the Church. Together we began to use one to ones to explore the problem with other members of the congregation: One admitted to fear of Bible study either because of the vulnerability involved or a previous experience where they'd felt trapped into being their every week for ever with people they did not like. Another couldn't travel, another longed to offer hospitality, and didn't mind too much what the meeting was for. In our conversations we also discovered leaders struggling with depression or anxiety and leaders with hidden disabilities that they wanted to find a way to talk about with other Christians. This huge diversity of self-interests was discovered through one-to-one conversation by me as minister or by other trained members of the congregation and then through small groups.

Across the teams, we decided to run a Bible study on

Disability in three homes for just five weeks, three times over a year. People that it would stop after five weeks and reorganize later in the year on a new theme (mental health) and could choose different group to join if they wished. On week five, the groups were challenged to invite a visitor with a disability from another church to speak. Each week we shared something of ourselves, heard a story of a churchgoer with a disability, then used this listening as a lens through which to read scripture and challenge us. Attendance at Bible study went from four to twenty-five. Lives were changed, friendships were made or rekindled, and people had encounters with God with a few witnessing to their faith with strangers for the first time. Instead of building a program and expecting people to turn up we raised the expectations of people that they could formulate a plan and implement it. Because we put relationship before program the turnout was easy – people understood who they wanted to invite and why. No one felt coerced to attend and everyone knew why they wanted to be there. Even if the reasons for being their varied a lot. But best of all, we had developed new leaders, hosts, readers, prayers, storytellers, and bible study leaders developed from out of the congregation. And this was just the start.

Transforming Liturgy through Organising

When I first arrived at St Mark's I quickly changed a few Orders of Service which were in urgent need of repair. One went well, the other was a bit rubbish for all sorts of reasons but not least because I didn't really know who I was worshipping with. I needed to put relationships before program again. Two years later, it was increasingly clear, through conversations, that our Advent service book was no longer fit for purpose. The congregation had changed considerably in outlook since it was written. Up until this point, my practice had been to write the liturgy alone, like so-called-expert I thought I was and give it to someone else to proofread. Changes were either too superficial

or pastorally clumsy and divisive. They were often more about my idea of better worship than the congregation's ideas. In an organized church this had to change.

Ahead of our AGM, I announced to the Church that I would be devising a new Advent Order of Service. I could do this alone but would much rather do it in company and would like to use the AGM to elect a team. I promised it would take a team no more than four meetings of one and a half hours per meeting with some work between. The team would then disband, I assured them. Through one-to-one conversations I was able to make sure that people with very different ideas of what worship should be like all felt confident to put themselves forward: some hated the current liturgy, others wanted to make sure we didn't go too far, others wanted to make it more inclusive and expansive, some cared about the music, others the choreography, others the opportunity for discipleship. Others just wanted to be part of an interesting conversation.

Not only did the team get to know each other better but they were tasked with undertaking one to one conversations with other members of the congregation in order to produce a liturgy that reflected their needs. The level of theological engagement was intensely exciting, and the liturgy was far braver than I could have managed alone. By early November we had our team of eight who knew the new service book inside out and had a sense of ownership and expectation that they could communicate to the rest of the congregation. I have never known such a buzz of excitement on a Sunday morning like the first Sunday of Advent that year.

Transforming Welcome through Organising

One Saturday evening I received an unexpected phone call from a member of the congregation, "When can we meet up? I need to talk to you." Barbara had just been on a Citizens UK two-day training event and was about to have her first post-

training one to one. She had evidently decided that the person who most needed acting on was the vicar: I was chuffed! As we got to know each other in the coming months Barbara's leadership in the church developed from not seeing herself as a leader at all to bringing about significant change to the whole culture of the church. She was angry about the level of welcome people experienced in the hall after our Sunday morning service. Many people avoided going from the Church to the hall at all. No tables or chairs were put out anymore, so people huddled around radiators, often in the same groups each week. Any newcomer would stand lost in the middle of the room and would rarely come again. Among those who did come each week nothing much was made of the opportunity for discipleship it offered. In the past the after-church-coffee had done all these things but not anymore and many people felt the loss of it.

Because I had been learning to listen better to my conversation than previously, I had some sense of who might share Barbara's concern enough to act with her. We chose to experiment with a five consecutive Sunday's of reorganizing the space and the people in it. We chose the church season of Lent because some people felt that we should go back to our practice of fasting before Church each Sunday while others might just manage that for five weeks if there was cake after the service. Everything seemed to be going according to plan until I got word that the tea and coffee volunteers were worried. At St Mark's, and perhaps at your church too, bands of volunteers will often choose an informal union representative whose job it is to let the vicar know when there is unrest. It is not always a pleasant job to tell the minister that they are wrong, and it often takes diplomacy, courage, and leadership to do so. Clearly our plans for Lent were not going to work without better negotiating with these key volunteers. We had a large team of people on the tea Rota. I phoned each one (I missed one, but she forgave me) and invited them to come to the vicarage along with other people who had an interest in the experiment.

Sixteen people turned up. We shared our hopes and anxieties in a round, read the bible in a way that coached us into attentiveness to one another and only then discussed how to move forward.

By the time we got to Lent more than a third of the congregation had a good understanding of what was to come. For five weeks there were dressed tables, a buffet of goodies, and structured conversations. Members were invited to sit with a "Reasonably friendly looking stranger" – language borrowed from Partnership for Missional Church – for fifteen minutes and ask each other two specific questions: "Why did you first come to St Mark's Church?" and "What do you love about this Church?" Relationships deepened, we learnt a great deal about evangelism, a member of the congregation who had been on the fringe got more involved in the week-day life of the church, new friendships were made, and old ones were rekindled. What had felt like a doctor's waiting room had turned into a party: the extroverts were happy because they had new people to talk to, the introverts were happy because they were able to have time-limited structured conversations. And in the end the tea Rota were happy too: thanks be to God!

Relationship Before Program

It may be that I am unusually naïve or ill-prepared for ministry. I am certain that there are church leaders around who, either by instinct or education, do this sort of organised ministry all the time. For me it was a revelation that transformed my leadership from a struggle to a joy. The outcomes are as diverse as people are, but the principles are universal. People act on the stuff that matters to them; this includes the ministers of churches and their congregations. Deepening relationships in congregations increases their capacity to lead and act. Members of congregations who develop their capacity to lead and act increase the depth of relationships. Community Organising is about campaigning for a Living Wage, better housing, or safer

streets by acting with and acting on those with positional authority in the public realm. But it is also about discipleship and congregational renewal as congregations learn to act on their ministers, wardens, elders, and other leaders and re-energise worshipping communities by challenging ministry-as-usual. St Marks could be described as a liberal Catholic congregation: our worship is formal and elaborate, our hymns are rarely modern, and our ministers and choir are always robed. The tools of Community Organising can help grow churches of all traditions; rather than stretch an increasingly precarious human resource, involvement in social justice can raise expectations of ministers and laity alike for who among us might lead us and how.

Loving our Neighbours in 'The Street' during the pandemic 2020-2022

Anne Richards

Background

The Street is a mile long, single-track road with a pedestrian walkway that is also used as an area for vehicles to pass one another. It is surrounded by woodland and a conservation area which is now a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and runs into the main road to a large town.

The Street was historically part of a landed estate and a track serving a farm but has now grown into the means of access to parks, a school and nursery, care homes, some small home-based businesses, a number of older houses and several small housing developments: around 100 dwellings in total. Most of the Street today is privately owned by those residents who share equally in the costs of maintaining it.

When the Street was first developed from its more rural, farm-based setting, the newest houses were occupied mostly by residents from the town, which, being itself full of small, close-knit communities, created the context for neighbour relationships. Many of the new residents already knew each other, often by having been at school together, or having lived in proximity previously. For example, two immediate neighbours had also been neighbours in another part of the town before, several were members of the same sports club, and four of the houses in one development were bought by people

who had not only been at the same school, but in the same year. This created a group of neighbours with a number of things in common: they were active and upwardly mobile, were families with young children and many, though of a number of different denominations, were active churchgoers. Another common feature was an interest in the environment (the Street has many trees with Tree Preservation Orders from the estate) and particularly had an interest in preserving the ancient estate hedgerows and the wildlife of surrounding woodland: foxes, badgers, bats, birds and insects. At the initial stage of housing development, the Street was surrounded by meadow and public footpaths which supplied a flow of local public interaction with known families and friends passing by. Another factor was that most of the residents spoke with the same accent and idiom and had living parents or siblings locally who all knew each other through common history within the town. Neighbour relationships began therefore with strong bonds of memory (such as the memory of a person who had been killed by lightning in the Street), common history and 'voice'. The Street had some of the initially homogeneous features of a 'plant' in the ecclesiological sense.

Over thirty years, as houses changed hands, the population of the Street enlarged and diversified. By 2020, some of the larger houses had been bought to rent, bringing in more families sharing the accommodation or renting single rooms. There were also many more people of different ages, family situation, spoken accent, heritage, ethnicity and religious affiliation. Some of the first buyers had died or moved on, children had grown up and moved away and the networks of knowing one another and having a common history of town, school or employment experience, had diluted considerably. The meadows and public footpaths also disappeared, replaced by stone lions, brick enclosures and electronic gates.

Neighbour relationships also changed: from unlocked doors and inter-flow of people in and out of each other's' lives and dwellings to a different kind of looking out for one another.

Instead of popping round, people put emphasis on the Neighbourhood Watch programme and with the development of the internet, a closed Facebook Group through which people shared news and information relating to the Street – lost or loose pets, local petitions, traffic news, missing parcels, and so on. Relationships moved from 'looking in' on people to 'looking out for' things going on externally: 'who is out there and what are they doing?' Instead of people coming round to 'pick your own' from people's fruit trees, neighbours left out baskets of fruit for others to help themselves. The porous boundaries hardened into thresholds.

However, older residents from the first cohort, especially as they retired, put more effort into volunteering for outside care of the Street. More volunteers came to weed and plant the verges, to clean it of leaves and twigs, to mow the green spaces, and carry out routine maintenance. Volunteers cleared snow and gritted and salted the road during bad weather. The Street's committee provided some of the tools and requirements. With houses more closed off to adults and children getting together, neighbour friendships became more about external groups operating outside, planting trees in memory of those who had died, visiting a Street smallholding together and feeding the animals, and organising street parties for particular occasions.

Younger people also provided services to the Street, but these typically came with a (small) financial cost, such as an exercise class in the park, and offers to build furniture or wash cars.

Christians in the Street

At the first phase of development, a number of the neighbours also knew each other because they were active in the town's local church communities. Initially, these were Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist and Baptist attenders. Many of the children attended local church schools. The local churches

in the town are easily accessed and those going to church on Sundays would often give each other lifts or walk down to their various churches together. Christians in the Street would also put up posters in their windows or on Facebook about church events, and neighbours would attend charity coffee mornings in different homes, or organise visits by a local band to play Christmas Carols in the Street. Church attendance, then, was an established practice among a range of the families and very visible to the rest of the Street's inhabitants. Established churchgoers were good at encouraging neighbours to come with them to church at Christmas, Easter and Harvest, and to social events such as fetes and bazaars, but less enthusiastic about encouraging them at other times of the year.

As the residents in the Street diversified and moved in from city outskirts, Christians now also included those from different independent Pentecostal communities which were newly meeting in halls and buildings in the town. Unsurprisingly, as the Street diversified, people of other faiths and no faith also became greater in number within the community.

Divisive issues prior to the pandemic

As with any community, the Street's inhabitants have encountered division and disagreement. As houses were rented out to greater numbers of people, petty issues arose over vehicles and parking, the school run, and litter (litter-picking is undertaken by volunteers). The usual slights and injuries fractured a few relationships but these often mended naturally over time. One woman refused to attend a street party organised for the whole Street because a few people forgot to flash a 'thank you' whenever she gave way coming up the Street in her vehicle.

As more people bought the larger houses to run small businesses, issues arose over business waste, house modification and increased noise and vehicles, from (for

example) a dog-grooming service. There was more serious outcry over the influx of drugs, unheard of in the early years of the Street's development, with significant pressure to flush out the local 'pharmacy' and to discourage people using the dark, leafy corners to carry out transactions.

As the Street diversified however, religion and politics began to drive some deeper and more complex divisions. The local town developed a strong UKIP presence leading up to Brexit which also resonated in the Street. A UKIP hopeful canvassing in the Street, asked residents to list grievances about their lives, such as the state of the NHS, jobs and immigration, but racking up xenophobic remarks specific to neighbour relationships, from 'curry smells' to 'foreign' voices. Some residents made snide or disparaging remarks of the 'this is a Christian country' sort.

On further investigation, the presenting issues were not so much about having a faith other than Christian, but lack of participation in the general ethos of the Street. This focussed on things like families not putting up any lights at Christmas or refusing to entertain children at Hallowe'en: external, visible tokens of solidarity.

This background of neighbour relationships, in all their complexity and processes of change from open, fluid relationships and friendships, to external visible communal groupings, and then to judging people on the amount and quality of their participation, was suddenly and severely challenged by the pandemic affecting everyone, all at once.

The Pandemic

When the first lockdown was instigated in March 2020, a number of interesting things happened in the Street. With people stuck inside their homes, and the visible externals of Street life suddenly lost, people began to think again of what the difference is between not wanting to visit neighbours in their homes or outside and being prohibited from doing so.

The Christians who were habituated to going to church together on a Sunday in particular felt deeply lost and disenfranchised from their support community and missed church dreadfully. Interestingly, it was this group, prompted by their churches, who immediately thought of their neighbours and what they might need. Using the Facebook Group, these neighbours, closely followed by other volunteers, began a system of piggybacking shopping trips, collecting lists from those who were shielding or afraid to go to the shops or for whom the long queues outside at the major supermarkets would prove difficult. When supermarkets began to have empty shelves and items could not be obtained, a 'wish-list' on Facebook was put up and the next person to go shopping would look for those items – or for the much-desired toilet rolls. Consequently, the first system put in place by the Christian friends in the Street was one of supply of essentials.

As lockdown continued, this same group of Christian neighbours drew up a list of people to visit by knocking on windows and checking visually that people inside were safe and well. People were encouraged to leave a note on their door or on the mat if they needed anything. Social distancing was maintained and physical contact kept to a minimum; nonetheless, people posted about how grateful they were to see their neighbours and to feel that someone would be along to ask if they were ok and needed anything. Encouraged by the Christian group lead, other people began to join a community of volunteers to get cash, medication or baby supplies.

Following this pattern, the same core Christian group made a point of contacting the care homes and offering support to the staff who were deeply concerned about the vulnerable people they cared for and for their own health and safety in the context of Covid. This was at the early stages of government advice, when no vaccines were available and it was quickly becoming clear that people in care homes were especially vulnerable. Because visitors were not allowed, Christian neighbours sometimes acted as halfway houses, taking messages from

relatives and friends and passing them on, sometimes in sanitised packets through open windows or doors, or reading cards aloud.

Two people who had been typically active in providing things for church fetes and bazaars turned their sewing skills into pandemic response. After asking for old cotton cast-offs, they created between them masks for every single person in the Street who wanted one – gaily coloured creations which made everyone smile. There were many (socially distanced) conversations about the masks and how fresh and breathable they were.

The particular geography of the Street also had an interesting effect on neighbourliness. Because it was permitted to go for exercise, people went out and walked up and down the Street, typically to the park and back. But because the Street is so narrow and there is only one walkway, people had to pay particular attention to giving each other space to pass each other, but it was also impossible to avoid each other without saying something, especially if one person or group had to walk in the road. People who did not normally acknowledge one another began to find it impossible not to say hello, comment on the weather and briefly pass the time of day. As elsewhere in the country, more people acquired dogs and soon dog walking was not only a daily activity in which one would inevitably meet people but evolved into 'Dog Meet' a pre-arranged group meeting in the morning in which the open space of the park provided the ability to people to meet at a distance and talk with one another while the dogs ran around. Dog Meet grew so popular that new times in the afternoon and then in the evening and even late at night attracted different groups of residents to meet and greet each other and to ask after one another. When a group member did not show up, the other members made sure to check that they were all right. These new forms of social bonding brought different groups of neighbours together. Interestingly, it was a person for whom social interaction is especially difficult, but who has a passion

for dogs, who became the source of 'naming' information for others. By means of his dog knowledge, he created all kinds of incipient relationships and networks which achieved extra importance at a time when people were otherwise separated from one another. This appeared in social media messaging, with messages for 'Lulu's owner' or 'Jasper's house'.

In addition to this, with people furloughed or working from home, the person responsible for planting the verges and weeding in the Street discovered that more people wanted to join her to have an excuse to get out of the house and have a legitimate reason to extend their time in the fresh air. So many people wanted to join in and help, to feel they were 'doing' something, that she had to get cones and high vis jackets to ensure their safety while working in the Street. The Street now is full of plants and flowers and the area of planting has been extended backwards into the surrounding woodland, because of the number of people available to clear the areas. Although restrictions have now been lifted, those groups of gardeners have discovered that their bonds endure and their love of being outdoors, talking and working and transforming the look of the Street has a significant social value beyond the pandemic. Nonetheless, the numbers of volunteers has begun to decline again.

The Christian group initiated another phase of activity as regulations changed. When it was possible to meet outdoors, socially distanced, they started afternoon tea times on their front lawns (many of which are open to the road). Neighbours were invited to come along for a chat and tea and cake, as long as they brought their own cups and plates. Garden furniture was placed on the pavement and sanitised and, together with the excellent weather in Spring 2020, these occasions drew in a good crowd of people, especially elderly people (and their dogs) who were lonely or missing their families, clubs or religious communities. Again, the narrowness of the Street meant that people going for a walk or for fresh air could not miss these gatherings and would stop and chat if only to see

what was going on and what hospitality was on offer, even if they were not actually intending to 'go'.

Further, when Covid regulations began, the local paper, which had always been delivered to every house, stopped being delivered, though it was available at supermarkets. One member of the Street volunteered to collect enough copies for each household and delivered them herself so that people would not be cut off from local news. This delivery meant that people would talk to her about local news and events, so that she became much more than a delivery person, but a means of interchange and sharing of opinion. She still does this delivery today.

By summer of 2020, some of the Christians felt able to begin asking neighbours if they wanted them to pray about anything or would like the church community, meeting online, to include their petitions more formally in intercessions. Many people received this gratefully and began to talk about their own faith journeys, quite often beginning with why they either had never gone to church or had stopped going. The exploration of faith journeys, in the context of an existential threat like Covid, seemed a natural next step in conversation, once people had got very used to seeing one another and talking to one another about neighbour needs. A few people, interestingly, expressed regret for no longer meeting Jehovah's Witnesses, who had, prior to the pandemic, been regular visitors in the Street, and had for the most part been good-humouredly indulged, if not necessarily invited in…

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A number of things have happened to the character of the Street with two years of the pandemic having passed. One is an increased sense of community and neighbourliness which, interestingly is not the same as the neighbourliness borne of common town background and family experience, but one which has been burnished by the common experience of living

through the pandemic. For example, this neighbourliness has crystallised into a really fierce need to protect the community of the Street against 'the world'. Another small development proposed for the bottom of the Street has been fiercely opposed with hundreds of objections, based around the need to protect the infrastructure of the Street itself, but also the wildlife which has been once more greatly appreciated since lockdown when the animals and birds not only proliferated but were seen, heard and loved.

There has been increased knowledge and appreciation for visitors to the Street like the staff in the care homes whose presence was barely noticed prior to 2020. Now walkers say hello to them and stop and talk with real concern about the complexities of their jobs and worries they have. At the same time, there has been increased hostility towards unwelcome visitors: pressure for improved lighting and CCTV to prevent drug deals and 'kids hanging about' in the unlit parts of the Street.

The tone and type of posts on the Facebook Group has also changed with the increased activity brought about by the Pandemic. While prior to the pandemic, people posted factual information, or posed straightforward questions, many posts are more personal, with more saying thank you to others, shout outs to people who have given their time or energy, and many more posts with pictures, emojis and kisses. People feel more confident about commenting on one another's posts and asking for 'in-house' help. The undercurrent of 'let's keep it in the Street' has become particularly strong.

As the particular concerns of the pandemic have faded somewhat and been replaced by economic concerns and fears about energy price rises, people in the Street have started to talk about those who cannot afford to heat their houses. The urge to share and offer hospitality to those who might struggle is strong, but raises the question of relative affluence as a form of status: I can afford to heat my house and you can't. This also raises the question of whether neighbour friendships and

relationships can return again to open doors and people 'coming in' to others' spaces. At the time of writing, this may feel like a good thing to offer, but a step too far.

Reflections

Caring for one's neighbour during the pandemic has been a hallmark of the Street. But it is interesting to note that many of the activities taken forward by Christian neighbours had their roots in everyday church life – knitting and sewing for the church fete became mask making; after service tea became teas on the lawn; Harvest festival or food bank shopping became shopping for neighbours; praying in church became asking if people wanted prayer or comfort. When church activities stopped, those energies found an outlet in localised social care for others. Churchgoing numbers at the present time are still down on previous levels, but activities in the Street are continuing. Does this mean that people have found a real validity in 'doing church' in their immediate neighbourhoods and communities and are using online church, for example, to sustain their spiritual lives? Or will going back to church suck up those energies into church community life with none left for the neighbour community?

Notwithstanding, the stronger social ties and friendliness has increased insularity and created new resistance to 'outsiders'. The boundaries of the Street and its housing stock are now much less porous. The stone lions are stronger and less inclusive. Does this offer an insight into how cliques form in close-knit church communities, interfering with welcome and mutuality? As a greater sense of 'us' has developed among the diverse families of the Street, there is also a greater sense of 'them'. One might speculate that people engaging with one another, especially when cut off from work colleagues and family contacts, has meant that the Street community has become a different kind of family or kinship from shared experience which has to be protected. Does this also tell us

something about how churches with strong congregational bonds become less welcoming or tolerant if they are 'disturbed' by the presence of newcomers and strangers? The residents of the Street now show a strong desire to 'Other' those people who are unfamiliar – teenagers gathering in the park, walking up the Street ('when they don't live here'), strange vans or people hanging about. One person reported a suspicious person, complete with CCTV images, only to discover it was someone's son (whom they knew) waiting for a cab. Also 'friendliness' and respect for the Street has become a measurement of entitlement for delivery drivers and visitors. Unfriendly people are more unwelcome.

Another interesting development is pushback against the very infrastructure of the Street's management on grounds of fairness and care for others. Some people are now interrogating the management company as to why older, poorer residents are not treated by ability to pay rather than exacting the expensive flat rate for every household. Decisions about new lighting have engaged many more people on matters of social responsibility – using solar power rather than expensive electric and generating conversations about rising costs of living and the impacts on everyone, rather than just demanding better lighting. The neighbourliness and friendship bonds of the pandemic seem to have brought in a desire to look at ethical issues, justice matters and a big picture for everyone in the Street community, although not extended beyond the confines of the Street itself.

Conclusion

The Street has a background of roots in common experience and history which has formed a bedrock of community ties which prior to the pandemic were loosening through diversification of residents and less investment in that history, coupled by a number of dividing issues. The pandemic shook all of that up and reforged neighbour care and ties, not least

because active Christians diverted the energy and skills they would have spent on churchgoing into neighbour care. These transferable skills penetrated into opportunities forged within Covid rules and have crystallised out into new neighbour relationships, community behaviour and considerable generosity. However, this has come at the cost of hardened boundaries, greater suspicion of 'others' and solidarity 'against' perceived threat or injustice. Additionally, while Covid permitted a kind of democratic sharing of time, money and effort, the economic crisis creates more complex problems about how to help out those who are poorest. This process might teach us more about how churches promise friendship, mutuality and welcome and yet come across as hostile and suspicious. Loving our neighbours might have an event horizon. Perhaps we should be aware of that in all Christian communities which promise welcome.