

“Nuts and Bolts” (I): Reflecting on the Governance Review Group Report

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Perhaps, like me, you have dipped into the *Governance Review Group Report* with a cocktail of emotions – wariness, Deja-vu, impending sense of gloom tipping into despair, a degree of cynicism too...but also tempered by some hope and optimism. These reactions would all be valid. So I'll begin by saying what is good about the Governance Review Group, and am pleased to say that unlike The Green Report on leadership, there is actually some theology in this document, and what there is of it is appropriate and constructive.

However, even at this juncture there is the inevitable chicken and egg question. Did the theology come first, and therefore help sire the report? Or did it come after, when the report was mostly written? You would be right to plump for the latter, since good as the theology is, and occurs early in the document, it is clearly not the parenting agent in what follows. The theology is a 'Christening' of the organizational makeover, and therefore sits uncomfortably in the text. It is conspicuous in this respect.

This raises an obvious prior question: “where would you **begin** a report on the current and future shape of governance structures in a church or denomination?”. There is only one orthodox answer to this question: God. One begins with God-in-Christ, and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus, the body language of God; the Verb of God Made Flesh. The church as the body of Christ can only be structured once it has realized that its vocation is not self-preservation, but lies in life, death, resurrection, risk, service and sacrifice.

Good governance flows from the values and purposes that the institution exists to be and espouses. Institutions that forget these are ungovernable. A report that cannot quite reach for, clarify or identify the values and purposes of a church will always struggle to land in the soul of the body. Such reports are noted (perhaps by General Synod?), filed and quietly forgotten. I suspect that this is the teleology that awaits this latest iteration of ecclesiastical reform. No matter how hard it tries, the work is one of bandaging, patching up and keeping going. Usually, this is all being “reimagined” too, with “vision” and “strategy” as the functional acolytes.

And yet, there are *some* good things in the report; it is a proper curate's egg. There is an attempt to introduce the seven (Nolan) principles of public life, which includes integrity, accountability and transparency. Such a pity then, that the authors qualify their discussion of transparency by stating that "we have tried to recommend governance structures which offer suitable levels of accountability". Not the serpentine caveats: tried, recommend, suitable and levels all beg questions. Who tries, and how hard? What definition of 'suitable' are we working with? Why are there 'levels' of transparency and accountability? So Nolan principles almost gain some purchase, only to be hedged and edged out by the people who really know what is best for the church. They are Bishops and senior ecclesiocrats. General Synod members, prepare to be reformed; for you will soon be interviewed to see if you are "appropriate" to be elected

I imagine that more than half of the Governance Review Group would think such questions were unnecessarily suspicious and subversive. But here is the moment, I suspect, that many members of General Synod will gravitate towards the dissenting end of the Anglican spectrum, for when you start to pick on one sentence, a savvy-critical reader will move through the gears swiftly, from vague discomfort, on to mounting concern, finally finding their alarm.

For example, the report tells us (para 63.) that "the Church's governance should be designed in order to enable its mission to be fulfilled". I am sure that the authors of *Governance Review Group Report* do not intend such functional language. But they lack the self-awareness to know this. This is plainly wrong. The governance of any church flows *from* its mission; it is not its cause.

Good governance is but one natural by-product of the churches primary point of identity and only reason for even being a church. There is only one Great Commandment. This is named and identified as such in the Old Testament, and in the gospels too:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

The American Episcopalian contextual theologian and writer, Urban Terry Holmes III, concluded his meditation on Anglican polity (*What is Anglicanism?*, Morehouse Publishing, 1982, p. 95) with these simple words, which apply to all churches, and to us too:

“All religious questions merge into one query: What shall we do?...[our] course leads to living in the world as God sees the world. We can debate the trivial points, but the vision is largely clear. To love God is to relieve the burden of all who suffer. The rest is a question of tactics”.

The *Governance Review Group Report* is a classic exercise in tactics, but unless one begins with God, the tactics will be ones of aversion and diversion. We see this most clearly in the slight mention of ‘safeguarding’ (para. 50). Yes, the report rightly says that the Church of England’s endeavours in this field, to date, represent “the most tragic example of the human cost of governance failure that could be imagined”. Here, the tactical trajectory does not go far enough. Our safeguarding practices are by-product of our governance, lacking transparency, accountability, fairness and justice. Such practices may not be wholesome, but they most certainly express core values. The work to be done, then, is to challenge those values within the body that found themselves such an easy pied-a-terre in our governance.

To be fair to the Bishop of Leeds who chaired this work, he ends his opening Foreword with these words:

“It is inevitable that some readers of this report will feel that some things are lacking in coverage or perhaps that others are over emphasised. We invite all who read the report to see that what we have set out to do is not to cover every aspect of what will be required in implementing the changes we think are necessary but, rather, to provide the basis upon which we can move to a consideration of the “nuts and bolts” of change and the legislation required. We invite reading with a generosity of spirit and a willingness to pursue the better governance of the Church for the benefit of all its serves”.

Yes, some slack should be cut for you, I grant you.

But the problem with dwelling on the “nuts and bolts” is that we lose sight of the bigger picture, and the God who, as the artist and builder, continues to construct this work we only dimly glimpse as the Kingdom of God. This is where we come back to discerning what kind of values the text of *Governance Review Group Report* emerges from.

Even at a basic “nuts and bolts” level, “God” gets a mention eight times. That is slightly less than “sift” or “sifting” (people for their suitability for roles and functions) which clocks in at eleven mentions. But the winner of the word-count, by some distance is “appropriate” or “appropriately”. Helpfully, we are given few clues as to who will decide upon and determine what is “appropriate”. I can reveal, exclusively, that if you are enjoying this critique so far, you will not be an “appropriate” person for any of the key roles as inchoately implied in the report, once this structural shake-up and shake-down has been completed.

To be clear, if you could get the originators of *Governance Review Group Report* onto the analyst’s couch, I think it would be interesting. My personal choice for the therapist best-placed to treat the patient is Elliott Jacques (1917-2003). Jacques developed the notion of requisite organization from his 'stratified systems theory', running counter to most others in the field of organizational development. He developed the concept of 'social systems as defence against unconscious anxiety' which shed light on the close relationship between organizational task (i.e. what people thought the main aim of an organization was, such as production or manufacture, etc.), and unconscious group dynamics and how each can aid or distort the other.

This is the issue for the leadership of the church – the unconscious anxieties the bishops have about success, numbers and mission, and then their displacement activities that try and address their fears. Of course, what is unconscious to them is pretty visible to everyone else, and evidential in Diocesan strategies, strap-lines, absurd mission targets and guilt-inducing growth-saturated propaganda. They could use these lines from Leonard Cohen (‘Anthem’, 2008):

How the Light gets in...
Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There’s a crack in everything

The anxieties need to be surfaced and faced, of course. But can the church return to its calling, and begin with God?

The theologian Dan Hardy (1930-2007) once famously critiqued an ACCM Report on the future of theological training and education. (As the Good Book might say of this genealogy, "...and Lo, CATCM was before ACCM; and ACCM begat ABM; and ABM begat MinDiv; and MinDiv begat BAP..." etc.). Typically, Hardy asked, what do with the Church of England's perennial question-itch: "what does the church require of future candidates for ordained ministry?". To this, Hardy said "wrong question". The first question is, "what does God require?". Such a question produces an answer that won't rest of functional answers to institutional neuroses. The answer will almost certainly be about the eternal values that flow from the heart of God: goodness, kindness, fearless care, hope, compassion, prophecy, contemplation and worship.

Elsewhere, Hardy reflected on the nature of the church – a body he believed to be Christ-like in three ways. First, kenotic: emptied of self-absorption and prepared to abrogate power and position in order to love and serve others, even unto death. Second, abduction: it was to be constantly drawn into and caught up in the purposes of God, and no others. Third, granular: it would result in grains, seeds, fruits, soil and sediment that would bring stability, sustenance and order to life, to the glory and praise of God. Good governance would be a fruit, but is not a seed.

The Christian faith – and its reification in the form of congregations, denominations and churches – teaches us that ecclesiology itself is a kind of social theory, that owes its life and identity to Christ: the true vine. We are but a branch. We are not the vine – just the vessel through which the life of God flows to give fruit to the world.

Churches are not our property. We are only custodians and tenants, not the owners. We do not own the truth. It owns us. Our churches are sacred spaces. But they are also a public space. Churches are, first and foremost, a vision of social polity – how to live together as people, rather than simply setting out the proposed terms and conditions for the membership of a clearly delineated sacred society.

Evelyn Underhill, writing to Archbishop Lang on the eve of the 1930 Lambeth Conference, reminded him that the world was not especially hungry for what the church was immediately preoccupied with. Underhill put it sharply in her letter: “may it please your Grace [...] I desire to humbly suggest that the interesting thing about religion is God; and the people are hungry for God”. Bishops need to be able to feed us, not manage us.

Bishops in their oversight should really function as public apologists, in the public square, when they defend the foolishness of the cross and the truth of the gospel, and so facilitate and enable lived corporate demonstrations of faith’s endurance – and of the love, forgiveness and communion that is to be found in Christ. The primary calling for our bishops is to mediate the wisdom and compassion of God: to be truly good teachers and pastors, after the example of Christ himself, no less. Being a bishop is not an ecclesiastical ‘job’. It is, rather, an ‘occupation’. Bishops are to be occupied with God (for which they need theology and spirituality); and then to be occupied with what they think might preoccupy God’s heart and mind – the cares and concerns Christ has for our broken world and its needy people (and so engage in pastoral care). Thus occupied, a bishop might then be said to be doing the ‘job’ the church believed and discerned that they were actually called to do.

So, if our post-social, post-truth and post-religious age is to be addressed, spiritual courage, prescient wisdom and public theology are needed – if the churches are to remain resilient, and Christianity to survive as an agent of social capital in the service of humanity. Alas, *Governance Review Group Report*, by not beginning with God, landed nowhere near enabling us to understand the church as body language of God, or the verb of God made flesh.