

Rickety Religion (Part Two: The Advent of Structures)

Rickety (adjective) = liable to collapse or come clattering down, first used in the 1680s, derived from rickets (noun) via the notion of weak, unhealthy, feeble in the joints, a disease caused by Vitamin D deficiency, but originally a local name for the condition common in Dorset and Somerset. The Latin name for the disease, *rachitis*, comes from Greek *rhakhis* (spine) was chosen by English physician Daniel Whistler (1619-1684).

Edward White Benson, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1882 to 1896, once preached that the Church of England and all true faith should, supremely, be an expression of what he termed “rickety religion”. Ideally, it should not be so self-sufficient and able enough to support itself, and would to some extent be dependent on others. There was no other way to be, as our frailty, weakness and dependency would leave us open to the grace of God in a way that the safety of self-sufficiency will often deny. We need to live in a constant state of dependency before God, seeking nothing other than the presence of Christ, love, mercy and grace. Only when the light of God pours in through the cracks in the earthenware vessels that we are, and the body of Christ we become together, can the truth of Christ begin to trickle out from within.

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in.

Leonard Cohen, ‘Anthem’ from the album *The Future*, 1992.

In this short series of ‘Advent Reflections’ we look at issues relating to mission, money, sex, power, integrity and identity within the Church of England. Our first post dealt with the Advent Calling. The second question we now turn to is: “How do the structures of the Church of England express its’ values?”

We begin by inviting you to enter this perfectly ordinary scenario within the Church of England. This is a gathering of the Bishop's Council, and you need to imagine a medium-sized facility, out of town, situated on campus-estate of other offices and regional headquarters. Inside this Diocesan Church House there are committee rooms, offices and some larger conference spaces. Bishop's Council is held in the largest of these rooms, with a sizeable boardroom table around which members gather, with officers and secretaries sitting along the sides. So far, so good.

The composition of those seated around the table, at first sight, looks encouraging. Whilst it is only 25% female and 75% male, this is better than it was a few years' ago. In terms of age, the youngest will be over 40 and the oldest north of 60. The facial complexions are overwhelmingly white, but we have two exceptions to that in the room. This is, again, better than it was a few years' ago. There is wheelchair access to this ground-floor room, and as it happens, one member of the Council has got mobility issues that require this gathering to be accessible. This Council is fairly satisfied that this is a 'balanced' representation of the Diocese.

Yet appearances can be deceptive. Two of the women and one of the men seated at the table are there to represent the interests of those churches who oppose women being ordained as priests or bishops. This is assumed to be balanced, because everyone else accepts women clergy. However, only one woman at the table will ever vocally speak up for equality. The Bishop's Adviser on Women in Ministry post was phased out long ago, once women could become bishops. That it, it seems, put an end to any gender-based discrimination, so no further advocacy was needed.

There is one person at the table who is gay, has a steady partner and has entered into a civil partnership. To keep the balance, there are two people also at the table who represent those churches that oppose equal marriage, and also think that gay clergy should not be permitted in the church. Those churches campaign on such matters, and as a matter of conscience, withholding much of their quota payments from the Diocese. Yet, they need a seat at the table too, so they can continue to express their position. You see, it is important to maintain that sense of balance.

We don't know what people around the table think about disability or ethnicity. All persons in the room are sufficiently self-aware to know that you cannot discriminate against people on grounds of ethnicity or disability. That would be wrong; and illegal. But sexuality and gender are different, are they not? Nobody in the room ever has ever had the hutzpah to say that this would have been the same 150 years ago, when slavery was permitted in some parts of the worldwide Anglican Church. Or that discrimination on grounds of race was tolerated and sanctioned by some churches until quite recently – our lifetime, in fact. Nothing is said, because we have all been educated into accepting opt-outs on equality regarding gender and sexuality, and schooled to not compare such stances to ethnicity or other aspects of human identity. And this board meeting aspires to be representative and balanced.

As the Council gathers, it looks, to all intents and purposes, like any executive board meeting might in any other commercial organization. The Bishop sits at the head, flanked by advisers and assistants. To begin the meeting, today's bible study is about equality, mutuality, service and vocation. Nobody notes the irony. That the room comprises persons who would deny the right of others present to be there is part of the balance that is being maintained. That the chairing of this is usually done by a white male is barely referenced. In any case, he will be at pains to point out that the balance means none should be excluded, and that all minorities must be affirmed. Here, women find themselves referenced in peculiar sentences that usually group them together with other minorities worthy of representation and inclusion.

This scenario is pretty typical for many-a-diocese, and I daresay other versions of it exist in PCC's, Chapters and Synods across the land. But perhaps what is striking about the specifics of the scenario, above, are the things we now take for granted, and so much so, they neither strike us as strange or peculiar. And yet, I think the scene set is much stranger than you might think, and would have puzzled and perplexed Edward White Benson, Edward King, and almost all Bishops in the Church of England up to 1950. But why? Here are five brief suggestions.

First, why is the Diocesan Headquarters in this location, and why are so many people staffing it, and what do they spend their days doing? To be sure, there is HR, stewardship, mission, evangelism, social responsibility, overseas mission-links, ever-growing panoplies of communication and safeguarding staff, education, clergy housing, the Diocesan newspaper, IT, offices for Archdeacons and others, and more besides. The annual running costs are drawn from the quota extracted from parishes, which in turn is set by those occupying Diocesan HQ, overseeing their various growing service-levels and ministries that need to be provided for.

Second, you can begin to see why this might puzzle and perplex Benson and King. After all, who would ever ring up or call in on the Diocesan HQ (located in a largely forgettable campus of light industrial buildings and low-rise office blocks) and ask for a baptism, wedding or funeral? Or just a pastoral visit? Few would know where this HQ was, or what it was for. For 99.9% of the population, the Church of England is to be found in the parish church, meeting hall, vicarage or chaplaincy. Indeed, for 99.9% of people on the electoral rolls of any Diocese, a visit to central HQ will never be necessary or ever happen. I mean, why would you?

Third, King and Benson would be struck by how similar the Diocesan HQ building and the operation of staff were to the neighbouring businesses. Boardrooms, meeting rooms, open-plan working, offices and the like. When and how did the business of the church start to look so similar to other kinds of business? I don't say that this is right, or wrong. But the resemblances would strike our predecessors as being peculiar. And perhaps unsettling?

Fourth, if Benson and King were given a tour of Diocesan HQ, they might be surprised to learn that 25% of the entire Diocesan staffing budget (covering all of the clergy stipends, housing, allowances and other support) was consumed by this operation, located somewhere on the edge of town with other company HQs. They would be even more surprised to learn that for every one pound a parish raises, 75% goes directly to the diocese to meet ‘central costs’. True, parishes and chaplaincy continues to be affirmed as “front-line mission”. But it is a peculiar front-line if 75% of the resources are immediately sent back to HQ, many, many miles away from where the real action is. An army doing this would not fare well.

Fifth, “structure is an expression of value”, and although Benson and King could not have been immersed in sociology, they might have wondered at the relationship between the headquarters and the branches, or the central office and the local outlets. As we noted in the first part of these reflections, that memorable sociological phrase, “structure is an expression of value” (see Stewart Clegg, *The Theory of Power and Organizations*, 1979; and Martyn Percy, *Words, Wonders and Powers*, 1996, pp. 116-119) leads us to ask if churches need to reflect more on how their **structuring** signposts what really matters; the indispensable, and is valued. Benson and King would undoubtedly be perturbed by the growth of the central HQ, and the cuts made on the front-line. They’d ask, surely, “if the Church of England is primarily known through its **local** interfacing – parish clergy and chaplains – what are we doing cutting those posts, and putting more money into a centre that nobody sees or would ever really care for, let alone visit? What are we **valuing**, exactly?”.

You get the drift here. There is not much point in the Royal Mail if you close half of the local Post Offices and cull tens of thousands of postboxes. “A Presence in Every Community” is a fine sentiment, but becomes less plausible and trustworthy if the local outlets get absorbed into much larger districts, which in turn collapse into being regional hubs. Of course, we can do some things on-line. But no central HQ can afford to keep growing at the expense of the local presence in the community. The identity and value of the Royal Mail is tied-up in its local accessibility, familiarity and availability.

The Post Office parable for the Church of England needs little exposition. Like churches, every Post Office is different. They bumble along providing a reassuring level of service, and serve us, as institutions do, with many of the basics that communities need to keep themselves open and connected. Yet somehow, Bishops, Diocesan HQ’s and their staff have come to resemble a small-medium-sized franchise operation. They govern their branches remotely, set them targets, and channel their latest offerings and products through the local staff. The Diocese has a new vision, plan, needs or message – and the outlet is required to market this, and pay central HQ for continuing to be a staffed outlet. But beware, if the outlet misses its target, it is in danger of losing its staffing, and it ultimately risks closure.

This is a strange business model for the church. A kind of ecclesiocracy that is based on ecclesionomics. Yet oddly, this is an organization that is cutting back on the outlets locally, in order to concentrate on its regional branding. But no-one is going to come to their Diocesan HQ for a funeral, baptism or wedding, or in their hour of need. In most of our light-industrial out-of-town office complexes, the lights go out at roughly 6pm, and the car park will empty. It becomes a wilderness where no-one will hear you scream.

John Robinson once opined that the House of God is “primarily the world in which God lives, not the contractor’s hut set up in the grounds” (Robinson, 1965, p. 27). The church was only ever meant to be the Constructor’s Hut on God’s Building Site, which is the world. I think Robinson – not to mention Benson and King – would have been perplexed to find these huts closing, and one giant regional shiny HQ-hub being developed and staffed in place of the business of building the Kingdom of God in our local communities. Structure, remember, is an expression of value.

Of course, the church is not God’s primary preoccupation, and a Diocesan HQ even less so. The world is God’s main concern. Jesus thought so too, and acted accordingly, and died and rose again for this very reason. Helping to bring about the Kingdom of God *is* Christian faith. We are not called to be devoted members of the *Diocesan Preservation Society* (good work though such bodies undoubtedly do). For Christians, Jesus is the body language of God. He sees the unseen; hears the unheard; speaks for the mute and marginalized; touches the untouchable. The incarnation reconciled the gap between humanity and divinity.

Hortense Calisher once observed that “sociology functions best by alarm”. In some respects, it is only possible to blow on the glowing embers of concern by judicious use of sociological parallels. Zygmunt Bauman once noted that “the task of sociology is to come to help of the individual...[for] we have to be in the service of freedom”. The service of freedom can come through macro-scale institutions (i.e., religion, family units in general, the law, universities, etc.); meso-scale sub-groups (i.e., such as judges, bishops, vice-chancellors, etc.); and finally, micro-scale actions (i.e., the local, familial, ordinary or intimate business of everyday living, etc.).

We need kindness, truth and service to permeate the macro, meso and micro at every level. But nothing is gained – and all may be lost – if the leadership groups occupying the meso-level do not understand the macro-scale, and no longer value the micro-levels of institutional life. Increasingly, however, Dioceses find themselves being restructured, over-managed and overpowered at the micro and macro-levels by hubristic meso-level managers and their blueprints for change. Left unchecked, this will only cause catastrophic long-term damage to the identity, mission and value of the church in local communities and chaplaincies.

Yet there seems to be no end to flow-charts, mission action plans, strategies, targets and reviews, and all those other forms of “soft-bullying” now so prevalent in the “disciplining” (usually called “discipling”) of clergy and congregations into deferring to the greater powers and growing needs of middle-management who dominate from the rest from their meso-level-platform. (Benson and King might ask, “do you really need all of this? We managed for a long time without Diocesan HQs; we can probably cope without them now...”).

The other problem underlying the present re-structuring of the Church of England is that it became easy prey to the late-capitalist rhetoric of growth-related metrics, returns, conglomeration and rationalization. This is fine for businesses that are running a franchise operation, or perhaps resourcing and stocking outlets. But it is a hopeless, hapless foundation for institutions, and perhaps especially churches.

We are called to be in the places nobody wants to be, and to richly abide amongst those people and communities that nobody wants to be with. Institutions have two primary functions: socialization and stabilization. The extended family is perhaps the smallest and oldest form of institution known to humanity, and it is no accident that the earliest churches were based on such units: the *oikos* (household) of faith, comprising old, young, widows, paid and slave labour, freeborn, kith and kin.

The early churches understood that you could not run Corinth out of Galatia, or manage Philippi from Thessalonica. These people and places needed different kinds of visits and letters from Paul, because they had their own local issues to resolve. Each one needed a different kind of empathy, compassion, attention and direction. The office was where they went. The New Testament does not give us a “General Epistle to People in General”. That’s why the first Bishops were so mobile. They could not sit in offices and run things from some centre. Paul would have agreed with Graham Greene – “One can’t love humanity. One can only love people”. Likewise, there is no “general ministry” for “these people generally”. It is always local, particular and free. That is what makes ministry so expansive, expensive, exhausting...and exhilarating.

These are some of the reasons to restructure the resourcing of the church *for* local service, and move away from centralization. Such things belong to the world of business, and whilst we can learn from these, we have no need to replicate them. Our whole business model is different.