

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

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It is rare to write a follow-up article in the wake of comments made on social media. However, I have made an exception to this rule. Given the careful attention paid by commentators in their critiques, there was more to say by way of conclusion. Readers of the two earlier pieces will recall the attention drawn to the over-use of “appropriate” as a qualifying term for all the persons and systems that await overhaul – well over 30 mentions. “God”, as we noted, barely got a look-in (8). So, I was grateful for this comment on ‘Thinking Anglicans’ that said: “...extending excellent Martyn Percy’s textual analysis as some measure of a document, I see within the Governance Review Group Report dated July 2021 the following occurrences”:

Bishop	138	
Board	119	
Committee	73	
Diocese/an	26	
Clergy	19	
Staff	17	
Parish	13	
Priest	3	
Rector	2	(both within director)
Vicar	0	
Incumbent	0	
Pastoral care	4	
Preaching	1	
Pension	31	
Child/ren	2	(one in relation to IICSA)
Govern	331	
Lead	55	
Manage	48	
Investment	42	
Strategy/ic	36	
Vision	35	(incl. one division)
Lessons Learned	3	
Gospel	2	
Jesus	1	

In a sense, these words and numbers tell their own story. If were to generate a word-cloud illustration, Jesus would be the size of a small lonely ant, whilst the behemoth of Govern-Board-Manage-Committee-Lead-Strategy would be the largest-known dinosaur ever to have roamed the planet.

How did we arrive at another report in the Church of England where our “core business” – care, compassion, service, worship, integrity, virtue, eternal values, kingdom-building and community – hardly merit a mention? To say nothing of an ever-shy (but I’m thinking perhaps shifty?) tendency to keep God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit out of this as much as possible. I thought, following the Parable of the Tenants (Matthew 21:28-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19), all the church could ever claim was to be managing God’s business. It is not our vineyard. Not our fruit. Not our kingdom. We are here to work the land and help with the harvest. As I read the *Governance Review Group Report* again, I was tempted to adapt a John Cleese quote in one famous episode of *Fawlty Towers*: “whatever you do, don’t mention God! I did once, but I think I got away with it”.

As I noted in previous articles, the theology contained in the *Governance Review Group Report* felt like an afterthought, or just some gloss. It does now appear that those drafted in to provide the theological guidance either drifted off or resigned before the end of the process. They are named and thanked in the report as though they were there from the beginning through to the end of the process. This seems unlikely, and the incorporation of their names is another reason to doubt the provenance of this report. The theologians who it is claimed were consulted are stellar. But no-one who is theologically literate can see much evidence of them really turning up.

Any report of this kind ought to start with some fundamental questions. These might include ‘who is Jesus Christ for us today?’; ‘what does the Lord require?’; ‘what is the greatest commandment?’; ‘how is God at work in the kingdom beyond the church?’; ‘where does the Holy Spirit lead us in the light of that?’; and ‘what should the church be in the light of the God who is always beyond us?’. These would do for starters, but you can doubtless think of others.

The reason the *Governance Review Group Report* is so poor and is that it won’t engage with the obvious questions. Because if you asked those questions, you might end up with some very rich ideas and answers about the nature of God and the nature of the church, and their relationship, and therefore the texture of reform that is required. But the authors were probably told not to go there. So they didn’t, as it might have led to a different outcome.

For example, if the English population as a whole really cherish, love and value the church for the quality of *care* it provides to others (i.e., the lonely, elderly, bereaved, etc.) – through clergy, lay ministry and congregations – then we might be funnelling more resources and energy into care itself. Then sustaining it, and ensuring those who care most are also looked-after, and not afflicted by heaps of burdensome administration, daft targets, or expectations and rubrics that actually *prevent* them from caring. In the NHS, do you want to meet a nurse who really cares, and can treat you well (in all senses)? Or an efficient one, who last month met all their targets, and is now being groomed in a talent pool?

I guess you could have both, but if forced to choose between the two, I know whose hands I'd rather be in. If that is so for nurses, then why is it so difficult for our Bishops and the authors of the *Governance Review Group Report* to write a simple sentence on the value of care? Let alone of caring for the carers.

The debate about the usefulness of the *Governance Review Group Report* lies in the questions it will not face. It won't face those questions, because the current Church of England leadership are afraid of the answers. Or, of discovering that the answers proposed by the leadership have no traction. Let me explain more.

The oldest institution in the world is the family, or perhaps a form of marriage or partnership that originated families. This institution predates Christianity and all other major faiths. The church is, primarily, a family – albeit an extended household (Greek = Oikos), incorporating the slave, tutor, freehand, labourer, widow, orphan and others. Now, families to run well have to be organised. But they are not organisations. They are institutions: bound principally by fidelity, fellowship, values and love, rather than by utilitarian metrics.

Now, this is not an essay that pitches institution against organisation, and comes out in favour of organic rather than mechanistic goals. I have already mentioned nurses, so we can say here that hospitals have to be organised, and there are aspects to their identity that are organisational. Sometimes, we can only cope as a social conglomerate because there are systems where the computer says “no”; where “you are not a priority”; and where “I lost my place of the waiting list”. Frustrating and painful though this can feel – and sometimes deeply personal, though it rarely is – we cannot negotiate social life exclusively through our individual or group felt-needs. There has to be some organisational buffer between us in so many walks of life, and often at critical, delicate points of human existence. Organisations are like clothing: useful, often fashion-driven, basically functional, and ultimately expendable.

Organisational approaches to bodies, people and groups are useful, and indeed essential. We work in them, and they work for us. However, 'the organisation' will not send you a bereavement card. As the organisation has no heart or hands, it can't. But someone feeling and caring within that organisation might write to you, and do so on its behalf. We may feel cared for by them. That this organisation has been *kind*. But organisations cannot, of themselves, care.

Churches are, as I say, meant to be organised, rather like families. But you know, sometimes the most unorganised families – hopeless in some respects – are the most loving, and can give you the very best start in life. So how is that the *Governance Review Group Report* has produced yet another offering that the flesh, soul and body of the church (i.e., clergy, parishes, congregations, etc.) will simply be recoiling from, virtually viscerally?

I suspect that this may lie in a kind of undiagnosed 'systemic autism' prevalent in church leadership. By this term, I mean conduct characterized by difficulties in social interaction and communication, and by restricted and repetitive behaviour. It can often present as poor emotional intelligence, and an apparent lack of empathy or compassion. Does the Church of England exhibit this? Yes and no.

Yes, in the sense that within our CDM processes, we have inculcated institutional autism. Bishops – note, a primary task, is care – are not allowed to care for complainants or respondents. The NST has developed a veritable panoply of autistic-type systems, that somehow cut out justice, fairness, transparency and kindness, and replaced core values with a thick crust of impenetrable bureaucracy. No-one feels cared for by a Core Group. No-one finds an NST process to be kind. No-one thinks to ask, 'why is the church like this here?'

Any yet no, in the sense that parishes, congregations, clergy and ministers are exemplary at care. Because the closer you get to where God is at work in ordinary people, the more likely it is you will encounter love, care, kindness and compassion. At this level, the church is family-like; and can even be organised.

There are no real cures for systemic autism – just the hard work of therapies and disciplines that manage the condition. The trouble with organisations that are systemically autistic is that they are usually the last to realise it. Moreover, they often recruit leaders who copy the inherent traits of systemic autism, and if left unchecked, the organisation soon becomes known for its inhumane systems, and its lack of tactile care, kindness, courage and compassion.

I have never been much of a fan of Avery Dulles' *Models of the Church* (1976), preferring instead the more nuanced approach of Edward LeRoy Long JR and his *Patterns of Polity* (2001). His discussions of monarchical episcopacy, managerial episcopacy, pastoral and exemplary episcopacy would be useful for the authors of the *Governance Review Group Report*. As would Long's discussion of representative leadership, congregations, associations and what he terms 'over-structures'. Few major denominations lack these aspects. The question is, how are they blended, and in what ways is the ecclesial, political or social body conscious of them?

Let us take an example from social and political life. Social care and social work is an active and reactive 'caring profession'. Yet it is funded by the tax-payer, and regulated. Even if the authority of oversight is dispersed, there is some level at which ownership of the quality and delivery of care, and its remit and scope, is a constant. It is handled by the Civil Service or government department, whether local, regional or national, and the elected MP and Cabinet Minister who might exercise managerial, monarchical or representative oversight. As a sector, social work and social workers will respond differently to the styles of leadership that a government minister brings. But governments come and go, and there is a sense in which the constancy of this caring profession must be sustained independent of the next minister promising to "shake-things-up" in the sector, whipping it into line with last years' manifesto promises.

Popes can come and go too. But the Curia (an ecclesiastical civil service) remains. There are some good aspects to this. And there are some down-sides too. A Curia that does not like a new Papal agenda can drag its feet, and implement change very slowly, at an almost glacial pace. New policies and priorities are easy for any Pope to promote; but they are much, much harder to implement.

Then there is the Church of England, which comprises over 40 dioceses, with centres of power vested in each Bishop, each Diocesan HQ, Church House Westminster, the Church Commissioners, General Synod, the Archbishops' Council and Lambeth Palace. Each Diocese is its own charity and limited company. Centralisation is difficult, and insofar as the Church of England has any kind of continuity in institutional memory through the constancy of an equivalent to a Civil Service, that is now largely extinct. It may once have existed in Church House Westminster or Lambeth Palace. But successive 'episcopal governments' have reduced their powers (i.e., slashing costs!), rebranded, re-imagined, and the reformed (again!). The result is a kind of organisational chaos that makes for the worst of all worlds; but always with the best of intentions.

If looking for an example of this, safeguarding in the Church of England is particularly apposite. The NST has little power over Diocesan safeguarding functions. The performance of Dioceses in this field is variable. There are some good examples of practice, but there are some atrocious ones too. The handling of the Fr. Alan Griffin and Canon Paul Overend cases are instructive here. The 'centre', such as it is the Church of England, would have you believe all their safeguarding is good. But it is a curate's egg: good in parts; truly terrible in others. But when systemic autism rules, the energy and resources don't go there, and disproportionately allotted to 'making a good impression' instead.

The results of this in the wider church are now easy to observe. Huge chasms emerge between rhetoric and reality, and between leaders and the led. The bridges of trust and care that once spanned those gaps were broken long ago. Some of this was done by the Bishops themselves, who either can't, won't or don't care. They are process-driven; by targets, management and strategy, imagining they are CEO's of an underperforming charity, recruitment or care agency. They tend to lead like this too, and don't seem to be *care-driven*.

Whilst I am wholly sympathetic to the problem that the *Governance Review Group Report* tried to address, the starting place for the work was fundamentally wrong. Indeed, the authors avoided the obvious fundamental ground for any further development: how is the church of today to be an expression of the body of Christ in its local community, parishes, chaplaincies, regions and nation? Instead, the authors focussed on dioceses and bishops, who, let's be honest, have little impact on most churchgoers, and even in Church of England parishes, are not exactly what folk spend their time thinking and talking about.

I mean, when was the last time you went to church and found yourself in a lively lay-led discussion about the latest Diocesan strategy, vision, motto or shiny new episcopal initiative? They might politely chat about these things when the Bishop or Archdeacon comes a-calling with a sermon, or visits for a charge. Otherwise, it is business as usual on the ground, and back to caring for others with the clergy and chaplains. And yet, the new orders, glossy reports, flow-charts that have been pulled off flip-charts keep arriving in the post and in-box. What is all of this for, I wonder? Who is being served by this growing mountain of paraphernalia? Does any of it *connect...to* anything? Meanwhile, the elephants in the room grow ever-larger, squeezing more folk out. Because someone decided sexuality, gender, poverty, climate change, racism, refugees, disability, poverty...and fixing the hole in the church roof, are less of a priority than the new Diocesan Mission Plan, which won't mention any of the above.

I have often opined that the organisational texture of the Church of England bears some relationship to the University of Oxford. What do the two have in common? Here are some observations. First, a very small central administration that is probably inadequate for a university or denomination. Second, a federal-type structure that has over three-dozen colleges or dioceses, but all of different size, age, wealth and reputation. Third, huge disparities between them in terms of power and wealth, yet some kind of centralised 'levelling up' financial system in which the richer bodies (usually resentfully) are meant to help the poorer ones. Fourth, Oxford is governed by Congregation, and by Council; as the Church of England is by General Synod. Sort of. There are College fellowships (which are self-governing) just like Diocesan Synods that also self-govern. Sort of.

Fifth and finally, there is another centre – very different to the first one – where the Vice-Chancellor or Archbishops work, yet can do little on a day-to-day basis to impact how any college or diocese is actually run. When the Vice-Chancellor speaks for the University of Oxford, does he or she speak for St. Swithun's College, founded in 1475 AD? Maybe. It kind of depends on what the Vice-Chancellor was talking about at the time. Do the Principal and Fellows of St. Swithun's need to take any notice of this Vice-Chancellor's speech? Not really. But it is a free world, and you can agree or disagree; or not bother to note it. As with the Vice-Chancellor, so with Dioceses, Bishops and Archbishops.

Increasingly, the survival of the Church of England is going to come down to being truthful about its size and sustainability. Can you have dispersed authority and finances (currently the case), yet tighter central control, and an emasculated General Synod? The Methodist Church in Britain centralised as much as they could: care homes, HR, safeguarding and much else. That has largely ensured an even quality of training, oversight and investment is delivered nationally, and it is a model the Church of England ought to consider going forward.

However, at present, for all the alleged vision of the *Baines Report*, it suffers from the same hubris of self-sufficiency that has dogged the Church of England for well over two centuries. I see little sign of anyone able to grasp the nettle – or indeed to know what the nettle looks like, and where it is. The future for the Church of England faces some quite brutal economic choices – and some decisions will need to be made very, very soon. Indeed, those days are already upon us. But do the people running the Church of England – ecclesiocrats – understand the ecclesionomics of what we are facing? I fear they do not. Moreover, the question is not just 'who is running the ecclesial economy?', but also more importantly, 'for whom and for what purposes are they running it?'

The evidence of chaos, lack of accountability, monarchical episcopacy cannot be masked by endless innovation. Increasingly, we seem to encourage spin-off franchises – multiple fresh expressions, breath-taking announcements of thousands of new congregations and the like – when in truth, we struggle to sustain our core business. These shiny new initiatives all have the “CofE Brand”, and sit proudly amidst the aisles and in the front shop windows of Diocesan HQ’s. But the shiny new things don’t sell well, and nor do they pay their way. Is there any fresh expression – any – paying a normal parish share/quota to a Diocese? The staple-core ‘product’ subsidises each new product-launch. Yet the business is still loss-making. We should stop doing new things, and get back to what were good at, and what people valued church for.

But we don’t and won’t. Our leaders drive us on to fresh innovations, restructuring, reform and endless re-imagining. We have done this with parishes, theological education and much else. Yet the underlying problem is never addressed. We are now declining at such a rate that we need to really make some hard choices...and if we don’t do something soon, we will become the ecclesiastical equivalent of a Debenhams or Woolworths. Big places, visible in most communities, over-stocked, yet very popular at Christmas. But not enough customers for the rest of the year, and so ultimately insolvent.

I mentioned nurses and hospitals earlier. One of their main roles is to look after patients. Now, there is a word with some meaning: the patient. The church is full of patients too: folk waiting for healing, blessing, care, renewal and worship. We wait patiently and expectantly, and we do so in hope. But in the meantime, the systemic autism of the Church of England keeps us in limbo. The leadership’s willed unconscious refuses to act with prescience and courage, only craving more innovation, productivity and reform.

Finally, then, some Breaking News. The Church of England does not have to exist. God can build the Kingdom without us. So we need to discover why we do exist. We cannot take our future in the spiritual market place for granted any longer. Religious consumers can manage without us – the statistics on weddings, funerals and baptisms now tell us exactly that. This is one of the reasons why the *Governance Review Group Report* is such a disappointment, and a lost opportunity. Yet its fundamental flaw remains. If you are trying to reform the church and you don’t start with God, it never ends well.